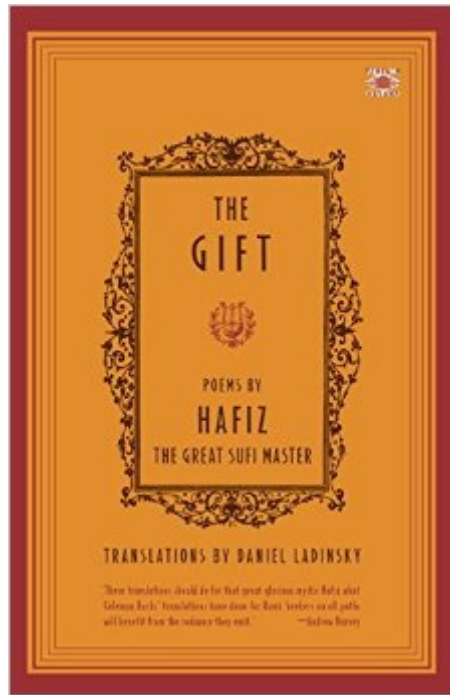


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The Gift



Synopsis

Chosen by author Elizabeth Gilbert as one of her ten favorite books, Daniel Ladinsky's extraordinary renderings of 250 unforgettable lyrical poems by Hafiz, one of the greatest Sufi poets of all time. More than any other Persian poet—even Rumi—Hafiz expanded the mystical, healing dimensions of poetry. Because his poems were often ecstatic love songs from God to his beloved world, many have called Hafiz the "Invisible Tongue." Indeed, Daniel Ladinsky has said that his work with Hafiz is an attempt to do the impossible: to render Light into words—to make the Luminous Resonance of God tangible to our finite senses. I am a hole in a flute that the Christ's breath moves through—listen to this music! With this stunning collection of Hafiz's most intimate poems, Ladinsky has succeeded brilliantly in presenting the essence of one of Islam's greatest poetic and religious voices. Each line of *The Gift* imparts the wonderful qualities of this master Sufi poet and spiritual teacher: encouragement, an audacious love that touches lives, profound knowledge, generosity, and a sweet, playful genius unparalleled in world literature.

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Customer Reviews

Hafiz has long been one of my favorite poets. I first discovered him when I was in college via Goethe and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and I've been reading his poems ever since. Since I am (alas!) without Parsi, I'm unable to read Hafiz in the original, and must rely upon the kindness of translators. Daniel Ladinsky has done an interesting job of rendering Hafiz's verse into English. Ladinsky has an ear for rhythm and he strikes me as an individual with deep spiritual sensibilities.

When he renders one of Hafiz's couplets as "The body a tree./God a wind", one senses that there's more going into this translation than just philological expertise. Ladinsky, like Hafiz, is a mystic. That spiritual bond with Hafiz, as well as a shared joy in the sheer vitality of creation, makes Ladinsky's renderings light-hearted, in the sense that they shimmer with what Hafiz would call God's Light. Some of my favorite examples: "Whenever/God lays His glance/Life starts/Clapping"; "What is the beginning of/Happiness?/It is to stop being/So religious"; "All the talents of God are within you./How could this be otherwise/When your soul/Derived from His/Genes!" But while I can appreciate the lyrical way in which Ladinsky tries to express Hafiz's insights, I do wonder about the reliability of the translations. They're loaded with modernisms that are somewhat grating after a while: we're derived from God's "genes," the sun is "in drag," characters in the poems "dig potatoes," the soul visits a "summer camp." Moreover, many of the renderings make Hafiz sound suspiciously like a Zen master throwing out koans (an obvious example of this is the poem Ladinsky titles "'Two Giant Fat People".) To his credit, Ladinsky freely admits in his translator's preface that he's "taken the liberty to play a few of [Hafiz's] lines through a late-night jazz sax instead of from a morning temple drum or lyre." But he's unapologetic, claiming that the translator's job is to help Hafiz's spirit "come across" to the Parsi-less reader, and that this demands a free rendering. I'm not so sure. This attitude strikes me as rather patronizing to the reader and disloyal to Hafiz himself. So my bottom line is this: Ladinsky's book is a good read on both poetical and spiritual grounds. But I'm forever left in doubt as to whether I'm reading Ladinsky or Hafiz.

If you want to read the poetry of Daniel Ladinsky, buy *The Gift*. A lot of people seem to like Ladinsky's poetry. Just don't make the mistake of thinking that these are translations of poetry by Hafiz. They're not. They're all-new, all-original English language poems by Ladinsky. I don't know why he publishes his own work under the name of Hafiz. If you want to read the poetry of Hafiz in English translation, consider *Hafiz of Shiraz* by Peter Avery.

Living in Iran years ago, I first encountered the poet Hafiz as a beloved Iranian folk figure. I have read with pleasure and an open heart many versions of his poems, both in Persian (Farsi) and in English. It was with high expectations because of reviews that I bought this book, only to find Mr. Ladinsky's poems literally unrelated to the original Hafiz. Instead, based on his own explanation, they appear to be simply a product of his imagination. The author has no background in Iranian culture and speaks no Persian. Instead, he obviously uses the commercially successful style of Coleman Barks (of Rumi notoriety) by reading someone else's word-for-word translation and then

creating new verses, the intent being to "capture the spirit" of the original. But these verses are so distant from Hafiz that one wonders how they qualify even as "renderings," an amorphous term for Mr. Barks' practice that allows the bypassing of usual literary standards. Rendering is much less demanding intellectually than translating as well as an easier way of becoming published, and it contains a built-in literary defense mechanism (the plea of subjectivity) against criticism for poor scholarship or inauthenticity. Rendering is not new. Before the Iranian Revolution, one task of Iranian academia was the separation of authentic work of Hafiz from a mass of imitation poetry falsely attributed to him. Now comes this work that bears substantially more resemblance to the tone of Mr. Barks, its apparent stylistic model, than to Hafiz. Even giving the author the benefit of the doubt for sincere devotion and industry, this book and his other two similar works best fit into the category of "spiritual opportunism." This phrase, "spiritual opportunism," appeared recently in a national article about several authors (Andrews, Rampa, Morgan, et al.) who have written about mystical customs (Native American, Tibetan and Australian Aboriginal) in such a way that they now are accused of appropriating other cultures' spiritual traditions, either through ignorance or for the purpose of personal gain. Mr. Ladinsky's work seems to take appropriation even further than the others. Not only does it superficially represent a spiritual tradition of a subjected foreign culture, it actually offers self-created verse as representative of a specific poet. Even though Iranians lack a voice to make their great poets known in an authentic manner within the current culture of pop spirituality, no amount of commercial success can disguise the truth that this book is a misrepresentation of the poetry of Hafiz and that it does a grave disservice to Iranian poetry and spiritual traditions.

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