

The Enchantment of Storytelling

Teaching Persian Literature in Italy Today

Daniela Meneghini

A word of heartfelt gratitude that goes back a long way in time. Franklin Lewis should have been one of the editors of this volume, and it would have been an honour for me to have worked with him. My grateful thoughts go to all his valuable work dedicated to the discipline we love, but I owe a special memory to his PhD dissertation, *Reading, writing and recitation: Sanā'i and the origin of the Persian Ghazal*, which was for me a starting point and a confirmation of the worthiness of undertaking a statistical-lexical study on a large corpus of classical Persian *ghazals* (Lirica Persica project). There are writings that leave an indelible mark on our education, and his research on Sanā'i was such for me.

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Why bother remembering a past that cannot be made into a present?

SØREN KIERKEGAARD

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Sometimes I think paradise must be one never-ending read

VIRGINIA WOOLF

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1 Introduction

In 1982, Italo Calvino (1923–1985) published, in the cultural insert of the daily newspaper *La Repubblica*, an accurate and astonished review of Alessandro

Bausani's translation of Nezami Ganjavi's *Haft peykar*, published with a learned introduction by the translator and an apparatus of notes edited by himself and Giovanna Calasso.¹ The words and tone of the refined writer and critic with respect to the work to which he devotes so much attention reveals not only admiration and depth of reading, but also casually opens a fortunate season of attention to classical Persian literature in Italy.² A reflection on the extent of the presence of Persian literature in Italy – inside and outside of universities³ – even though it has never been the subject of specific investigations (whether in reference to the expansion of the dissemination of such literature through translations and essays, or in reference to academic teaching) has, in my opinion, become increasingly urgent in recent decades. This urgency is mainly linked to two factors: the first is the gradual abandonment of the teaching of literature, which, even in university courses dedicated to the Persian language, is becoming an increasingly ancillary subject.⁴ In fact, one can observe a certain tendency to privilege in the teaching planning phase, often in order to attract a greater number of students,⁵ more seductive subjects related to the sociological or political-economic sphere, or to cinema and the performing arts. The second factor concerns the necessary rethinking of the relationship between classical Persian literature, which has always been privileged, and modern and contemporary Persian literature,⁶ considered, until a few years ago, of lesser interest in the teaching of this discipline.

Now, irrespective of the specificity of Persian and all previous contextualisations, the question of *why* teach literature is the first fundamental question we must ask ourselves when we organise our courses, especially today, in a digital society, which – as has been pointed out countless times – induces the new generations to “disregard the axiomatic authority of the written text.”⁷

1 The article is to be found in Calvino 1991:64–71.

2 At that time, translations of some important classical works arrived in bookshops: Sa'di 1979; Nezāmi 1985; Scarcia and Piemontese 1973; Rumi 1980, Kay Kā'ūs ibn Iskandar 1981; Zāqāni 1979.

3 This distinction is necessary because many of the essays published in scholarly journals do not go beyond the narrow circle of specialists, and therefore have no real impact on, for example, publishing policies or the dissemination of knowledge of Persian literature in Italy.

4 In the last reform of the courses at my university, for example, it was decided to decrease the study of literature from three to two years.

5 It must be remembered that in recent years, the political situation not only in Iran but in the entire Middle East has led to a significant drop in enrolment in our degree courses, both bachelor's and master's degrees.

6 Only recently have a few essays begun to be published on the subject, see Longhi (2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2021, 2023); Meneghini 2020.

7 Bordoni 2007:141–2.

From a perspective of the history of ideas, the study of literature was seen for centuries as an instrument of ‘moralisation’, to gradually transform itself, in a recent more secular perspective, into an instrument of ‘humanisation’. In other words, such teaching has been recognised as having an educational task as well as a founding function of national cultural identity, in the case of the literature of one’s own mother tongue and country. However, we actually have to come to terms with a reality: we have very little solid evidence that literary studies do anything to enrich or stabilise moral perception, in short, that they humanise.⁸ This has been an established consideration for decades and is now so evident that we are left to wonder whether that educational and humanising function could ever have been true. Even if it was not, it was nevertheless believed and willed to be true, it was assumed with conviction that literature had an educational purpose, as all the literature of *adab* in the Islamic world has tended to argue and prove for centuries.

Recent and less recent events, including in Iran, are yet another confirmation of that illusion. Once this assumption – that knowledge of a literary tradition can make man more ‘human’, while a consistent body of evidence says precisely the opposite⁹ – has been undermined, it is necessary to honestly and radically rethink the objective of our work: from such a rethinking will then also derive content and method.

