Iraj Afshar
a life of friendship, books and manuscripts;
Some personal recollections

Messages informing me that Iraj Afshar had died on March 9, 2011 in a hospital in Tehran, came from many directions. Iraj Afshar is one of the greatest names in Persian bibliography. But to say that Islamic codicology, paleography, and the sciences of the book were his only interests would not do justice to his many proficiencies. He was an ocean of knowledge who generously shared his expertise with all who cared to ask—both in and out of Iran. He was also a good friend whose death fills me with sadness and despair. He was too great a scholar for anyone to make a serious effort at giving a fair assessment of his achievements so early after his passing. It is far too early to grasp the full significance of his work. Iraj Afshar's sons, Babak, Bahram, Kooshiar, and Arash together with a number of others compiled an analytical bibliography of their father's writings in 1999, which has been regularly updated with supplements since then. In fact, in the years to come, we will continue to see new, though posthumously published articles by Iraj Afshar as if he were still active and among us. It is indeed difficult to believe that he is no longer with us. At this place and moment in time I can only mention some personal details that directly came to my mind when I heard of the loss of this good friend.

I first met Iraj Afshar in the spring of 1970. He was then the director of the Library of the University of Tehran, and I had just enrolled as a student in that university. “What a kind and honest man”, was my first impression. I had already had my first experiences with Iranian bureaucrats, but Iraj Afshar was an entirely different personality. He had a genuine interest in me and in my rather futile attempts to study Persian literature. I still see him sitting in his large subterranean office, or rather study, just outside the campus grounds of Tehran University, where I lived. He must have been writing a book or an article and he was certainly not brooding over official papers. An employee of the library stood in attendance and brought the books that he wanted from the shelves that covered the walls of his study. I met him there only once or twice as I was far too shy a student to impose myself on such a great scholar.

Three years later I met him again, in Paris, during the last International Congress of Orientalists. He was of course the most prominent figure in the delegation from Iran. He immediately recognized me and shook my hand while expressing in his face the genuine joy of meeting an old friend. This struck me as remarkable because I could not believe that I had made an impression on him in Tehran. Then there was a long period during which we had no direct contact. I left the field of Persian literature altogether and concentrated on Islamic studies instead. Yet, I have always profited from the little Persian I learned in 1970 in Tehran.

After 1979 I assumed that Iraj Afshar had somehow survived the Islamic Revolution but I was unaware of the details of his life. I was optimistic about his well-being as it was evident to me that even under the new regime his service to Persian culture would be indisputable and sufficiently recognized. Later I understood that he had quit his job as head-librarian but had continued to work as an independent scholar. He has continued his scholarship until his last days.

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1 Published Works of Iraj Afshar. Compiled by: Babak Afshar, Bahram Afshar, Kooshiar Afshar, Arash Afshar. Los Angeles 2003. They had this booklet of 184 pages (!) printed at Printup Graphics, the commercial press which they run in Los Angeles.
When I founded the journal, *Manuscripts of the Middle East* in 1986, Afshar and I reconnected by exchanging copies of *Manuscripts of the Middle East* for copies of *Åyandeh* (the Persian Magazine of Iranian Studies) that he had revived from a journal of the same name, which his father, Dr. Mahmood Afshar, founded in the year of his birth (1925). Iraj Afshar published innumerable notes of various lengths in this journal and signed them with his initials: two alifs, or just with the word, Åyandeh.

From 1991 we were to meet on a more regular basis, because both of us sat on the Board of Experts of the al-Furqan Foundation for Islamic Heritage, which was then based in Wimbledon. The Board convened three or four times a year, sometimes more often, usually at a locations in the UK, Istanbul or the Middle East. It also gave courses on codicology and paleography in various cities throughout the world, at which we participated as teachers. This involved a lot of travelling, often to quite exotic places. The al-Furqan Foundation is the brainchild of Shaykh Ahmed Zaki Yamani, the former Saudi Oil Minister, who has spent a considerable part of his immense fortune on promoting knowledge of the Islamic heritage. The al-Furqan Foundation, which has in the meantime moved to a location in Central London, has published an impressive number of manuscript catalogues, editions of classical texts, and important monographs. By far its most noteworthy and valuable contribution to the field of Islamic manuscripts has been the publication of a monumental bibliography, entitled the *World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts*, the English version of which appeared between 1992-1994. An updated Arabic version was published somewhat later. Another important work published by al-Furqan was François Déroche’s *handbook of Islamic codicology*. Immediately upon publication in 2006, in both English and Arabic, it became an indispensable tool. The members of the Board of Experts of the al-Furqan Foundation would during its meetings give their opinion on the numerous proposals that arrived from all corners of the world and I was always impressed by Iraj Afshar’s conduct in these meetings. He came up with simple and pragmatical solutions, and put dubious, and sometimes confusing or confused proposals to simple tests of common sense and philological verification. This had a healthy effect on the clarity of the arguments and the progress of the meetings.

