

Telling Iranian Tales in America A Review of Abbas Milani's *Tales of Two Cities*

"...that oldest human longing—self revelation." Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937, 1990).

"The quest for a story is the quest for a life. The search itself is the subject of a new kind of literature, what might be called a 'plebian autobiography'." Jill Johnston, "Fictions of the Self in the Making," *The New York Times Book Review* (25 April 1993).

"Look, Ma, I'm breathing. See me take my initial toddle, use the potty, scratch my sister, win spin the bottle. Gee whiz, my first adultery—what a guy!" William Gass, "The Art of Self: Autobiography in an Age of Narcissism," *Harper's Magazine* (May 1994).

The New York Times Magazine for 12 May 1996 was "A Special Issue" called "True Confessions." In the lead article, called "Confessing for Voyeurs: The Age of the Literary Memoir Is Now," James Atlas reports that some 200 memoirs got published in America in 1995 and that two dozen were being published in the spring of 1996, among them Abbas Milani's *Tales of Two Cities: A Persian Memoir* (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 1996, 263 pages). Atlas describes memoir writing today in these words: "It's a democratic genre—inclusive, a multi-culturalist would say. The old and the young. . . ; the famous and the obscure; the crazy and the sane: the contemporary memoir is like the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma in Kafka's fable 'Amerika,' where everyone can be an artist. Everyone can be an autobiographer." Abbas Milani acknowledges the Americanness of his *Tales of Two Cities* in this statement: "Memoirs are all but absent from the rich Iranian literary legacy. . . . In fact, when talking to Persian friends, I still refer to this narrative as a collection of essays about modernity. I beat around the bush. The word 'memoir' makes me uncomfortable. With American friends, my discomfort dissipates."

Tales of Two Cities reuses the title of Irish writer Dervla Murphy's story of Bradford and Birmingham, while echoing that of Charles Dickens' famous novel, and presents "tales" about a childhood in Tehran, adolescence and young adulthood in the San Francisco Bay area, and early professional life back in Tehran from 1975 to 1986. As it turns out, the book neither has a second city in it nor gets an objective correlative or other significance out of Tehran, where author Milani taught at a university in the mid-1970s, then spent a year in a Pahlavi prison for "writing pamphlets and leaflets against the Shah and his regime," witnessed the Iranian Revolution of 1978-9, and again taught at a university in the first years of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Abbas Milani's mother gave birth to twelve children, only five of whom survived. During her last delivery, Mrs. Milani's fallopian tubes were closed without her knowledge by a physician relative in attendance. Abbas Milani's "frugal" father was a merchant. He and Mrs. Milani thought "children were a necessary nuisance." Mrs. Milani participated in religious fasts, hosted a weekly visit by a mullah, and "considered herself a follower of" Ruhollah Khomeini. As a Shi'ite, she used to burn effigies of Moslem Caliph Omar set up near their "malodorous outhouse" and spit on them and called him a "Sunni dog." Mrs. Milani also "believed in the magic of her dreams" and was anti-Semitic, causing young Abbas to grow up frightened by Jews. He also grew up thinking that assaults on Iranian Baha'is were "righteous responses of the pious people of Tehran." As for Iran's monarch, the young Abbas "debated with great zeal . . . whether he actually defecated and if so, whether it was golden or made of organic material."

Mr. and Mrs. Milani made Abbas shave his head to go to school after a younger brother got "ringworm." Mrs. Milani screamed at Abbas on one occasion when she saw that he had his hand in his pajama bottoms ("Masturbation, we were told, weakened the eyesight, reduced virility and fertility, caused acne and nervous tics, and led to premature baldness"). Abbas was often sent to the coal bin in the cellar for punishment. And his parents also sent him to a public

school where "some teachers had designs on their students . . . Pederasty was a . . . pestilence of those days. Some students bartered sexual favors for higher . . . grades."

Abbas "suffocated under patriarchy," "was raised . . . with bigotry and rancor," and had a childhood deprived of "playfulness" because it was "contaminated with religion." Simple pleasures associated with the Ramazan month of fasting and the Iranian springtime New Year's celebrations are his fondest recollections of family life. Play with brothers and sisters during these years goes almost unmentioned. Family activities and outings likewise do not figure significantly in reminiscences, although the author recalls going to Mehrabad Airport to eat dinner as a grand excursion. His most vivid childhood memory, to which he devotes a whole chapter, was his "traumatic" circumcision at the age of eleven. He begins a chapter devoted to the most consequential event of his life in these words: "Four summers after my circumcision, I was on the plane to America."

