

BOOK REVIEW

An invitation to wander

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Preface to the book *Contrasts*, collection of poems by Hamlet Isaxanli, translated from Azerbaijani into Russian by Alla Akhundova, Izograf, Moscow, 2006

The world of poetry is an “ark of salvation” from the stormy sea of physical reality surrounding us. In that reality, an epic drama is being played out: namely, the confrontation between mountains and valleys. Understanding the secrets of this drama through art or by creating poetic works is a sign of a transcendent soul. Only the soul can be the helmsman of this kind of wandering.

As medieval Islamic philosopher Ibn Bajja wrote, “a human acts as an intermediary between eternity and those things which appear and disappear.” This statement is even more aptly applied to a poet. No matter what problems may bother him in this material, transient world, his poetic ear is tuned to music of unearthly perfection known only to him. The harmony between heavens and earth brings forth a movement from one world into another: from the moonlit world of appearance and disappearance—the world of potential and actual being—into the world of poetic space, where the soul becomes eternal.

A reader, entering the world of poetry in the footsteps of the poet, can travel this same journey, allowing him to experience—even for a moment—the sensation of eternity. Thus he will be able to more deeply appreciate what was given to him through the “accidental gift” of his own life. However,

such spiritual wanderings as these do not come easily to the artist or to those whom he leads along with him. Miracles, including the miracle of creativity and its understanding, are not obtained as free handouts.

Hamlet Isaxanli, like all other true poets, is transparent and simple. However, these qualities are as deceptive as the “closeness” of the clouds or a smooth flow of water over a rocky river bottom. Knowledge pretends to be serene, but it is made up of obvious truths impregnated by their collisions with fatal passions. Isaxanli keenly senses this with each fiber of expression in the fabric of his poetry, woven in its own stanzas of art and philosophy.

As Novalis wrote, “that there is a difference between poet and thinker is only an illusion, and if it were true, it would be to the detriment of both of them.” The poetry of Isaxanli suffers from no such detriment. He is first and foremost a preserver of the great Arab-Islamic philosophical traditions, the roots of which lie deep in antiquity. In examining these roots, we see more clearly the artistic temperament of Isaxanli, who in keeping with the times transcribes the journey of his soul not in the usual worn-out emotional or lyrical keys, but in accordance with the criteria of the creative personality of al-Farabi, in unity with active reasoning, for “the perfection of humanity *includes* philosophizing, in the ability to think.”

It is well known what a great role Islamic thought played in the development of mathematics and astronomy, which in their syncretistic approach to the knowledge of the origins of the universe and human beings took on a character almost of holy magic. But are not poetry and music the same magic? It is revelation descending into the hearts of those who try to grasp the meaning of human existence.

For these reasons, some scholars of Hamlet Isaxanli’s poetry have given it the designation Neosufism. This opinion is especially promoted by Turaj Atabaki, historian and translator from the Netherlands. The remark of Hans Ahmed Schmide, German philologist and translator, is also noteworthy: “While reading your poems I felt sure again that there is a highly interesting mutual connection between mathematics and poetry.”

Indeed, his thoughts—based on a foundation of reason—piece together a graceful, equation-like structure of metaphorical verse out of the multifaceted natures of different spheres, which are normally inaccessible to

everyday minds accustomed to linear schemes of thought. To that end, the material world—or more accurately, the absence of material things—is the leitmotif of the book *Contrasts*.

By all indications, the poet and mathematician Hamlet Isaxanli is no stranger to medieval Arabic/Islamic philosophy with its ideas of the emanation of Many from One, the return of Many into One, and the presence of One as Many. These ideas generate various emotions that characterize the book *Contrasts*: excitement created by the sensation of the presence of One manifested in nature and human life, reverence before the Divine beginning in the smallest details of earthly existence... Though these feelings are the most prominent themes of the book, they are still elegantly understated.

An exaggerated demonstration of feelings or faith symbols would be uncharacteristic of Isaxanli's work. This mood can only be sensed from the intonations and whispered plots of his lyrics. The name *Contrasts* is paradoxical, in that it seems to proclaim the aesthetic preferences and views of the author; however, upon reading the collection, it becomes clear that the author leaves much to the individual choice of the reader. From his very first poem "Oldest Nostalgia, Oldest Question" he offers not answers, but questions, stirring up within the reader the desire to work out all the complexities of the human condition. The human himself is a vessel of both good and evil, and even the universe (of which he is a part) is based on contrasts.