It should also be remembered that the teaching of language retains its own instrumental function, whereas the teaching of literature, outside the academic training of future specialists, cannot be considered a priori essential, nor the bearer of value as such, in itself. The study of literature is not a privileged or indispensable tool even for understanding a country’s culture and traditions, as it shares with many other forms of expression (cinema, photography, music, performing arts, etc.) the possibility of granting access to real cultural contact. The value of teaching literature must be discovered, and cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, I imagine that it is not the goal of any teacher who calls herself such to lead her students to look good in a living room conversation. The reading and study of literary works, classical or contemporary, ‘reveal

8 Steiner 2001:88.

9 “When barbarism arrived in 20th century Europe, the humanities, in more than one university, offered little moral resistance, and this was not a trivial or local matter. In a disturbing number of cases, literary erudition gave a servile or ecstatic welcome to political bestiality. Such bestiality was sometimes reinforced and refined by individuals educated in the culture of traditional humanism”. (Steiner 2001:88). “Are the ‘humanistic’ disciplines human? And if they are, why did they fail at nightfall?” (Steiner 2001:94). The translations are mine.

something that already existed but we did not know':¹⁰ free of goals and objectives, its teaching must be rethought in form and content.

2 The Teaching of Persian Literature in Italy: a Bit of Recent History

As in most European countries, the official teaching of Persian literature at major Italian universities officially began in the second half of the 19th century. Rome, Naples and Turin were the first universities where the subject was taught.¹¹ It was, however, in the second half of the following century that this teaching not only became more specific as a name, but also acquired its own autonomy within the various degree courses with a classicist and philological slant.

We do not feel it necessary to reconstruct here the history of this discipline as a teaching activity; we think it is more significant to identify a few personalities who have given a direction and left a clear mark on what is currently the panorama of the teaching of Persian literature in Italy. So I will move on to describe my own reflection as a teacher of that discipline.

Undoubtedly it is Alessandro Bausani (1921–1988), already mentioned, whom we can see as the founding father of the modern teaching of Persian literature in Italy. His teaching and research activity, which has been the subject, even recently, of important publications in which his work is retraced and inspired by it for new studies,¹² was broad and interdisciplinary – a characteristic that was widespread in those years among European Iranists: from

10 Tabucchi 2013:15.

11 There is no need to go over the history of Iranian studies in the broadest sense and the teaching of Persian literature in Italy here; a complete summary can be found in Cereti 2007.

12 One need only think of the many volumes dedicated to him – in which one can also find his complete bibliography – with essays inspired by his work or insights: Scarcia 1981; Scarcia Amoretti and Rostagno 1991; Di Nola, Filippani-Ronconi et alii 1995; AA.VV. 1998; LoJacono 2021 especially Orsatti 2021. As further confirmation of the vitality of A. Bausani's insights, Chiara Fontana has recently carried out a research project that takes its cue from the concept of Islamic Languages proposed by Bausani himself. This research, entitled: "Islamic Languages on the Silk Road: Lexical, Semantic and Symbolic Convergences", aims at a re-reading of Bausani's paradigm of Islamic Languages that detaches itself from an eminently linguistic perspective and observes instead the semantic continuity between the idioms examined in the light of the historical-cultural dynamics linked to the spread of Islam in the area. This research is taking shape in a series of articles entitled: *Towards an Ethos Poetics of the "Islamic Languages". Re-reading Bausani and Semantic Nomadism Through the Idioms of the Silk Road* soon to be published.

grammar¹³ to the history of literature (not only Persian but also of Afghanistan and Pakistan), from history *tout court* to religious history, from the history of science to mysticism, etc. He was an eclectic, brilliant and generous scholar whose direct teaching marked several generations of students (especially at the universities of Rome and Naples), and who left a legacy of studies and translations on which most of the teachers of the next two generations, including my own, were trained. His approach to the history of Persian literature, to return to the focus of this contribution, marked a turning point compared to previous approaches, especially from a methodological point of view. With his *Letteratura neopersiana* ('Neo-Persian Literature'), included in the volume *Storia della letteratura persiana* ('History of Persian Literature') published in 1960 together with Antonino Pagliaro,¹⁴ the latter author of the part on pre-Islamic Persian literature, A. Bausani proposed a review subdivided by literary genres with an approach that was more stylistic than literary-historical in the strict sense, bringing a breath of fresh air to this discipline. His close and profound familiarity with the original texts, his keen and participating interest in the development of that literature from the 10th to the 20th century (the text also includes a final sketch on 20th century literature *Sguardo alla letteratura contemporanea*, 'A Look at Contemporary Literature') and his pioneering attempt to delineate a path and stylistic development within individual genres (from *qaside* to *ghazal*, from *masnavi* to *robā'i*, and ending with prose), testifying to his insights with extensive anthological excerpts, make this work still indispensable for the study of Persian literature in our university courses. The fundamental lesson that Bausani left behind, from my point of view, is the primary need to base any research on the materiality of texts, and to disengage oneself, even in the study of Persian literature, from the schemes of an impressionistic or historicist criticism of the kind developed by Benedetto Croce. His aspiration would not be totally fulfilled, and his approach remains in fact deeply tied to the nexus between literature – national identity – history – religious history, typical of the European mentality at the turn of the 19th–20th century, a nexus that has undergone serious questioning in all European literatures in recent decades.

