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PICTURING AYATOLLAHS' Iran: Laurence Deonna and HIGINIO POLO*

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RESUMO:

Neste trabalho comparo duas visões recentes de ocidentais sobre o Irão contemporâneo: a visão da jornalista suíça de fala francesa Laurence Deonna e a do historiador espanhol Higinio Polo. Tentarei mostrar como os interesses subjectivos de cada um contribuem para uma construção diferenciada das representações de um país muito diferente em vários aspectos das perspectivas ocidentais, nomeadamente quanto ao papel da religião na vida do dia a dia e quanto ao papel da mulher. Deonna está interessada na apresentação do que vê, e para tal dá a voz a muitas das pessoas que encontra, não escondendo a sua posição crítica. Polo, pelo seu lado, quer viajar, observar o quotidiano e fazer notar as diferenças entre o Irão de hoje e a Pérsia.

ABSTRACT:

In this paper I will compare two recent views of Westerns towards contemporary Iran: the view of a journalist, the Swiss Laurence Deonna, and another by the Spaniard Higinio Polo. I try to establish how the subjective interests of both contribute to a differentiated construction of the representations of a country in many aspects far away from Western perspectives, mainly in the role of religion in everyday life and the position of women. Deonna is interested in reporting what she sees, thus giving voice to different people she meets, even if she does not hide her critical position. Polo instead wants to travel, to observe everyday life and contrasts today's Iran with the old Persian culture.

PALAVRAS CHAVE:

literatura de viagens,
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KEYWORDS:

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Travel activities are always changing, because of political and social contexts. There are not many new things that can be said to inform the reader about another country, its landscape, its geography, history and archaeology. Travel texts tend to repeat the information, sometimes to exhaustion, concentrating on a few stereotypes. What is important is the travellers' relation to the country they are visiting, how they as subjects relate to the object, human or not. How they construct a bridge between the information they have before entering the country, what they have read, especially how they differentiate themselves from previous travellers.

First of all, we must bear in mind the importance of understanding the relation between the subject and the object, between the "I" and the "Other". This Other we meet in texts is nothing else than a construction: the Other and the Otherness – the people and the country - can only be found in the subject itself: "The Other is indeed just as fictional as the "I". No-one has ever succeeded in describing it as a substantial Being" (see Schütze, 2000: 7f). The Other only exists outside me as another "I", and is therefore not describable in all its complexity. The writer creates an image, which he then translates into a text-image. In order to create this image of the Other, the writer (or any observer) has his own preconceived ideas plus the collective imagotypes he has internalised. Travel-texts are therefore intercultural narrations: the traveller's context, his culture, travels with him in search of the culture of the Other, which he apprehends by comparing directly or indirectly with his own.¹ The same applies obviously to the text-traveller, a cultural construction of the author, in most cases his textual representative.

Reading texts means mixing up times: when we read today something about Iran, we interpret it in our own times, the Iran of Ahmadinejad, even if the texts were written before that time. We read in the present and historically at the same time and build a new image based on both times. Exactly like the travel-

writer, the armchair reader has his own ideas about the region he is reading about. He creates subjective images upon other subjective images of the text-traveller. Western writers and readers usually situate the Other from the Middle East not as an equal, but in a rather arrogant way. Very often we do not meet the Other, but images of him, in the "we-they binary of European visions [...] with the critique of prejudices of Western travellers and their misconceptions of the Orient" (Al-Hajri, 2006: 35, 34).

There have been a lot of travel texts to Persia, or Iran since 1935. I will just name a few 20th Century travellers I have been dealing with in my research: the British Gertrude Bell, Freya Stark, Vita Sackville-West, Robert Byron, the Swiss Annemarie Schwarzenbach, Ella Maillart, Nicolas Bouvier, the German Margret Boveri, the Swede Maud von Rosen.² This list could go on. We could say with Al-Hajri that there is a great heterogeneity of texts about those regions and so one can not see all of them with the same eyes, as Said partially did with his binary system (*idem*, 71). Already in the 30s the country was well known, but a certain spirit of adventure was necessary: the roads were awful, it was not always safe, the cars were not reliable on those poor roads. We are already far away from the romantic oriental views of the *Thousand and one nights*. The imperial eye is over, except in the nostalgic views of some. Neo-colonial views have substituted them and a new openness toward that Other, as we will see. We witness the struggle between Islam and modernisation. For Westerners, Islam in Iran (and other Muslim countries) is a hindrance to development, and this reinforces the idea of superiority on the part of many towards the Muslim countries.

