

Anecdotal Notes on (Mis-)Reading Chubak

In the middle of a June 2005 telephone call to Ahmad Jabbari at Mazda Publishers to pay by phone for an earlier book order, I remembered to request a copy of a new Mazda publication called *Reading Chubak*, the first study in English on one of my favorite writers and people. Ahmad sent me the book right away, but with characteristic generosity refused to include an invoice.

The book's cover, with four symmetrically placed copies of an image of Iranian fiction writer Sâdeq Chubak (1916–1998) brought to mind the moment when the photograph was taken. It was late December 1979, when Sorayya and I, Mohamamad Ghanoonparvar and his wife Diane in tow, had made a long-planned trip to California, to see Sorayya's sister Mahin in Los Angeles, take our daughter Elizabeth to DisneyWorld, and drive north on the Coastal Highway to San Francisco, and then across the bay to El Cerrito where Mr. and Mrs. Chubak had settled after abandoning their Darrus house, albeit keeping their London apartment.

We took the trip in my gray, stick shift, four-door Ford Granada, with its burgundy leather-look upholstery, the first and last full size car and last American-made car Sorayya and I have owned, a birthday gift from her to me two years earlier. En route, something happened to the car's springs in Arizona, the repair of which cost us a couple of hours and me \$110.

The book's cover shows Mr. Chubak, sitting on the floor, his back against a pillow, autographing a copy of one of his books for Ghanoonparvar. It was a relaxing, cheerful evening for the six of us. Mr. Chubak had not changed at all since the summer of 1975, when we spent several evenings together. At the end of one of them, he volunteered to drive me home. Actually, Mrs. Chubak drove. Mr. Chubak was barefoot and dressed in Bermuda shorts. I persuaded him to stop in for a minute at the house of a friend where I was staying, near Sehrâh-e Arâmené. That friend, a Persian teacher and colleague of mine when I was serving as Language and Cultural Affairs Office for the American Peace Corps in Iran, was a great fan of Mr. Chubak and a person whose lot in life did not include routinely meeting leading writers. Mr. Chubak agreed. When my friend opened the door and recognized his hero standing next to me, it overwhelmed him. We sat for a few minutes. My friend poured a glass of scotch for each of us. Mr. Chubak signed a book or two, and left. My friend later relished the moment, my stock skyrocketing thereafter in his eyes.

As described in *From Durham to Tehran*, I had first met Sadegh Chubak in 1970, during a Fulbright year in Tehran. Fulbright Director Charles Boewe had asked me about Chubak's works one day at the Fulbright Office. I had gushed about them, especially *Tangsir* and *The Patient Stone*. Boewe, who was a friend of Mr. Chubak's, reported to the latter that he knew an American who had actually read his two novels. Chubak, without any adue, asked Dr. Boewe to ask me to call him to arrange a meeting, which turned out to be a steak and potatoes dinner at The Chubaks' startlingly American home. Another memorable dinner, described in the special Chubak Issue of *Daftar-e Honar*, took place at Ali Dashti's house.

Chubak was one of nine or ten people I've chanced to meet since college days with whom I've found myself on the same wave lengths without long acquaintance or any fanfare. After that first dinner at his home, I put him in that category. In early 1980, as I readied *Major Voices in Contemporary Persian Literature* for press, I thought about such people in my first ten or so years in Persian Studies. Three names came to mind: Ali Shari'ati in Mashhad and the *khâstegar* [representative/best man] in my courtship of and marriage to Sorayya; Iraj Afshar in Tehran who opened academic doors for me there; and Sadegh Chubak. I dedicated *Major Voices* to the three of them.

When I came to The University of Texas in the fall of 1974, with the charge of starting a program in modern Persian literature, I had in the back of my mind that Americans needed to experience lyric poetry by Nimâ Yushij, Ahmad Shâmlu, Mehdi Akhavân-e Sâles, Forugh Farrokhzâd, Sohrâb Sepehri, and Nâder Nâderpur, such prose fictions as Chubak's *The Patient Stone* and Hushang Golshiri's *Prince Ehtejâb*, and prose fiction and non-fiction by Jalâl Âl-e Ahmad. So, when graduate students asked for suggestions about research projects or couldn't decide on something to work on, I steered them in cited directions. I encouraged Leonardo Alishan to translate modernist lyric poetry, Mino Ramyar Buffington to translate *Prince Ehtejâb*, and Mohammad Ghanoonparvar to translate *The Patient*

