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ABDULLA QAHHOR IS A STORY MASTER

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ABSTRACT: - In the anglophone world, Central Asia remains somewhat of a terra incognita on the map of literary traditions; thus, whenever a translation from the region does appear in English, it is something to celebrate. Today, there is reason to do so thanks to the efforts of Christopher Fort, a scholar of Uzbek literature and an assistant professor of general education at the American University of Central Asia.

KEYWORDS: Author, novel, times, literature, novel, metaphor.

INTRODUCTION

Fort has just published a partial translation of Tales from the Past, the literary autobiography of Abdullah Qahhor (1907-1968), arguably the greatest master of the Uzbek short story from the Soviet period. While the full translation will come out later next year, a large excerpt—including the foreword and the first chapter—is available to read online, providing a rare insight into Qahhor's world and his role as a key public intellectual, navigating the political minefield of the Stalinist period and its aftermath. His other works include two novels: Mirage and The Lanterns of Qo'shchinor.

Uzbek literature is a rich field encompassing different languages, alphabets, and traditions—one of which is the Soviet Uzbek literature from the 1920s to the 1980s, mostly written in Cyrillic Uzbek and Russian. The beginning and the end of this period can be characterized as times of exciting diversity, unlike its heavily censured middle period. To understand the twenties, it is necessary to go

back to the late nineteenth century, when an innovative generation of intellectuals—the Jadids, who took their name from the concept of "usul-i-jadid," or "the new method"—revolutionized the literary landscape of what was then Tsarist Turkestan, one of Russia's latest conquests in Central Asia. By the early 1920s, this generation had created a golden age of Uzbek literature, which produced the first novels ever written in Uzbek, experimenting with various form and themes. However, the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, targeting independent intellectuals across the entire Soviet Union, put a brutal end to this period, sending many prominent writers to jail, camps, and eventually to their death.

After the thirties, a new generation of writers emerged in Uzbekistan, having pledged full loyalty to the demands of political correctness and socialist realism—the Moscow-imposed model of writing fiction. Abdulla Qahhor, G'afur G'ulom, and Oybek were among the most famous names. However, as Fort himself explains, this generation is more linked with its predecessors than it might appear: "These authors later demonstrate some regret over their participation in Stalin's purges of their forefathers. While relatively quiet in the 1930s, Qahhor in particular became a major voice of opposition in the Soviet Uzbek literary establishment of the 1950s, advocating for less oversight from the Writers' Union [the powerful institution that dictated the correct political line for writers in every Soviet Republic]. He also produced the only piece of Uzbek literature, of which I'm aware, written for the drawer. His Earthquake, written in the 1960s but first published in 1987, illustrates some of the terror of the purges and, depending on how one reads it, some guilt for his complicity in them."

During the Soviet period, Qahhor was celebrated for his mastery of the short story and for his criticism of pre-Soviet Uzbek society. But here again, he remained a reformer of some kind, perhaps still influenced by the ethics of the Jadids, who were known for publicly criticizing any abuse of power—including, at the time, of Muslim clerics, something that initiated numerous attacks upon them from the conservative parts of society. Fort points out that: "In the 1950s, Qahhor began to cultivate a public self-image as a sagacious observer of the past, who uses wisdom to vigilantly police the present for vestiges of corruption, self-dealing, and other vices. He particularly emphasized this aspect of himself in conflicts with other members of the literary establishment. At the celebration of his sixtieth birthday, attended by Sharof Rashidov—a fellow writer but better known as the First Secretary of Uzbekistan's Communist Party—Qahhor famously addressed Rashidov, saying: 'I am not an ordinary soldier of the Party, but a conscientious member, and for that reason, I do not salute with every step I take.'"

As the Soviet Union embraced perestroika and began to tolerate more open debates about culture and identity, allowing a partial revision of the Soviet past, Qahhor's name started to resurface in relation to this incident. After the 1991 collapse of the USSR, many prominent authors who operated in the Soviet period underwent various reassessments—and for some, new canonization processes. Writers who had written in their national languages were of particular interest, since Russian has been promoted and privileged over all other language. Thus, Qahhor became the focus of even greater attention.

