A Story of an Archive: Love and Death in Prison Letters
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A Party with the Moon

In one of those endless nights of the summer of 1988, besieged by a strange grief, an Iranian woman political inmate squeezed herself in between the narrow space of the metal shutters of the cell and stared at the mystifying sky. A gulping void was rapidly growing inside her, as if a monster was about to swallow her from within. Her heart seemed to know of the gravity of the loss of which she would only learn months later. Unlike the smooth gliding of the clouds, her hand hastily moved on the paper to accommodate the words which were forcing their way out. She had to however restrain herself and her hand to conform to the boundaries of the seven-line rule of prison letters and to the censorship. Every word, metaphor, and poetic expression had thus to be carefully chosen. The fusion of her intense emotions and prison regulations were manifest in the letter she wrote that night, wherein the trivialities of the everyday interrupt the fantasies of her party in the moon.

> In the absence of any news about you, for hours last night, I sat in solitude with you and with the sky of our memories. Such a sky: the darkness intermingled with colors, the moon glided on the shoulders of the bright silvery clouds in the heart of the pouring moonlight. When during such fantastic moments I invite the moon to our party, do you hear the knock of the moon and I on the window of your heart? When you sit to watch the moon, do you recognize me riding on the clouds of the far out dreams coming towards you? These days I come to see you more than ever. Your letters do not reach me and with no visits with you, I restlessly await your letters. Write to me. How is your shoulder, your jaw and teeth? If you need money please write me about it…I am fine and as always spend my days with sweet memories and treasured beliefs and more than ever am eager to see you.

As the opening suggests, this paper offers only a glimpse to the story of love, separation, and death, all condensed in a small archive of prison letters, exchanged in the 1980s between two

inmate couple. The husband was executed in the summer of 1988 but the woman survived and now lives in the US. For her and many other surviving inmates, the summer of 1988 embodies a turning point, a referential moment in relation to which other events find a place in their mental and symbolic calendar. Yet, confined by the time limit, I herein neither offer a detailed account of the events of that summer nor of the content or the complex multilayered meanings of the letters. I rather pursue two interrelated and quite urgent goals. The first of these imperatives has to do with the elements of time and justice, or indeed our disjointed time and its injustices and the silences they impose on this particular history of the massacre of political dissidents in Iran. I should point out, at the outset, that I perceive the brutality of political suppression in Iran inseparable from and in fact within the global ideopolitical milieu which enables such grave injustices. I thus take issue with those views that consider the exercise of violence by the Iranian state a manifestation of its assumed anachronistic theocracy or and of the inherent violence of Islam. I believe that this perspective ignores both the complex diversities of modern nation-states, of which Iranian state is albeit a unique example, and the dynamics of power and knowledge of all discursive traditions, including Islam.

My second concern stems from the danger posed by our present world system, which is embodied in the ideopolitical and socioeconomic regimes and hegemonic discourses. This danger demands of us the invocation and exposition of all forms of injustices, including the massacre of 1988. It is our task to expose all modern forms of violence for what they are, either disguised behind seemingly antique religious beliefs or under the white mask of liberal notions of freedom and democracy. Both disguises offer testimony to the prevailing yet elusive myth of Enlightenment to having freed human from naked force of "barbarism" while indeed equipping the mythic barbarism with advanced technologies.

Against these injustices, in the spirit of Derrida's work in "the Specters of Marxism," this paper converses with the revolutionary spirits of the past as a way to learn how to live justly in our disjointed time. With Benjamin, I envision articulating the past as a way of "seizing "hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger (1986: 255). Benjamin's portrayal of angel of history enables me to think about the 1988 massacre at once as a unique event and as part of a catastrophic injustice of our time. The challenge is how to give this event its deserved time and justice, in another words, how to besiege time as if forcing it to stand still, while, in Benjamin's words, "a storm blows with such violence that irresistibly propels the angel of history into the future we call progress (259). In pursuit of a way out, I submerge in love and resilience that emit from these prison letters, as did our woman inmate when she clang to her husband's letters, read them night after night, first gulping them down, then drinking them sip by sip, and finally letting them dance in her mind as if waves in the ocean. Their melodies softened the torment of those nightmarish months and years; she slept to them as if to mothers' lullabies, wore the pearl of their words like a talisman and was rescued from her agony and despair by the power of love.

