

But not everything is so gloomy in Mickiewicz' wonderful collection. There are moments of cheer delight, as well as gentle humour, as town-dwellers flee the summer heat in California, the morning routine of a London commuter, or indeed carefree days spent in France.

“where everything climbed high
Words, ambitions, hopes, joys
An overgrown beach....

Later, we will repay debts to carefree nights.”

The Tyrant

By Jennifer Langer

So many of the writers in the Exiled Writers Ink network were forced to leave their countries of origin as they were ruled by tyrants whose sole aim was to spread terror and fear over an entire country. In exile some writers have expressed their strong feelings by creating literary work of resistance.

What is the connection between tyrants, the Persian poet Hafez (1315-1390) and the German poet Goethe (1749-1832)? One of the themes of the twelve books of Goethe's *Divan* is 'The Tyrant'. He was inspired to write the *West-Eastern Divan* (1819) upon reading the first German translation of the divan by the fourteenth century poet Hafez. Goethe responded emotionally to Hafez's poetry to create a poetic connection between west and east at a time when the Orient was seen as alien, as a threat to the West.

I am at a Shubbak Festival of Contemporary Arab Culture event. In a tiny bookshop off the Kings Road we hear the exiled poet Mourid Barghouti's response to Goethe's poem 'The Winter and Timur' which is a poem of resistance against Timur under whom Hafez composed his poetry when Persia's Shiraz and Esfahan had been conquered by Timur. The protagonist threatens Timur:

'Yes, by God! from Death's cold clutches
Nought, O greybeard, shall protect thee,
Not the hearth's broad coalfire's ardour,
Not December's brightest flame.'

Barghouti's poem 'The Obedience of Water' appears in *A New Divan* (Gingko, 2019) which takes the form of a lyrical dialogue between east and west in which twenty-four poets were involved – twelve from the east and twelve from the west.

Each pair of poets responded to one of the themes of the twelve books of Goethe's original *Divan*.

In 'Obedience of Water' Barghouti's focus is on the tyrant rather than the victims, yet he declares that he has lived amongst tyrants all his life and been forced into exile by them. He tells us that he was deported from Cairo because of his poems of resistance which he retrospectively defined as propaganda and therefore bad poetry. Apparently in the Arab world, poets hold a platform of importance as the people's expectation is for the poet to be their voice and therefore poetry often descends into propaganda. This struggle of the tension between popular demands and the desire for emancipation has shaped all Middle Eastern poets.

Deploying satire as a form of resistance, in 'The Obedience of Water' the poetic persona ridicules the figure of the tyrant by focusing on his weak and paranoid inner soul and his constant need to gaze at himself in the mirror reflecting his fragility and vulnerability which however, are concealed by the power of his tyranny leading to the population having become accustomed to feeling afraid. In the poem the tyrant resembles an ordinary person and although the temptation is to demonise tyrants turning them into satyrs, the poet stresses that this one looks perfectly normal lacking hooves and a horn although he does have a snub nose. The last stanza is permeated by the imagery of water. The tyrant's preference is for the people to behave like water, to stagnate and be as nothing but in the end the tyrant drowns in the self-same water suggesting that the people have risen up and taken revenge on him.

'The Tyrant' was translated from Arabic with the use of an intermediary, by the T.S. Eliot prize-winning poet George Szirtes who is seated beside Barghouti in the bookshop. Surprisingly they have shared a common space which is Budapest where Szirtes was brought up and where Barghouti was exiled. They animatedly discuss the area where he lived and Barghouti fondly remembers his Budapest literary encounters. Yet another shared area is tyranny and Szirtes informs us how Hungarian poets wrote under this scourge. The poet Gyula Ilyés who lived at a time of trumped up charges and state murders was unable to publish work criticising the government and so wrote for his desk drawer. A telling poem by him is 'One Sentence about Tyranny' (1980) which makes the point that tyranny pervades every aspect of life.

I had observed just one partnership between east and west but the *New Divan* includes the literary outcome of many in the form of translation which creates a conversation between languages and cultures such as that between Reza Mohammadi, exiled from Afghanistan, and Nick Laird and between Fatemeh Shams, exiled from Iran, and Dick Davis. It all began with Hafez!