Isaxanli is not afraid of questions which are sometimes considered to be trivial and even banal. As a scientist he knows very well that even these types of questions give rise to great discoveries, or at least lead towards them. His questions are unlike the illusions created by cynical and experienced minds which, knowing the prices of all things but having no idea of their value, may create only, as Alexander Blok noted, "beautiful coils around emptiness."

From the logic of the questions posed by the poet in the aforementioned poem, it becomes clear that his love for the creative world is inseparable from a keen moral sense, from the sense of responsibility to his calling. The universal question "why am I alive?" gives rise to an important personal

application: “what did I bring to this world?” Sometimes the following development is even reached: “what will become of all my efforts?” And if anything remains, “if what I have sown will germinate, how will these little shoots bear storms?” But this is not a major point for the poet. This final question leads the readers to the culminating thought of a poem that is small, but acts as keynote for the whole book: “If these sprouts stand strong, **at what cost** will they live?”

Isn't it true that in modern life, which is “sown” with questions, we rarely hear this question raised? In fact, on the answer of this question certainly depends not only an individual fate but, to make a bold generalization, also the future of mankind. After all, at what cost are happiness, success, prosperity and peace achieved? For Hamlet Isaxanli, cost is the boundary around the field of ideas about personal and universal values. But if we are to cross outside this boundary, then for the sake of what?

Truthfully, the answer to this question is not stated directly, but it is implied in the undertones of the question. The answer to this question penetrates Isaxanli's book, full of lyrical thoughts and doubts, memoirs and fleeting impressions, where the helmsman is the poet's soul.

Before we launch into the space of his poetry, let us look (albeit briefly) at the biography of the author.

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One of the greatest Russian poets of the 20th century, responding to a biographical questionnaire for a magazine, felt it sufficient to give a scarce enumeration of the main features of his work. However, at the end he added a profound phrase: “The rest is in my poems.” Any true artist could probably make use of this statement. It is my opinion that Hamlet Isaxanli is no exception. Nevertheless, the majority of Hamlet Isaxanli's biography as a poet and human is not random or incidental, but interconnected. First of all, features of his life appear both in the scientific field and in literary activity, such as aspirations toward perfection and colossal giftedness. It would be a myth to say that a poet writes his poems with the same spontaneous ease as a bird sings. Besides, who has ever asked birds how they sing?

Hamlet Abdulla oglu Isayev (Isaxanli is his pen name in poetry and in research conducted in the humanities and social sciences) was born on March 1, 1948 in the village of Kosali in the Gardabani district of the Republic of Georgia. That little boy from a remote village finished secondary school with a gold medal (the highest academic award), and then he graduated in 1970 from the College of Mechanics and Mathematics at Azerbaijan State University (present day Baku State University) with honors.

His desire to be more deeply involved in scientific activity led him to continue his studies by enrolling in the PhD program (*aspirantura*) at M. V. Lomonosov Moscow State University, one of the best higher education institutions in the world. In 1973 he defended a dissertation leading to an academic degree of Candidate of Physical/Mathematical Sciences (equivalent to a PhD in mathematics).

From 1973 to 1988 Hamlet Isayev conducted independent research at the Institute of Mathematics and Mechanics of Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, at M. V. Lomonosov Moscow State University, and at the V.I. Steklov Institute of Mathematics in the USSR Academy of Sciences. During this time he wrote fundamental works in various fields of mathematics.

In 1983 Hamlet Isayev successfully defended a dissertation leading to an academic degree of Doctor of Physical/Mathematical Sciences (D.S.) at the V.I. Steklov Institute of Mathematics—an impressive achievement for such a young scholar.

In 1990-1991, in spite of the war and the social and economic catastrophes suffered by the country, H. Isayev was assigned by a resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Azerbaijan to undertake vast organizational activities to start a new higher education institution. As a result, he established Khazar University, which subsequently achieved wide fame in the international arena. This university, under the leadership of H. Isayev, is now a recognized center of education, research and culture.