After our meetings of the Board of Experts Iraj Afshar and I often spoke about other things, including his own work of course. That was of dazzling proportions and constantly in state of further development. It struck me that he showed a lively curiosity in the activities of the younger generation of persianists outside Iran, many of whom he knew personally. He was the very opposite of the inward looking armchair oriental scholar who easily and gladly scorns the Orientalists. Of course, foreign scholars ’doing Persian literature’ will never attain anything that even resembles the vast knowledge of Iranian scholars. But that being as it is, it does not mean that the orientalist’s endeavour are by definition less valuable. The added value of the foreign student of Persian literature is his different classical background and philological approach, together with his access to resources which are not always accessible to scholars living outside Europe and North America. Iraj Afshar realized, possibly more than anyone else, how important it was to include the foreign community of European, American and Japanese Persianists in a joint scholarly project. Keeping people together, rather than excluding them, was his preference.
Our lives crossed many more times. One example really stands out in my mind. In early June 2004 Iraj Afshar visited my hometown Leiden, and visited me at my home. He participated in a symposium which was organized by Dr. A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, the Lecturer of Persian at Leiden University. The subject of the conference was that remarkable fourteenth-century manuscript, known as *Safinayi Tabriz*, with its hundreds of texts, a one-volume-library of incredible size and inestimable importance. Iraj Afshar had not come there alone: a fine selection of Iran’s philologists, archivists and literary historians accompanied him. On the sunny Sunday morning after two serious days of conference I rented a small motorship and we all merrily toured around, first through Leiden’s rivers, the Rhine, the Leede and the Zijl, and several of its canals. Then I headed towards the lakes north of the city, with a treasure of knowledge on board, as if we were re-enacting the subject that we had been talking about during the previous days. It was Holland at its best, the boat wobbling on the sweet waters of Leiden, the fingers of the little waves melodiously drumming on the hull of the boat, with nature around us in full expanse, a true *Safinat al-Nashat*, that had saved us from a dreary morning in town. The azure sky reflected on the surface of the lake with us gliding, on the surface of the mirror, floating as travelers in space. These are unforgettable moments. I felt honoured when in that same weekend Iraj Afshar suddenly took away my notebook and wrote a poem in it of his own making, to the point and full of nice paronomasia. I quote it here in full:

> "Our ship threw out its anchor in the river of Lugdunum. Our merchandise on this trip was *Safina-yi Tabriz*. Twenty pearl divers of Persian literature sat together, spoke, then left. The result: the manuscript (copied) seven hundred year ago by Malikān Was not (just) a ship but was (itself) an Ocean. Iraj Afshar, Leiden, 25 Khordād (1383 / 5 June 2004)"


3 Iraj Afshar’s autograph in Notebooks Witkam, FN 51, p. 41. Lugdunum Batavorum is the Latin name of Leiden. I am grateful to Dr. A.A. Seyed-Gohrab for solving for me the problem of ‘Malikan’ in line 4.
At such occasions it was as if time, that unreliable and gluttonous friend, was simply forgetting about us, and I rarely worried about the finalities of existence. To me it was as if Iraj Afshar had always been there and would remain with us for ever - and we with him. That makes it the more difficult to come to terms with the fact that he now has left us for good. He himself was not spared in the past few years, his wife died, and also one of his sons. Sometimes his health failed him and he regularly went to California to live with his sons, in order to have medical check-ups or to undergo treatment. He often used Amsterdam Airport as his hub between Tehran and Los Angeles and would then take one or two days off in the Netherlands, to rest, to meet old friends, and would then continue his journey to the Far West. In December 2005 we were in Jeddah together and it was there that I suddenly felt an acute anxiety that time would in fact not spare him. I remember seeing him leaving by bus somewhere, and I was sure that that was the last time I was to see him alive. Fortunately I was wrong.

In 2009 I met Iraj Afshar again, twice even, first in the codicology conference of the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna, where he was the revered nestor of Persian book science, and in November 2009 in Tehran, my first visit to Iran since 1970. Then I had the pleasure of going to dinner to Iraj Afshar’s house in Niavaran, north of Tehran. I went in the company of Nader Mottalebi Kashani, the enthusiastic young editor of *Nāmeh Bāharestān*, an important journal on Islamic manuscripts. It is he who invited me to write these recollections for his journal.

The last time I saw Iraj Afshar was in Leiden, early in 2010. He was again on route to the West, and I availed myself of the opportunity to invite him to sit on the board of Leiden professors for the public defense by one of my students, Ms. Carmen Pérez-Gonzales, of her Ph.D. thesis. Iraj Afshar’s presence, dressed as he was in a Leiden gown, was one of the highlights of the ceremony. The history of Iranian photography is yet another field of interest of Iraj Afshar, on which he has extensively published. But I could see, there and then, that he was tired, and that he was the one who was doing us a favour, not the other way around.

During his last visit to The Netherlands, late in 2010, I missed Iraj Afshar by half a day. Later, Dr. Seyed-Gohrab, who was his host during his brief transits, gave me a copy of the book which Iraj Afshar had brought with him. It was his edition and facsimile reproduction of the unique Leiden manuscript of the *History of Shaykh Uways*. I was one of the dedicatees, and the book contains a friendly inscription. Five years earlier I had sent Iraj Afshar a microfilm of the manuscript. I had immediately forgotten about it, of course, but he had not. I wrote a few lines of appreciation to Los Angeles, but received no response.

Two images remain with me: the vigorous and welcoming librarian in Tehran in 1970, and the image of the venerable scholar who added splendour to an academic function in Leiden in 2010. In between these moments lie forty years of friendship, books and manuscripts. May God have mercy on his soul.

Leiden, 3 April 2011

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