In our global world, more and more of the same is seen everywhere, wakening our nostalgia for the past. The typical has changed to a "hybrid", the typical is almost always a product for the tourism industry. Hybridisation, a mix of local and global, is clearly characterizing our world. Therefore, it is understandable that travel-writers avoid the tourist routes, and search to meet

the Others in their home-contexts, to pass from monologue to dialogue, as far as possible, to find, as Marie Louise Pratt has put it, a "contact zone". The traveller knows more or less what he is going to meet: except for the other "I's" he might encounter. Writers and readers have to learn once more the capacity for astonishment, a capacity linked with our feelings (see Müllensteiner, 2000: 504), to be able to see beyond the lies, the prejudices, often caused by politicians and the media. Müllensteiner sees the aim of travel-writing as being to give the reader "the colour of reality (...) how a country really is, its identity" (*idem*, 509).

I would like to give a brief panorama of Iran's history after 1979, so that the historical and social contexts the travellers meet in these two texts and in many others travelling to the region may be understood. In 1979, the USA supported regime of the Shah came to an end. The Shah had tried very hard to westernise the country, not respecting many of the traditions of the country, namely those linked to religion. Ayatollah Khomeini took power in February, starting the Islamic revolution, with many excesses, such as the occupation of the American Embassy. One year later Saddam Hussein started a bloody war against the new Republic, thinking the country was weakened by the internal convulsions. Iraq was supported in this eight year long war by many countries, both Arabian and European, and from 1983 on by the USA. Some speak of about one million deaths on the Iranian side, especially because of the use of chemical weapons. The war had exactly the opposite consequences the Americans and Europeans had thought: it only deepened radicalism and the anti-west front. In 1989 Khomeini died, and his conservative steps were followed by Khamenei. 1997 saw the election of Khatami as president, who wished to make some reforms in the Iranian civil society. Once more the western world misinterpreted the spirit of the reforms: they did not represent westernisation, but an evolution within the Islamic state (see Perthes, 2006: 312). In

2002 President Bush declared Iran was one of the countries of the "Axis of evil". The Americans contributed again to the radicalisation of the Iranian society, where America is seen as a devil. Khatami had great difficulty in his efforts to dialogue with the West. As a consequence, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, an ultra-right populist politician, with a provocative foreign discourse, was elected. All my texts are situated before this last president was elected.

I have selected two authors, showing two ways of looking: the Swiss Laurence Deonna is a journalist who travelled several times to Iran in the eighties and nineties. Her aim is not to give a general presentation of her travels, but rather of the themes she as a journalist is interested in. Higinio Polo, a Spanish historian and novelist living in Barcelona, travelled to the country in 1999, looking for the old Persia, which forced him to make comparisons with today's Iran. >>

Laurence Deonna is a French speaking reporter and photographer from Geneva. In 1987 she was awarded the UNESCO peace prize for education. She is a great reporter for the Middle East area and the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia. She follows the steps of another great Swiss traveller, Ella Maillart, who writes the preface to her latest book, with photographs she has taken from 1967 on, many of them taken in Iran. For more than thirty years she has engaged herself in questions of peace and human rights, of the need to defend different cultures and to accept the Other in his own contexts without any prejudice. In her many books, characterized by humour and melancholy, she shows a good deal of interest in the situation of women in the regions visited.³

Persianeries is a book with reports from her travels to the "Iran of the mullahs" from 1985 to 1998, enabling us to see differences between Khomeini's and Khatami's Iran. The title indicates it is not a travel book, but a journalistic text dealing with aspects of Iranian daily life.