Hamlet Isayev is the author of a numerous articles, monographs and textbooks on mathematics; social sciences and humanities; history of science and education; history of literature, culture and civilization; and theory and history of translation. Besides writing, he finds time to give

lectures and to make speeches and presentations world-wide. He is also a thoughtful editor of scientific journals and magazines, monographs, textbooks, and dictionaries.

People of such an encyclopedic scale are often compared with the masters of the Renaissance. Hamlet Isayev's (Isaxanli's) many-sided, versatile activity has been recognized and is widely reflected in literary, periodical and scientific articles and books written by different authors. Even songs and other musical works have been composed based on his poems.

Jamal Mustafayev (professor, honored scientist, and Doctor of Philosophy) characterizes the poet: "Hamlet Isaxanli's area of interests is extraordinarily broad. *He unites rational thought with the spiritual culture, deriving great benefit from European, Eastern, and Russian scientific and literary thought. This does not tear him from his roots; on the contrary, it stimulates a deep understanding of our spiritual essence.*"

Poet Zalimxan Yagub draws readers' attention to the following: "Hamlet Isaxanli, having an enormous scientific potential and recognizing the poetry in mathematics, carries out with dignity the will of the great poet Fizuli who said: *"Poetry without science is a building without a foundation."*

Hamlet Isaxanli was awarded a number of prizes for his great achievements in scientific, educational and poetical works and activities. He has also been elected a member of well-known international organizations. Some of his achievements are as follows:

Yusif Mammadaliyev Prizewinner (1994), Co-chairman of Azerbaijani Rectors' Council since 1996, member of Board of Governors of Eurasia Foundation - Caucasus (1997-1999), member of Board of Governors of Open Society Institute -Azerbaijan (1998-2004), President of the Association of Azerbaijani Private Universities since 2001, member of the International Academy of Sciences (2002), "Golden Pen" prizewinner for his achievements in Poetry and Creative Writing, "Samad Vurgun Prize" winner for his services in the development of Azerbaijani culture and literature (2005), member of the Russian Academy of Pedagogical and Social Sciences (2005), member of Education Commission under the President of Azerbaijan (2005).

Hamlet Isaxanli's books of poems *Contrasts (Təzadlar-2001)* and *This is Life as Well (Bu da Bir Həyatdı - 2004)* were published first in the Republic of Azerbaijan, then these books were released in the city of Tabriz, Iran (Iranian Azerbaijan) in Arabic script. Another of Hamlet Isaxanli's books of poems, *Feelings Turning into Poems, (Şeirə Donən Duyğular - 2004)* was also published in Tabriz. In Tbilisi his book *Poetry of Life (Həyat Poeziyası)*, published in 2004, was translated into Georgian and won the hearts of readers. At present he has two more books of poems in the process of being published.^{1*}

Hamlet Isaxanli's poems have also been translated into Russian, English, Chinese, Turkish, Georgian, Estonian and other languages. Isaxanli himself completed masterful translations of Russian, English, and French poetry into Azerbaijani, including the works of well-known poets such as V. A. Jukovskiy, E. Baratinskiy, F. I. Tutchev, A. Fet, N. Qumilev, A. Akhmatova, S. Esenin, G. G. Byron, W. Blake, R. Gerrik, J. Nerval and others.

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Hamlet Isaxanli's scientific and literary activities have received manifold reviews, but one fact is impossible to overlook: the poet and his works are appreciated in full agreement with the traditional Eastern approach, which pays attention to personal character beyond just a person's public achievements. In this approach, proof of success is still not enough to earn praise, especially in the Eastern worldview where the Western concept of success is indeed viewed as negative. Rather, importance is attached to the perfection of a poet (again in accordance with al-Farabi), and this perfection comprises the happiness gained only by means of knowledge and virtuous behavior. To confirm this fact, let us take note of the praise offered for the book *What Did I Bring to This World?: "There are some people who live meaningful and full lives; they gain glorious success; they become examples for people around them; they leave pleasant memories in others' hearts.* Professor Hamlet Isaxanli is one of these rare personalities *who is highly favored by the public at large for his scientific achievements, fruitful*

¹ His two books of poetry, *Dörtlüklər (Quatrains)* and *Ziyarət (Pilgrimage)* were published in Baku, Azerbaijan in 2007 and 2009 accordingly.

enlightenment activity, inspired poetic talent and excellent human qualities.”

