Latif Pedram

The Library is on Fire

The historian Ata-ol Molk Djoveini tells of the arrival of Genghis Khan at the mosque of Bukhara, a major cultural center of the times with a vast library:

"They carried chests of books and sacred manuscripts into the courtyard of the mosque and dumped them onto the ground, they used the chests as feeding racks in the stables, they drank glasses of wine and summoned the city's musicians so they could dance and have fun inside the mosque. The Mongols sang; they shouted for someone to assuage their thirst; they ordered the Imams, the wise men, the religious scholars, the clan chiefs and all the notables to serve them and to stand guard over the horses. Genghis Khan decided to leave for his palace, followed by his men who trampled the pages torn from the sacred book that had fallen into the debris. At that moment Amir Imam Jalaleddin Ali ben Hassan Al-Rendi, the supreme religious leader of Transoxiana, turned to Imam Rokneddin Imamzadeh, the eminent scholar, and asked him: 'What is happening to us, Molana? Is this a dream, or is it real?' Molana Imamzadeh replied: 'Say no more. It is the wind of God's wrath blowing, and we no longer have enough strength to speak.'"

On August 18, 1998 the wind of divine wrath blew once again on Pol-I Khomri, a city in northern Afghanistan…

Through the little window of the hideout where I took refuge, I watched the Taliban burn books on the city's main public square. I was the sad witness of this autodafé of the 55,000 books from the Hakim Nasser Khosrow Balkhi Cultural Center. It was as if Genghis Khan, disguised as Mollah Omar (the Taliban leader) had entered the city with his army to repeat the most tragic event of our history. At that moment I too did not have the strength to speak. I knew the story of how the Mongols had destroyed the Houses of Knowledge.[1] I had also read the accounts of the sacking of the Ismailian library by the army of Holakou Khan and at a later date the burning of Persepolis by Alexander. This time it was not something recounted by Rachid-olddin

1. *These were centers for study founded at Khorassan and Baghdad by Nezam-ol Molk, the powerful minister of the Selgoukides in the seventh century.*

Fazlollah, or Ata-ol Molk Djoveini. This was an event taking place before my eyes at the dawn of the third millennium. It is the duty of the intellectual to be the chosen witness of his times but I would have preferred never to have been witness to the martyrdom of spirituality, culture, and the written word by agents of ignorance and sorcery. Through this repetition of a tragedy so often repeated in the history of our civilization, Afghanistan shamefully entered the twenty-first century.

I come from Afghanistan, a country that for nine years has been involved in a war of resistance against the Soviet Union. A country that struggles hopelessly in a whirlwind of civil wars that leave in their path hundreds of thousands dead and millions who are physically or psychically wounded. A "ruined land," an "exhausted land," a devastated country that could engrave on its pediments the words that Dante wrote at the entrance to hell: "Abandon every hope, ye that enter." The resistance of language, the struggle against censorship, the determination to win freedom—these are the themes comprising the daily dialogue among writers and intellectuals of this country, but most of them have been sent before firing squads, have had to go into exile, or still are waiting, always waiting, for the sudden coming of their own death in this hell that Afghanistan has become. This daily dialogue is no longer anything more than a bitter dirge, the tale told by "Finnegans" inevitably in mourning for themselves.

Afghanistan has been ruled by bloody repression, absolute unbounded despotism for twenty years. Garcia Lorca's words express its atmosphere: "only sighs still slave away." We, the poets and writers of Afghanistan, are prisoners of this embodiment of stupidity which has descended upon us like a lead weight. There is no prevailing order in this country and the dictators, the ebdals[2] are simultaneously the center of everything and its orbit. This is why we, the exiled Afghan writers, are attempting to make ourselves heard in other countries—to say what we have to say. At the heights of disillusionment we hope that our true needs will finally be satisfied.

If the three tyrannies that have dominated Afghan society have anything in common it is the hatred borne by all three—Mongol, Communist, and Taliban—for books which they have systematically destroyed. When the Communist Party took control, the liquidation of non-conformists began. A mountain of books from the library of the University of Kabul, which were judged to be "bourgeois," or "capitalist," by the democratic party were collected and destroyed. When they could not destroy all the books they were locked away to mildew in cellars. During the bloody dictatorships of Taraki and Amin a great many young people and intel-

2. *Ebdals are "little saints" and represent a certain level in the hierarchy of sufi saints.*

lectuals were imprisoned or executed simply because they had read or possessed books that did not correspond to the "Party line."