It is not organized chronologically, the themes imposing

their own order and the rhythm of the anthology. Deonna's main purpose is not an analysis of the country, but rather, as she writes in the introduction:

J'ai simplement voulu donner à voir et à entendre. Et tenter de comprendre, autant que faire se peut, une révolution décidément pas comme les autres. (Deonna, 1998: 8)

[I wanted just to make the reader see and hear. And to try to understand, as far as possible, a revolution which was definitely not like any other.]

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She follows certain themes which interest her. She is intrigued and instead of explaining things from a Western point of view, she listens and gives her interviewees a lot of text space. Therefore great parts of the book are in direct speech, with the voices of many Iranians, linked with the regime or critical towards it. Reading Deonna's book helps the reader to question his or her own stereotypes about the country. The author does not aim to be neutral, she produces some critical, usually rather witty, comments. We don't see much of the country, as we did in Byron's or Bouvier's travel accounts. She gets around following her agenda with dates to interview public people. Each theme is developed in short chapters of different lengths, with titles indicating the main issues.

The book could be divided into a number of some main themes: Mashad, the Vatican of the shi'as; cultural events (interviews with caricaturists, poets, filmmakers); Isfahan and the Anglican bishop; an Armenian in Tehran; the war against Iraq and the cemetery of the war martyrs in Bechte-Zahra; the Evin prison near the capital; Qom, the holy town; interviews mainly with women in different places and situations. The book is illustrated with photographs by the author herself, showing the interviewees and social aspects of the country, only a few landscapes, which shows Deonna's interests and complement the text. She complements her text with some caricatures by artists she has interviewed.

The aim of her journey is to understand the power of religion, the theocracy, the isolation of the country, the position of women, things a Western reader might find difficult to grasp.

The leading idea of the book is given at Tehran airport, where she has to take a plane to Mashad, "la super-sainte" [the super-saint] (*idem*, 11): an "Islamic Propagation Shop" and an announcement she will find everywhere, in public buildings, in taxis: "The Islamic head covering is obligatory" (*idem*, 9) As in so many, if not all, travel books on Iran the presence of the *tchador* will accompany the reader as a black shadow throughout the 185 pages. The author has to wear one in Mashad to be able to visit some religious sites. One officer tells her, seeing her difficulties in getting her new *tchador* right: "C'est que vous n'êtes qu'une débutante, avec le temps, vous vous habituerez." [It is because you are just a beginner, you will get used to it with time] (*idem*, 13) The book ends again in an ironical reference to that item of clothing: "La révolution style travailleuses-entchador-unissez-vous" [the revolution of the type workers-entchador-get-together] (*idem*, 173), another ironic comment of the narrator while talking to a counsellor to Khatami for feminine affairs. Women are indeed omnipresent in the book, few men are interviewed. She interviews the lawyer Shirin Ebadi, who will become the Nobel Peace prize in 2003, with whom she discusses the difficulties of women in becoming judges or having similar positions to men. In Iran "la loi coranique règne dans son interprétation la plus étroite, la plus bornée." [the Koranic law rules in its strictest and most limited interpretation] (*idem*, 151), says Ebadi. Deonna interviews Azan Taleghani, who presented herself as a candidate for the presidency of the country in 1997; later on we have a talk with Fatemeh Rafsanjani, who organized the first Olympic games for Islamic women. Everywhere we find Deonna interviewing people or trying to meet normal Iranians and foreigners who live there, especially Afghans, fleeing from the Taliban, but also Armenians and Iraqis, who fled the persecution of Saddam

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Hussein. Omnipresent is a negative feeling towards the satanic Americans. "Death to America" is a frequently heard slogan around the country. It cannot be forgotten they supported Saddam Hussein in the Iraq-Iran war and the Taliban. The war with their neighbours from 1980 to 1988 is still omnipresent. Deonna visits the cemetery of Bechte-Zahra, in honour of the martyrs of that war. Here we meet two Irans: the popular, living the religion with no critical distance ("Mourir pour Lui, ça c'est beau, c'est pas comme tomber du tram" [To die for Him, that is beautiful, it is not the same as to fall off the tram] (*idem*, 114)) and the guide, who says: "je prie chaque jour, mais devant tant de soumission, je deviens folle" [I pray every day, but facing such submission, it drives me crazy] (*idem*, 115). Deonna even interviews a survivor of the war.

