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**The Absent I in Persian Poetry**

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In all our lives, there are a handful of watershed moments which, if properly recognized, can illuminate the past, change our relationship to the present, or influence if not determine the course of the future. For Martin Luther, that moment came 500 years ago when he cut himself loose from the Pope. These watershed events occur when we no longer stand for an idea, a relationship, or the ubiquity of the ongoing order.

I experienced such a watershed moment, albeit on a much smaller scale and far less consequential, when I published, here in America, my first book of poems in Persian. It was a slender volume of carefully selected work called, *For the Sake of Water*, which, as luck would have it, was very warmly received and reviewed. Praise comes a writer's way in many ways and, in my case, one particular praise came via a phone call from a leading critic one night. She lavished me with many encouraging words, and at the end, she offered two bits of advice. Both unsolicited! Of the two, the most important was this: Reduce, or better yet, eliminate the mentions of the pronoun I. "Too many 'I's in this thing!" she said, "You need to exercise modesty, or you might be mistaken for a narcissist."

I hung up the phone that evening perfectly intrigued. Here was a highly regarded scholar who was not advising me in the ways literary scholars should—to deepen my thinking or clarify my language, or challenge myself to reach for other, bigger ideas beyond what I was already engaged with. In fact, she was advising that I act as my own censor, to eliminate references to my "self." I distinctly remember thinking that I must dig deeper in the very spot where others wished to uproot me from. As a young woman in a highly patriarchal society, I was not about to give up that vast, cherished personal space that no other but the blank page afforded me. The "I" I was asked to eliminate was not only the person that I was at the time, it was also the person I was trying to envision and become.

In those days, I was a relatively new refugee to America, hesitantly standing around the edges of the American society and the English language, looking for a way to gracefully and quietly get inside both, on a practical level, find a job, on an impractical level, find out what Americans do with their "I's in poetry. With great literary cockiness, for whatever Iranians might not have—be it a nuclear arsenal or a robust economy, and in whatever way America could eclipse Iran—Iran still outperforms all in the realm of poetry. After all, Iran has had an ancient poetic tradition that has produced the likes of Rumi, America's #1 bestselling poet and Omar Khayyam.

But as my relationship with my adoptive language began to evolve from a refugee's uncertain interaction to, in time, a citizen's confident rapport, I began to wonder. The greatest advantage of any writer thinking, working, and reading in two languages with equal ease is that access to two distinct traditions can ward off the provincialism of the imagination, reveal prospects one could not see in a monochromatic world. Reading and comparing, placing one against the other, it was at last this well-known poem by Emily Dickinson that brought me to a breathtaking halt:

*I am nobody /Who are you/Are you nobody too?/That makes two of us/Don't tell. /They'd banish us you know.*

There are many ways to fall in love with this poem, but the surest is to view it from the perspective of another literary tradition with little patience for a literary self. I was positively smitten. It was as if all my life I had lived among brunettes, and was suddenly meeting a blond for the first time! Why was it so electrifying? Soon thereafter, I encountered another gem called the Song of Myself which shook me in the way that only a great work of literature can cause a reader to. After the opening "I celebrate myself and sing myself" came these moving lines:

*... I know I am august,  
I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be understood,  
I exist as I am, that is enough,  
If no other in the world be aware I sit content,  
And if each and all be aware I sit content ...*

Here I must mention that the Iranian mystic poet, a leading Sufi figure named Mansour Hallaj, had expressed a similar notion several centuries before Whitman in his poetry, but particularly in one famous line: "I am God! I am the truth!" But his subsequent imprisonment and execution overshadowed the legacy he might have left if he had lived longer or garnered followers.

Another compelling encounter was with Theodore Roethke, in a poem called: My Papa's Waltz. In it, the narrator poet, a child, describes the moment his drunk father is beating him. This is a tormented and highly tragic "I," but an "I" that still sees his personal pain worthy of being told.

Those of you who have been born into and raised on English may not fully appreciate these exceptional “I”s. These perfectly uncensored “I”s which exercise their right to exist on the page, and are clearly not afraid of being deemed immodest, or narcissistic.