His best pupil and highly original explorer of the vast linguistic, historical-religious and literary space of Eurasia was Gianroberto Scarcia (1933–2018),¹⁵

13 Further confirmation of the importance and topicality of this scholar's insights can be found in the recent Meneghini – Orsatti 2023 consisting of the publication of his dissertation, orally discussed because of the ongoing war, in 1943.

14 Pagliaro – Bausani 1960.

15 For a complete bibliography see: Compareti et alii 2004 and Compareti 2023.

who unlike his master devoted himself more to the Central Asian Persosphere rather than the South-East Asian area favoured by Bausani. The founder of Iranian studies at Ca' Foscari University in Venice, Scarcia left the teaching of Persian literature proper to his best students fairly early on, preferring classes in Iranian philology, religious history and finally the history of the Muslim world at large. It should be remembered that Scarcia favoured the birth at the Venetian university of teachings closely linked to the sphere of Persian literature and unique in Italy, such as the chair of Afghan language and literature and the chair of Armenian and Georgian language and literature, confirming in this sense the breadth of vision and sense of inextricable interconnection between Islamic and non-Islamic civilisations, from the Balkans to Central Asia, that had already been his master's. One of the threads running through his work and a model that still constitutes, in my opinion, an important stimulus for scholars in training, is his research aimed at documenting the close connection between literature and religious history, and his investigations into the pre-Islamic roots of the fundamental motifs of Persian literature.¹⁶ Among other things, Scarcia followed up on the study of the so-called 'Indian style' of Persian poetry, which had already been one of the privileged subjects of Bausani's work,¹⁷ collaborating on several occasions with his direct pupil Riccardo Zipoli in delving into this field of study.¹⁸ In 2005, Scarcia published, together with Stefano Pellò and with facing original text, the complete translation of Hāfez's *ghazal* from P.N. Khānlari's edition accompanied by an extensive introduction and a substantial apparatus of explanatory notes. This is an important milestone for the representation of the poet from Shiraz in Italy, although Hāfez's *ghazals* enjoyed great success in the Italian publishing scene in the first decade of the 2000s.¹⁹

Riccardo Zipoli, who taught Persian literature in Venice for forty years after having trained on the works and different methods of Bausani and Scarcia, has developed a vision of the study of Persian poetry that is rooted in Lotman's structuralist criticism and the lexical statistical methods inaugurated by the

16 Exemplary in this regard is his study devoted to the character of Shirin (Scarcia 2004).

17 For a reconstruction of Bausani's definition of Indian style and a bibliography of his students' works on the same subject, see Meneghini 2021.

18 We recall among the various contributions Scarcia 1983 and Bidel 1997, both of these volumes contain essays by Bausani confirming the central role that his studies had with respect to the development of the theme. We recall that A.L. Beelaert in a review article (Beelaert 2019) emphasises how those who wish to deal with Indian style cannot ignore reading the works of Italian scholars.

19 Based on the Ghani-Qazvini edition of Hāfez's *Divān*, Giovanni D'Erme published a full three-volume translation: Hāfez: 2004–2008. See also Hāfez 2011a; Hāfez 2011b; Hāfez 2005; Hāfez 1998.

works of Muller and Giraud.²⁰ The principles of structuralist criticism and the statistical-lexical method were applied by him to the study of classical Persian poetry.²¹ Zipoli's work – in which I also collaborated for over twenty years – and thus his teaching placed a strong emphasis on two aspects of the study of literature: that of a thematic and stylistic approach based on statistical-lexical data, and that of the study of the classical sciences on which poetic composition is based, in particular the *'elm-e balāghat* in its disciplines of *'elm-e bayān*, *'elm-e badi'*, *'elm-e qāfiye* and *'elm-e 'aruz*, from the Rādūyāni's *Tarjumān al-balāgha* to the recent Sirus Shamisā's studies.

We cannot dwell any longer on this excursus by presenting other figures on the Italian scene of the teaching of Persian literature, each characterised by their own vision of teaching and research.²²

What I believe we can state with a good margin of safety is that, until a few years ago, the lines of individual or team research coincided with the focus of the teaching activity, whereas today, progressively, this approach must be questioned and radically rethought. The time of monographic courses in which one expounded methods, progress and results of one's own ongoing research is, in my opinion, definitively past or, in any case, no longer represents the heart of teaching and no longer meets the expectations of students in recent years. I do not intend to deny the virtuous link between research and teaching that has always characterised university teaching; however, I do consider it necessary to adopt a perspective that is less teacher-centred and more focused on the training of students of whom only an almost insignificant percentage will continue their studies in academia. The others will leave the walls of the university, taking very different paths, with a baggage of skills but above all of experiences that will be precisely those that we have been able to offer them.