Of the Disjointed Time

If one could ever speak of beginnings, the beginning to the series of the events leading to the massacre of 1988 was the end of the eight long bloody years of the Iran-Iraq War, which presented the Mojahedin-e-khalgh-e-Iran, an Iranian opponent organization, an opportunity to attack Iran. The offense was immediately defeated. Yet, like the reaction of the US in the wake of the September 11th, the Iranian Regime also rushed to avenge and extended its revenge beyond killing those who were involved in the offense. It too used the offense as a pretext to unleash a massacre which targeted those with the least means to fight back. If for the US these were civilians of Afghanistan, Iraq, and the already marginalized others within, in Iran political prisoners were hit hard. So surreal was the scale of this brutality that when that hellish summer

was finally over, the jail was unrecognizable even to its own survivors. From November to the December, thousands of families received the news of the execution of their loved ones. Yet again I will not concentrate on the horror but on the enduring love and resilience that these letters convey which rendered living through that unfeasible period a possibility and an art.

Of Memory

In his debate with Socrates about memory and writing, Phaedrus suggests that writing is a "recipe for memory and wisdom." Socrates negated this remedy and argues that writing "will implant forgetfulness in [people's] souls" for "they will cease to exercise memory" and "rely on that which is written" (1982: 156). Indeed, writing projects human nostalgia and desire to overcome death, while it is itself derived from a space of absence and death. In response to our humanly desire to overcome death, we hold on to the vanishing traces by employing language. Yet the inherent silence in language and writing urges us to reckon with the new lives that sprout out from ruins. Writing, says Brinkley Messick, "is a remedy and a poison,"… "a protective against death," which is itself "predicated upon a kind of death."

Of this "kinship between writing and death" the Iranian political prisoners have first hand experience. Writing for these inmates was a double-edged sword which killed with one edge and brought back to life with another. If "Scheherazade's story in Foucault's reading is a desperate "inversion of murder,…the effort…to exclude death from the circle of existence," the stories in our prison letters were attempts in simultaneous exclusion and inclusion of death in the realm of sociality. Confronted with myriad faces in which death transpired in prison, many inmates wrote not so much in order to be rescued from organic death, but from the death of humanity within and without. Our prison letters exemplify this simultaneous sacrifice and salvage of writing.

Contrary to Socrates' view that the written words "seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything,…they say the same thing for ever," words never

say the same thing twice. Indeed, they might even stop telling any tangible story and become mute. Like traces, words can also, in Derrida's words, "lose their power of signification," and become testimonial to our elusive relationship to the past. The intricacies we face in recovering the meaning behind these letters mirror the obstacles of reconstructing the traces of a massacred political generation in Iranian recent history. How does one tell the story of a past that is so carefully forced to erasure, which drifts by so fast that one's scars are deepened by those of the new but already past ones? How does one name one's pain in the midst of this phantasmagoric political landscape to which violence is so indispensable and constitutive? How does one write about the "evil doings" of one home while it is targeted as the "axis of evil" by one's other home? How does one expose one massacre without welcoming another?

Of Fading Traces

The crushing of the dissidents which had begun nearly immediately after the inception of the Islamic Republic in 1979, was escalated in early 1980s, but slowed down before taking an implausible toll after the Mojahedin-e-Khalgh-e-Iran's attack. The 1event of 1988 was distinctive first of all because no longer could the state exert and obscure its violence in the foggy revolutionary atmosphere of the early years, but by breaking its own laws and thereby, in Benjamin's words, making them into laws. Secondly, the enormity of this massacre and the silence that was imposed on it confronted the surviving families with a far greater than danger than the enormity of their loss, the absolute death of their loved ones. For, death in and of itself is not an utter non-existence; nor does it entirely erase one's social existence. The dead remain in the social realm by and in the traces they leave behind of their once lived life. Compelled to sustain our social existence, we leave traces, write letters, and create archives. Yet memory betrays us; signposts are often lost or shifted, misleading us in our illusive journey back to the

"origin;" the return is thus rendered an impossible longing. Of this longing for a return and the desire to move forward the husband inmate writes:

> In solitude, I converse with you, try to remember your talks, laughter, pain, and songs, try to engage with you, try to hear and imagine the changes in them after this long time of separation with no visit. Yet, how badly I miss you!

