

Ali Mirsepassi

Obituary

Death in Exile: Professor Mehrdad Mashayekhi, 1953–2011



In my reflections upon the life and death of Mehrdad Mashayekhi as an Iranian public intellectual living in exile far from home, I would like to explore the themes of exile, the personal–political axis between the private and public worlds, and the structure of mortality.

The 1981 film *Nostalgia* by Russian director Andrey Tarkovsky explores the many dimensions of identity's disintegration while in exile. The coherence of ordinary time is broken by worlds molded from the dreams and reflections of what is physically distant but—for that very reason—ever more painfully close to the heart. The lost time of belonging with others borders on the cosmos rendered devoid of God. From simple gestures to languages and landscapes, all of the beauty of the world can combine into a suffocating force of loneliness. Far away loved ones blur upon the dream horizon, reflected unfaithfully in the darkening mirror of memory, on the other side of unyielding political borders. Loved ones become as cold and remote as statues at the end of shadowy corridors in daily efforts to hold onto their warmth from afar, days that span into years just as rain drops build into flooded streets. Those corridors, in the mind, become the infinite arches of the eternal. The exiled can become statues in their turn gripped by the fear that any slight movement might irreversibly erase the hope of return through the obstacle of a new life. In that

unnatural stillness distant loved ones remain right there in the room in dreams, receding back into shadow with each awakening in a world of ghosts and ruins.

The film powerfully shows how the displacement of living in exile is a source of emotional and cultural vulnerability. But I want to paint a picture of how such a troubled life also contains great potential for empowerment. We might point to several types of exile experience.

Many are those living in exile while in the public sphere at home, a half-conscious limbo divided from the self. The eighteenth century philosopher Montesquieu's masterpiece of Enlightenment thought, the *Spirit of the Laws*, was banned by the Catholic Church and placed in 1751 in the Index of Prohibited Books. His exile within the French public world was expressed in his *Persian Letters* (1721), where he ethnocentrically invoked two "imaginary" Persians in exile as the most convenient way of distancing himself from his own cultural and political criticisms of Absolutist France—and displacing his confusions and anxieties about the alienating qualities of his world upon what was from far away. Yet we can argue that Uzbek and Riva, his very puppets, imposed a certain attitude in the story in using the predicament of exile to expand their own limited and limiting moral and cultural horizon. In this way they offered a more "cosmopolitan" critique, not only of the East but also of the West. The doubling of projecting onto what is far away contains the transformative power of imagining a character. In a situation of radically asymmetrical power relations it often amounts to reductive stereotyping. At its best it becomes a crossing over, where we understand ourselves in the other. Through a humanist solidarity the unyielding borders cease to reflect back our own fears and weaknesses. This was almost certainly the meaning of the final scene in Tarkovsky's film, when the main character carries a lit candle across a large body of water without letting it be extinguished—the sense of sharing, transmission and hope. Solzhenitsyn is perhaps the contemporary iconic example of exile among the eastern Europeans. The fountainhead of his inspiration was Dostoyevsky, steeped in the nineteenth century conflict between the Slavophiles and the westernizers, who ridiculed the Enlightenment as a glass house in *Notes from the Underground*, and promoted Alyosha as the pure Orthodox soul of Mother Russia against the Western-tainted nihilism and violence of Stravrogin in *The Possessed* and *Brothers Karamazov*. Hence, for Solzhenitsyn, the crisis of modern Russia is the "forgetting of God" which has left only estranged memories of the Russian soil and blood on the floor of cold prisons. In some respects the un-Persian intellectuals in exile, this movement among east Europeans often represents the authentic Russian or eastern European as involved in the struggle against the alien imposition of communist totalitarianism. With a comparatively comfortable intellectual and moral position in relation to the West, they are the national embodiment of the culture and people of their homeland. Nostalgia for the being of community and the earth; the warm pattern of childhood, family and old age like the rising and setting of the sun; the beauty of religion, tradition and music blurring into folk myth and intimate dreams. These longings, sometimes incinerating into forms of self-destructive nihilism, are important themes for these exiled intellectuals. Like the burning pages of a book at the water's edge, the flame and smoke reflect a rainbow; the fear of the light in exile from our flesh and blood like years of not seeing the sun. Gholamhossein Saaedi (1936–

85), among Iranian exiled intellectuals, may be placed within this category. He wrote a piece comparing “*mohajir*” (immigrant) and “*tabeedi*” (exile), rejecting the notion of the cosmopolitan type who feels universally at ease in any non-native setting, even though he was secular/humanist and modernist to some extent.¹

