

OBITUARY

Alessandro Bausani (1921-1988)

Professor of Oriental Studies, Encyclopaedic Scholar, Gifted Linguist

The date 29 May 2001 marked the 80th anniversary of Alessandro Bausani's birthday, whose premature death thirteen years earlier, saddening as it was, brought forth many expressions of admiration from his colleagues and students from Europe and beyond. They praised his erudition and the vast range of his academic interests, the eloquence and elegance of his style, and, above all, the power of his creative mind, demonstrated in over 329 publications, plus at least two books that were published posthumously.

Three years after his death, coinciding with his 70th birthday, the University of Rome published *Yad-Nama. In Memoria di Alessandro Bausani* ("In Memory of Alessandro Bausani") in two volumes, containing 74 articles by scholars from around the world on topics related to Islamic studies, the history of science, linguistics, and literature. However, *Yad-Nama* was neither the first, nor the last compilation of studies devoted to Bausani. Ten years earlier, on the occasion of his 60th birthday, a festschrift called *La Bisaccia dello Sheikh* ("The Bag of the Sheikh") was published, including 39 articles by his colleagues and former students at the University of Venice. It demonstrated the respect and affection that a younger generation of Italian orientalist felt towards him. And, in 1995, scholars at the Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli, where Bausani held the chair of Persian Studies from 1956 to 1974, a chair to which Urdu and Indonesian were later added, dedicated a volume of 35 studies to his memory, appropriately titled: *Un Ricordo che Non si Spegne* ("A record that will not die"). And finally the journal of the Istituto Per L'Oriente in Rome published its volume 3, *Nuova Serie* (1998), with 9 contributions all dealing specifically with some aspects of the "Maestro's" own scholarly heritage.

Literature and religion fascinated Bausani more than any other subject of academic interest. These two fields with their manifold ramifications in terms of time, country of origin, and language that inspired him to ever new endeavours. The taste for beauty of poetic statement and faith in the basic universality of religious truth motivated him to search for thematic and linguistic interdependence in different cultures and religious traditions. Thus Iran, the homeland of superb poets for over eleven hundred years and the cradle of several great religions from Zoroastrianism to the Bahá'í Faith, became the focal point, but also the springboard of his lifelong study and writing. It is only proper that in all of the volumes mentioned above, Bausani has been remembered as a scholar with the broadest stretch of intellectual curiosity and academic capacity. His mind was open to impressions from different humanistic disciplines, religious traditions, and cultural varieties. He did not limit his linguistic and literary research only to Persian language and literature (which, nevertheless, ranked highest among his contributions). He was a prolific Islamicist who wrote a monograph on Islam, *L'Islam*, in 1980 and dozens of long articles on a variety of Islamic subjects; for example, a substantial volume

on the *Ikhwan as-Safa* (the Brethren of the Purity, a 10th century esoteric religio-philosophic society), entitled *L'Enciclopedia dei Fratelli della Purita. Riassunto, con Introduzione e breve Commento dei 52 Trattati o Epistole degli Ikhwan as-Safa* (Napoli, 1978) (The Encyclopaedia of the Brethren of Purity, a summary with an introduction and brief commentary of 52 treatises and epistles by the members of that society), and a translation of the Qur'án with an extended introduction and copious notes (1955, 1978).

He studied other religions and religious traditions as well. Zoroastrianism and the Bahá'í Faith, separated from each other by nearly three thousand years of religious development in Iran, played a significant role in his thinking and scholarship, not only as different entities worthy of investigation, but as the two ends of a long chain of religious systems and philosophy, all entwined with each other in a large part of the world. Bausani's ideas and studies in this field culminated in one of his most original books, *Persia Religiosa da Zaratustra a Baha'ullah* (1959, 1999; recently published in English with the title: *Religion in Iran. From Zoroaster to Bahá'u'lláh*, translated by J.M. Marchesi. New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 2000).