Sent by his parents to school in California in 1964, the fifteen-and-a-half year-old Abbas enrolled at Oakland Technical High School and then at Merritt Community College. He worked to pay his way through school, first as a newspaper boy and later as a bartender. The majority of students at his high school and community college were African American. He had a two-year romance with an African American woman named "Caroline" at the junior college. He lived in Oakland "ghettoes" while in college because he, a self-declared Maoist, "wanted to be close to the 'oppressed masses'." His "anti-Americanism" led him to avoid watching the first landing of American astronauts on the moon.

Abbas Milani found his own way through puberty and sex. He recalls: "I remember my own first tango when I was sixteen. The close embrace of my partner, in spite of the heavy starch on her rented gown, gave me an erection. I pulled back, ashamed. It was only when I was forty that I mustered enough courage to ask the sweetheart of my middle years whether it was aesthetically acceptable for American men to have erections while dancing. 'Not only is it acceptable,' she said, 'its absence is almost a sign of malice'." Mr. Milani describes his first experience of sexual intercourse in these words: "The feel of this girl's lips and tongue was at once luscious and lurid. I was beset by sensual and emotional dissonance; craving consummation I was also repulsed by what in my vocabulary of those days could only be called lascivious lust. I was livid and aroused and mortified. Every cell was a volcano, with the lava of youth seething to erupt."

Mr. Milani does not describe his university training except to say that he "taught Persian at Berkeley in the late sixties" and that weeks after submitting a doctoral dissertation, he returned to Tehran, where it took him "all of ten minutes to be hired as an assistant professor of political science at the National University of Iran." He got married at this point to an Iranian woman called "Fereshteh"—they had "lived together in Berkeley for three years." He married despite his mother's objections and his father's threat: "I will disinherit you." He also made contact at this time with anti-Pahlavi opposition in Tehran. "Influenced . . . by the Russian notion of the intelligentsia," he became "a secular version of the warrior-knight messiah." The author writes that his activities were dangerous because "Patrols roamed the city in search of peripatetic revolutionaries." Several months later, he also joined "a 'think tank' connected to the queen" [Farah Diba Pahlavi] and occasionally thereafter wrote speeches for her.

Two years later, by this time in constant fear of arrest for his anti-regime pamphleteering, the author was arrested, as was his wife, and "thus began my six-month journey into the Komiteh ["Committee to Fight Terrorism"], and subsequent year-long imprisonment, including three weeks of solitary confinement. About his Komiteh interrogator, the author writes: "In the past eighteen years, rarely has there been a day or night in which the memory of his threats, his punch, and the fierce look in his eyes has not haunted me." Milani's prison mates included such prominent Shi'ite clerics as Messrs. Lahuti, Mahdavi Kani, Montazeri, Rafsanjani, and Taleqani. Of Rafsanjani, the author says: "As a short beardless man, he had to surmount a serious cultural obstacle."

There was a trial. The author writes that his was "a case which attracted much publicity in the West." In exchange for a promise of release from prison within a year, the author agreed not to criticize the Pahlavi monarchy during the trial. Later, before his release, he wrote "a short note, promising never to engage in subversive acts against the

government." After his arrest, his mother said: "I will never visit my son in a prison." The author informs readers that "she kept her promise."

In the early 1980s, the author taught at Tehran University's Faculty of Law until dismissal for signing petitions against the use of torture in Iranian prisons. He says he also wrote a great deal in these years, for example "a deeply melancholic book in Persian called *André Malraux and the Tragic Vision*." The Iran-Iraq War and missile attacks on Tehran brought new terror into the life of the author and his wife, now parents to a son. So, the author left Iran in the summer of 1986. His wife and son joined him a year later. By then, the author had found a permanent teaching position at a "small liberal arts college run by the Sisters of Notre Dame."

But his marriage failed, and the author fell in love with a woman named "Barbara." Of Barbara, he says: "It was love at first sight. Her eyes were deep blue. . . , and she was dressed immaculately. Her voice was as tantalizing as her looks. . . All my life I had dreamed of such a relationship." On Barbara's birthday, she and the author "spent the whole day writing a letter to *The Los Angeles Times* appealing for help for the victims of the most recent earthquake in Iran. Americans had all but refused to help the Iranian victims."