Fort shares an interesting element to describe the post-Soviet canonization of key Uzbek figures: "Contemporary Uzbekistani commentators have kept the sagacious Qahhor while erasing his conflict with Rashidov—on which the mythology was partially built. Rashidov, despite his vilification

in the late Soviet era, has now been accepted as a great Uzbek hero, working towards the country's eventual independence. The national ideology promoted under the previous president, Islam Karimov, held that all such heroes of Uzbek culture worked together united towards that end of independence; therefore, conflicts between major Uzbek figures had to be downplayed."

Today, Qahhor is considered a classic, present in school and university curriculums—a rather ironic twist, as he is often referred to in such textbooks as the "Uzbek Chekhov" for his mastery of the short story. Interestingly, Qahhor also worked as a translator, and translated some of Chekhov's short stories as early as in the 1930s. Speaking on the link made by the official discourse between the two writers, Fort explains:

"While Qahhor eliminates the irony from Chekhov in much of his work—some of which is humorous, but certainly not Tales from the Past—he adds in his desire to shock the audience to attention via precise word choice. We see this best in a passage from the chapter 'To'raqul the Shoeseller,' in which the eponymous merchant and patron of Qahhor's family orders eighty sickles from the elder Qahhor as payment for staying in his home. Abduqahhor, the young Abdulla's father, had hoped to produce additional sickles to then sell to supply his household needs, but the shoe seller repeatedly cheats the family by collecting all the sickles produced at the end of the day, never counting them towards the debt of eighty. This greed is obvious enough to the family, but it is only the young, observant Qahhor who notices that To'raqul's outward appearance of a minor swindler conceals a corrupted soul. Another boy, Holiq, whom Qahhor meets in the street, convinces the young narrator to follow him to share some cherries with Xayri, the youngest wife of To'raqul. Qahhor writes:

I hadn't even known the shoe seller had a wife. Whenever he left his ichkari, he locked it, and no sound of a wife ever emerged from there. Xayri would apparently put a basket in the ariq for Holiq to then float the things he had gathered to her . . .

[When we arrived,] the courtyard was completely silent . . . After a moment, the tip-tap of soft steps and a light ringing sounded out . . . On one side of the large courtyard, a tiny girl appeared, wearing the long white dress of an older wife and a European-made handkerchief over her head, contrasting sharply with the sochpopuk in her hair, which jingled as she played with a ball.

Qahhor endeavors to shock the reader through subtle yet evocative detail, rather than declaration and naming. This child narrator offers little more than that which is quoted above; he does not state after this description that To'raqul is a pedophile, but instead lets his Uzbek Soviet reader—who would have been aware of the myriad Soviet efforts to rid Uzbekistan of underage pairings—draw that conclusion for themselves. Omitting an overly didactic summary of the episode forces readers to focus on the incongruous images that Qahhor highlights; the girl wears the white dress of an older married woman and is locked in the interior of the house; the ichkari, away from the eyes of neighbors who might covet her as a sexual object, indicates that she is a sexual object. Yet, her hair is adorned with sochpopuk, a Persianate decoration of silk, cloth, and little metal spheres and bells, woven into the hair of young virgin girls, and she also plays with a ball, both of which suggest she should not be seen as a sexual object. Though Qahhor does not mention sex, these contrasting images shock the reader by forcing him/her to imagine how this girl has been violated and deprived of her innocence."