Letters are often exchanged between private parties; they await response and assume an ongoing communication. Relying on this capacity the woman inmate employs the metaphor of a pigeon and writes: "A domesticated pigeon will never experience a higher flight for the horizon of its need do not rise higher than some water, seed, and a little nest. Like a pigeon, if one seeks a mere comfort of a small home and the seed of yesterday, whither the flight of tomorrow?" The husband engagingly responds: "The pigeon of my mind takes its seed and water from my existence. Its pursuit of comfort resides in my existence, which is itself defined by my relationship to the world. I therefore cannot simply decide for the pigeon of my mind to fly higher, unless I create new conditions for my existence to transform the domain of my being and my flight (May, 1988). In yet another letter: "I'm reading the last line of your letter, but am unable to take my eyes off. Like the cool water that is given to a thirsty person, again and again I gulp it down with my eyes, then my mind begins to fly…." Here again he is conversing with his lover. Yet, all along, the presence of an intrusive third party haunts these apparently "private dialogues," for their letters are read by inspectors and often shared with other inmates. Occasionally, the inspector' eerie apparition transpires in the inmates or their families' letters by introducing a rupture in the conversation, by superimposing a spectral handwriting on their letter and commanding: "Do not write more than seven lines." Hence in prison letter, the inherent silence of the archive is further augmented.

Of the Archive

Silence, Michel-Rolph Trouillot tells us, enters the process of historical production at crucial moments from making *archive* to *narrating history*. Adding to this is the fact that from the instant that their navel cord is detached from their author, as with that of any text, their authors are lost to the reader, and the letters take the life of their own. In each reader they are reborn not as the letter, but as a letter, read in the here and now and in the presence of a reader. Take the following letter, for instance, where the husband expresses his feeling about receiving a life sentence after anticipating his execution for over four years.

> *I am not happy for the sheer fact of being alive. That in and of itself is no the reason for my happiness. But when [if] I live in a world of human joy and pain, I will be happy and your presence in my life has always given me confidence that with you I would not merely age but live.*

Surely, each of us will translate the above passage into our own sociopolitical and cultural language, which varies from the socio-historical ambiance within which it was produced. The enigmatic nuances of the words which are chosen not merely for their literal and poetic connotations, but also to circumvent the censorship, cultural taboos, and the seven line limitation are further obscured when attempting to translate them in and from their different localities and from a gone by past. In the absence of the thing, we employ language which is always already a substitution. To assume a single reading to these letters is thus to ignore Marx's insight that "the unity of the commodity is also its internal and irreducible difference," for translation, in Rosalind Morris's words, "is marked by the fact of identity's absence" (2000: 18-9). Note the following excerpt from the husband's letter, which is written in the midst of the bombing of the Iranian cities by Iraq.

> *Today, especially since the evening I have missed you so much. I have a strange feeling. At first I told myself that perhaps your letter was on its way, but now that it is almost one in the morning and I've lost hope to*

receive a letter, I am worried; what if you are sick? I know that I will no longer be able to sleep tonight. Imagining that you might now be suffering from pain drives me crazy; I lose the ability to do anything. I have no visit with you, nor do you yourself tell me about your well-being,… The lack of news and my worries about you frustrate me. Perhaps, for many, this might not be comprehensible that, under such conditions, while time after time, distressed with and horrified by the sound of explosions, people search for their loved ones in the ruins of bombings, in the midst of thousands of heart- ranching scenes of bombings of schools, factories,…, I worry about a narcissus. I find no words to explain this. What is to say? How can I explain that this narcissus is the flower of my soul; she is my whole life,.. that I give my life for the blossoming of this flower? How can I not be worried! And you, while knowing that I have no news about you, you simply write: "do not worry about me at all.