3 Theories, Themes and Practice: a Bit of Recent History

It would be difficult, or perhaps impossible, on this complex and very active terrain, to identify specific and declared teaching methodologies dedicated to Persian literature, not least because in the Italian academic world, systematic training of teaching skills has only been developed in the last few years. Before

20 Muller 1977. Giraud 1954.

21 Meneghini 2007.

22 Scholars such as Giovanni D'Erme (1935–2011), Michele Piemontese, Maurizio Pistoso and Carlo Saccone, each in their own field, were models for their students. Even a concise overview of the research areas and methodological lines that characterised the work of all of them would require a separate paper.

this new initiative, a newly recruited teacher would enter the classroom and deliver his or her lesson without having, in most cases, a solid methodological framework on the teaching he or she was called upon to cover. The method was ultimately born empirically from the previous experience as a student, and was formed over the years with the progressive experience as a teacher.

With respect to the subjects of this teaching, what can be said with some certainty is that, apart from one specific case,²³ classical Persian literature has been the main subject of this curriculum to date. Only a few brief mentions are made of modern and contemporary literature, which often stops at Sādeq Hedāyat and Sādeq Chubak for prose and Amiri Firuzkuhi or Parvin E'tesami and Farrokh Farrokhzād for poetry, just to add, with the latter names, a nuanced mention of gender issues and the appearance of women in the Iranian literary landscape.²⁴ I am aware that any generalisation remains superficial, nonetheless I do not believe that what I am saying strays very far from what has been a shared practice for decades in the venues where this teaching was and is active.²⁵ In fact, in Italy, in its method and intellectual organisation, the academic study of languages and literatures, especially non-European ones, reflects the oldest tradition of classical studies (Greek and Latin), privileging precisely classical production over modern or contemporary ones.

Another general trend in teaching practice has been the direct access to texts that took place as early as possible and, in my opinion, sometimes without the necessary gradualness. In my experience as a student of Persian

23 My colleague Natalia Tornesello of the "L'Orientale" University of Naples, since her doctoral thesis, has mainly devoted herself to 20th-century Persian literature by studying the origins of contemporary Persian novels (with a look at the tradition of *hekāyāt* and *maqāmāt*). This has since remained, along with cinema studies and Qajar literature, her preferred area of not only study but also teaching.

24 One of the most active Italian translators and researchers who devoted themselves to contemporary literature was Anna Vanzan (1955–2020) who, not surprisingly, had earned her PhD in the United States, at New York University where the study of contemporary Persian-language literature, inside and outside the borders of Iran, has always been alive.

25 The programmes of currently active Persian literature courses (academic year 2023–2024) at the Universities of Naples, Rome, Bologna and Venice, confirm my assertion: colleague Bernardini in Naples, colleagues Orsatti and Casari in Rome, colleague Norouzi in Bologna and colleague Pellò in Venice present, in their official teaching programmes (online *syllabus*), content involving Persian literature from the origins to the 18th century. The modern age is always excluded from their official programs even though in the reading list recommended by colleague Norouzi, for example, we have a wide selection of modern poetry and prose in Italian translation (from Sapehri to Kiarostami, from Hedāyat to Mohebalī). See the individual web pages compiled by lecturers to confirm my assertions. This is a fact that is in no way meant to represent a form of judgement but only the objective ground of our reflections.

literature in the courses taught by R. Zipoli, there remains the anxious memory of being confronted with verses by ‘Orfi Shirāzi²⁶ as early as the middle of the first year, having just acquired the rudiments of the grammar of the language. The patient and careful practice of guided reading, supplemented by all the necessary information on thematic developments, rhetorical figures, rhyming devices and metrical scansion, metaphors and allusions to previous tradition, etc., eventually brought the student out of the darkness of the cave into which he had felt thrown in the first lesson; however, the sense of having skipped necessary steps remained inexorably.

4 How Our Teaching Methods Evolve to Include Contemporary Literature

Based on my reflections of more than thirty years, the factor that can bring about a substantial change in the teaching practice of past decades, in which the necessary organisation and gradualness was sometimes lacking, is the connection, not only theoretical but practical, of the teaching of language with the teaching of literature. Today, teaching language using contemporary literature, with duly selected texts, represents an opportunity and a decisive break from a past that marginalised this production. Such a choice has the advantage not only of enhancing language learning, but also of favouring the teaching of literature itself. It is a step that, among other things, forces us to tackle head-on the issue of the diglossia in Persian, given that, over the past eighty years, the spoken language, albeit with uncertainties and hesitations, has now also asserted itself in fiction.

What I think can be said is that the clear separation of the two subjects, language on the one hand and literature on the other, as is still the practice in our universities,²⁷ has inherent limitations that penalise the teaching of literature in particular. I will try to explain this statement below. For several years now, I have been teaching (among others) two courses, the first for the bachelor’s degree, the second for the master’s, in which my work is based precisely on this point: language learning and literary knowledge can profitably grow together. Obviously, I am not talking about the most basic levels of language

26 The professor was investigating the theme of the ‘mark’, *dāgh*, in the *ghazals* of this author and of Kalim Kāshāni, both representatives of the so-called Indian style of Persian poetry (Zipoli 1983).