Language had a particular fascination for Bausani, both for its own sake and as the vehicle for the expression of feelings and thoughts. Perhaps no one knows exactly how many languages he knew and to what degree he was able to communicate in them or use them in research. However, it is certain that his gift for languages, at least for reading purposes, was rare. A friend once told me that at the yearly conferences of the European Arabists, Bausani always spoke the language of the host country. In the early sixties when I was in Naples, students from different countries, not conversant in Italian, used to talk with Bausani in their own languages. I jokingly compared him to Solomon who, according to legends based on the Qur'án's *Sura Naml*, spoke the languages of all birds and animals. He had a special knack for making jokes based on the sounds of words and idioms in various languages.

Bausani was an expert in the national literatures of several countries in the Middle and Far East. He wrote three volumes on the literatures of Pakistan and South East Asia, encompassing Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Baluchi, Bengali, Pashtu, and Indonesian, Malay, Burmese, Siamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Javanese (see *La Bisaccia*, bibliography nos. 72, 143, 153). He also produced entire volumes of annotated translations of important poems, such as, for example, Nezami's *Haft Peikar*, *Le Sette Principesse* ("The Seven Princesses," a medieval Persian romance, 1967), three of Sir Muh. Iqbal's poems: *Il Poema Celeste* (Javidnama, The Book of Eternity), 1952, 1965, *Poesie di Muh. Iqbal* (Poems of Muhammad Iqbal) 1956, and *Golshan-i Raz-e Gadid* (The New Rose Garden of Secrets), 1958. He also translated Khayyam's *Ruba'iyat Quartine* (Quatrains) in 1956 and even Avicenna's *Opera Poetica* (tr. from Arabic and Persian, 1956). However, his opus magnum in literary studies is *Storia della Letteratura Persiana* ("The History of Persian Literature," 1960, 1968) in which he approaches the subject, not chronologically as his predecessors had done, and without filling the pages with mere names, titles, and dates. Instead, after two short chapters on political history and development of the Persian language, he describes the immense body of Persian poetry detached from historical circumstances by analyzing it in terms of motives, lyricism, romances, panegyrics etc. in Qasida, Ghazal, Roba'i, and Masnawi forms.

His deliberate disregard for minute details and variants, overlooking of the textual

borrowings of metaphors and other forms of interdependence, and neglect of other exercises of text verification, may have occasionally led to pitfalls. But Bausani's taste and style, and certainly his inclination to originality, determined his methods and preferences. They left little room for long pauses and painstaking search for sources hard to obtain. He started and finished the *Haft Peikar* translation, as I well remember, within only two months. The number of articles he wrote on individual poets and scholars, on literary genres, on the sciences and medieval scientists in Islamic countries, on socio-political and religious trends, is too large even for cursory references. Poets and mystics from Nezami, Sana'i, 'Attar, Rumi and Hafiz down to Bidel (1644-1720), Ghalib Dihlavi (1797-1869), Hali (1837-1914), Iqbal (1873-1938), Qa'ani (1807-1853), Tahereh (1816-1852), and Na'im Sedehi (1855-1916), are only some of the more famous names, with Rumi and Iqbal faring supreme in his mind. In 1980, years before the recent popular interest in Rumi in western countries, he published an anthology of Rumi's mystical poems, translated and annotated. A number of his non-religious and non-literary articles dealt with geography and astronomy. Abu Raihan al-Biruni (973-1050), the supreme scholar and polymath in the history of Islamic civilization, attracted him greatly (*La Bisaccia*, nos. 20, 179, 182, 192, 193, 229, 233).

Bausani was a true European humanist with deep-rooted ties to and knowledge of western poetry, art, music, and philosophy. His lifelong devotion to his oriental academic interests did not come at the cost of neglecting his own great cultural heritage. The publication of a delightful little volume, *La Bbona Notizzia, Vangelo di Matteo Nella Versione Romanesca di Alessandro Bausani* ("Glad Tidings, The Gospel of Matthew, a Romanesque Version by Alessandro Bausani," published twice in 1992) typified his blending of humour and fascination for languages. It should also be noted that he was a member of the prestigious Academia dei Lincei.