She meets a few artists, usually a part of the population with a critical view of the way such a country is ruled, without much freedom of expression. Morad Saghafi runs a small oppositional magazine. He speaks about stereotypical ideas of Iranians in Central Asia, which we can compare to our European "orientalist" visions:

Comme pour tout Iranien, l'Asie Centrale, ce sont d'abord les contes de mon enfance, les filles de Samarcande aux tresses noires comme la nuit, aux yeux sombres comme la passion, aux soies douces comme leur douce peau. D'innombrables poèmes persans rêvent de Samarcande cité de rêve. (*idem*, 40)⁴

[As for every Iranian, Central Asia is first of all the tales of my childhood, the girls of Samarkand with their braids black as the night, their eyes black as passion, with smooth silks, as their smooth skin. Innumerable Persian poems dream of Samarkand city of dreams.]

Deonna visits the satiric magazines *Golagha* and *Kayham Caricature*. To laugh is important (even Khomenei has said that). But it is not always easy to mock oligarchies through texts or caricatures. Massoud Shojai Tabatabai tells her:

C'est cette difficulté pour un caricaturiste d'arriver à donner vie à ... à la masse d'une femme en tchador ... qui me pousse les ... pinceaux ... et me pousse à dessiner des poules, auxquelles je fais prendre des poses. (*idem*, 56)

[It is this difficulty for a caricaturist to give life to ... to the mass of a woman in tchador ... which leads the ... brushes ... and make me draw chickens, whom I oblige to pose.]

The author visits the woman filmmaker Yassamin Maleknasr, who has lived a long time abroad, but now works in Iran. Being marginalized both as a woman and because she has no children, she fights for women's rights in her films, such as *The Common Plight*, a portrait of an independent woman. >>

Deonna visits Simin Behbahani, the greatest poetess of modern day Iran, as she is told. The authorities say she demoralises the nation, she casts doubts about the perfection of Iran (cf. *idem*, 118). Therefore, she is not particularly appreciated by the authorities.

The all present theme is religion, because there is no separation between it and politics. This poses problems for many, not only intellectuals: A taxi driver says "J'aime pas les mullahs! Entre deux enturbannés, c'est tout du pareil au même" [I don't like the mullahs! Between two turban wearers there is no difference.] (*idem*, 47), showing his doubts about Kathami. Another man, selling music cassettes, uses the same word: "Nos enturbannés prétendent qu'une femme qui chante, c'est contre l'islam, parce que sa voix attire les hommes comme la voix d'une sirène." [Our turban wearers think that a woman who sings is going against the Koran, because their voices attract men like the voice of a mermaid.] (*idem*, 126). A third one confesses: "Nous avons si peu droit au plaisir" [We have so little right to pleasure] (*idem*, 127). Deonna talks about "la tyrannie du non-plaisir" [the tyranny of non-pleasure] (*idem*, 143), a sort of living without the bodies.

First of all, we find the author in Mashad. We get to know a very rich foundation, the Asta Quds Razavi, a financial

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company employing 16.000 people. Past and present meet at the library, visited by 5.000 students per day, where traditions and the most advanced technology meet in the same rooms. She visits Tus in the north of the town to see the mausoleum and the gardens dedicated to the great Persian poet from the 10th century Ferdowsi: his poems are heard through various loudspeakers. In the pamphlet in the museum dedicated to the poet it said *The book of the Kings* was "Le livre sacré des Iraniens" [The holy book of the Iranians]. The director has corrected it, it was a sort of "crime de lèse-Allah" [a crime against Allah] (*idem*, 31), as the author ironically points out! In the prison of Evin, an educational prison, the prisoners are prepared to re-enter civil society with new (that is Islamic) principles. In Qom, the "big mullah factory", her main interest is to visit the University in this town. Of course she is only allowed to visit the one for women. Here the male teachers stand beyond a screen, the girls only see their shoes! Deonna notices, in her view, the fanatical look of the students, including a Negro American and a French girl, who preferred to leave their countries in search of a pure spirit here. The French student tells the author: "Parce que pour moi vivre Dieu, c'est Le vivre au quotidien et l'islam ... l'islam m'entoure, lui. L'islam me dicte quoi faire, quand prier, quoi porter ..." [Because for me to live God means living Him in daily life ... Islam enfolds me. Islam tells me what to do, when to pray, what to wear ...] (*idem*, 143). The traveller doesn't see the slightest critical idea, which she has seen in other places.