27 A quick examination of the web pages of universities that offer a Persian curriculum in their curricula allows one to verify what is stated here.

courses, which must necessarily have their own autonomy, but about the intermediate to advanced levels. The two courses in question are: for the bachelor's degree *Literary Genres in Translation (Persian)* and for the master level *Cultural Narratives and Dynamics (Persian)*. These are two courses of thirty to forty hours that, despite their different premises, arise from a single reflection and tend towards the same goal: to arouse enthusiasm among the students about Persian literature in a broad sense (from the classical to the contemporary or vice versa), enhancing their tools for understanding texts and thus instilling in them the passion and confidence that can make them readers in the original language.

Before turning to the concreteness of my experimentation, it is necessary to add a few elements to this reflection. The growing interest on the part of academics and students in contemporary Persian literature, and the increase in the publication of translations – especially of novels and long stories – in the Italian publishing scene²⁸ are two closely related facts. In my opinion, the presence of translations fosters a climate of curiosity and interest in university students to the extent that “translation means the mixing of two different images of the world, of two different patterns of human life”.²⁹ And this happens more effectively with literature than with cinema: the former has an intrinsic slowness that encourages reflection, while the latter, while having a strong impact, is often consumed with a rapidity that prevents sedimentation.

Through reading Iranian works in translation, young students are introduced to the literature of the language of study with ease and immediacy. Good **direct** translations of contemporary Iranian literature into Italian are an

28 However, the translation of Persian literary works into Italian is still a limited phenomenon compared to other countries. According to the 2022 Report on the State of Publishing in Italy compiled by the Italian Publishers' Association, translations from foreign languages occupy just under 11% of the book market. Of this slice, 61% is occupied by translations from the Anglo-Saxon language area and 30% by translations from French, German, Spanish and Slavic languages (AIE 2022, 25). Translations from Persian are placed in the remaining 9%, shared with the so-called “other languages”, at an average of six publications per year (Longhi 2016b). A very small figure that nevertheless conceals more than one positive trend. The market for literary translations from Persian has doubled over the last ten years, before which the average was less than three titles per year, and has been affected by some decisive transformations, such as the birth of publishing projects dedicated to contemporary Persian fiction (the Ponte33 publishing house and Francesco Brioschi Editore's “Gli Altri” series) and a greater specialisation and continuity of translators' work (Meneghini, 2020). Adult fiction is the dominant genre, followed by translations of classical texts (respectively 76 and 44 titles translated since the 1960s), while the reduced attention paid to date to fiction for young people stands out (Moradi Kermani 2019; Moradi Kermani 2023).

29 Steiner 2001:93.

invaluable tool not only to get in touch with the culture and society expressed in that language, but also to provide the student with an important resource for studying the language. Indeed, it cannot be assumed that reading, for instance, the translation of Nezāmi's *Haft Peykar*, mentioned in the introduction to this article, or that of Zoyā Pīrād's *Cherāghhā rā man xāmush mikonam (I Will Turn Off the Lights)*³⁰ require the same commitment and, above all, the same background knowledge from the student of Persian. In the absence of that background, interest and pleasure in reading are also undermined by a strong sense of frustration. The knowledge required for a non-superficial reading of Sa'di's *Golestān*, both from the point of view of language and cultural-historical contextualisation, is far superior to that which would enable a student with a good basic vocabulary and a good command of Persian syntax to tackle Hushang Moradi Kermani's stories for young adults like *Khomre* or *Morabbā-ye shirin*.³¹ This is not a matter of finding catchy shortcuts or lowering the level of teaching; it is a gradual approach to the terrain of literature, of recognising that contemporary literature, first in translation then in the original, is an excellent bridge to classical literature. Contemporary prose, moreover, has the advantage of virtually introducing the student into Iranian society, through the encounter with, for example, the use of *ta'arof*, formal and informal speech registers, idiomatic expressions, etc. Let us not forget, to paint a minimum picture, the essential part that themes, narratives and characters from classical Persian literature play in modern and contemporary literature: we need only think of the references found in Chubak's *Sang-e sabur* and all the literature for children and young people that is inspired by tales from the *Shāh-nāme*, the *Kalile va Demne* and the *Masnavi-ye Ma'anavi*, to mention only the most important. The connection, finally, between literature and cinema (a subject that is, however, beyond the scope of this contribution), represents another perspective and an additional teaching resource that can be used to explore an important part of the cultural production and interpretation of contemporary Iran.³²

If there is any truth in the famous aphorism 'Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire', a good literature teacher must implement every honest strategy, not only to ignite but even more to keep alive and develop their students' interest in the subject. In the case of teaching literature, there is also an added value since such teaching has a unique and vast cultural scope:

30 Pirād 2019.

31 Moradi Kermani 2019; Moradi Kermani 2023.

32 With respect to the two books by Moradi Kermani mentioned here, students have the opportunity to see films produced in Iran by Ebrāhīm Foruzesh and Marziye Borumand respectively.

literature creates, invents and discovers. To clarify my outlook, I present the experiences I mentioned above in summary.

