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The great land of the Sophy

Persian influences

By Abbas Milani
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 The Iranian



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I gave a talk at a fundraiser last week. The event itself is worth writing about. The [Iranian Federated Women's Club](#) in the San Francisco Bay Area are offering scholarships of up to ten thousand dollars to ten young Iranians of university age. I thought you might be interested in the text of the talk.

In 1935, at the suggestion of Persia's misguided Ambassador to Nazi Germany, the country's name was changed to Iran. That was the heyday of Aryan supremacy and the word Iran literally means "land of the Aryans." Something of a breach began to appear in Persian and Western consciousness. Persia with its indelible aura of past grandeur and glory, was suddenly, and I think unwisely, replaced by Iran. With the simple stroke of a pen, as Foroughi soberly noted, the richly resonant and renowned identity of Persia was traded for a bleak unknown.

In English, German and French, Iran is a novice of a word, one that conjures no memory but only a distant, troubled, and more recently, troubling, land at the end of the earth. All too often, Iran is still confused with Iraq, assumed to be another 19th century colonial concoction, an expedient consequence of the "Great Game."

Persia has more than two thousand years of often-splendid recorded history. Though in recent times the malignancy of its politics has caused it to be much maligned in the Western media, it has contributed much to the common heritage of humanity. It has played a formative but frequently forgotten role in shaping Western consciousness itself.

What I can offer here tonight is a mere overture to the long and wondrous symphony called Persian history. To begin at the beginning - and the beginning was the Word-- the Bible is replete with profuse praise for Persia and its kings. In the book of Ezra, the Lord of the Old Testament speaks through the proclamations of Cyrus, King of Persia, who declares, "The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem."



[Thus Spoke Zarathustra](#)

A Book for All and None

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

Cyrus, as we know, acceded to this lordly edict and thus was the second Temple in Jerusalem built. In other parts of the Old Testament, Cyrus is often referred to as God's "Anointed" and the "Chosen" Ruler. This fulsome praise was partially in recognition of his role in freeing Jews from their Babylonian captivity; of equal importance was the fact that the vast Persian empire of the time was a paragon of religious and cultural tolerance.

There is something of a consensus among historians -- with the glaring exception of Sheikh Sadeq Khalkhali, of course -- that Cyrus was in fact the first ruler to issue a declaration of human rights. It pre-dated the much-lauded Magna Carta by more than a millennium. Cyrus was also the first ruler to create a truly multi-cultural empire by affording the conquered peoples the liberty to maintain their own linguistic, religious and cultural autonomy. So ubiquitous was his reputation that songs in his praise had reached as far away as Iceland and formed an important part of their sagas.

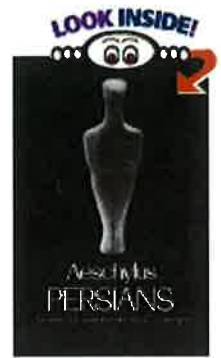
Many Biblical scholars have further shown that a plethora of key theological concepts, from the notions of Satan and hell to those of angels and heaven, and most importantly, the idea of the resurrection of the body have all been the result of Persian-- or more specifically, Zoroastrian-- influences on the Bible. Some scholars have suggested that Zarathustra was the first prophet of a monotheistic religion; others maintain that the idea of a millennium -- the significance afforded to thousand-year cycles in history -- found its way to Christianity through the Zoroastrian religion.

Hegel, the 19th century German philosopher, whose writings are considered by many as the apex of Western philosophical tradition, uses unusual superlatives in describing the role of Persia and Zarathustra in history. "Persians," he writes, "are the first Historic people . . . In Persia first arises that light which shines itself and illuminates what is around . . . The principle of development begins with the history of Persia; this constitutes therefore the beginning of history."

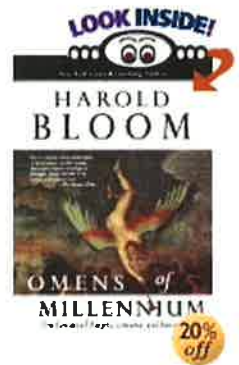
Hegel wrote these lines around the time that Nietzsche was writing his magnum opus, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The book offers a radical critique, almost a total debunking, of the whole Western tradition of philosophy. It is no mere accident that Nietzsche chose to articulate his critical views in the name of Zarathustra.

