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AKHAVAN-E SALESS, MEHDI

AKHAVAN-E SALESS, MEHDI (Mehdi Aḵavān-e Ṯāleṯ; b. Mashad, Esfand 1306 Š./February 1928; d. Tehran, 4 Šahrivar 1369 Š./25 August 1990), prominent poet (Figure 1, Figure 2).

LIFE

Akhavan was born to ʿAli, an apothecary (*ʿaṭṭār*) from Fahraj in Yazd province, and Maryam, a native of Khorasan (Akhavan, 1969, pp. 17-18). He completed his elementary education in Mashad and entered the city's Technical School (*honarestān*) in 1941 to study welding; he graduated in 1947 (Moḥammadi Āmoli, p. 29, Kāḵi, p. 27). He was, in his youth, attracted to music and, wary of his father's displeasure, secretly learned to play the *tār* (Akhavan, 2003e, p. 447).

Akhavan was first a student of the traditional school of Persian poetry and started his poetic career as a classicist. Apparently Parviz Kāviān Jahromi, an instructor in the technical school in Mashad, familiarized him with the elementary principles of classical Persian prosody (Akhavan, 2003c, p. 386). Akhavan soon found his way to the literary circles of Mashad, the most notable of which, the Khorasan Literary Society, was directed by ʿAbdol-Ḥosayn Noṣrat Monši-Bāši and regularly attended by such literary figures as ʿAli-Akbar Golšan Āzādi, and Sayyed Maḥmud Farroḵ. At the suggestion of ʿAbdol-Ḥosayn Noṣrat Monši-Bāši, Akhavan opted for M. Omid (lit. hope) as his pen name (Akhavan, 2003e, p. 450; idem, 1992, p. 51). As he grew older, however, "[H]e began to play with the meaning of that poetic name with a

dubious, gradually deepening sense of irony." (Karimi-Hakkak, 1991, p. 18)

Soon after, however, Akhavan, along with Reżā Marzbān, ʿAli Milāni, and a few others, formed Bahār, a literary circle more in tune with modernist trends in poetry (Akhavan, 2003a, pp. 200-01). It was during this period that Akhavan became involved with leftist politics, which was popular among the intelligentsia and artists during the 1940s (see COMMUNISM ii, iii). He soon became a member of the provincial committee of the recently established Youth Organization of the Tudeh Party (Marzbān, p. 374).

In 1947 Akhavan moved to Tehran (Rezvani, 2007, p. 76), having already seen his poems appear in print in Mashad's local papers, such as *Rāsti* (Akhavan, 2003e, pp. 452-53). In Tehran, Akhavan began work in editing, and in 1948 was employed by the Ministry of Culture and sent to the outskirts of Varāmin as a teacher, a position that gave him ample free time to further familiarize himself with classical Persian poetry. He continued to be engaged in the political activism he had initiated in Mashad (Akhavan, 2003e, pp. 454-61). In 1950 Akhavan married his cousin Ḵadijeh (Irān). They had six children: Laleh (who drowned in the Karaj River at the age of twenty), Luli, Tus, Tanasgol (who passed away only four days after birth), Zardošt, and Mazdak ʿAli.

In 1951 Akhavan's first collection of poetry, *Arḡanun* (The organ; Figure 3), dedicated "to all freedom-fighters," was published with an introduction by Reżā Marzbān. The first edition of the collection consisted of his classical poems, as well as some poems which exhibited his gradual departure from the prosodic rules of Persian classical poetry. In later editions, *Arḡanun* was altered substantially as Akhavan added more classical poems and removed several others. In 1951 he was appointed literary editor for the newspaper *Javānān-e demokrāt*, (Young democrats), a position that expanded his contact with the poets of his generation (Moḥammdi Āmoli, pp. 54-55).

The oil crisis of the early 1950s and the ensuing military coup that ended the premiership of Moḥammad Moṣaddeq and reinstated the shah in 1953 (see COUP D 'ETAT 1332 Š./1953), created much frustration among the young, active generation of Akhavan's time. He was apprehended twice for political activism and involvement with the Tudeh Party, first for a short period of time in winter of 1953 and then a month later, at which point he was imprisoned for roughly a year (Marzbān, p. 372; Dastḡayb, 1994, p. 9). Disappointed by the failure of democratic overtures in Iran, Akhavan refrained from political activity and settled into a self-devised and idealized figure that he called

"Mazdošt," a composite of aspects of Zarathustra, the Persian prophet, and Mazdak, the archetype of the rebel prophet in ancient Iranian culture, with a small sprinkling of ideas from Mani and Buddha ("Tak o tanhā rah-e Mazdošt puyam," in *To rā ey kohan bum o bar dust dāram,* 2008, p. 134).