Stone. Carter Bryant, the fourth of my Persian literature Ph.D. students in the 1970s, had already decided on a dissertation topic, a translation of Reza Barahani's *The Infernal Days of Mr. Ayyâz*, part of which he published in Leo Hamalian's *New Writing from the Middle East*. As for *Major Voices*, it included, at my invitation, Alishan's work on Nimâ Yushij, Akhavân-e Sâles, and Ahmad Shâmlu, Buffington's translation of *Prince Ehtejâb*, and Ghanoonparvar's plot summary of *The Patient Stone*. I hadn't encouraged anyone to work on Forugh Farrokhzad or Nader Naderpur, whom I wanted to keep for myself! Other volumes with translations and essays by these and other graduate students on modern literature topics followed, among them: *Iranian Society: An Anthology of Writings* by Jalâl Âl-e Ahmad, *Literature and Society in Iran, Politics and the Writer in Iran*, and Jalâl Âl-e Ahmad's *By the Pen*.

In mid-1979, Ghanoonparvar finished his translation of *The Patient Stone*, the major part of his dissertation in UT's Program in Comparative Literature, and set out for The University of Virginia, where he taught Persian for five or six years. As Co-Chair of his dissertation supervisory committee, I worked on the Persian-content part of his dissertation. The two of us read the original and his translation of *The Patient Stone* line-by-line. Even before he finished his translation, Ghanoonparvar was naturally hoping to publish it and wanted to get Mr. Chubak's approval. But he didn't know Mr. Chubak, whom he got to meet on that December 1979 trip.

Before we visited The Chubaks in El Cerrito, I had talked to Ghanoonparvar about his plans to translate *The Patient Stone*. At the same time, concerned about keeping my relationship with Mr. Chubak intact, I told Ghanoonparvar that he would have to discuss possibilities with the writer on his own and leave me out of the conversation. In the course of two or three days in the pleasurable company of the gracious Chubaks, at their house and at a San Francisco waterfront restaurant, I heard no mention of *The Patient Stone* or its translation. The waterfront restaurant also remains vivid in memory because, on the way up the stairs to its second-floor entrance, Mr. Chubak momentarily lost his balance and almost pitched backwards. It took momentary effort on the part of the rest of us in keep him from falling.

On the way back to Austin from California, after a quiet New Year's Eve at a motel in Carmel, we stopped in Albuquerque and rode the tram to Sandia Peak, where we had lunch. I was wearing the only pair of cowboy boots I've ever owned, a Christmas gift from Sorayya. Going up and down the tram, a scary experience then for Sorayya, Elizabeth, and me, we had no inkling that ten years later Albuquerque would become a center in our universe, skiing there and in Santa Fe favorite favorite winter activities and The University of New Mexico and College of Santa Fe home to two of Elizabeth's degrees and Albuquerque the city where she'd meet her husband Jeff.

Two years later, in January 1982, Sorayya, Elizabeth, and I went to London for six months on a research grant, so that I could work on *A Lonely Woman: Forugh Farrokhzad and Her Poetry*. A chief source for background information in it was to be Ebrahim Golestan, who lived there and was a friend of Chubak, who was living in his cited London apartment. As described in *A Lonely Woman* (1987), Golestân declined to volunteer any information about Farrokhzâd, whose name didn't come up in our conversations that spring.

We saw a lot of Mr. Chubak that winter and spring. Sorayya, Mr. Chubak, and I went punting on the Cam. We enjoyed quiet dinners at our apartment in William Goodenough House and have Mr. Chubak's expert photographs of times there as mementos. We ate dinners at his place on Cavendish Street. We had a lively dinner with Orson Welles' films playing in the background at Golestan's Eaton Square townhouse. On a walk in Mr. Chubak's neighborhood one day, I mentioned to him that former student Ghanoonparvar was still trying to place his translation of *The Patient Stone* with a publisher and apparently had reached an agreement for its publication with Ehsan Yarshater and Persian Heritage Series. Chubak responded with surprise and irritation, cursed me goodnaturedly for having introduced Ghanoonparvar to him, and expressed the same unwillingness to have anything to do with Ehsan Yarshater that Golestan routinely expressed. I reminded Chubak that I had nothing to do and would have nothing to do with the marketing of Ghanoonparvar's translation and that I considered Ehsan Yarshater a friend and the most important Persianist in the West and thus didn't want to hear Chubak and Golestan's negative views of him or involve myself in any conflicts between and among the three of them. Chubak never mentioned Yarshater's name again in conversation, but occasionally thereafter in letters wrote news about Ghanoonparvar's translation and his views of the latter's work and personality

Back in the States, Chubak and I talked on the phone every couple of months, literary gossip, his sons, his health, and such the subjects of our conversations. Although likely better at English than I at Persian—he could produce good imitations of various British accents and had a special interest in Red Lewis—, Chubak appeared to take particular pleasure in the exclusive use of Persian in those conversations.