Deonna has the critical eye of a journalist, as she has had in her other books about the Middle East. But she makes it clear that she comes as a western writer, with western eyes. She finishes the book with a rather positive touch:

Comment ne pas comprendre alors un peu l'Iran, en dépit de ses maladresses? N'en déplaise à ceux qui pensent encore et toujours que le respect des droits de l'homme va de pair avec Coca Cola, comment ne pas ressentir une sorte de sympathie pour ce pays de soixante millions d'habitants, descendants

d'une civilisation trois fois millénaire, lorsqu'il tente de résister à l'holocauste culturel que l'arrogance américaine fait subir à la planète entière? (*idem*, 186)

[How not to understand Iran a little bit, in spite of its lack of tact? In spite of those who always think that respect for the human rights goes together with Coca Cola, how not to feel a sort of affection towards this country of sixty million inhabitants, descending from a civilisation which is over three thousand years old and which tries to resist the cultural holocaust the American arrogance tries to impose on the whole planet?]

Deonna's book is a critical Western view on the Iran of today, full of curiosity and the need to hear the Others' points of view. As a fighter for human rights she does not have a neutral position, but gives us a final comment praising the country, not the regime. >>

Higinio Polo has a quite different approach to his journeys. He has a PhD in contemporary History from the University of Barcelona, where he still lives. He has travelled all around the world, interested in the role of history in contemporary life in areas he visited, among others the Middle East. He has written three novels as well.⁵ Seeing the world from a rather critical point of view, he is extremely sensitive to questions dealing with abuses of power both from the Americans in the world⁶ and the different theocratic regimes. As he says in an interview, "I don't believe one writes about travels, but about human beings" and goes on to say "travel to Iran or to Vietnam, to Argentina or South Africa, I get nearer to other realities which express the human diversity and the loneliness of normal people facing the brutality of the imperial power or of their accomplices." (Erasmó R., 2004: 1)

In 2002 Polo publishes the book *Irán: Memorias del Paraíso*, reporting a journey which took place in 2000.⁷ Let us have a quick look at the title: it shows the interest of the writer in going to look for the presence of Paradise. In Persian, Paradise means garden. Memories of a past, which Westerners

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in previous centuries dreamt about: the world of Scheherazade, the Persian poets, many other tales about the Middle East for whom many authors showed such a great interest, which we can see for instance in Goethes *West-Östlicher Diwan* and in many other literary and pictorial works, which can be summarized under the title "orientalist views". It is therefore a look at the past in the present. It will take us from Tehran to Bam, Shiraz, Isfahan, Persepolis, Tabriz, Anzali, Mashad and other smaller towns. We see his interests in visiting the past: the mosques, the tombs of famous poets he happens to know, the caravanserai of the time of the Silk Road. But he wants to see how people live: he strolls through the narrow old streets, the bazaars, we see him in tea-houses in all places he visits, he even smokes a water-pipe, he sees women with their strange *tchadors*. Like so many travellers he too is interested to see how the minorities live, such as the Armenians, the Afghans and the Zoroastrians.

Let us see the first chapter in which the author explains the reasons for this trip to Iran. Unlike other travel writers, he tells us what he has read before about the country, which will have a certain influence on the way he sees things, comparing his views with the ones of previous authors. He wants to meet the people who created such astonishing poetry, with such an important Empire in the past. He wants to understand the religious aspects of everyday life, a point he doesn't appreciate much, as we will see in some comments on the mullahs and other religious powers. His first interest was awakened by the translation of Khayyam's *The Rubaiyat* by Edward Fitzgerald and to some extent sporadic information about events as the huge, scandalous, expensive party Shah Reza Pahlavi gave in honour of the 2500th year of the Persian Empire. He knows what happened in 1979 with the arrival of Ayatollah Khomeini: the end of a dictatorship and the beginning of a theocracy. The aim now is to follow the steps of three men: the poet Omar Khayyám (1084-1131), the sultan Nezam ol-Molk (1018-1092), famous for his ruling the multicultural state, and Hasan Sabbah (ca. 1034-