After his release he was sent to the environs of Kashan to teach. He soon quit the job and returned to Tehran. In order to pay his keep, he found employment in journalism, publishing at times under aliases and pen names (Akhavan, 2003c, pp. 384-85). In the years following his imprisonment Akhavan, along with Ḥosayn Rāzi (a pseudonym for Ḥosayn Purḥosayni; see Qahremān, p. 161), was in charge of the literary section of *Irān-e mā*, a political journal published by Jahāngir Tafażżoli (Marzbān, p. 377; Moḥammadi ʿĀmoli, p. 64).

Zemestān (Winter, 1956), Akhavan's second collection of poetry consisting of 39 poems, demonstrates in no uncertain terms his increasing familiarity with, and positive disposition toward, Nimaic poetry (Figure 4). The collection earned Akhavan celebrity status in the Persian society of the time (Moḥammadi ʿĀmoli, pp. 64-65). The title poem of the collection, as held by a critic, not only exhibits Akhavan's rich poetical disposition and his studied familiarity with classical poetry, but also paints a penetrating image of the wintery outlook of Persian society in the gloom-ridden years of the 1950s (Yusofi, pp. 738-41)

Following the publication of *Zemestān,* Akhavan began work with Ebrāhim Golestān (b. 1921), the author and filmmaker, in his film production company. There, his responsibilities included editing film scripts and supervising soundtrack recordings. His colleagues included Forugh Farrokhzad, Fereidun Rahnemā, Karim Emami , and Najaf Daryābandari, among others (Golestān, pp. 338-40; Emāmi, pp. 102-3).

Having turned to Nima Yushij (1896-1960), Akhavan spent long years introducing Nimaic poetry to Iranian audiences to good effect (Alishan, p. 130). Throughout his essays and books, Akhavan draws a basic distinction between Nima's approach to poetic signification and the manner in which he invites his readers to participate in the act of creating meaning, on the one hand, and that of certain classical poets, on the other, who worked with a complex set of inherited concepts linked together throughout the centuries, and whose readers have been conditioned to anticipate adherence to conventions now defunct.

In 1959, Akhavan's third collection of poetry, *Āḵer-e Šāh-nāma* (The ending of the *Shah-Nameh*), was published, containing what would prove to be some of his most acclaimed poems. The title poem of the collection not only reveals Akhavan's meditation on Iran's glorified pre-Islamic past, but also conveys his elegiac conviction on the impossibility of its revival.

… Mā

Fāteḥān-e šahrhā-ye rafta bar bādim.

Bā ṣedā-i nātavān-tar zān-ke birun āyad az sina,

Rāviān-e qeṣṣahā-ye rafta az yādim.

(*Āḵer-e Šāh-nāma*, 2008, p. 76)

… We

Are the conquerors of cities gone with the wind.

With a voice too weak to come out of the chest

We relate forgotten tales.

(For the English translation and a detailed analysis of the poem, see Soroudi, 2010a, pp. 4-17.)

Āḵer-e Šāh-nāma was extremely well received by readers and critics alike. Forugh Farrokhzad regarded the collection's title poem to be "one of the most powerful poems to be composed since the inception of Šeʿr-e now" (see *Didār o šenāḵt-e M. Omid*, ed. Cyrus Ṭāhbāz, Tehran, 1968, p. 190). Jalāl Āl-e Aḥmad, while at times critical, was also complimentary, especially of the poet's sensitivity to social and political issues (Āl-e Aḥmad, pp. 27, 31-34).

In 1961 Akhavan left Golestān Film Studio and began a period of cooperation with Radio Iran, where he was engaged in writing cultural and literary programs (Golestān, p. 341; Akhavan, 2003b, pp. 115-16). In 1965 he published his fourth poetry collection, *Az in Avestā* (Of this Avesta; Figure 5). The collection, in which approximately three-quarters of the poems are composed in what is generally recognized as Nimaic style of poetry, earned critical praise as the pinnacle of Akhavan's Nimaic poetry. "The style that Akhavan first explored in a number of his last poems in *Zemestān*, and which has good

renditions in *Āḵer-e Šāh-nāma*, comes to fullness and perfection in this collection" (Šafiʿi Kadkani, p. 58).

