



Iranian Literature

Shiva Rahbaran, editor

IRANIAN WRITERS UNCENSORED

Freedom, democracy, and the word in contemporary Iran

Translated by Nilou Mobasser

303pp. Dalkey Archive. Paperback, £12.99

(US \$17.95).

978 1 56478 688 3

Under any authoritarian regime, writers are often at the vanguard of the resistance movement and Iran is no exception. According to Shiva Rahbaran, editor of this fascinating collection of interviews with contemporary Iranian writers, "Poets and writers have always been admired and feared for the power of their pen by Iran's rulers".

The book's main focus is on how the Iranian Revolution of 1979 shaped the nation's literature and the effects that literature has had on society. Originally published in Persian in 2004, Rahbaran's interviews were carried out during the relatively benign rule of Mohammad Khatami, when Iranians briefly enjoyed a less repressive atmosphere. This translation by Nilou Mobasser, who died earlier this year, is particularly timely, given the recent uprisings in the Arab world, and raises interesting questions about how art and literature reflect or are changed by monumental events.

Persian culture has a pre-Islamic tradition of poetry, both written and spoken, but novel writing flourished only recently. Hafez Musavi suggests that this is because the novel is "the product of modern society, in which the individual plays a fundamental role" and Iran is only just entering "this phase in our social life". The novelist Amir Hassan Chehelan claims that the Iranian Revolution "was like a full-length mirror that showed us to ourselves" and so contributed to the growth of the novel in Iran. He identifies the move towards "thought" as opposed to "imagination and emotion" (the realm of poetry) as fundamental to this shift.

However, a long tradition of poetry is continuing to influence Persian culture today and remains a powerful tool for dissidents. Mohammad Haghgooghi, who died in 2009, affirmed that "poetry is infused into Iranians' blood" and has always offered the means to challenge the status quo: "in any age, the poet has been a protestor of a kind, resisting the thought-molds of the day". Mohammad Ali Sepanlu offers a similar take when he notes that "one of poetry's intrinsic characteristics is that it doesn't surrender to ruling systems".

Many of the interviewees offer perceptive analyses of the parallels between Western and Persian literature and the reasons behind their divergent paths. What hits home most forcefully is the pervasive fear of censorship, resulting in an imaginative use of form and language, symbolism and allusion which, as



"Wati Kutjarra (Two Men Story)" by the Spinifex Men's Collaborative (detail); from *Ancestral Modern: Australian Aboriginal art by Pamela McClusky, et al (176pp. Yale University Press. £35. US \$50. 978 0 300 18003 9.)*

many of the writers argue, is lost on the majority of Iranians. Nevertheless, words have the power to transform society and as Chehelan concludes, despite the state suppression throughout the past century, "there's been a porthole that they've never been able to close. The name of this porthole is literature".

LUCY POPESCU

History

Andro Linklater

WHY SPENCER PERCEVAL HAD TO DIE

The assassination of a British Prime Minister
296pp. Bloomsbury. £18.99.
978 1 4088 2840 3

On May 11, 1812, Spencer Perceval was gunned down in the lobby of the House of Commons by John Bellingham, a failed accountant from Liverpool. Shot at close range, Perceval was dead within minutes, and he remains the only British Prime Minister to have been assassinated.

Remembered now for his violent death, rather than his record as a statesman, Perceval was a superlative manipulator of the unreformed parliament. He accumulated immense power, used in the pursuit of unpopular goals. He squashed social unrest, prosecuted the war against Napoleon, and most controversially, sought with great practical effectiveness to crack down on the illegal trade in slaves.

As Andro Linklater characterizes him, he was a dull, not very intelligent man whose pleasures in life consisted of administering devastatingly effective, personal attacks on his political opponents, and spending quiet nights at home with his wife and large brood of children. Though beloved by his family and Conservative political allies, Perceval made many enemies, and in many parts of the country there was jubilation on the news of his death. No more so than in Liverpool, the

assassin's home city, whose merchants and general population alike had suffered an "angry decade . . . tipped over like a bee-hive, its trade in slaves stamped out", and the associated trade with America stifled.