The relationship with Barbara didn't last. The author then met another woman: "it even proved possible not only to fall in love, but to sustain a satisfying life with an American woman. With Jean, a psychologist. . . ,"—and this is the book's last line—"I might have indeed regained the lost paradise

Besides the experience of parts of its author's life and a feel for the times and events he observed, *Tales of Two Cities* offers glimpses into his individuated personality even beyond what he may have intended to communicate. Implications of foregoing quotations offer such glimpses. Occasional substandard and unidiomatic expressions, mixed metaphors, gratuitous assertions, use of passive voice verbs, and mixing of levels and registers of diction suggest how the author grew familiar with the language environment in California where he has spent half of his life, how much of his Persian heritage colors his English, and how he thinks in American English. Milani's prose may suggest a conflicted or mongrelized and hybrid personality. That is a good and necessary thing if people believe what happens to Sala(hud)din Chamcha(walla) and what his creator Salman Rushie says about the world which inspired *The Satanic Verses*, the book Saladin stars in.

Milani's prose also relies on the sorts of clichés which carefree speakers may use, but which may not communicate thoughts and experiences precisely. Nevertheless, such clichés as these can tell readers something about the person who writes them: "I hit the streets," "a den of fanatics," "anxiety nearly crippled me," "rumor mills," "a battery of zealots," "odyssey of suffering" (about a woman who never traveled), "nerves taut as a bow," "nights riddled by anxiety," "hunger had devoured my appetite," "a mine field of emotions," "a tidal wave of joy," "students were smitten with Persia," "bedazzled face," "beat around the bush," "glances became pregnant," "the tyranny of retailers reigns supreme," "[he] threatened to close shop" (there being no shop), "mullah would have a fit," "the wait lasted an eternity," "I ambushed my parents," "off limits," "one hot topic," "pull no punches," "walking on eggshells," "aghast at my ignorance," "head for the hills," "an odd duck," "he was catapulted into," "the agonies of saying goodbye . . . had taken their toll," "rising tide of revolution," "I was hurled into my fate," and "paltry price to pay" (not about a commercial transaction).

Mr. Milani's personal views on things Persian or Iran also add to reader experience of an individuated personality. As only someone unfamiliar with twentieth-century Persian and English poetry could imagine, he asserts: "Sohrab Sepehri . . . was to Iranian modern poetry what Eliot is to the English poetry of the twentieth century." Milani has this to say about the person to whom he devotes more space than to any other individual: "Not much is known about the life of Ayatollah Khomeini." (Writings by Michael Fischer, Roy Mottahedeh, and Amir Taheri show the wealth of information available on Khomeini's life even in English.) In everyday matters as well, Mr. Milani shows that he is caught between his Iranian past, not so well absorbed, and his American present, not wholeheartedly embraced. For example, because he knows that the Persian word *chaharshambah* denotes "Wednesday," he cites Wednesday as the day on which the annual, Tuesday evening, New Year's ceremonies called *chaharshanbeh suri* take place.

As for Mr. Milani's perspectives as a university professor of Political Science, these statements of his about revolution further reveal his individuated personality. (1) "Revolutions are cauldrons of bewitching images that create the illusion of amity between a powerful ruler and an enthusiastic but otherwise docile and amorphous mass. With their insatiable passion for the carnival, revolutions seem tailor-made for television." (2) "Revolutions are like relationships; they can bring out the best or worst in us." (3) "Revolutions invariably strive to erase memory." (4) "The one common characteristic of twentieth-century revolutions is that nothing about the private lives of the populations is private." That readers may disagree with these generalized assertions does not make them less "truthful" as clues to parts of Mr. Milani's personality.

As for authorial intent in *Tales of Two Cities* and bases for the book's thematic, the author states at one point: "Writing a memoir is no doubt an act of self-assertion, an explicit recognition of the perceived value of an individual life." As Iranian self-assertion in an American medium and as testimony to Mr. Milani's belief in the value of his individual Iranian life and in its depiction of an Iranian who has lived in "times or turmoil and change" and who has had "many benighted days," *Tales of Two Cities* will interest students of Iranian culture. Moreover, as an autobiographer who did not dare Milani's candor in my *From Durham to Tehran* (1991), I applaud *A Persian Memoir* for its lack of self-censorship. But, as a student of literary biography and autobiography, for whom memoir writing as therapy or as self-promotion or as a chance to settle scores or as a hedge against mortality are interesting but tangential features, I haven't discerned the book's thematic warps and wefts and the fabric they make up. Love and language are two possibilities.