5 Teaching Resources 1: Literary Genres in Translation (Persian)

I have been teaching this course for several years, with the main aim of providing students at the first level of studies (Bachelor's degree) with critical linguistic-cultural tools to read translations of various literary texts, from the *nasib* of a *qaside* to a *new* poem by Nimā Yushij or Sohrāb Sepehri.

The course consists of two parts, a theoretical part devoted to the principles of translation studies and cultural studies³³ and a practical part in which students are guided through the contrastive reading of classical and contemporary literature texts and their direct translations.³⁴ The practical work on the texts is developed both on the front of the understanding of the original in its various aspects (from the historical-literary collocation to the linguistic and rhetorical register) and on that of the translation choices and the critical analysis of the translations themselves with respect to the levels of form, content and 'pure language'. The basis of such a balance seems to me to have been described perfectly by J. Berger in these words:

Because true translation is not a binary affair between two languages but a triangular affair. The third point of the triangle being what lay behind the words of the original text before it was written. We then gather up what we have found there and take this quivering almost wordless 'thing' and place it behind the language into which it needs to be translated. And now the principal task is to persuade the host language to take in and welcome the 'thing' which is waiting to be articulated.³⁵

33 A broad outline of the history of these two disciplines is an indispensable premise for the aims of this course: tracing the passages and reflections, even extreme and provocative ones, that have emerged in these fields of study (questions of gender, complexity of post-colonial literatures, linguistic cannibalism, state policies, etc.) provides the student with an overview of the elements that come into play in the relationship between two cultures through translations, from the selection of texts to the interlinguistic relationship.

34 The practice of indirect translations is mentioned in the theoretical part to highlight the terrible distortions it usually produces.

35 Berger 2016:7–8. These words by Berger bring to mind, in a more modern fashion, Walter Benjamin's idea that the true purpose of translation is to free the 'pure language' enclosed in the text, that is what is hidden behind the words and has not been made explicit by the original author, in other words, the secret essence, the ineffable, reawakening the echo of the original. Benjamin 1962:39–52.

This seems to me to be the focal point: to identify that *pure language, what lies behind the words*, which is what the writer fundamentally writes for and which the translator then has the responsibility to get across to the reader. In literature, that *pure language* is what describes the human condition in the broadest sense of the expression. Here we also touch upon the point that brings us back to why we teach literature: because the human condition is one and true literature, ancient and modern, courtly and science fiction, is one of the ways to encounter and investigate it. Moving from the two texts opposite to the identification of the third corner of the triangle identified by Berger is what gives meaning to humanistic teaching and to the teaching of Persian literature in our case.

In other words, the teaching of literature cannot be mechanical work, not even the teaching of classical Persian literature, even though it adheres to a rigid and firmly codified canon.³⁶ Banishing mechanics from our teaching is the first imperative, out of respect for the texts, out of respect for us teachers, and above all out of respect for the students who follow us. We must have the courage to go very deep into the reading: we must be able to make the students grasp, after a thousand years, the resigned determination of Esfandiār who goes to meet his marked and known fate because he cannot transgress the rules imposed by his role; the moral fragility of the hero Rostam who, faced with the real possibility of being defeated by the young Esfandiār, in order to put into practice a plan that transcends him, asks for and accepts the magical help of the Simorgh;³⁷ the students must be shown the extraordinarily creative acuity of observation that leads to the descriptions of nature that we find in the *nasib* of a Ghaznavid poet, such as Farroxi or Manuchehri; the depth and refinement with which Nezāmi describes Shirin's pain;³⁸ the acute and good-natured observation of human weaknesses narrated by Sa'di³⁹ in a comparative perspective of a historical-cultural nature; the ironic and delicate stories by Hushang Moradi Kermani that tell us of the condition of children and

36 These words seem significant to us on this point: "Literature, in fact, has less to do with science than with technique, and technique should not be looked down upon. As is well known, *téchne τέχνη* in Greek means "art" and it is there, in knowing-how-to, that the art of speech has its roots; composing a poem and telling a story is not so different from making bread." Barengi 2018. With respect to the happy metaphor of 'making bread' for the translation work, see Pier Paolo Giarolo's documentary entitled *Tradurre* ("Translating"), 2008.

37 Ferdowsi 2019; vol. v: 291–438.

38 Meneghini 2018.

39 Meneghini 2019.

young people in a cultural context very distant from our own;⁴⁰ the dry and essential prose of Faribā Vafi that with the light touch of a scalpel draws without discount on certain obscure aspects of the mentality and the condition of women. And finally, why not, it is worth showing how much transgression can be produced, accepted and handed down within the rigid and codified canon of classical Persian poetry, reading some examples of satirical and obscene verses by the greatest representatives of that literature.⁴¹

These are only a few examples, but the abundance of possibilities that open up is exciting and inexhaustible⁴² while my guiding imperative remains: I show you how and why this work deserves your attention. Working on translations with the text opposite is reassuring and very educational with intermediate students: proposing a guided and literal reading, explaining the translation choices, identifying the most critical passages and reflecting on this difficult manoeuvre in order to understand the complexity of the act of translation and its profound relationship with the original text; and above all, seeing the continuous negotiation between the source and target texts within the responsibility that the act of translation entails; all these aspects, while on the one hand contributing to forming a solid awareness of the complexity of reading literary texts, on the other hand challenge the student to approach texts experimentally by comparing their own points of view. In the end, in my experience, the students become passionate, ask to read more, take suggestions and advice:⁴³ the study of literature not only enhances their language skills but also makes them grow and mature as readers and, I believe, as people.