In November 1984, in the company of Farzaneh Milani, I spent a wonderful afternoon and evening with him and Ms. Chubak. Mr. Chubak had then just begun suffering from vision problems, which got serious, then worsened, and finally left him blind. I didn't see him again. One of my letters to him, in 1989, thereafter appeared in *From Durham to Tehran*. In March of 1990, I went to Berkeley to attend a talk by Nader Naderpur and to hear Ahmad Shamlu's much talked about talk on Ferdowsi's *Shâhnâmé*. I spent my spare time with Hammy Dugan, a close friend from high school and college days, and his wife Holly and felt guilty afterwards for not having visited Mr. Chubak in El Cerrito. But Messrs. Shamlu and Naderpur did, which must have pleased all three of these leading figures in the post-Mosaddeq Iranian literary world.

In the fall of 1986, during Michaelmas term as Visiting Fellow at Durham University, I spent a morning at Frank Bagley's house in a nearby village. His involvement with the *Man with a Gun and Other Stories*, a translation of Chubak's *Tangsir* in it, came up. Maybe he also mentioned his correspondence with Ghanoonparvar and the latter's translation of *The Patient Stone*. Meanwhile, Ghanoonparvar was having these thoughts about Bagley, as reported in *Reading Chubak*: "Mr. Bagley made a series of suggestions, including making my translation more idiomatic and adding explanatory notes, . . . suggestions that were totally unacceptable to me, since my translation had been described as 'brilliant' by a colleague and former friend" [= Michael Hillmann!]. If one has a stone big enough to hit two birds at once, it might unintentional hit something else, the other casualty here being logic. That is to say, according to the translator of *The Patient Stone*, if a "colleague and former friend (?) approves a translation, the translator needn't heed suggestions by more experienced translators.

Reading Chubak is a useful compilation—for readers unable to read Chubak in Persian—of plot summaries of all of Chubak's fictions, along with brief authorial impressions and characterizations of them. But, it also devotes a fourth of its pages to a chronology of Ghanoonparvar's problems with Mr. Chubak and a characterization of the author unrelated to critical appreciation of this fiction.

The author of *Reading Chubak* says this about Mr. Chubak: "in the work of Chubak . . . at times one sees overt and sometimes covert traces of anti-Jewish sentiment in addition to strong resentment of non-Iranian Arabs and their culture. . . . In the case of Sadeq Chubak, in my frequent telephone conversations and the occasional meetings with him in the 1980s, I became certain that these sentiments were deeply rooted and ingrained in the psychology and character of Chubak."

Persons who knew Sadeq Chubak (and his Arab relatives!) well have a contrary impression of this private, limelight-avoiding, unassuming, witty, observant, friendly, sensitive, and generous man. Moreover, no academic or intellectual reason existed for an author to devote fifty out of two hundred pages in a book called *Reading Chubak* to impugning the character of a dead writer, a person whom the author of *Reading Chubak* had not confronted in life in such terms during a ten-year period when he says he had such thoughts about the writer. The author apparently had no such thoughts before Chubak objected to the placement of the translation of *The Patient Stone* with Iranian Heritage Series.

As for his stated rationale for including negative ad hominem commentary in a purportedly literary critical study, Ghanoonparvar asserts that his "intention in writing the chronicle of [his] interaction and experience with Sadeq Chubak. . . has been to make available certain facts to the present and future generations of young scholars or produce more insightful interpretation and reading of Chubak's work. . . in the context of. . . Chubak's character. . . and prejudice."

As a literature teacher and critic, I am not alone in telling students that the beliefs and behaviors, admirable or indefensible, of fiction writers have no bearing on critical appreciation of their fictions qua fiction. If critics thought writers' beliefs and behaviors relevant in reading fictions, Louis-Ferdinand Céline (Destouches) and Ezra Pound, for

example, would have very different places or no places in the pantheon of twentieth-century world literature. In the case of Sâdeq Hedayat (1903–1951), Iran’s most famous and controversial writer of fiction, critics ignore his personal xenophobia and anti-Arab and anti-Jewish anti-Semitism in appreciating his short stories and his famous novella called *The Blind Owl* (as illustrated in my *‘The Blind Owl’ as Narrative*).

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