Akhavan's world view, suggestive of his obsessive engagement with the eternal struggle between light and darkness, earned him a critical attack by Reżā Barāheni (see, "Sevvom-e barādarān-e Sušiānt," in Reżā Barāheni, *Ṭalā dar mess: dar šeʿr o šāʿeri* II, Tehran, 1992, pp. 963-1005). It should be noted, however, that an increasing deterioration in the human condition is discernible in Akhavan's conception of history (Ahmadi, p. 235); and his "flight into the past," as held by a critic, "is the strong yearning of a refugee, who in the end arrives at bolted doors." (Soroudi, 2010b, p. 159)

In 1969 he moved to Abadan to find employment with the local television station. There he researched and wrote literary and cultural programs as well as pamphlets on the historical geography of several regions (Kāḵi, ed., 1991, p. 28; Akhavan, 2003b, pp. 112-19). In that same year his fifth collection of poetry, *Pāʾiz dar zendān* (Autumn in prison), was published. This collection was re-published in 1976 as *Dar ḥayāt-e kučak-e pāʾiz, dar zendān*, (In Autumn's little yard, in prison), later recognized by Akhavan himself as its "principal title" (Akhavan, 2002b, p. 141). The collection includes a number of poems composed during his incarceration, mostly in Nimaic meter. With a few notable exceptions, most are devoid of the literary quality and significance encountered in his earlier collections.

In 1974, following his daughter's death, he returned to Tehran and began work at Iranian National Television, appearing frequently in literary programs in the period preceding the Revolution (Moḥammadi Āmoli, pp. 87-88; Kāḵi, ed., 1991, p. 29). In 1977 he accepted positions teaching the literature of the Samanid period as well as contemporary literature at Tehran University, the National University, and the Teacher Training College (Kāḵi, ed., 1991, p. 29; Akhavan, 2003c, pp. 385-86).

Zendegi miguyad: ammā bāz bāyad zist ... (Life says: Still we must live ...), Akhavan's sixth poetry collection was published in 1978. The book, as noted by Akhavan in his introduction, is more a "recollection in verse," and "not poetry in the customary or usual sense" (Akhavan, 2002b, p. 141) *Duzaḵ ammā sard* (Hell, yet cold, 1978), Akhavan's seventh collection is a composite of classical and Nimaic verse as well as a poem entitled "Āhāy, bā to-am!" (Hey, I'm talkin' to you!), that is significant in that it is devoid of meter (see Free Verse); a form with which Akhavan rarely experimented. Akhavan's Nimaic verse in this

collection fails to attain the heights encountered in his earlier works. The collection also includes a number of poems in *now ḵosravāni*, a term he coined after the pre-Islamic poetry known as *ḵosravāni* [see BĀRBAD] (Akhavan, 2002a, pp. 270-76; see also Šafiʿi-Kadkani, 1994, pp. 561-74).

In 1979 Akhavan commenced work as Editor in Chief of the Sāzemān-e entešārāt va āmuzeš-e Enqelāb-e Eslāmi, or what had been *Moʾassasa-ye entešārāt-e Ferānklin* before (see Franklin Book Program), but he did not last there for more than a few months. In 1981, despite his long years of employment in governmental organizations, he was retired without pay (Kāḵi, ed., 1991, p. 29; Akhavan, 2008b, p. 192; Akhavan, 2003c, p. 386).

In 1989 Akhavan's eighth collection of poetry, *To rā ey kohan bum o bar dust dāram* (see below) was published. It includes some of Akhavan's best poems in classical prosody. His complete abandonment of Nimaic meters in the collection, however, raised eyebrows in modernist literary circles to the extent that it was regarded by some as a "hollow shell" (Ḵoii, p. 243).

In 1990, at the invitation of the Berlin-based Haus der Kulturen der Welt (House of World Cultures) Akhavan visited Germany, as well as England, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and France (Kāḵi, p. 29). "It was his first and last trip outside Iran. Everywhere he went, he met with a welcome worthy of an icon" (Milani, p. 829). Akhavan died of a heart attack in Tehran in that same year. His body was interred beside the Ferdowsi Mausoleum in Tus. A collection of his Nimaic poems was posthumously published by Morteżā Kāḵi, as *Manẓuma-ye boland-e savāḥeli va ḵuziāt* (2002, repr. in 2006), which paled in comparison with the poet's work in his prime. The collection, of which several poems were published while Akhavan was alive, also consists of one poem in *čahārpāra* (foursome), entitled "Emšab šab-e čist? ..." (pp. 76-78).

WORKS

Mehdi Akhavan-e Saless holds a place of singular distinction in the history and development of modern Persian poetry. In the almost century-old battle between the followers of the rhymes and meters of classical Persian (see ʿARUZ), and the modernists straining to free themselves from the constricting rules that governed poetry for centuries, few if any can match Akhavan in feeling at home with both. He has composed some of the acclaimed and enduring poems in the two, often warring, traditions, and, more importantly, has discredited those traditionalists who argued that only those incapable of

composing classical poems would turn to Nimaic verse (Rezvani, 2009, pp. 29-30). Akhavan not only made significant contributions in publishing critical articles and books to establish Nimaic verse in the literary lexicon, but also gave it credence in his own compositions (Šafiʿi Kadkani, 2012, p. 108).