To unpack the ideas, emotions, and symbolic expressions congealed in this short passage one has to decipher not merely the political culture of his time and place but also their unconventionality. Indeed, as a political activist of that era, he is himself conflicted and wary that his personal concerns and romantic feelings would be stigmatized both by his own comrades and the Regime. Mindful of the intrusive presence of the inspectors, he deploys the metaphor of narcissus also as a secret code, for only the two lovers know that Narcissus was the nickname he had chosen for her, resembling her to the *narcissus* flower with its strong stems but delicate petals that grows in and withstands winter, but is the harbinger of spring.

To do justice to the complexity of his expressions which strive to at once smart out the censor, respond to the anticipated criticisms of his comrades, and cope with his own conflicting emotions is an undertaking that belies beyond the scope of this brief intervention. Suffice it to hint at the recurring metaphors in these letters which affirm the consistency of their unwavering love and humanity. The reiteration of the imageries and poetic expressions in another letter of his might illustrate the point. "At nights, through the bars of the window, I stare at the moon to feel your smiling gaze for I know that you watch the clouds. I know you love rain, snow and

avalanches [note that the term avalanche, Bahaman in Farsi, also implies the Revolution for the 1979 Revolution occurred in the Iranian month of Bahaman]. The letter goes on: I know that with the warmth of your gaze you please the moon so I can see a narcissus on the blushed face of the moon. Yet, my soul does not rest. I wonder where I can find you. Again and again, I read your letters. In the end, I realize that I must revisit my heart and soul for there you reside. With the ear of my heart I hear your voice: 'as long as the story of exchange-benefit is preventing our unity, we must embrace all the suffering and torment of love.' My soul feels appeased. In solitude, I carry on a conversation with you since conversing with you is the source of life for me and I regret why I did not use every moment of it while together.

The persisting love and resistance underlying these imaginations and imageries supersede and overcome the distance not only between the lovers but also between them and us. Notwithstanding the fact that the precise meanings of these words fly away for, in Bakhtin's words, "every utterance brings into being a distinct accent, denotation, and a new imprinting in the memory," like migrating birds, the spring of shared humanity brings these letters back if not to their original home, but to a home, to us. As human we often live our lives nearly oblivious to our mortality. Every now and then, however, when death steals away our loved ones, or is about to knock on our door, we are pushed out of our whimsical slumber; reminded that soon we might too be cut off from our unfinished kisses. It is from this space, upon hearing of her husband's execution, our woman inmate writes to her husband's brother.

> Today it's been three days, no three years, or perhaps only three seconds. I do not know since when these stares are trying to convince me of living without a soul. Do you believe this? Do you believe that the sun of a compassionate and ever concerned gaze would no longer follow our footsteps**,** that the shimmering spring of his soothing and serene words would never again tell us of our wrongdoings, that the fruitful hands of a lover would no longer channel the stream of love into our souls; that never again he would teach us to love with our entire being?... Yet this

> belief is seeping through and spreading its wings inside me: “he did not pass by in the refuge of the shadows. Can’t you see the brightness of the sun on his path?”

Let’s end this paper with the words of the ghost-husband from another letter of his which offers yet another testament to an unwavering resistance against injustice and to the hope and love that cry out from the space of despair.

> Tonight my heart has missed you so much that it will not calm down. Right at this moment, the moon, with all its beauty has captivated everyone under its gaze but I am burning with longing to see you even for an instant. I am surprised at why this fire that is inflaming my soul, does not burn my body. Perhaps, no, certainly because of the deeply rooted hope in our hearts, hope for a tomorrow when the bodies could be happy with their work, when you and I will could gleefully hold hands and wonder around on the green heart of meadows, filled with narcissuses and jasmines. With these hopes we embrace the fire of separation in our souls.