

Critical Paper on Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*:

Reflections on Marjane and Ruth and Ed

For the Novel Club meeting of January 8, 2019

By Joyce Kessler

I had a number of reasons for recommending to the members of the Novel Club Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis, the Story of a Childhood*, a brilliant graphic buildings roman of revolution and renouncement in 20th century Persia. Most of these reasons centered on the value of reading contemporary novelistic forms for the sake of getting a jump on new (or novel) cultural forms. As I thought about *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2, the Story of a Return*, though, I became convinced that the most compelling thing about this two-volume work was not its form as a narrative, but its subject. I began to see its most significant value as a dramatic narrative of a particular human experience of the present day – the particular experience of losing one's home. We all currently share in that experience in diverse ways: some through a direct and permanent departure, some by being left behind, some by witnessing its stressors in person and some by encountering it in a television broadcast or a newspaper photo essay. Some of us experience it through our own stories of family heritage, some through political discourses on questions more (or less) abstract from our personal experience; i.e., whether or not our President's border wall will be made of concrete, or whether our immigration policies should be further modified in either direction. Population shifts necessitated by social conflicts or national revolutions are constantly in our minds because they are constantly in the news. As I

assessed the ways that the 2003 translation of Satrapi's two-volume graphic narrative spoke to 2018, my critical approach to *Persepolis* inflected. What began as a defense of the graphic narrative was shifting to an interrogation of the form's suitability to meet the needs of a subject as dark as Satrapi's – that of exile.

It is helpful to remember that though various forms of illustrated texts date back to classical times, and the origins of the comic book from 1933's *Famous Funnies*, graphic narratives date from a more recent (and some would say more prophetic) decade: the 1970s. Genres that combine text with images have always been sneered at by the literary establishment, despite the commercial success of illustrated magazines in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Though he succumbed to his publisher's pressure to place his short stories and novels in such popular venues, Henry James passionately stated the case against pairing pictures and words: "I have always hated ... the negation of all literature that the picture book imposes." (*The Illustration of the Master*, Amy Tucker 13). The lowly cultural position occupied until very recently by comics, however, has been elevated with the introduction of the graphic narrative, which has gone from being seen as novel in form to being accepted as a genre suitable for many kinds of storytelling. In his 2016 book, *Reading Graphic Novels, Genre and Narration*, Achim Hescher identifies its most salient generic feature as "complexity," which can be observed within a number of subcategories, including "multilayered plot and narration, ... complex text-image relation, meaning-enhancing panel design and layout, references to texts/media, and self-referential and metafictional devices." (Abstract, Jstor)

There is, in fact, much agreement among scholars of the bitextual narrative on one premise regarding the relationships between the word and the image: that each is a kind of text

that must, on its own terms, be read. In *The Artist as Critic*, Lorraine Janzen Kooistra has outlined a set of dialogic relations between picture and word, relations in which diverse ways of reciprocal commentary inform readers' ultimate understandings of bitextual narratives such as graphic novels. In discussing tonight's narrative, we might embrace Kooistra's as our central question: "What is the relationship between image and text in the production of meaning?" (9) Satrapi's first panels are richly complex in their image-text relations, the verbal text of which gives a rather concise historical brief of the year of Persia's Islamic Revolution and the succeeding year's effects on Persian school uniforms, juxtaposed with images bearing differing relationships to the dry words –little girls wearing required veils, their faces ranging from puzzled, to uncomfortable, to sulky (what Kooistra would call "answering" images that align with, but also visually embellish the words in their shared space on the page); a close crowd of adult men and women, uniform in clothing and gesture (Kooistra's "quotation" image, which provides an emphatically direct visualization of the words); a schoolyard of little girls wildly inventing silly and subversive games with the veils (images Kooistra would term "parodying" or "cross-dressing," the latter to be addressed in our discussion after this paper is concluded). As you no doubt have noted, *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* are crowded with complex image-text relations, and therefore satisfy the terms of Hescher's distinction between the comic book and the graphic novel.