40 In the case of authors such as Hushang Moradi Kermani, we also have the opportunity of dealing with films based on his stories (see note 27). The viewing of the film, if done after the reading of the story, is an interesting field of verification to discuss with the students how their imagination worked from the written text versus what is reproduced in the film.

41 Zipoli 2015 and Zipoli 2016.

42 Dealing with contemporary literature or classic obscene literature, it will be necessary, among other things, to address the central issue of censorship that Iran exercises on publishing activities. Today, writers have developed various ways of escaping censorship, ranging from the patient adaptation of their texts to publication abroad followed by clandestine importation of their books into Iran (Mohebbali 2016).

43 A reflection that will also need to be proposed concerns the Persian literature of the diaspora, which over the decades tends to express itself more and more in languages other than Persian, either out of necessity or ideological choice, although themes related to Iranian history and society remain prevalent (it would suffice here to mention the successful publications of Kader Abdolah's books in Dutch). This liminal and complex territory of literature also merits a socio-historical digression.

6 Teaching Resources 2: Cultural Narratives and Dynamics (Persian)

This course is dedicated to first-year students of the master's programme in Persian in the humanities. The title is rather vague and is meant to be catchy, a wink to the globalised imagination of our youth, avoiding somewhat worn-out references, perhaps, to the discipline it actually deals with, namely Persian literature, in the broadest sense. The attractiveness of the title, however, played a part in constructing the structure and content I decided to give to this teaching. The question is always the same: to meet the interest of the students, to make the reading of the texts a living thing, to stimulate in-depth study, to solicit attention and sensitivity to the texts, to advance linguistic competence. In a master's course, where the commitment required of students to individual work compared to the frontal lesson is greater, constructing a course aimed at those objectives leaves more room for action.

The hypothesis explored was that of following a major theme as it develops in texts of different genres (historical and moral prose, narrative poetry, theatre, novel, etc.), from antiquity to the present day: the idea of justice, the idea of education and friendship, the concept of the virtue (*honar*), for example, have been the themes that have guided the course in recent years. Once the theme has been shared with the students (sometimes the theme emerges from the students themselves after a wide-ranging discussion), my part is to delimit its scope without rigidly defining it, to propose a set of texts that deal with the topic in different ways, and finally to provide a critical bibliography ranging from encyclopaedia entries to some specialised articles in Western languages and Persian. From here we begin to organise the work on the texts, always keeping to this question: what idea of justice do we find, for example, in Ferdusi's *Shāh-nāme*, in Sa'di's *Bustān* and *Golestān*, in al-Ghazali's *Kimīyā-ye Sa'ādat*, in Nezām al Molk's *Siyāsāt nāme*, in Nezāmi's *Maxzan al Asrār*, in Nāser al Din Tusi's *Axlāq-e Nāseri*, and then in Parvin E'tesāmi's *qaside*, in Gholām Hoseyn Sā'edi's theatre (*Chashm dar barābar-e chashm*), or in some of the stories in Amin Faqiri's *Dehkade-ye por malāl*? Each student in the master's programme has already developed his or her own preferences over the previous three years, and the work on the original texts is divided among all of them: the students read the texts on their own and, after submitting their work to me, they make a report that is shown to the whole class: the written report, once corrected and supplemented if necessary, is shared with everyone.

What I have seen over the years is that the students, through this type of work, engage with texts that are completely new to them, with very different and in some cases very complex vocabulary and syntactic structures; they become familiar with non-fiction of different genres (from the literary

criticism article to the website or magazine) and ultimately acquire the courage to tackle Persian literature in its different expressive registers. At the same time, they read, and the fact that they precisely delimit the context they are dealing with prevents the student from becoming discouraged, as often happens when faced with voluminous works.

Reading the classics serves to understand how we think; reading the contemporaries serves to verify the ineradicable legacy of the classics assimilated into the DNA of new writers and to observe what individual and social urgencies underlie writing today. Indeed, literature, as a simulation and invention of experiences or as a reflection on experiences themselves, represents a refined form of social technology, aimed at safeguarding the cohesion and self-awareness of a community of speakers.

In my view, what is important for students to know passes through two filters: that of my responsibility and that, linked to the previous one, of the growth of their skills and cultural sensitivity. The question I never cease asking myself: “why do I teach classical and modern Persian literature today, in this globalised world on the brink of environmental catastrophe” must be matched by the ever-present question in students of what the study of literature means to them. Beyond Persian literature, a student embarking on a degree course in the humanities cannot avoid this question. These two questions cannot be answered definitively and must always remain alive, and by necessity cannot stop talking to each other.