Of course the end of the nineteenth century was not the only or the last time Zarathustra played a prominent role in shaping Western philosophic discourse. Indeed, in the 1990s, so strong were Persian influences in the millennial fever, and in other New Age ideas, that Harold Bloom, the eminent American critic, wrote in his *Omens of Millennium* that the last decade of the twentieth century should in truth be called the age of Zoroastrian revival.

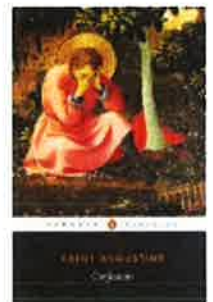
Zarathustra was not the only Persian prophet to play an important role in the development of Judeo-Christian theology. Scholars like Carl Gustav Jung have traced some of the ideas and rituals of Christianity, particularly the notion of a Messiah sent down from heaven, the ritual of baptism, and the sharing in the body and the blood of Christ, to Mithraic rites.



[The Persians](#)
Greek tragedy
Aeschylus



[Omens of Millennium](#)
The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection
Harold Bloom



[Confessions](#)
St. Augustine

Even the architecture of the Christian church, with its hallowed nave, seems inspired by the designs of Mithraian temples. Western art, no less than history and theology, bear testimony to the ubiquity of the Persian presence in antiquity. Of all the extant works of Greek tragedy, for example, the only one that is about a non-Greek subject is Aeschylus' play [*The Persians*](#).

Persian influences continued long after the days when Christianity was born. St. Augustine's [*Confessions*](#), written a good three centuries later, affords clear evidence of the immense influence Persian ideas, including those of Mani, exerted on Augustine's intellectual development, and through him, on the evolution of Christian theology and culture. In fact, some scholars have suggested that Augustine's strict admonishments against bodily pleasures, and his dualistic vision of the world as a place riven between good and evil, are evidence that he co-opted many of Mani's ideas into Christianity.

Indeed, Persia can be held at least partially accountable for what has come to be pejoratively called the Manichean view: A vision that reduces the infinite complexities of reality into a simple duality of good and evil. Even well into the twenty first century, the cosmology and ethics of such popular films as *Star Wars*, and *Lord of the Rings*, continue to resonate with Manichean perspectives.

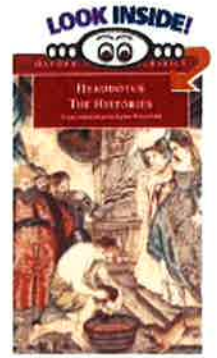
Interesting and important as these religious influences are, Persia's role in the development of the Greco-Roman or Western sense of cultural identity is no less significant. It would be no exaggeration to suggest that the West's consciousness of itself as a unified civilization, distinct from the culturally different "Other," was shaped in opposition to Persia.

More than four hundred years before the birth of Christ, Herodotus, often called the father of Western history, and himself born within the confines of the vast Persian Empire, wrote his seminal work to chronicle the wars between the Greeks and the Persians. In the opening paragraphs of his [*Histories*](#), he writes, "in this book, I hope to do two things. To preserve the memory of the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements both of our own and of the Asiatic people. Secondly and more importantly, to show how the two races came into conflict." He goes on to explain that by Asia he means both Persians and the lands dominated by them.

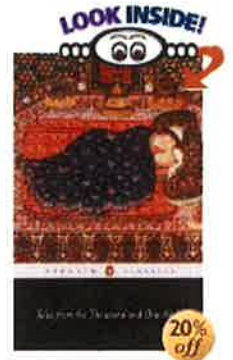
Though in what must be the first clear instance of smug Eurocentrism, he calls Persians "Barbarians," he nevertheless marvels at their many accomplishments. He writes, for example, of Darius as the discoverer of much of Asia, as the king who mapped for the first time many of the seas and rivers of the world, and as the far-sighted monarch who even attempted to build a waterway where 2400 years later, the Suez Canal was constructed.

Darius is of course also the king who helped build the great city of Persepolis. The ruins of that once great city are still considered one of the most important historic sites in the world; its architecture, combining eclectic influences from many corners of the globe, exemplifies the genius of the Persian spirit.