Whether before or after the Islamic revolution it has always been possible for a Zahak to appear in our countries. We have had the communist, Hafizollah Amin,[3] and the Muslim, Molla Omar. Our "cheerful lack of concern" between the appearances of such men can be explained by our inability to look at the past and analyze it. Ahmad Chamlou[4] was right: "We have no historic memory." That is why we are always taken by surprise.

During the 1970s and 1980s we were suddenly engulfed by djudanovian literature. After the government's publication of the "Seven Orders"[5] we had to advance by leaps and bounds.

In the beginning we were happy because the immobile Afghan society was suddenly thrust into the whirlwind of history. During these so-called "libertarian" times, we rushed in with slogans like "justice, liberty, socialism." We never asked ourselves the questions like those Adorno or Horkheimer asked: "Why doesn't humanity enter into conditions that are humane rather than drowning itself in a new form of barbarism?" Then when the Communist regime was established and dozens of intellectuals, poets and writers were executed and thousands of us were imprisoned (even fifteen-year-olds, which was what happened to me), we understood, as Hafez said "what the dawn brings us"—where we stood on the chessboard of history.

The power of the People's Party (a satellite of the Soviet Union) caused certain changes and an awakening of political thought; even if this was by means of a "proletkult" literature and "Socialist realism." But Stalinism very quickly showed its real face: even the simplest of protests on the part of intellectuals were punished. It was forbidden to form political parties, unions or artists' and writers' associations outside of State structures. All movements, whether they were Marxist, Islamic or nationalist were severely repressed. The beginning of the armed struggle drove many writers and intellectuals opposing the regime to take refuge in the guerrilla camps and, once again, the movement toward freedom started off in an undemocratic manner. This was perhaps due to the misfortune of intellectuals in the outlying quarters. People whose profession consists of writing and who should do their fighting with pen in hand, found themselves in a situation so untenable that they finally took up other weapons. This is how, in a country like mine, it becomes paradoxical to

3. President and head of the People's Party of Afghanistan (Communist). He was assassinated in December 1979.

4. One of the greatest poets of the Persian language of our times.

5. Reforms that included, among others, agrarian reforms, the right to private property, the freedom of women, etc.

act democratically. Literary engagement is walking on the razor's edge. I myself was obliged, as a result of the political pressures of the pro-Soviet regime, to stop writing for the time being and to take refuge in the headquarters of Ahmad Shah Massoud in the Panjshir valley. I can still feel the terror of those days when I witnessed bombings and massacres in the rural regions and murders of the civilian population by both sides.

When "the wind of paradise" began to blow in Afghanistan in 1992, all sciences and arts that did not deal with "the noble subject" were thrust aside. After 1994 this wind rose to gale force. The Talibans have rung the death-knell for any resurrection. The national archives and the museum at Kabul, which contained the most important manuscripts and age-old cultural treasures, such as those by Ay Khanoum, Mandigak and Talla Tappeh, have been completely devastated and plundered. The area around the museum which fell into the hands of first one warring party and then another during the civil war, has been destroyed and there is nothing left of it now. The huge statues of Buddha at Bamiyan have been attacked and damaged and, if the Buddhists had not mounted a protest and Unesco issued a serious reprimand to the Taliban, they too would have been destroyed. The Taliban are against painting, sculpture, photography and music. What has become of the chalices of Jâm at Herat, masterpieces of the Timurid period?[6] We have no idea.

During the years when the People's Party's ruled, official associations of writers and artists were created. While works such as *The Mother*, and *The Steel Was Tempered* circulated widely, the Party's central committee ordered that the works of Nietzsche, Sartre, Beckett and Popper, among others, be withdrawn from all the libraries of Afghanistan. That was the beginning of a campaign of "cultural cleansing" to get rid of capitalist and western publications. Foreign books could not come into the country. Access to works by other writers in the Persian language, Iranian or Tajiki publications, became extremely difficult. Perhaps that is one of the things that prevented the rise of Persian literature and culture throughout the world, though we had hoped it would develop much as Arab and South American literature did, and for the same reasons.

