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Understanding Place Through Poetry

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Llun y clawr:
Tudur Dylan Jones

Cyhoedd Baruddas gyda chefnogaeth ariannol Cynghor Llyfrau Cymru. Argraffwyd gan Wasg y Lolfa, Talybont.
I have long been interested in how power works. In college in California, I studied Political Science. But I learned a big lesson about power thanks to poetry. A visiting poetry professor from Iran hired my roommate as his assistant. She typed his materials at our kitchen table, where the light was strongest, and I began to read as she un-scrolled one from her portable typewriter. The manual roller made stuttering clicks as the pages unfurled from its coil. I was smitten by what I read. I hadn’t seen much poetry in my modest education. Those first conjured images from a poem by Sohrab Sepehri remain with me even now, decades later: the sound of water’s footsteps; a garden on the shadowy side of wisdom; washing a cup in the stream of memory. The hair at the back of my neck tingled. My blood felt uneven coursing through my veins.

My awakening from those pages of poetry would eventually chart my future course. The next term I signed up for Persian language class so that I could discover more. A couple years later, when I had learned enough for an instructor to assign poetry, I grew excited. The first poem I remember painstakingly making my way through in Persian was a modern one by Ahmad Shamlu in his disillusionment after the revolution in Iran. It started with these lines, which were so arresting that I was certain I was right to study the language:

“They smell your breath
Lest you have said: I love you.”

I figured out how I could get a Persian language fellowship to pay for graduate school.
Considering that I wanted to study poetry, it was ironic that my funding sprang from national security concerns. During the cold war era, the Defense Department had calculated that if the US got into war in different parts of the world, they would need some Americans to speak the local languages. Persian was one of those so-called strategic languages but very few universities taught it. I was accepted into New York University to study Political Science concurrently with Persian literature. My program began with classical poets, Ferdowsi, Saadi, and Hafez. Then the Sufi, Rumi. Eventually, I made it to modern poetry and fell for one of Iran’s most important contemporary poets, Forough Farrokhzad. She was a confident iconoclast who sometimes used mysticism in her feminist works. I read her Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season.

In another ironic twist, I went on, for the rest of my career, to specialize in Iran’s politics, not its poetry. Yet my understanding of Iran is fundamentally shaped by Persian poetry. My professional energies have long been devoted to reducing Americans’ sense of threat from Iran and specifically counseling against war between the US and Iran. I am convinced that without the empathy I gained through encountering Iran first through its culture, I would be more likely to “other” Iran as many do.

I have been washing my own cup in a stream of memories, with devoured poetry spilling across my mind ever since I arrived for my summer studies program last summer in Lampeter, Wales. I was there with a group of American writers working intensively with “a sense of place.” Cymru (the name for Wales in Welsh) is a place of poets and I was fortunate enough that summer to hear from several Welsh poets. I was hearing, as much as seeing, Wales. Not in decades had I been surrounded by such a fullness of sound-scape. Or had my own attention directed to the intricacy of words and their aural impact. Wales can do that to a writer. There, I noticed the soft sibilance of sea shore words alongside the jagged concrete of rock and peak phrases. Rolling vowels like quilted rural hills. The repeating sounds in meter like the returning tides. For me, there, the fluid and verdant landscape melded with the language: poetry is the sound of Cymraeg green and the feel of surf trickling over Cymraeg stones.

Watching the timeless rooks patrolling Harlech Castle, I suddenly recalled that the Persian word “ruk” or rook, means “tower.” And, the rook chess piece is a castle tower. How about that intersection as a “thin,” liminal, space with words?

Again immersed in a land of poets, I began to perceive Welsh commonalities with Iran’s poetic tradition. Rhyming and sound harmonies of
cynghanedd are meant to be sung, as is the epic poetry of Iran. I imagine I could find a similar obsession with sound patterns in The Mabinogion as in Iran’s The Shahnameh.

Folktales and legends in Persian begin, “yeky bud; yeky na bud”: Once there was; once there wasn’t. Don’t I recognize Wales expressing a similar sensibility? Echoes left afterwards in poetry might trace out a politics of the dispossessed. King Arthur, not only the ‘once,’ but the future king, too. The Shi’a of Iran have clung to their minority sect alongside the majority Sunni branch of Islam elsewhere in the region. Like Welsh secular legend, the Twelfth, or “Hidden,” Imam of Shi’ism not only invokes a glorious past, but when out of occultation, will restore rightfulness to the future.

I knew of hiraeth before I arrived in promised Wales, but my feeling for the concept deepened each passing day there. I saw this longing as both large and small, universal and specific. I notice how Persian poetry resonates with hiraeth, too. A few lines of mystical Persian poetry I can still recite by heart, from Rumi, echo in my own:

Listen to the tale from the cut reed (pipe)
crying from separation -
the lament of infinite longing

Both Iran and Wales are ancient lands with past greatness baked into proud cultures. Poetry in both places has the power to carry forward the time before to re-animate pride through the ages. The familiar Welsh cry, Yma o Hyd, We Are Still Here, could well be sung in Iran. Endurance and justice are touchstones. This collective nostalgia manifests a fiery lament born from subjugation. As I travel in Wales I feel the sustained wound of a minority long in the dark shadow of the hegemon. One can see its mark of power in past deforestation and lately poached water. If the Welsh pine for the return of something, maybe it is a wholeness, a making right to a national soul. Unjust “otherness” is also at root of the Shi’a spiritual minority experience. It doesn’t surprise me that Wales has more poets than any other country in Europe. Or that Persian poetry is admired around the world. Poets ensure that hiraeth and the many sounds of the pierced heart are re-inscribed in each generation.