Don’t get me wrong! In the many centuries of Persian poetry, there had been numerous references to the poet/narrator’s self. But they were for the most part, “We”s, disguised as “I”s or “I”s which had somehow dissolved and disintegrated into a **belief** or a **passion**. There had been heroic “I”s which vied to save the king, or the nation, and perform valorous acts on behalf of the good. There had been enamored “I”s, Rumi among them, in love with another, God or a mortal, ready to sacrifice all for the sake of the beloved. There had been self-pitying “I”s, spurned lover/poets who had taken to the bottle and were wistfully plaintive about their unrequited love. There had also been philosophical “I”s, as in Omar Khayyam, in which the poetic self looks at the mundane matters of daily existence to draw meaning from them. This is an instructor “I” dispensing advice about life and its highly transient nature. All these references to the poet, in fact, transcend the self or cast it away in the service of something greater.

Which is why a small, colorful and mischievous self like that of Dickinson’s, with no grand ambitions other than to introduce her deceptively minor and anonymous-seeming self is so alluring. Hers’s not a “self” trying to transcend itself, perform superhuman tasks, or look into a metaphysical world. It does not wish to shed its singularity but is boldly revealing it and looking for its kindred.

A culture that wants to diminish the presence of the individual also needs, among other things, a language that helps that culture to do just that. Persian is no exception. Two particular grammatical qualities of the Persian language help discolor the presence of self or the singular individual on the page. First: Persian, like many other languages including Hebrew, allows for all the personal pronouns to be absorbed into the verb. Rather than saying, for instance, *I know*, the “I” can be eliminated, and instead a tiny suffix, a single letter can be attached to the end of the verb to reveal who the subject of the sentence is. In short, if you’re not reading or listening carefully in Persian, you may miss the suffix and therefore not be clear as to who the person or persons is or are. This simple trick of language does the work that an apostrophe performs in English. But the English apostrophe shortens the verb, not the pronoun. In other words, in English, it is the action that gets downsized not the person.

In a secondary way, Persian diminishes the emphasis on the individual by eliminating some key details, including doing away with gender distinction. Both *she* and *he* are assigned the same pronoun in Persian. Which of course causes a basic ambiguity. In conversation, save the mention of the person's name, unless the listener pointedly asks who that third person is, a he or a she, will remain a mystery. This ambiguity has had advantages and disadvantages. Under highly censorious and religiously strict circumstances, a poet like Rumi, by most accounts a gay man living in a highly homophobic era, was able to get away with writing love poetry, because at the end of the day, the beloved he referred to was often a neutral being which, luckily for him, the authorities decided was not another man, but God. And when he spoke of the beloved, the ambiguities of the language kept the nature of that love a perfect mystery. So, we have all that we have from Rumi, in great part due to a grammatical glitch.

But something far greater than mere ambiguity is at work here. The absence of gender differentiation discolors the individual. What is it a man? A woman? No one knows. A mortal, as in a lover? Or an immortal being, like God? The language will leave us guessing.

Why the absence of specificity, this tiny touch that ever so innocuously turns something material into something vague and nearly immaterial, is a toxic and dangerous turn, I cannot get into here. Suffice it to say that authoritarian regimes always rely on it, because they need sacrifice to carry out their missions. To get their subjects to do so, they must rupture the attachment of their citizenry to the physical world, to begin with in language.

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None of this would be more than esoteric nitpicking or merely Persian literary inside baseball were it not for an enigma that has been lingering: Why is it that Iran with so much potential always seems on the brink but never quite makes it? Politically speaking, the 2009 peaceful uprising that came to be known as the Green Movement, and surely sparked the flames of uprisings in other parts of the Middle East within a year, never culminated in a democratic change. The slogan that was heard the loudest in the days of the protest was “Where’s **my** vote?” In retrospect, perhaps the better question would be: Where is “I?”

If the structure of a language is such that it softens or discolors the individual presence of the writer, then how does the thinking about or articulating the desire for the Self take shape? If the self has no space on the page, if the individual cannot claim a rightful place in language, can the society make any room for him/her?

Recently, there have been calls for the necessity of a Martin Luther in Islam. Is such a figure in fact a necessity or a remedy? I don't know. But that Luther, if he's coming, will need to contend with a reform not only in religion, but also in language.