Persians freely adopted aspects of other cultures, but always did so only after creatively transforming them into something that was



[Histories](#)
Herodotus



[Thousand and One Nights](#)
Tales



uniquely Persian. This fascinating trajectory can be traced in everything from the way we prepare our tea and rice, to the way we build our colonnades and domes.

Even in religion the same spirit seems to have prevailed. In a monumental four-volume study, the French philosopher, Henri Corbin, shows in some detail how pre-Islamic Zoroastrian, Mithraic and Manichean ideas, by dint of the Persian assimilating and persevering instinct, were reformulated in such a way as to make them amenable to the conquering Arabs and their new religion. Indeed, an eclectic cultural elasticity has been said to be one of the key defining characteristics of the Persian spirit and a clue to its historic longevity.

The bulk of my time has already lapsed and I have barely hit even the high notes of the first five hundred years of Persian history; I have hardly finished the overture to the symphony I had promised. If we had more time, I would have talked about the library at Sarouye -- located near where the city of Isfahan is today.

Though only a few random pages of its vast holdings have survived, we know of its grandeur through the testimony of its contemporaries, who compared it, in terms of the awe it inspired, to the Egyptian pyramids. We could have reminisced about the famous Jondi Shapour Medical center in Pre-Islamic Iran, and I could have offered evidence of its refreshing openness to scholars and doctors from any and all religions and nationalities of the world.

We could have delighted in discovering the fascinating role Persia played in the consciousness of the medieval Western mind. We could have talked of the Grail Legend and the scholarly belief that its sources should be sought in the Persian myth of the Cup of Jamshid and in the text, *Borzounameh*. We would have talked of the role Persians played in the early inception of *A Thousand and One Nights*, often called one of the most influential books of all time. The Shahrzad of the story, a Persian princess, is universally recognized as the archetypal story-teller, the embodiment of the power of clever and cunning narrative.

We could have talked of the impressive litany of Persian theologians, philosophers, mathematicians, astronomers and scientists who, according to Ehsan Yarshater, helped shape what has come to be called the Golden Age of Islam. I would have reminded you that as an ironic result of the Crusades, Europeans rediscovered Aristotle through the Islamic world, and that this discovery, in turn, helped spur the Renaissance.

I would have told you about Avicenna and Biruni whose work in medicine and astronomy were standard texts in European universities well into the nineteenth century. We could have talked about the work of scholars who argue that the Copernican revolution in Europe would not have been possible without the earlier contributions of Persian astronomers. I would have reminded you of the glories of Rasad-khaneye (Observatory) at Maraghe, arguably the most famous center for astronomical research in the thirteenth century. At that time, scholars from as far away as Sweden traveled to Maraghe to learn the newest theories and discoveries of astronomy.

I would have referred to the works of the Persian mathematician, Kharazmi whose name is synonymous with Algebra. At the same time,

we would have lamented the fact that in recent years some museums and libraries around the world, apparently seduced by the flow of Arab Petro-dollars, have begun to call their Persian collections by the misnomer of Islamic, or sometimes even Arabic, art and culture.

We could have referred to the work of scholars who have found strong Persian influences on such canonical works of Western consciousness as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and two great works of Chaucer-- the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Parliament of Fowls*. We could have together traced the early evolution of Paris University, the center of intellectual ferment and rebirth in thirteenth-century Europe, and investigated the role Persian thinkers and scientists played in this renaissance of rationality in the West.

I could have described what I think was a native, nascent, Persian modernity that emerged between the tenth and twelfth centuries. I would have talked of Beyhaghi and Sa'di, Arouzi and Razi who, long before the West, began to experiment with ideas that would later form the kernel of the European Renaissance. I would have invited you to read Ohran Pamuk's new novel, *My Name is Red*, where the Turkish author suggests that Persian painters of the Isfahan, Gazvin and Herat schools experimented with the laws of perspective, long before Giotto painted what is hailed as the first modern painting.

I would have described some of the wonders of the sixteenth century city of Isfahan, and how it captured the imagination of so many European travelers, awed by its grand mosques, its sumptuous bazaars, its tree-lined boulevards and its splendid gardens. Versailles in France is said to have been at least partially inspired by these gardens. Much in fact could have been said about the Persian idea of a garden, so different from its Western counterpart. As Persian gardens found their way to the West, so did the Persian word *pardis*, where it became the source of the word "paradise".