Theologian Aziz Punhan notes, “*In Isaxanli’s works one can trace high culture and morality, spirit and the richest intellect.*”

Poet Muzaffar Shukur also emphasizes the poet's human charm: “I was pleasantly surprised at Hamlet Isaxanli’s modesty and simplicity, which are characteristic only of bright personalities. These mark the manifestation of high intellect and morality. His poetry unites a European outlook with Eastern wisdom.”

The thoughts of Iranian scholar-philologist Yunus Vahdati complete these observations: “*Hamlet’s poems rise from the bottom of his heart to caress the soul; his poems revive the reader. They are earnest and pleasant, and their beauty comes from their simplicity.*”

Hamlet Isaxanli's contemporary, writer Movlud Suleymanli, called his poetry “*an expression of an eternal word.*”

In their numerous letters addressed to the poet, readers describe his poems as most worthy of praise for their organic unity of sincere simplicity with deep thoughts, reflecting the remarkable harmony of his inner world.

“*Your poems are beautiful,*” succinctly summarized the Chinese Central Translations Publishing House in their letter addressed to the author. If we take into account the nuances of the Chinese perception of beauty with its millennia of philosophical roots, we see that such an appraisal is of considerable value.

All these thoughts in connection to Isaxanli’s literary activity have also given critics an opportunity to speak about the developments of “*new processes*” and “*artistic innovation of forms*” in contemporary Azerbaijani poetry through Isaxanli’s poems. (For example, one such statement has been made by poet and philologist Turan Matin from Turkey.)

However, it is thought that Hamlet Isaxanli's muse—or what defines the substance of his poetry—is his ideal which has its origin in the Eastern philosophical worldview, as noted above. He writes in the tradition of Nizami, Fizuli, Vidadi and Vagifa. Hamlet Isaxanli would never follow in

the path of European thinking with all its idols, as the following quote from classic English poetry reveals:

*“And new philosophy calls all in doubt,
The element of fire is quite put out;
The sun is lost, and the earth, and no man's wit
Can well direct him where to look for it . . .”*

If we interpret the sun in this quote as **“formative light”** or “the Supreme Mind” of Neo-Platonism, and we take the Earth to be the center and foundation of the world, then there is nothing more foreign to the position of philosopher Isaxanli than the aforementioned outlook.

For if the sun should ever cease to be the source and meaning of life and the Earth to vanish from its post as life’s foundation, then there would only remain death and chaos to believe in. In that case, it would not be necessary for artists to visit heaven or hell in search of answers to the questions troubling the human condition. For Isaxanli, such searching is important. His words are not empty when he writes, *“What would I ask of Fate? -Not a gift. To be protected from reproof, negation, doubt, and empty or severe words.”*

Poet and translator Imir Mammadli, hinting at the universal nature of Isaxanli’s poetic utterances, writes, *“His creative work as a whole is a bouquet of pleasant words and elevated greetings addressed to each human and to all mankind.”* Here it is worth mentioning that there is no universalism which is not some type of mask for an author. Everything he says, including his logic, is a pretext for him to create his poetical autobiography. His sense of “me” infects, in some way, even well-known ideas; reality appears to him through his own presuppositions. His languor turns into new criteria, into unique reality—*his reality*. And this is inimitable uniqueness; creative individuality can only be interesting to certain circles of readers from different backgrounds. Each original poet burns with his own flame, and he is always seen as some kind of heretic in relation to generally accepted opinions and to the trends of what is fashionable.

Even as I have remarked about the translator, I find it necessary to repeat here that Hamlet Isaxanli is incredibly fortunate to have had *Contrasts*

(selected works from two books - *Təzadlar* and *Bu da Bir Həyatdı*) translated into Russian and compiled by Alla Axundova, who is herself a delicate lyric poet with a rich cultural outlook. She has very skillfully transferred the Azerbaijani master's variety and richness of talent into the language of Pushkin and Lermontov. After all, translation is always an endeavor to foretell the fate of a poet from his words, and Alla Axundova has achieved her purpose.