Bellingham is typical of the deranged non-entities who come to infamy through spectacular criminal acts. He held everyone but himself responsible for a long period of imprisonment in Russia and personal financial ruin. He somehow convinced himself that shooting the Prime Minister was not merely legal, but morally just. He barely tried to defend himself at the trial that followed the murder, and he was hanged within a week, questions about his true motivation unanswered.

He denied that he was part of a conspiracy. But Linklater skilfully unpeels the onion of this enigma to identify the forces that led to the assassination. Bellingham was a fool, but other shadowy figures helped him along the way, recognizing his usefulness as an instrument of murder. He was on the edge of bankruptcy, so where did he find the funds to live in London in the style of a gentleman for weeks before the assassination? The book could have been subtitled: "Liverpool's revenge". But to disclose more would be to spoil this entertaining and deftly structured piece of historical detective work.

DAVID WALLER

Czech Fiction

Jiří Weil

LIFE WITH A STAR

Translated by Rita Klimora and Roslyn Schloss
256pp. Daunt. Paperback, £9.99.
978 1 907970 06 1

Jiří Weil's *Life with a Star*, published in Czechoslovakia in 1949, banned by the Communist regime for being "decadent" and "existentialist", and first translated into English in 1989, is a deceptively simple first-

person narrative recounting the life of a Jewish man, Josef Roubicek, in Nazi-occupied Prague. In the first scene, Roubicek rolls himself a cigarette of strawberry and raspberry leaves: it is a token of a life of bricolage, a culture of ersatz, as demeaning laws incrementally deprive him of the comforts of civic life, of participation in it, and of his status as human being.

Appropriately, the book is sparse. Roubicek's main relationships are with a stray cat, a remembered lover, and a personified Death. Calamitous incidents occur to other people and largely in hearsay. The most significant event does not happen: Roubicek is passed over when, in the sanctuary of an underground synagogue with blood-stained walls, the names of Jews summoned to be deported are read out. Roubicek's exception is both explained through bureaucratic oversight, and freighted with symbolism (a cruel parody of the Jewish Book of Life; scapegoating and sacrifice; passover), inviting the inevitable comparison with Kafka, and rendering quotidian incidents elsewhere in the novel parabolic.

What appears initially as Roubicek's acquiescence to his fate turns to resistance. The Germans and Nazis are never identified except as "they"; Roubicek refuses to understand the word "Jude" on his yellow star or the "contorted and twisted" Gothic script in which it is written. Weil himself survived the war, in Prague, by faking his own death. In one sequence, Roubicek encounters a man called Joseph Rubitschek – the German version of his own name – who commits suicide. The book ends on a note of bleak triumph, as Roubicek decides to "overcome death" by destroying any traces of himself, in a paradox which finds the strongest resistance to annihilation in deliberate self-erasure: a resistance of the Nazi translation of individuals into numbers. *Life with a Star* refuses sensationalism and with straitened narrative means sets a powerful symbolic system resonating. Despite endorsements by Philip Roth, Arthur Miller and Siri Hustvedt, *Life with a Star* and its later companion novel, *Mendelssohn is on the Roof*, a somewhat lighter work exposing bitter ironies in the Nazi rule of Czechoslovakia, have not reached the wide audience they deserve. Their current reissue is very welcome.

KATHRYN MURPHY

Philosophy

Alain Badiou

WITTGENSTEIN'S ANTI-PHILOSOPHY

Translated by Bruno Bosteels
320pp. Verso. Paperback, £14.99.
978 1 8446 7224 0

Alain Badiou's *Être et événement* (Being and Event, 1988) began starkly with the philosophical equivalent of drawing battle lines in the sand: dismissive of Anglo-American thought, Badiou's definition of workable contemporary philosophy is basically Continental. *Wittgenstein's Anti-Philosophy* is another attempt to shore up the division between Anglo-American and European philosophy, but in doing so the ancillary effect is a text that also brings the two traditions into an unlikely conversation.

What feeds Badiou's study, and this unusual dialogue, is a tension that is repeated throughout Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-*