If we had time, we could talk of the unusually large number of invariably favorable references to Persia in Shakespeare's poems and plays. You might have been surprised to learn that Shakespeare was familiar with the writings of the Sherley brothers and other English travelers to Persia. It was probably the reports of these brothers that led Shakespeare to equate Persia, the land of the Sophy, with luxury, lavishness and beauty.

To complete our overture, we would have to talk about the formative role Persians played in the development of Sufism, the Islamic brand of mysticism. We would talk about the influence these Sufi poets had in the development of 19th century Romanticism. We could have together browsed through some of the essays of Emerson, the quintessential American intellectual, and read the passages where he suggests, with no hint of hyperbole, that Saidi's prose and poetry are only comparable to the Bible in terms of the universality of their transcendental wisdom.

We could have also talked about Goethe, one of the greatest German Romantic poets of all times, who, in his own words, reached a new "mountain peak of his life" when he first encountered the poetry of Hafez. He went on to write his *Eastern Divan* in homage to Persian poets. We would have reminisced about Khayam and his genius for science and poetry, as well as his contagious appetite for a loaf of bread and a jug of wine. We might have found in his poetry early traces of

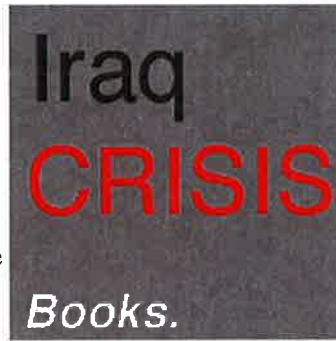
what in the twentieth century came to be known as Existentialism. We would have talked of the 11th century Persian poet, Rumi, who is now amongst the best-selling poets in America.

To give you a sense of the image of Persia in the Romantic imagination, I would invite you to read Sackville-West's delectable memoirs of her trip to Iran. And finally, I would ask you to read again *Moby Dick*, Melville's great American novel, and note the role Persia played in the author's cosmology.

Each of the recipients of these scholarships, each generous contributor who makes this lofty and noble enterprise possible, every one of the ladies whose vision led to the creation of the [Iranian Federated Women's Club](#), and whose tenacity and perseverance brought it to its current state of inspiring success, is an Ahab, fighting not to be revenged on the behemoth of the sea, but instead to seek the best of a great and glorious tradition.

Needless to say, what I have offered tonight has been a highly selective series of images from a long and complicated history. Consciousness of such peaks of civilization must not turn us into self-deluded and self-satisfied addicts of our past glory, oblivious to our country's all too many lapses into despotism and fanaticism. From the Chagari troop, bent on literally cannibalizing their king's foes, to despots that blinded the male population of a city at a whim, Persia has had more than her fair share of historic calamities and inhuman barbarities.

Furthermore, as the West began to take its leap into modernity, we fell into a dread abyss of tyranny, religious fanaticism and irrationalism. We have yet to altogether free ourselves from these benighted conditions. Khayam could have been referring to our time, when he wrote, "They say the lion and the lizard Keep/the court where Jamshid gloried and drank deep."



Maybe on nights like these we are allowed to dwell on the glories of our past; we are, after all, gathered here to help support the education of a new generation of Persians, whose critical understanding of the accomplishments of our much abused nation will make them wise and gallant torch-bearers in the long, complicated, sometimes terrible, often glorious march of our history and heritage.

Author

Raised in Iran, Abbas Milani was sent to be educated in California in the 1960s. He became politically active and in 1974 received a PhD. in Political Science. He returned to Tehran and taught at the National University but was imprisoned by the Pahlavi regime in 1977. After the revolution he became a professor at Tehran University, but in 1986 he emigrated to the United States. Since 1987, he has been chair of the Department of History and Political Science at Notre Dame De Namur University. He is currently a Research Fellow at Stanford University. His books include [The Persian Sphinx: Amir Abbas Hoveyda and the Riddle of the Iranian Revolution](#), [Tales of Two Cities: A Persian Memoir](#) and [King of the Benighted](#).