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While reading poetry one always wonders: How are these poems born? What is the first stimulus for the poet, the awakening image or association to rhythm and melody before the words were placed into lines? Let's remember Blok's words: "Sound approaches, and the soul, humbled by the sound, grows colder." Anna Akhmatova adds, "If only you knew from what kind of rubbish those poems shamelessly spring up." Even those two examples can show that artists' senses can be "tuned" very differently.

I think memory plays a great role in tuning Hamlet Isaxanli's poetic senses. I use "memory" here not only as it relates to one human, but also as a cultural phenomenon. I am speaking of the type of memory which the sage Ibn Bajja invokes in his "farewell letter," where he discusses spiritual and heartfelt memories that are realistic enough to seem like communication between creative people and their gone or distant loved ones. This type of "contact" may be accomplished when we believe in eternal truths about the immortal soul. The shared experience of memories helps us to acknowledge a great humanist idea about the unity of the human world and the possibility of coming to mutual understanding in the process of getting to know *other* views.

Yes, time "rubs out most of the manuscript of memory," the poet says, "but the heart does not part from the past even for a moment." It is only memory which can preserve spiritual forms that were engraved on the honest deeds of the past. Nevertheless, the author's high sensitivity doesn't mean in any way that he carries out his creative works in the detachment of an abstract sphere. Quite the opposite is true; the attractiveness of Isaxanli's poetry is that he opens the door wide to a diverse and colorful reality, but he never

lets out of his sight the main purpose of his creative work: “to nurture morality and teach kindness.”

A reader will be quite sure of this moral aim after skimming a few of Isaxanli’s bright poems, such as “Good and Evil,” “Where are we?,” “White and Black,” or “Roots.” The poem “Do You Remember?” distinguishes itself from others for its tragic profundity. The best of his poems are understood as a confession of a clever and proud heart – a confession addressed to himself, and to each of us, who will have to pass through our own earthly path as a human, in the fullest sense of the word.

Hamlet Isaxanli explores one very perceptive memory in the recollections he makes in one of his best poems, “A bird in the sea.” One reader wrote about this amazing miniature: “It takes a real poet to see the tears of the dying bird with a broken wing.”

However, the poem does not limit itself to commemorating one situation. It gives birth to a feeling more complex than sorrow. The poet has a gift to be able to “see” and express in words the “crumpled silk” of a “touch-me-not poppy” or the “deathly yellowness” of an autumn garden. He deals here with the fragility of life in general, blame, and the human responsibility to care for nature surrounding us. At times people wrongly accept the mute silence of nature as meekness, but poets exist for the purpose of clarifying this, because “all is clear to poets.”

With his poetry Hamlet Isaxanli informs his readers that there is no way to avoid the complete disappearance that inevitably accompanies mortality except to preserve our lives in the heavens. Each of us carries his own worth or his own shortcoming into the world, where the drowning bird and you, staring into the ancient waters of the Bosphorus, are united...

Summary

An invitation to wander

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“An invitation to wander” is Lyudmila Lavrova’s introduction to the book *Contrasts*, collection of poems by Hamlet Isaxanli which were translated from Azerbaijani into Russian by Alla Akhundova (Izograf, Moscow, 2006). Lavrova describes Isaxanli’s poetry as “transparent and simple,” comparing him to a medieval Arab-Islamic philosopher because of the themes throughout his works of “Many and One.” Even in small details of life and nature, he finds cause to revere the Divine. His poetry is also notable for its connection to mathematics and its foundation of reason. This is logical given Isakhanli’s background as a mathematician; Lavrova offers an extensive biography of the poet and a list of awards he has won. Despite the mathematic and rational foundations of his work, his poetry is not limited to being appreciated by a Western audience; Lavrova points out that Isakhanli’s poetry is also considered beautiful by Eastern standards of aesthetics. In fact, from an Eastern perspective, even more important than his “success” is his personal character, which is also worthy of esteem. Lavrova also discusses the origins of his inspiration for his works, concluding that the goal of Isakhanli’s poetry is to “nurture morality.”