1124), the old man from the mountains, the founder of the sect of the Assassins.⁸ Other goals will appear while he is travelling. As an historian he is interested in seeing what happened since the Pahlavis came to power in the twenties. He knew other poets: Attar, Nezami, Rumi, Hafez, Saadi, Ferdowsi. The reader will "meet" them en route! He had read Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*, Vladimir Bartol's *Alamut*, *The travels of Marco Polo*, the German Engelbrecht Kaempfer, with his botanical studies, the Polish journalist and writer Ryszard Kapuscinski's *Shah of Shahs* (1982) and others. But most important are Robert Byron's *The road to Oxiana* (1937) and Pierre Loti's *Vers Ispahan* (1904) and to lesser degree Ella Maillart's *The Cruel Way* (1947), the report of a journey from Geneva to Kabul, together with Annemarie Schwarzenbach. He has in mind some films by the Iranian Abbas Kiarostami too. Thus, he arrives in the country with lots of different textual experiences, which will serve him as comparisons, just as some paintings by the French orientalist Eugène Flandin, enabling him to see the differences between the middle of the 19th century and now.

"Irán es un gigantesco país, en gran parte desértico, cuyo pasado nos atrapaba y cuyo presente nos inquietaba" [Iran is a huge country, in great part desert, whose past and whose present troubles us] (Polo, 2002: 27). In these words Polo indicates his programme very precisely: he wants to travel in the present in search of a past and in a dialogue with previous writers.

In the second chapter the text traveller describes his first experience of the huge chaotic capital of the country. It becomes clear that Polo likes Iran and dislikes very much the all present mullahs. He sees this regime as corrupt as the Shah's, but now in God's name. His reflections on the subject are dealt with especially in this chapter, the following ones concentrate more on the people, the history, the culture.

La omnipresencia de los preceptos religiosos en la vida diaria de la población era evidente, sobre todo entre las mujeres, forzadas a esconder su cuerpo. No dejaba de sorprenderme que una revolución popular, contraria a los norteamericanos, que se habían comprometido con su apoyo al *sha* y por su intervencionismo imperial, una revuelta ansiosa de cambiar la vida, hubiese caído en manos de los *mullahs* y del Islam más retrógrado. [...] Tenían hasta una justificación para hacer obligatorio el chador, anclada en su particular interpretación del Corán y de la tradición musulmana: solamente los clérigos tienen derecho a decidir sobre las cuestiones relacionadas con la mujer. (*idem*, 33 and 42)

[The omnipresence of the religious precepts in the population's daily life was evident, especially among women, forced to hide their bodies. I was surprised that a popular revolution, against the North Americans, who had compromised themselves supporting the shah and through their imperial interventionism, a rebellion anxious to change their lives, had fallen into the hands of the mullahs and of the most retrograde Islam. [...] They even had a justification to force the wearing of the tchador, based on their very particular interpretation of the Koran and of Muslim traditions: only the clergymen have the right to decide on questions related to women.]

The clergymen, according to Polo, promised the Iranians freedom and gave them another prison.

A comparison with the Zoroastrian religion stresses the negative view on the way the mullahs interpret Islam:

La vieja doctrina persa, el zoroastrismo que había sido oficial durante el imperio sasánida, cultivaba la alegría y el placer, lo que contrastaba con las inclinaciones trágicas del Islam iraní, con el gusto por la tristeza y la desgracia, por la monotonía agria de las vestimentas fúnebres y su obsesión por ocultar la belleza de la mujer. (*idem*, 103)

[The old Persian doctrine, Zoroastrianism, which had been official during the sassanid empire, cultivated happiness and pleasure, which contrasts with the tragic inclination of Iranian Islam for sadness and disgrace, for the grievous monotony of mournful clothing and their obsession with hiding the beauty of women.]