Akhavan, unlike Nima, stays engaged in a critical dialogue with the past and deploys classical imagery and symbolism in his modern poems (Alishan, p. 132). His careful mingling of classical linguistic conventions with contemporary language (Dastḡayb, 1966, p. 32), and his quest, in his own words, "to shortcut from Khorasan to Mazandaran" (Akhavan, 2008a, p. 202), give the language of his poems a characteristic flavor and distinguish them from other Nimaic poetry. Akhavan's archaic language, although emulated by other poets without much success, generated a mixed reception among literary critics (Āl-e Aḥmad, p. 33).

A mixture of folk stories and mythological tales, many of Akhavan's Nimaic poems follow a narrative line. The narratives are characterized by an epic disposition with pictorial overtone (Yarshater, p. 299) and are never void of relevance to contemporary social life (Behbahāni, p. 54; Ābedi, p. 237). He often chronicles an event or a series of events, as in "Ṭoluʿ," (*Āḵer-e Šāh-nāma*, , pp. 60-65), and "Nāgah ḡorub-e kodāmin setāra" (*Az in Avestā*, , pp. 103-11), or narrates a story as in "Katiba" (*Az in Avestā*, , pp. 11-15). While non-narrative poems also feature prominently in his poetry collections, this characteristic has resulted in negative comments from some critics (Barāheni, pp. 1018-19).

A deep sense of defeat predominates Akhavan's poetry, and this predicament is movingly addressed in many of his poems. In the gloomy years following the military coup of 1953, Akhavan "was the spokesperson of his generation" (Daryābandari, p. 249), and effectively captured "the morose melancholy of a whole generation of intellectuals who felt treacherously betrayed and dangerously bereft of hope in the aftermath of the fall of Mohammad Mosaddeq in 1953." (Milani, p. 823) In one of his most cherished poems, dedicated to 'Pir Moḥammad Aḥmadābādi,' he evokes the coup in a variety of symbols, and paints a dark and depressing picture of the years that coincided with Mosaddeq's exiled life in Aḥmadābād, the village he owned near Tehran.

Didi delā, ke yār nayāmad

Gard āmad o savār nayāmad

Bogdāḵt šamʿ o suḵt sarāpāy

Vān ṣobḥ-e zarnegār nayāmad

(*Arḡanun*, 2007, p. 102)

O heart, you saw that the loved one did not come

The dust came and the rider did not come

The candle burnt to the end

But the golden dawn did not come.

(See also "Āb o Ataš," "Zemsestān," and "Pand" in *Zemestān*; "Nāder yā Eskandar" and "Jerāḥat" in *Āḵer-e Šāh-nāma*; as well as "Ān gāh pas az tondar," and "Nowḥa" in *Az in Avestā*.)

Although socio-political issues find "the most sincere expression in his poetry" (Šafiʿi Kadkani, 1966, p. 58), Akhavan often lends his verses to the implicative power of imagery rather than the explicative nature of literal language. In contrast to the blunt advocacy of political ideologies with which much of the literature of the period is stamped, and to which time has already proved to be an enemy, Akhavan, in the best of his poems, creates two fully independent semantic fields, each complete in itself; one of which, however, is intricately embedded in the poem, requiring more subtle intellectual involvement for revelation (Rezvani, 2007, pp. 105-6). "Bāḡ-e man" in *Zemestān* offers a rewarding example:

… Bāḡ-e bi-bargi,

Ruz o šab tanhāst,

Bā sokut-e pāk-e ḡamnākaš. …

Bāḡ-e bi-bargi

Ḵanda-aš ḵunist ašk-āmiz.

Jāvdān bar asb-e yāl-afšān-e zardaš mi-čamad dar ān

Pādšāh-e faṣlhā, pāʾiz."

(*Zemestān*, 2007, pp. 166-67)

… The leafless garden,

Is alone day and night,

In its pure and sad silence. …

The leafless garden

Its laughter, bloody tears

Forever, on its golden-maned horse gallops

The king of seasons, the autumn.

Akhavan's verse is not limited to social and political issues, and benefits from a diversity of subject matter, addressing love and nature. Although he is equally acclaimed for his long poems on love, both in classical and Nimaic meters, he is particularly adroit with short love poems.

"Laḥẓa-ye didār nazdik ast.

Bāz man divana-am, mastam.