Translating a Soviet Uzbek author requires particular skill, for two main reasons: there is little awareness in the anglophone world about the culture and habits of Uzbek society, as illustrated by the excerpt above, but more challenging is perhaps the attempt to transfer into English what is being read between the lines in Uzbek. Qahhor wrote at a time of heavy Soviet censorship in the name of socialist realism, yet a reader of that time would have been able to detect allusions, subtle irony, and veiled criticism—all of which could only be alluded to in a very coded way. Fort explains: "Perhaps one of the main obstacles in translating this author into English was in changing the expectations of the audience. Certainly, when first reading it, I was myself looking for an author who was subtly and markedly critiquing the Soviet order as some kind of Uzbek analogue to the Russian dissident. There are critiques in his work to be sure, but nothing systemic; Qahhor very much lived and wrote within the bounds of Soviet discourse. So it's a challenge to explain to the Western reader—who so often looks for that politically challenging content—that one has to approach the text with an eye to the ways Qahhor challenged the political authority of his day from within the system, like in his conflict with Rashidov above, and the ways in which he fashioned himself."

Judging from the excerpt, Fort has done a masterful job in finding the appropriate English to transfer Qahhor's style, as well as the cultural and historical intricacies of that period. This merits attention, given that translations directly from Uzbek to English remain extremely scarce; as mentioned earlier, the few recent exceptions are Hamid Ismailov's Manaschi, translated by Donald Rayfield; Ismailov's Gaia, Queen of Ants, translated by Shelley Fairweather-Vega; Abdullah Qodiriy's O'tkan Kunlar (Bygone Days), translated by Mark Edward Reese; as well as Fort's own translation of Abdulhamid Cho'lpon's Night and Day.

The rare occurrence of translations from the Uzbek can be explained by several factors. First, Russian literature has traditionally been overprivileged in the field of studies and translations related to the former Soviet space. As a result, qualified translators from the Uzbek are rare, which makes anglophone publishers less inclined to "take a risk" with a literature most still consider as "unknown." Additionally, there lacks a sound translation program on the side of the Uzbek government. As Fort explains: "Around the 2000s, the Writers' Union of Uzbekistan began employing the country's various college graduates in foreign languages to translate works of their choosing into foreign languages. But these graduates had rarely spent any time living abroad, so as a result, the Writers' Union printed—in very nice and expensive editions—a number of near Google Translate-quality literary translations that held prestigious value. They would be presented to foreign dignitaries as proof of Uzbekistan's investment in bilateral relations, or to dignitaries within the government as proof that the Writers' Union was fulfilling its goal of spreading Uzbek culture." Fort is confident, however, that a new generation of researchers and translators, both Uzbek and non-Uzbek, is coming to the fore to multiply translations.

For now, anglophone readers can get a taste of Qahhor's bittersweet irony through Fort's labors, perhaps best illustrated by this quote from Chapter One:

On another night, my father brought me to the samovar at one of the teahouses. There was a crowd of men there, all laughing. A large lamp in the center of the teahouse illuminated the platforms where the patrons were lying and chatting. My father led me between those platforms until we arrived at one where the

men there made room for us. From which side of the platform, I couldn't tell, came a thin, yet powerful voice singing a song. I looked around furtively until my father pointed to horn so large that no one could take it in their embrace. As I looked at it, I noticed that the song came from inside the horn that was attached to a yellow box. I had heard of this "song-machine" before, but I had never seen one. I stared at it intently. When the song ended, a new voice replaced the old: "thank you, Hamroqul-qori!" I couldn't figure it out. There must have been some little mustachioed men imprisoned in that yellow box.

Filip Noubel was raised in a Czech-French family in Tashkent, Odesa, and Athens. He later studied Slavonic and East Asian languages in Tokyo, Paris, Prague, and Beijing. He has worked as a journalist and media trainer in Central Asia, Nepal, China, and Taiwan, and is now managing editor for Global Voices Online. He is also a literary translator, interviewer, editor-at-large for Central Asia for Asymptote, guest editor for Beijing's DanDu magazine, and book reviewer for the New Welsh Review. His translations from Chinese, Czech, Russian, and Uzbek have appeared in various magazines, and include the works of Yevgeny Abdullayev, Bakh Akhmedov, Radka Denemarková, Jiří Hájíček, Huang Chong-kai, Hamid Ismailov, Martin Ryšavý, Tsering Woeser, Guzel Yakhina, and David Zábranský, amongst others.

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