Being a man he has fewer constraints than Deonna. The one thing he really enjoyed in this country, besides visiting the old mosques with their special architecture and the colourful tiles, were the bazaars. He visited them in all the places he went to, just sitting in a tea house resting and observing. He saw the bazaars as a central place for civilians: he observed the shop owners, the clients, the products, the movement. It is as the reader sees, hears and smells:

Hombres y muchachos arrastraban carros, sorteando a la gente, que ahora se arrimaba a las cajas que contenían limones secos, de color marrón, que sirven para cocinar y poner en las salsas, o gente que se precipitaba sobre otros limones secos y negros, o sobre los sacos de ajos cortados en laminas secas, en unos movimientos rápidos que permitían la circulación de carros, mercancías y compradores. (*idem*, 36)

[Men and boys pulled carts, avoiding the people who were bent over the boxes with dried lemons, brown in colour, used to cook and in sauces, or people who hastened over other dried black lemons or bags with garlic cut in dried slices, in quick movements allowing the circulation of the carts, goods and buyers.]

Similar lively descriptions can be found all over the text.

He is very enthusiastic about Shiraz, Persepolis and Ispahan, places he visited, and enjoys the nearness of the old Persian poets Hafez and Saadi:

Tenía muchas imágenes atropelladas en la mente y no sabía precisar si el alma de Shiraz la encarnaban las tumbas de los poetas o los recuerdos de su grandeza, la soledad de la ciudadela o el esfuerzo de los iraníes y de los refugiados afganos para salir adelante, su oscura miseria o el tormento de polvo que salpicaba su existencia. (*idem*, 89)

[I had many ideas trampling in my mind and I could not be certain if the soul of Shiraz was incarnated by the poets' tombs or by the remembrance of their greatness, the solitude of the citadel or the effort of the Iranians and the Afghan refugees to go ahead, their obscure misery or the torment of the dust which sprinkled their lives.]

It seems to be an usual practice in journeys by Westerners to see the minorities in the country. Both Deonna and Polo do it quite often in their books. It is a way to measure the capacity for tolerance of the Other in race or religion.

Polo visits Ispahan with Loti and Byron in his mind and compares their views with his own. He strolls through the old streets and yards, all just like a labyrinth. He imitated Byron, who had succeeded in smuggling himself in to see Fatima's tomb, forbidden to non-Muslims. He visits Qom and from there goes to Tabriz and the Caspian Sea. His last stop is Mashad, a stronghold of the Shi'as. To stress development he mentions that when Ella Maillart visited the Library in 1939/40 it had about 18,000 volumes and now it has over one and a half million. But he is not particularly interested in these matters: in an old Buick from the time of the shah he went to visit Ferdowsi's tomb, the writer of the Persian epic poem and then in Neyshabur the one of Khayyam: he is amazed by the lack of interest shown by Byron and Maillart in the famous poet.

On his way to the airport he thinks of the men smoking "felicices en su éden, pero yo sabía que no era así." [happy in their Eden, but I knew it was not like that.] (*idem*, 213) Polo asserts that neither the shah nor the severe mullahs were able to destroy life, even if they had tried hard and still do.

The book ends with Ferdowsi:

El poeta de Tus estaba allí, reinando sobre la historia persa, ajeno a la confusión de las calles de Teherán, tal vez recordando las impacientes palabras del profeta: "Los hombres están dormidos, y solo despiertan cuando mueren." Ferdowsi estaba allí, guardando las memorias del paraíso. (*idem*, 213)

[The poet of Tus was there, reigning over Persian history, alien to the confusion of the streets in Tehran, perhaps remembering the prophet's impatient words: "The men are asleep, and only awake when they die." Ferdowsi was there, preserving the memories of the past.]

The circle is closed: the paradise of the title lives in the poets, the ruins, the old buildings, it lives in Khayyám's quartets, many quoted throughout the text, in a Spanish rendering of Fitzgerald's translation, but it has to do with Hasan Sabbah's sect of the Assassins: he promised his followers paradise, of which he was able to give a small preview in form of wine, girls and other rather earthly pleasures otherwise forbidden on earth to those who followed the master's orders blindly. One of the victims was precisely Nezam ol-Molk, a protector of Khayyám.