Without warning, poetry changed my life by inviting me to listen for the spirit-kindling sounds of human connection. And decades later, off the bus in Wales, poetry, open-mouthed, again extended its hand. It offered me a way to hear this land and trace hiraeth, here and beyond.

A few months later, as the U.S. and Iran now draw their political conflict closer to open warfare, for me it is not an abstract part of the world. Instead poetry gives me the human connection to Iran, as it does to Wales, and is available to us all, everywhere. My attachment to
Iran’s poetry helps ground me in Iran’s enduring national pride. Learning Iran's culture through its epics helps me now have a more visceral understanding for what many Iranians feel is unfairness, and bullying, at the hands of the U.S. I don’t need to support either side's leaders as I deeply fear the potential for war.

And when an American president threatens to destroy Iran’s cultural heritage in order to defeat the country politically, it is not only against international law; I know it is a violation of the human spirit. Poetry, however, transcends artifact and will always endure. Poetry cannot be bombed.

Can poetry also point the way toward reducing the hostilities between the U.S. and Iran? This Persian proverb, which I suspect is also common in other cultures, can serve as a call for conflict resolution. The immovable does not make peace; the coming together of people does that:

کوه به کوه نمیرسه و لی آدم به آدم می رسه
A mountain never meets a mountain, but a (hu)man meets a (hu)man.

I long to hear the sounds of such connections.
Newidiodd barddonaeth ym mywyd i!

JO-ANNE HART

B

ium i a diadordeb ers talwn yn natur gyra.
Gwyddoniaeth Wleidyddol oedd fy nhwnc ym y coleg yng Nghaliffornia, ond oddi wrth farddoniaeth ac a dechreuais i ddarllen wrth iddi o'r fynnon o'r oesoedd eraill. A dyna agorion y byd hynny, fu farw o farddoniaeth cyn hynny yn adrogy i. Ma'i deudlaedd cyntaf, o gerdd gan Sohrab Sepehri, yn aros ar eu tynnu o'i peiriant. A dyna agoriad llygad oedd hynny; lle roedd y golau gryfafr, a dechreuais i ddarllen wrth iddi o Iran. Byddai'n teipio pethau'r athro wrth fwrdd y gegin yn rhannu'r llety â mi yn deipydd gan athro barddoniaeth hynny, ond chydig o prifysgolion oedd yn ei dysgu. Yn y amryfal rannau o'r byd, penderfynwyd bod angen y nawdd yn deillio o wybredoedd yng Nghymru a tharddoniaeth barddoniaeth Berseg. Pentref bynnag, mae'n rhaid i'r gwlad ofnadwy wedi ei diwylliant i'w gwneud, fel yr enw Saesneg 'rukh' wneud hynny i sgrifennwr.

Lle ddarllenais ei defnyddio adleisiau cyfriniol yn eu gwaith ffeministaidd. Darllenais ei rhagweld ym mynyddoedd, fel y enwi 'Yma o hyd' yn Iran hefyd. Dyfalbarhad a chyfiawnder yn ei flaen ac ail-danio eu hysbryd drwy'r oesoedd - gellid arall rheolaeth pa oedd wedi llunio fy nealltwriaeth i’r wlad. Bûm â’r ffordd a dechrau gwneud hynny i'w gilydd, fel yr enw Saesneg 'rukh', a darganfuodd gwyddoniaeth Berseg yn llaw hir a hwyr a mynd i'r afael â thema'r 'man a lle'. Gwlad beirdd ydi y llynedd. Bûm yno gyda chwarae o bobol eraill. Os oes capel ar gyfer 'dieithrio' hi yr un fath â mi, darganfuodd y wlad ac hamdden eu hysbryd drwy'r oesoedd. Wedyn y bardd Swffïaidd, Rumi. O dipyn i beth, mae Barddoniaeth Berseg yn codi uwchlaw creiriau. Dychmygu bod y wlad yn unig, oddi wrth wlad arall e.e. blywyddo, fel yr enw Saesneg 'rukh', a darganfuodd gwyddoniaeth Berseg yn llaw hir a hwyr. Os oes capel ar gyfer 'dieithrio' hi yr un fath â mi, darganfuodd y wlad ac hamdden eu hysbryd drwy'r oesoedd.

Os yw'r Cymry yn hiraethu am gael rhywbeth yn ôl, mae daethu am gael rhywbeth yn ôl gyfrifol. Os oes capel ar gyfer 'dieithrio' hi yr un fath â mi, darganfuodd y wlad ac hamdden eu hysbryd drwy'r oesoedd. Wedyn y bardd Swffïaidd, Rumi. O dipyn i beth, mae Barddoniaeth Berseg yn codi uwchlaw creiriau. Dychmygu bod y wlad yn unig, oddi wrth wlad arall e.e. blywyddo, fel yr enw Saesneg 'rukh', a darganfuodd gwyddoniaeth Berseg yn llaw hir a hwyr. Os oes capel ar gyfer 'dieithrio' hi yr un fath â mi, darganfuodd y wlad ac hamdden eu hysbryd drwy'r oesoedd.
Y traddodiad hardd ydyw,
Yr hen ddweud o’r newydd yw.

Dai Rees Davies
1942-2019