

Ilya Gershevitch (1914-2001)

O tenebris tantis tam clarum extollere lumen

Ilya Gershevitch, an Iranist of profound gift and perception, belonged to a disappearing breed of pioneering Oriental philologists. He was born in Zurich, Switzerland on 24 October 1914, the only son of Arkadi and Mila Gershevitch of Smolensk. Growing up in multilingual Switzerland, the Russian-speaking Ilya acquired fluency in European languages, a facility that would leave colleagues and students simply awe struck, especially when as praelector he introduced the latter to vice-chancellors for their degrees in flawless Latin.

After his schooling in Locarno and Lugano, Gershevitch attended the University of Rome to read Classics and Comparative Philology with Antonio Pagliaro. He proceeded then to England after receiving his *Dottore* in 1937, where an intended three-month stint turned into a lifetime's stay when Walter Bruno Henning, the Parsee Community Lecturer who succeeded H.W. Bailey in 1936 at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), attracted him to studying Iranian languages. He enrolled as a student in 1938, but with the outbreak of hostilities and evacuation of SOAS to Cambridge, was also required to monitor foreign language broadcasts between 1942 and 1947. Despite these demands, Gershevitch earned his second doctorate from the University of London in 1943 for his analysis of Manichaean Sogdian texts. This was published as *A Grammar of Manichaean Sogdian* (Oxford 1954, repr. 1961): an exhaustive treatment of all aspects of the hitherto unknown Sogdian language from fragments deciphered previously by Henning; it remains a standard reference work to this day. Originally a doctoral dissertation, it is a magisterial examination of intensely complex data and *minutiae* supplemented by wealth of examples which makes it a model for all dissertations in not only Iranistics but also historical linguistics.

In 1948, Gershevitch was called to the newly established Lectureship in Iranian Studies at the University of Cambridge. He next embarked on editing Yasht 10, namely, *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra* (Cambridge 1959, repr. 1967). Here his ideas on the metamorphosis within the Old Iranian religious structure from its hoary Indo-Iranian origin to Zarathushtrianism and finally Zoroastrianism are adumbrated. He also demonstrated therein the Iranian antecedents of the Roman Mithras and his

supercedure by Ahura Mazda in the early Iranian pantheon. That it set the benchmark for future Yasht editions and a "new era in Avestan scholarship" cannot be gainsaid. While the approach was retained, some thoughts were revised and outlined in "Zoroaster's Own Contributions" [xiii].¹ In these studies as well as "Old Iranian Literature" [xiii] and "Approaches to Zoroaster's Gathas," (*Iran*, XXXIII [1995]: 1-29), he firmly endorsed Henning's sixth century dating of the Iranian seer and his historical authorship of the Gāthās and steadfastly maintained this long after the *communis opinio* had veered between 1500 and 1000 BC.

The inspiration of his mentor Henning is acutely discerned here and elsewhere. As his oldest pupil, Gershevitch intimately knew this giant and till the last expressed his indebtedness to and espoused his master's *Forschungsstand* convinced that "the chances of his taking a false step in the solution of whatever problem he decided to tackle were reduced to the minimum compatible with human fallibility."²

Such elegance was also evinced in his papers to the late Vladimir Minorsky [xiii] and Emile Benveniste [xv]; the felicitously titled "Farr u Aurang" offered to Mary Boyce, a long-time colleague and another distinguished pupil of Henning;³ a ninetieth birthday essay to Sir Harold Bailey and, almost a decade later, a post-prandial, memorial eulogy at his centenary which I had the great good fortune to attend in Cambridge.⁴ Gershevitch spoke and wrote in English with a flair that was the envy of many a native writer. His seminal erudition was communicated with witty incisiveness in tantalizingly titled papers on Old Persian linguistics, Elamite onomastics, Achaemenid history, Avestan hymnology, Sogdian palaeography, Bactrian epigraphy, Ossetic lore and Bashkardi dialectology. Besides precise encyclopedic contributions and penetrating book reviews, he co-edited the *W.B. Henning Memorial Volume*

1. Roman numerals in square brackets refer to the pagination for fuller documentation located in *Philologia Iranica*, ed. Nicholas Sims-Williams, *Beiträge zur Iranistik* (Wiesbaden, 1985), pp. xi-xv.

2. "W.B. Henning 1908-1967 *In memoriam*," *W.B. Henning Memorial Volume*, ed. Mary Boyce and Ilya Gershevitch (London, 1970), p. vii.

3. "Farr u Aurang," *Papers in Honour of Professor Mary Boyce*, ed. A.D.H. Bivar *et al.*, *Acta Iranica* 24 (Leiden, 1985), pp. 191-194.

4. "Otmehaya 90 letie so dnya rozhdeniya Sera Garol'da Beili" [Marking Sir Harold Bailey's 90th birthday], *Vestnik Drevnei Istorii* 4 (1990): 208-216. Professor Nicholas Sims-Williams informs me that an English translation will appear in a volume of papers which were read at the "Indo-Iranian Languages & People" symposium jointly organized by The British Academy and Ancient India and Iran Trust in Cambridge (16-18 December 1999) to commemorate Bailey's birth centenary.