Polo's book is thus a multifaceted view of the present, with many voices from different pasts (the Persian, Loti's end of the 19th century, Byron's 1934, Maillart's 1939/40). >>

These two books follow different strategies. The one is a reporter, the other one a traveller, indeed, a cultural tourist. In Deonna's book we have several voices of people she meets usually following her agenda, in a mixture of narrative and dramatic modes. These meetings structure her text. She is not particularly interested in the tourist side of the country, of which we see very little, except for the social side she presents in words and pictures. She wants to understand how people, especially women, manage to be critical in this theocracy, and at the same time she gives voice to people in power or approving the regime. In this sense her book is rather political: she gives voice both to oppressed women as to others linked with the regime and religion, but the text is constructed in a way that even these voices are critically questioned.

In Polo's text it is the journey which structures the report. The "I" of the narrator is far more present in this book, since his point of view dominates everything through the narrative mode. We mainly follow the text traveller's eyes and what he has read, and only sometimes does he give voice directly to others, mainly men, because it is not so easy for a foreign man to contact Iranian women. He takes with him our perplexities about the present. As an historian he looks back and his book is a

permanent switching between today and the different yesterdays. In Deonna we have a great variety of opinions and points of view, some accompanied by photographs which comment and complement, providing the descriptions she does not give in words. Text and photographs complete each other. But the last word always belongs to the narrator as a commentator. In Polo we see mainly his view, his readings of society, which he compares with other fellow travellers from the past. He uses words to describe what he sees and feels, not a single photograph is published in the book. In his book one still finds echoes of the old mythical Persia. Deonna, on the contrary, is very much in the present.

Neither is interested in religious problems, but rather in the social effects of such an interpretation of a religion as Iran's.

In both books we follow a subjective mapping of the country, the reader follows two very different journeys. One in a more journalistic tone, the other more cultural. They look for the Otherness of Iranians through different inner constructions of the social space they have seen, heard, experienced. <<

NOTES

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[1] Defining "intercultural narrative", Tom Kindt refers to the fact that we need to have a narrative, a story and that it must integrate at least two cultures, not only showing them, but interrelating them. Not only referentiality is important, but thematization (Kindt, 2004: 140).

[2] See Gonçalo Vilas-Boas, "Travellers to Persia in the thirties: Maud von Rosen, Robert Byron and Margret Boveri", in *Cadernos de Literatura Comparada* 14/15 (2006): 119-144. >>

[3] Besides the book I deal with, Deonna wrote *Moyen-Orient. Femmes de combat, de la terre et du sable* (1970), following the situation of women after the six days war in Syria, Palestine, Egypt; *Femme reporter* (1980); *Le Yémen que j'ai vu* (1982); *Yémen* (1983); *La Guerre à deux voix* (1986), about the consequences of the war for Israeli and Egyptian women; *Du Fond de ma valise* (1989); *Mon enfant vaut plus que leur pétrole* (1992), actions and reflections on the Gulf War; *Syriens, syriennes* (1992-1994) (1995); *Kazakhstan. Bourlinguer en Asie centrale postcommuniste* (2001) and *De Schéhérazade à la révolution. Photographies* (2006), 126 pictures in black and white, covering forty years of journalism. Some of her first books were published by the protestant Labor et Fides, the latest ones by Éditions Zoé, both from Geneva.

[4] We could remind here the novel of the Libanese writer Amin Maloof *Samarcande*, on the traces of Khaayam too.

[5] Besides a journalist and essayist on political and cultural issues, Polo is a novel writer. His novels are *Al acabar la tarde en Singapur*, *Ventre de nácar* and *El caso Blondstein*. His PhD thesis was about the last days of republican Barcelona. A book on India (*La Noche de Calcuta*) is due soon in Spain.

[6] Polo has written a book on American politics: *Usa: El Estado delincuente*. He has expressed his critical views in many articles, some of them included in the book.

[7] On 27.02.2006 he published an article on Iran in the magazine *Rebelión*: "Irán, próxima subasta de guerra", critically analysing the positions of the Iranian President, Mahmud Ahmadinejad.

[8] See for instance Freya Stark's *The valleys of the Assassins and other Persian travels* (1934), the novel *Atamut* (1937) by the Slovenian Vladimir Bartol or the book by the historian Bernard Lewis *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam* (2002).

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