Bāz mi-larzad, delam, dastam.

Bāz guʾi dar jahān-e digari hastam."

(*Zemestān*, 2007, p. 144)

The moment of the encounter approaches.

Again I am crazy, drunk.

Again there is a trembling in my heart, my hand.

Again you would say that I am in another land.

An alluring image of ancient Iran flavors Akhavan's poems, creating a sharp, and often unfortunate, binary between Persians and Arabs (Āšuri, p. 275: Saad, pp. 87-93). His fifty-seven-line long qaṣida, "To rā ey kohan bum o bar dust dāram," wherein he takes readers on an imaginary journey around Iran,

roaming up and down its history and territory, noting all that he loves and adores, is replete throughout with his expression of a burning love for Iran.

Ze puč-e jahān hič agar dust dāram

To rā, ey kohan bum o bar dust dāram …

Jahān tā jahān ast, piruz bāši

Borumand o bidār o behruz bāši

(*To rā ey kohan bum o bar dust dāram*, 2008, pp. 157-59)

If I love anything in the world

I love you, ancient homeland …

May you be victorious, so long as the world turns

May you be joyful and mindful and fruitful.

(Karimi-Hakkak, "I love you, Ancient Homeland," in Mozaffari and Karimi Hakkak, eds., 2005, pp. 384-85)

Akhavan's ease with *qaṣida*, a genre rarely attempted by his contemporaries, brings to mind the erudition of the old masters (see "Tasalli o salām" in *Arḡanun* (2007, pp. 102-3) and "Safartān ḵoš" in *To rā ey kohan bum o bar dust dāram* (2008, pp. 145-46). His "melancholy mood of dashed hopes" (Yarshater, p. 299) is occasionally expressed "by a certain characteristic wit and irony" (Farzan, pp. 340-41), another feature not frequently seen in the poetry of his contemporaries. "His often ribald introductions to his collections of poems, particularly the one he wrote for *The End of Shahnameh,* are fascinating examples of his satiric gifts" (Milani, p. 826).

Akhavan's poems are translated into many languages, including English (e.g., Alishan, 1976; Banani and Hashmi, 1986).

In addition to his poetry, Akhavan penned critical essays on literary criticism which found publication in the media and also in the three volumes: *Badāyeʿ va bedʿathā-ye Nimā Yušij* (Nima's innovations and novelties, Tehran, 1978), *ʿAṭā va laqā-ye Nimā Yušij* (on Nima's legacy and literary idiosyncrasies, Tehran, 1983), and *Naqiża va naqiża sāzān* (Parodies and parodists, Tehran,

1995). A complete collection of his essays edited by Morteżā Kāḵi, was also published as *Ḥarim-e sāyahā-ye sabz* in 1994. Akhavan's prose, as encountered in his essays and introductions, was well composed and characterized by soundness and sincerity.

He also authored a collection of four short stories, *Mard-e jen-zada* (The possessed man, Tehran, 1975); a story for children and young adults, *Deraḵt-e pir o jangal* (The old tree and forest, Tehran, 1976); and *Āvarda-and ke Ferdowsi … zendegi-e rāstin dar afsānahā* (It is told that Ferdowsi … the real life in fables, Tehran, 1975), a book for children on Ferdowsi, his life, and his lifetime engagement with the creation of the *Šāh-nāma.* His narrative prose is by far overshadowed by his poetry.

POETRY COLLECTIONS

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Arḡanun (The organ) Tehran, 1951.

Az in Avestā (Of this Avesta), Tehran, 1965.

Dar ḥayāṭ-e kučak-e pāʾiz, dar zendān (In Autumn's little yard, in prison) Tehran, 1976.

Duzaḵ ammā sard (Hell, yet cold), Tehran, 1978.

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To rā ey kohan bum o bar dust dāram (I Love You Ancient Homeland), Tehran, 1989.

Zemestān (Winter) Tehran, 1956.

Zendegi miguyad: ammā bāzbāyad zist … (Life says: Still we must live …) Tehran, 1978.

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Idem,"Duzaḵ, ammā sard," *Se ketāb: Dar ḥayāṭ kučak-e pāʾiz, dar zendān;* Zendegi miguyad: ammā bāz bāyad zist ...; *Duzaḵ, ammā sard*, 9th edition,Tehran 2002a, pp. 253-343.

Idem, "Zendegi miguyad: ammā bāz bāyad zist ...," *Se ketāb: Dar ḥayāṭ kučak-e pāʾiz, dar zendān;* Zendegi miguyad: ammā bāz bāyad zist ...; *Duzaḵ, ammā sard*, 9th edition, Tehran 2002b, pp. 137-251.

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