How did we resist this form of Stalinism? And what happened to modern literature? What paths did it take to escape the clutches of the censor?

The first obstacle was the lack of political stability which made any sustained work impossible. The communist coup d'état in 1978, followed by the internal coup by Nadjib in 1984, then the creation of the first Islamic government in 1992, with the departure of

6. In the history of Persia and Afghanistan, the Timurid period was one of great brilliance. The Timurids were of Turkish origin and built their capital in the city of Herat in 1415.

Massoud's troops from Kabul in November 1994 and the arrival of the Taliban, forced us to have many different experiences. But all of these regimes, each in its own way, deprived us of freedom through repression, prison, denunciation, disappearance, etc. The pro-Soviet regime, confronted by extensive resistance and spreading combat waged by the armed forces, was compelled to cede some territory and then the methods of repression necessarily changed as well. Instead of embarking on open warfare the regime began to distribute newspapers to the population. A good many of those published during the years when Nadjib was in power were in reality government papers that were disguised to make it look like things were opening up. It was clear to us at the time that they were financed by the information agency, the formidable KHAD. *Weekly News*, while claiming to be critical of the government, was backed by the espionage agency. The regime wanted to use these newspapers to monitor and distort public opinion. In spite of a stifling system of censorship and control, the writers managed to find flaws in it and were able to exploit them by turning to metaphorical and allegorical language. Despite all the difficulties this was the richest contemporary period in Afghanistan because of the quality and quantity of literary production. There was a cheap literature, referred to as the workers' literature, or popular writing, which was financed and supported by the government. Its large printings contributed to the pro-Soviet propaganda machine. At the same time there were other, "independent" writers who pursued their underground activities. Forbidden short stories, plays or poems used to be duplicated and passed around as did manuscripts. The distribution took place at night. Despite all the dangers and pressures it was important to us that we remain in the country. We rejected the idea of emigrating and abandoning our profession to end up as cab drivers or waiters in some foreign country. Even less did we want to put up with the humiliation of the long lines waiting in front of welfare agencies in the host countries. So rather than becoming beggars we preferred this hell.

With the establishment of the Islamic government and the Taliban's coming to power even this minimum of cultural work was completely wiped out. The People's Party, at least, accepted the existence of "socialist" art and literature but the Mudjahiddin and the Taliban banned it all because "God does not accept those who paint and draw and warns the prophet against poets and people with fanciful ideas." Consequently all the cultural centers were off-limits. We were confronted with a complete negation of art and literature and there was no longer any flaw in the system to make use of. Everything was denied us. We had reached the point where we were asking ourselves (though the question meant something entirely differ-

ent from what it does here in the West): what can literature do?

This was the prevailing atmosphere when we were trying to work on freedom. And this is how we opted for aphorisms. Before turning to Adorno's Minima Moralia for inspiration, we dug deeply into the tradition of the literary masters and the Persian language. Literary creativity and aestheticism were at the heart of our concerns and as we ventured into the exposition of evil and violent acts, we were very careful to learn how not to set forth definitive truths and prejudices for our interlocutors. We knew very well the dangers of writing and the written word. It was not in books that we had learned what a single party regime was like or the nature of a ideological literature incorporating and consuming a single truth. Our school was our daily cohabitation with this literature and grammar of despotism. We created clandestine groups in order to continue working and distributing our works. Later we understood that this was not enough and that we were moving away from our real goal-literary creation. We then decided to dissolve our circles and devote ourselves to our individual work, thus escaping the dangers of groups, even if extremist leftist intellectuals and the political parties that took their inspiration from the "silent place of heavenly rest" and the "Kremlin's ruby star" accused us of abandoning our social responsibilities. And our group which, as Joachim de Fleuré put it, lived in "the third stage of history: the stage of the Holy Spirit," no longer believed in the official definition of social responsibility and literary engagement. And that was the beginning of self-destruction; we had done away with the functional meaning of our associations in order to be individual producers in an open space. This meant a break with the usual grammar, the usual text and the time-honored literary and social tradition. In order for the written word to be set free from the danger of clannishness, "associative illness," we had needed to cut back phenomenologically.