[xiii] and Igor Diakonoff *Festschrift* [xiv], and edited Volume 2 of *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Median and Achaemenid Period* (Cambridge, 1985). An enviable range and objective rigour comfortably demonstrated in rich articles instead of books is copiously testified in his output. To some, his dianoetic style made for convoluted reading: I, for one, return to his writings for the sheer pleasure of its refined prose. His sense of nuance and detail was also evident in his “dedicated but wholly uncompromising” teaching as remembered by Nicholas Sims-Williams, his most illustrious student and himself an Iranist of universal repute. Indeed Ilya Gershevitch would not compromise on the tergiversations of an “ažu-” or a “cercle gāthique” posited by his continental colleagues; his response to the latter would be: “Compared with Zoroaster’s epoch-making discovery of the twinning thought-egg, the other famous egg in history, that of Columbus, is mere chickenfeed.”⁵

In his final years, Gershevitch cultivated fruitful relations with Italian colleagues who reaped immensely from his learning. He duly noted Gherardo Gnoli’s rethinking and rehabilitation of his teacher’s views in the 1997 UCLA lectures.⁶ Gnoli repeatedly acknowledges Gershevitch’s influence on his reconsideration of Zoroastrian history as well as his stimulating insights into historiography that prompted him to dedicate *The Idea of Iran* (Rome, 1989) to him. Antonio Panaino likewise dedicated his fine edition of *Tištrya: The Avestan Hymn to Sirius, Part I* (Rome, 1990) and his 2001 *Quatre Leçons* at the Collège de France. But the crowning monument of Gershevitch’s scholarship and teaching is revealed in the superb edition of *The Christian Sogdian Manuscript C2* (Berlin, 1985), the published version of a doctoral dissertation inscribed to him by his student, Nicholas Sims-Williams.

Five significant undertakings, regrettably unfinished, now constitute his *Nachlass*. In 1956, Gershevitch set out with his wife, Lisbeth, for Bashkard, an inhospitable enclave of southeast Iran along the Makran littoral. In fact this area was hardly attested by Western travelers and the Gershevitchs were the first Europeans to have

5. Art. *Āit., Iran*, 6. This was originally a lecture delivered at a Zoroastrian studies colloquium. A simplified version shorn of notes and appendices is in “Dissent and Consensus on the Gāthās,” *New Approaches to the Interpretation of the Gāthās: Proceedings of the First Gāthā Colloquium held in Croydon, England (5th-7th November 1993) under the auspices of the World Zoroastrian Organisation*, ed. Farrokh Vajifdar (London, 1998), pp. 11-26.

6. Gherardo Gnoli, *Zoroaster in History*, Biennial Yarshater Lecture Series No. 2 (New York, 2000).

Obituaries

visited the area in and around the Biverch district that lay northwest of and between Angohran and Garahven. Detailed notes of his dialect recordings remain unpublished save for select remarks in "Outdoor Terms in Iranian" [xii], "Agricultural Terms in Iranian" [xiii] and "Iranian Chronological Adverbs" [xiii]. Two decades into his teaching career, Gershevitch was invited to deliver the Ratanbai Katrak Lectures at the University of Oxford in 1968: a signal honour and the highest distinction bestowed in Zoroastrian studies. In two of those six lectures he argued that the Elamite records preserved in Achaemenid chanceries were to be read as Old Persian because the former version truly represented Darius' original Persian pronouncements at Bisitun. These and lectures on other topics never saw the light of day but readers may profitably consult his "Iranian Nouns and Name in Elamite Garb" [xiii], "The Crushing of the Third Singular Present" [xiii], and "The Alloglottography of Old Persian" [xiv]. A work-in-progress report was all that was published on a rare Buddhist Bactrian text in "The Bactrian Fragment in Manichaean Script" [xv]; and, due to failing eyesight, there remain an incomplete discussion of Yasna 51 as well as field notes on South Ossetian dialects following a visit to that autonomous republic's capital, Tskhinvali, in 1990.

Accolades and appointments, not unexpectedly, came to Ilya Gershevitch during and after the completion of his formal teaching duties. He served as a Reader in Iranian Studies (1965-1982) and Fellow of Jesus College from 1962 until his demise. He was invited to Visiting Professorships of Indo-Iranian at Columbia University (1960-1961, 1965-1966) where he offered courses on Old, Middle and New Iranian; and as a University Exchange Visitor to the U.S.S.R. (1965). Gershevitch was elected a Fellow of the British Academy (1967); President of Philological Society (1980-1984); and corresponding fellow of the Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters (1982), Accademia dei Lincei (1987) and Academy of Sciences of the Russian Federation (1992). He was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the University of Berne (1971) and in the same year attended the 2,500th anniversary celebrations at Persepolis as well as the World Iranist Congress in neighbouring Shiraz.

It is heartening that Ilya Gershevitch received encomia in Russia, Switzerland and Italy; unlike Zarathustra, not all prophets go unsung in their lands. He rounded the "final turning point of existence" (Y. 51.6) and has now joined his teacher at the House of Song: an apposite abode for an accomplished cellist and pianist.

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