The example of Edward Said represents still another model. He combines elements of the Persian and the Eastern European experience. A non-Western critical mind who is less nostalgic and has a greater appreciation for a cosmopolitan ideal rooted in social justice, the Said model includes: an in-worldly ideal grounded in a genuine passion for the human predicament. While in Said’s case this passion focused upon the Palestinians, in Mehrdad’s case it concerned the Iranians. The broader ideal is accomplished by opening the mind and projecting a moral politics transcending both nostalgia and specific political issues to embrace what we might call an ethical cosmopolitanism. This involves appreciation for all that is good and beautiful in exile, and passion for those with whom one is connected—whether in daily life or from afar—as part of a larger and broader universe of existence. We find such a vision sketched in John Dewey’s idea of the *Common Faith*.² He calls such a perspective the “implicit” faith of mankind: in a variation on the thinkable/unthought it requires only to be made “explicit” through an inner and worldly struggle upon the horizon of the everyday. Someone’s love for their country and people can be a path to transcending selfishness and the embrace of all cultures and all people. There is a universalism based on universal fallibility and vulnerability of all human situations, and the struggle to respect the other as ourselves within the limits of that human context.

Because it is in-worldly and cosmopolitan, it challenges all of us to participate in the struggle for justice and human honor. Said was calling for participation not only from the Arabs but also from intellectuals and others in the US and the West. The same holds for the Iranian Green movement. This was also the spirit moving Mehrdad. Mehrdad was an Iranian with love and passion for his country and its people, but he was also part of a large and broad movement defined by a deeply cosmopolitan and moral character. Mehrdad’s commitment to sociological and analytical perspectives on Iranian politics represents the fact that he never yielded to a nostalgic view of his role as an intellectual and exiled activist. I feel that this type of exiled intellectual may be what Montesquieu should have imagined at the outset as the ideal cosmopolitan intellectual. That is, intellectuals who maintain an inner distance from their home of origin as well as the country where they have taken refuge, through remaining focused on an ideal of universal humanity that never forgets ordinary and everyday people everywhere.

This leads logically to the second point in the discussion: the interrelation between the political and personal realms. To be an intellectual in exile while involved in the struggle for freedom and justice constitutes a tremendous burden. How can one do this while living a “normal life”? As a result many live in a permanent moment of denying life. Others assume the responsibility and empower their lives by determining conduct with a clear purpose and moral reason. Mehrdad was certainly of the latter

¹Gholamhossein Saaedi, “Degardisi va Rahaiye Avareha,” *Alefba* no. 2 (Spring 1983).

²John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, CT, 1934).

type, being committed to living a good life. How was he—and others like him—able to do this? I would argue that at the root of this spirit in Mehrdad was his being a practical idealist. This is what Gandhi called himself and John Dewey also talks about this in his book *Common Faith*. Intellectuals concerned about ideas and the critical examination of values confront a garden of dual forking paths: confronted with the relativity of all human experience, they can easily fall into the seduction of nihilism. The practical idealist—the second option—is possible only when the individual’s intellectual and political life has an ideal end in the tradition of MLK or Gandhi. The ideal end must be of this world and practical in nature, or else we fall into the violent risk of absolute ends that fancifully ignore the everyday realities of most people. Mehrdad lived a life as an intellectual of this world. With his sense of humor, his love of friendship and community, and his always-curious analytical mind, he never faltered in his passionate exploration of the means to achieving our goal of a free and proud Iran.

While there is often great romance attached to the image of exile—after all it has constituted a cultural narrative from Homer’s *Odyssey* to *Casablanca*—it is far from the adventurous ideal. To accept your situation as an opposition figure, living an exiled existence for perhaps an entire lifetime, is really the most unnatural way of being and living. More importantly, you need to fight a really good fight. There are innumerable reasons to submit to a “normal” life or even convenient life and to achieve this by selling out. There are also all kinds of emotional and personal reasons and pressures to give up and submit to the forces of power in the homeland or in exile. That the community of exiles may quietly and peacefully deal with all these challenges does not mean that it is easy. At the culmination of an in-worldly struggle of life in a body, we are not necessarily consoled by notions of salvation or deliverance. Where, then, do we find the meaning in such a death?

This brings us to the final point, about death at the end of a life in exile. Simone Weil defined the central obsession of the *Iliad*—one of the literary cornerstones of Western civilization—as the power to “turn a human being into a thing while he is still alive.” Death is the most natural and common fact of life, yet it is also an experience we are never prepared for. Mehrdad himself, in the final two years of having cancer, ignored and snubbed it while becoming even more deeply committed in his love of life, ideas and politics.³ I continue to adore and admire him for that. What, then, are we to do now, knowing that he has passed away? We cannot ignore it or pretend that it did not happen. On the contrary, in the spirit of the public memory that nourishes the struggles and meanings in the lives of the living, I invite all of us to actively remember him and his life of struggle over the years. Death is always a terrible ending to the promise and passions in a human spirit, where there remains much life and color to give to so many others, but we who are here have the role of remembering his example as a practical idealist and celebrating the unique and creative passage of his life.

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³Simone Weil, *The Iliad or the Poem of Force* (London, 2006).