It has been several years now since the proletariat's shadow vanished from Afghanistan leaving room for the shadow of the Islamic oumma with its hyperboles. It does not tolerate dissident voices; it does not permit such voices. Today religion and literature are at war. How many works will find readers? How can anyone speak clearly about the direction that Afghan literature is taking? And yet, as Foucault said, "every work has meaning for the same reasons as a historical monument has meaning."

We have been engaged in civil war ever since Nadjib's government came to an end ten years ago. Neither Islamic jurisprudence, nor religion, nor the prophet, nor the sacred text have been able to provide us with a solution to put an end to this war. The reason and wisdom that should guide the fate of this poor land are in abeyance. How are we to find the road to freedom?

History has rarely seen a population so intent on its own massacre. Censorship, absolute silence, the annihilation of our cultural and historical past are only dreadful manifestations of this collective suicide. The language has been subjected to a shameful decline. For it holds no meaning, no message of hope for reconstruction: a whirlwind is bearing us off toward total degradation in the expectation of "the day of final judgment."

With the banning of arts such as painting, sculpture and dance, this backward-looking movement that the Taliban represents has increased in scale. Images revive idols, according to the Arabic Muslim tradition after the prophet. The image as a work of art, or indeed the work of art as an image or creation affirms the existence of a creator. A creator who could compete with God. But production and creation belong to God alone. In the Islamic society established by the Taliban therefore, no one has the right to paint sculpt or dance. Music is forbidden as well. Only epic and warrior poems and the tazieh (a traditional religious show) are allowed and only on the condition that they not be accompanied by music. According to certain Muslim legal experts any believer has permission to break or destroy musical instruments. Far from being considered a crime, the theft of instruments, according to these men of law, will be rewarded at the last judgment.

Only poetry, of all the artistic and cultural forms, has a certain freedom of expression in Afghanistan. Although Islam does not look favorably upon love poems, poetry offers great possibilities for expression; rhetorical figures, and the use of symbols and metaphors do not make the censors' task easy. Poetry occupies a unique position in our culture. Standing up to the power of political and religious censorship it runs into a great deal of hard feeling, even hatred. The collective sessions in which the Chahnameh is read, an important cultural tradition of the northern peoples of Afghanistan, have been banned by the Taliban. These sessions were not just literary. They did not simply resurrect historical memories but also functioned as political assemblies. Now it is considered a political crime merely to possess the text of the Chahnameh. Poetry is surely Afghanistan's art in distress.

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The Author—Latif Pedram

When waiting for Latif Pedram in central Paris this October I half-expected Mollah Omar himself to appear before me. What I got was infinitely more diplomat than despot. Pedram pulls up in a taxi wearing a suit and tie—he is softly spoken, pensive and instantly likeable. He does not smile often, and 'Library Is On Fire' is just one example of an extensive corpus of poetry and prose that suggests why not. Before the Taliban regime, Pedram taught literary criticism at the University of Kabul, worked as a journalist and ran several magazines. His speech now is pure poetry. Ask him why he writes, and he quotes cummings, Pound and Forster. He evaluates literature alongside science and philosophy and argues that writers have an inherent need to write, that they have the good fortune to find their hands full of words and images, and that literature frees words from the formulaic definitions imposed by fixed concepts. "It is only through literature that I can recreate this unusual world, the world I'd like to have."

Pedram is the co-founder of Open Asia, a Non-Governmental Organisation which champions cross-frontier dialogue across Eurasia, and which is concerned with arts and culture as well as humanitarian aid. In exile in Paris since 1998, Pedram feels the city's unrivaled literary enchantment makes it an ideal point of convergence for foreign writers. Unlike so many countries, France is a civilization that remembers and takes pride in its past—a past defined through literature. Pedram is unequivocal in his condemnation of air strikes on his already ravaged country but, wars aside, is equally unequivocal about the possibility of returning to Afghanistan: "I can't, I'm very much against the Taliban and they're very much against me." There is, perhaps, hope in the fact that the underground scene thrives to such an extent that 'exile literature' is fast establishing itself as a new genre of Afghan art. Yet the aesthetic revolution that necessarily follows every military coup means that "literature has been cut off from its public—it doesn't find its readers easily."

He's right, of course—it doesn't find its readers easily at all. But speaking to Latif Pedram I get the distinct impression that, as long as the writers write and the readers are patient, the real Afghanistan is indomitable.

Silvia Crompton met Latif Pedram in Paris
photo by Cate Woods