Despite this enormous scholarly productivity, Bausani was a leisurely, easy-going, humble, and unassuming person. No trace of haughtiness or pomposity could be found in his deportment. His sense of humour, openly and unabashedly displayed everywhere and with everyone, revealed much about his inner feelings and views. "Criminal" was his substitute for anyone's name he did not immediately remember, or pretended not to remember. His nonchalant way with people of high and low rank alike was endearing. One day a doorman of the Istituto, who loved Bausani, lifted him and pretended to be about to throw him down from the second floor. Bausani, hardly able to control his laughter, reported the incident to the entire class. His annoyance with university bureaucracy, such as being a member of the Istituto's Council and the resulting functions and obligations, many of them trivial in his view, was well known. His contempt for hypocrites and "Scheinheilige," his cheeky imitation of the accent of Iranians speaking Italian, his amusement at a little girl's pronouncing him "Il vecchio Peccatore" (the old sinner) because he placed a chocolate-box high up on a shelf beyond her reach—these glimpses at Bausani's everyday manner explain why so many found him so warm and engaging.

Perhaps his master prank occurred in 1964, when *Il Libro della Barba*, Bausani's translation of the satirical Rishname ("The Book of the Beard") by Obaid Zakani (d. 1370) was published. At Bausani's suggestion for a celebration, the publisher invited a number of guests whose names were compounds of "barba" (Barbanero, Barbarosso,

Barbalungo, Barbablu, Barbuto, etc.), randomly plucked from Rome's telephone book. It was a comic evening, when the guests, introducing themselves, realised that they were part of a bizarre farce.

Bausani loved many cultures and travelled widely with his beloved wife Elsa without whose devotion and care he felt lost. I have hardly known a couple more united in mutual love and understanding as Elsa and Alessandro. Iran and Pakistan were his two favourite countries. In both he delivered lectures to university audiences in their own languages and acted as cultural ambassador. In 1968, the Bausanis visited Chicago. The Dean of Humanities at the University of Chicago, with a selected group of faculty members, gave a luncheon in Bausani's honour. Near the end of the reception the door opened and, uninvited, a humbly dressed and humble looking man entered. The guests rose to their feet. The "intruder" was, perhaps then the world's most famous scholar of religion alive, Mircea Eliade. Eliade sat down and said he had come to see and to thank the author of an article that had greatly impressed him. He referred to Bausani's article, *Betrachtungen ueber die Zeit in Mythos und Dichtung* ("Thoughts on Time and Myth in Poetry").¹

These are only some of my reflections from many years of association and friendship with Bausani. I should not end without a few words about his religious affiliation with the Bahá'í Faith. For nearly forty years, since he had accepted Bahá'u'lláh and joined the Bahá'í community in 1949, he served as a member of the Faith's local and national assemblies in Italy. He was a speaker much in demand at all sorts of Bahá'í gatherings in Italy and beyond. A number of his written contributions about the Bahá'í teachings were published posthumously in a volume called, *Saggi sulla Fede Bahá'í* ("Essays on the Bahá'í Faith", Rome, 1991). His reputation and personal standing drew the attention of many in academic circles to the Bahá'í Faith. It was this religion that crystallized his character and, in a world where many scholars generally agree with Bahá'í principles, but lack the courage to commit themselves to a faith, Bausani stood out and staunchly proclaimed its timely appeal and vital importance for the world. He will be remembered as a Bahá'í who, in harmony with a major principle of this faith, demonstrated the possibility of essential harmony between faith and reason.

Heshmat Moayyad

¹ *Antaios* 5 (1963): 201-224 (translated from the original Italian, "Divagazioni sul tempo nel mito e nelle poesia," *Montaggio* 2.3-4 [1954]: 15-37).