Mr. Milani exhibits a perhaps culture-specific conception of his own personality with respect to love and sex. He writes: "All my life I have loved to be in love and it all began with my cousin." "Cinema was where I learned the little I know about the language of love." He writes: "I first fell in love with America . . . through Caroline It was with her that I first learned the ecstasies of an erotic encounter when touched by the power of love." Of his marriage to "Fereshteh," Milani writes: "Ours was a marriage of love. In fact, I had fallen in love with her long before I had met here. In retrospect, it seems to me that I was in love not with her, but with the idea of her." "My years in America . . . engraved in me a respect for the sanctity of . . . pleasure." He remembers this about Barbara: ". . . with the help of a few chilled shots of vodka, . . . she remarked, in that naked style of hers, how good our sex life had been." "Maybe my vision of love is anachronistic, but it was formed by a tradition permeated with mysticism." In contrast with Iranian love, in America: "Here, lovers are lonely monads, guarding turfs In English, we "fall" in love, whereas in Persian we "become" in love. One is dangerous and accidental, even serendipitous; the other is transformational and purposeful. Maybe these different conceptions were at the heart of my failed relationship with Barbara."

Thinking of *Tales of Two Cities* as a narrative about love, much as I'd think of a novel about love, I find "Fereshteh" its most intriguing character, both because of reasons readers can imagine for her future mother-in-law's disapproval of her and because of what the author doesn't say about her. Both facts lead me to imagine liberated intelligence and personhood not dependent upon men around her. Mention of "her much needed eye glasses" has me imagining that maybe she reads more, and less impressionably, than those men. Maybe her Pahlavi jailers were smart to take her glasses away: her woman-centeredness may have seen through them and male posturing in general. Regardless, mention of reading the book as fiction highlights what strikes me as one reason why *Tales of Two Cities* doesn't work well for me as literary memoir: it fails to make use of techniques of fiction almost invariably part of good literary autobiography.

A second possible cluster of images and ideas that may lend a texture to the "tales" has to do with language. The author makes a point of saying that he writes in Persian and English and calls himself "a minor polyglot." His oppositionist activities in Tehran and America, writing pamphlets and leaflets and letters to editors and translating books in times of stress, have to do with language and rhetoric. Interestingly, he doesn't join forces with activist wordsmiths in Tehran or California. He doesn't mention any engaged Iranian writers of the 1970s and 1980s in Tehran or any American writers.

His critiques of political figures have to do with language. He alleges that the Shah was inept "in his spoken Persian." He alleges Fardust's "inability to even read the text of a prepared speech." He sees Rafsanjani as a "master of double talk." "Language," he writes, "is a source of problems for all revolutions." His break up with Barbara had something to do with her displeasure that he would speak Persian when the two of them socialized with other Iranians.

The author does not explain why he has written *Tales of Two Cities* in English and for whom he is writing. Perhaps English will be easier reading for his son, who the author says means more to him than anything else in life. The book appears in a series by Mage Publishers whose primary audience would appear to be Iranians and Iranian-Americans who knows English.

For Milani, "Persian . . . is the language of poetry" and "a language of many subtle means, almost all related to an elaborate system of honorifics." Those two views suggest a tension that may parallel other tensions in the book. The author highlights one of them in his final characterization of himself in the book as "an exiled, often nostalgic Persian." That he chose the word "Persian" rather than "Iranian" and that he uses the word "Persia," for which no equivalent exists in the Persian language, instead of "Iran" signal to me his desire to be from somewhere which exists in mind and heart because of how difficult it is to be from the place which exists on maps. Earlier in his book, when he writes that Americans at Berkeley in the late 1960s "were smitten with Persia and Persians," he's writing about people for whom the words evoked a distant, romantic place and people, heirs to the culture of the Persians in high school and college Ancient History courses and part of an Orient which Westerners have long had good reasons to want to visit or escape to. But Pan American Flight 1 never went to Persia. It went to Iran and landed at a city whose history is no lengthier than that of Austin, Texas. For me, Iran and Iranians are better than Persia and Persians. But for Abbas Milani, identifying with the latter, may make the difficult business of being Iranian in today's world less difficult. The same may hold for his view of himself as an "exile" rather than as an "immigrant."

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.