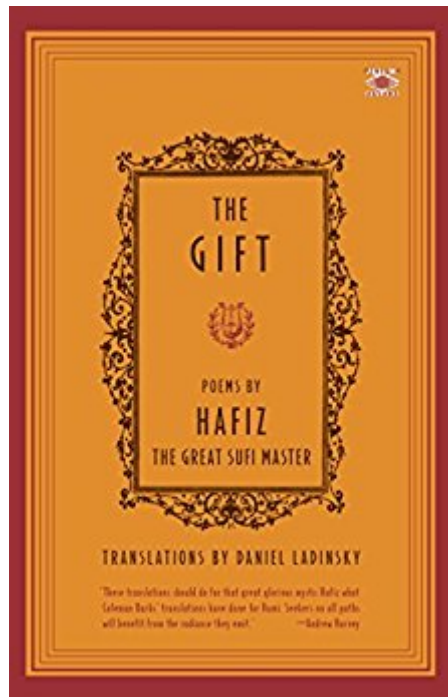


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The Gift (Compass)



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. Like 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").

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."

Several folk have asked me to jump into the Ladinsky debate and comment on what Ladinsky is doing and whether his work is worth reading. So let me come right out and say that Dan Ladinsky's book is perhaps the most inexcusably excruciating book bearing the name "translation" I have ever had the displeasure to read. This review will indeed be about the book, but it will also be an act of revenge for what I went through while reading it. It is a culturally narcissistic, colossally unintelligent act of literary charlatanry which derives its success largely from exploiting (and grossly perpetuating) some of the most shameful traits of the American public: ignorance of Islam and Islamic languages, unbridled consumerism, poor literary sensibility, New Age tripe and shallow thinking. Normally, my online reviews of translations take the translation in question and then compare parts of it to the original (I do not do reviews of translations whose original language I am not competent in.) However, in the case of Ladinsky's work, this is just not possible because there really *aren't any* originals being translated! Ladinsky's passages do not correspond to anything Hafiz wrote in Persian. At all. I'm not a Hafiz scholar, but by now I have read probably a couple thousand lines of Hafiz' poetry in Persian, and know a good bit of it by heart. I'm not saying this just to brag. My point is that, given this, as I perused the volume, I could reasonably have expected to at least recognize *some* of what Ladinsky was translating. I didn't. And it's not that these translations are just so free that I didn't recognize which Persian text they corresponded to.

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