7 Future Direction or Conclusion?

Literature is irreplaceable as the guardian of the possibility of integrating lived singularity into knowledge: that is, as a model of how empirical concreteness, necessarily contingent, particular, accidental, fortuitous (life is, after all, a succession of chances and occasions), can become a source of knowledge. And of nourishment: of bread. The power of literature lies in its speaking of everything to everyone. To make it seen, to make it felt: that is the challenge for a teacher. Literature is possibility: not only does it show the structure of the writer's thought and the context in which it takes place, but it allows us to tap into an ‘other’ world, becoming, in the mirror of that otherness, aware of ourselves and our mental structures.⁴⁴ – Literature is, to tell the truth, first and foremost

44 “Literature offers the possibility of getting more than what nature grants. Included in this more is otherness, the small miracle that is granted to us in the journey of our short existence: to come out of ourselves and become ‘other’”. Barthes 1977.

beauty, but on this level a teacher's soul perhaps falters when faced with the limits of verbal communication, nurturing the hope that through other languages that perception of beauty will manifest itself.

Many re-orientations, many ways of ordering and choosing the subject matter of our work are available to doctrine and imagination, and at this point, even that 'historical' divide between the classical and the contemporary becomes tenuous. If we do not make our humanistic studies responsible, that is, if we do not distinguish between what is of eminently historical and local importance and what contains within itself the pressure of the suffered life, then our work will be vain: it may be learned but it will not be culture. We should not forget the etymological meaning of this word, which is linked to the idea of making grow, cultivate (from the Latin *colere*). This concept is central to the work of the teacher: if culture is not growth, it can no longer be called such. Growth through literature is, in my opinion, represented by the development of a sensitivity that is able to grasp the meaning and beauty of 'narration', regardless of the forms that such narration takes. It also seems necessary to recognise, and to make students recognise, that the teaching of literature is an extraordinarily complicated and dangerous business: to know that when you are in front of a text you are taking in the essence of another human being, and this is always true, in any text and context.

At this point, a final thought goes to the court poetry that plays such a large part in the corpus of classical Persian literature. There is a widespread prejudice, among students coming from high school studies, that, oversimplifying greatly, assumes that court poetry, aimed at obtaining material or social recognition, is nothing more than a mechanical, albeit skilful, production of verse. Teaching Persian literature, one will inevitably be confronted with this theme, in itself extraordinarily interesting and the bearer of unexpected discoveries. We could start with a poet like Anvari, who in so many verses of his *divan* complains about his work as a poet, with regret, even anger and the regret of another possible career that would have been more appropriate to his high doctrine.⁴⁵ This poet's awareness of his role is acute and his regret comes across as sincere. At this point, a student might imagine that Anvari's *qasides* were merely repetitive exercises in panegyric style, lacking the inner tension that we are accustomed to look for in the verses of poets today. In fact, the reading of *qaside* 82 (the famous *Tears of Khorasan*) will confront the student with a completely different landscape. The great Seljuk poet, on this occasion, puts his doctrine (overflowing with scholarly references) and his compositional skill (full of refined comparisons and metaphors) at the service of one

45 Meneghini 2006.

of the most intense and moving descriptions of the barbarity of war. This small example will demonstrate that there, as here, and not only in the Middle Ages, the rigid formal binaries of court art represented, for some of the most refined and sensitive artists, more than a mere conditioning, a form of channelling creativity and compositional tension that bore extraordinary fruit.

At this point, reading about what it meant to compose verse in the Persian Middle Ages, for example through the words that Nezāmi Ganjavi dedicates to poetry in his *Makhzan al Asrār*,⁴⁶ will open a door on the idea of poetry and the prestige of this art; a prestige that is still very much alive today in the land of Iran and that continues to bear fruit (whether conscious or unaware of its roots). If, a few years ago, Kiarostami rewrote some of Hāfez's *ghazals*,⁴⁷ if the *naqqāl* continue to recount the exploits of the *Shāh-nāme* even outside Iran's borders,⁴⁸ if Anvari's refined *qasides* after 800 years still arouse an intense admiration, it means that *literature continues to tell us something that cannot be told otherwise*.

If the book we are reading does not arouse us, like a fist pounding in our skulls, why then do we read it? So that it can make us happy? Good God, we would still be happy if we had no books, and the books that make us happy we could, if need be, write ourselves. But what we must have are those books that come upon us like misfortune and grieve us deeply, like the death of one we love more than ourselves, like suicide. The book must be an icebreaker to break the frozen sea within us.

FRANZ KAFKA

46 Meneghini 2022.

47 Kiarostami 2006.

48 At the Morgana festival, held annually in the city of Palermo, Iran was the official guest in November 2022. The festival promotes knowledge of popular oral narrative traditions that are still very much alive in many parts of the world, including Iran. The performance staged on this occasion was The Story of Rostam and Sohrāb interpreted by Mojtaba Hassan Beigi, *naqqāl* (storyteller) and accompanied by Eshag Chegini percussionist and *ney* player.