Complexity is everywhere in Satrapi's tale. Sharp contrasts play between the relatively left-leaning, comfortable, bourgeois life of Marji and her family, and the lives of their neighbors and distant relatives who are immediately at risk when the fundamentalist Islamic forces become the totalitarian state enforcers of Persia's long-anticipated "revolution." Marji's

naivety, precociousness, and tendency to scrappy political jousting grow out of a dangerous ideological frustration which she understands imperfectly, but acts out often in public – amusing and gratifying to readers safely beyond the reach of the revolutionary guard, but of rising concern to her loving parents. Rough edges exist, too, between the graphic genre itself and readerly expectations of what human experiences and truths may be discovered within this popular form. Satrapi shows us a safe and secure world transforming into a precariously-balanced totalitarian society at warp speed across the panels, tableaux, and thought balloons of a narrative form that we associate with glamorous superheroes who are always on the side of freedom and never fail to protect the innocent. Marji's world has suddenly become a world out of joint, *el mundo al revés*, a childhood interrupted. To say the least, Marji had a place in her world, the boundaries of which were elastic enough to encompass the inherent contradictions of her family's aristocratic and yet Marxist legacy. At the end of the very steep learning curve traced in the first volume of *Persepolis*, Marji has been transformed, as rapidly as has the state, into a Persian child who is no longer safe in Persia, a young teen who must stand outside the glass of the airport waiting room, unable to beg help from or give help to her parents, whose distress in the necessity of sending her to live in Europe she is permitted to view, but to which she may not respond. The last image of the first volume shows us a child born of a state that can no longer find a place for her within its walls.

In 1934, just one year after the appearance of the first “true” comic book, Ruth Benedict, one of the founders of the discipline of cultural anthropology, published *Patterns of Culture*, a book in which she argued that the individual is always in some way shaped by the patterns of culture into which he or she is born, and that all cultures in some ways take their

shape from the individual people who live within and constitute them. Cultural anthropologists urged the overall value of cultural relativity in learning from the diverse cultures of the world, considering different social systems as equally, if differently, valid. Benedict observes: “Those who function inadequately in any society are not those with certain fixed ‘abnormal’ traits, but may well be those whose responses have received no support in the institutions of their culture. ... They are, ... ‘alienated from an impossible world.’ ” (139) Through Benedict’s lens, we can find a vantage point on Marji’s struggles in both volumes of *Persepolis*, though the experience of tragedy for Satrapi’s individual character and for her family is not in any way mediated from this angle.

By extension, we might say that culture also forms the ground for a society’s arts – arts are bred of, translated through, and inform the culture of their makers. The individual work of art that cannot fit within the pattern of the culture to which it is offered is usually well known because of its ability to provoke social outrage: think of Manet’s *Olympia* or Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. Again, Benedict’s idea of the relativity of the social values that determine the reception of an individual (or, as I propose, an individual work of art) can enhance readers’ understanding of the arbitrary cruelties, inequities, and losses involved in Marji’s first departure from her homeland. Perhaps the graphic narrative is actually the *most* suitable form in which to convey the complex social, political, cultural, and personal subjects that Satrapi weaves into her narrative cloth.

Changing places does nothing, however, to newly align Marji with the European society in which she finds herself at the beginning of the second volume of *Persepolis*. What people and institutions will she turn to for guidance as she matures to adulthood; who will befriend

and help to norm her to the way things work in her new “homeland;” how much social space can she make for who she is, and who can this new society, finally, shape her to be? Or will European society be unable to allow this little person a place or identity other than as an other, an exile, a figure upon whom to hang social fears and hatred?

In his essay, *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said ruminates beyond his natural sympathy to discover a difficult philosophic and moral proposition about the condition of statelessness – very much Marji’s condition in *Persepolis 2*. First wholly facing the fact that exile “is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place,” Said acknowledges the contributions of “exiles, emigres, refugees” to modern Western culture, noting the significant intellectual contributions made to contemporary thought by “refugees from Fascism, Communism, and other regimes given to the oppression and expulsion of dissidents.” (137) In the first half of *Persepolis 2*, as we follow Marji in her luckless struggles to find a place of belonging throughout her four years in Austria, we are made excruciatingly aware of her experience of a vast rift between her sense of self and the way she is seen by the Austrian, French, Swiss, and other friends, frenemies, or enemies with whom she tries to shape her new life. Their failure to see her as she knows herself to be, however, keep her running away, crossing borders local, psychological, and moral, until she finally realizes that she needs to return to her native place. Having descended from her original feisty, intelligent independence to an unsustainable morass of drugs, homelessness, and ill health, she succumbs to her need to feel her mother’s comforting hand on her hair. But as Said observes, “The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons...” (147)

In the second half of *Persepolis 2*, an older and mostly lost Marji returns home, but not without donning the veil. Image 3. in your packet shows the last frame of this passage in the narrative. Marji peers out from under her veil in the mirror, her bleak and beaten expression answering her words: “So much for my individual and social liberties ... I needed so badly to go home.’ The total blackout image of her dark, shrouded form from the back as she faces the mirror, though, raises pertinent questions about the socio-political realities she faces upon her return that she – literally, within the frame – cannot face. Kooistra’s questioning relation between words and images captures the disruptive effects of the ways in which both kinds of texts can interrogate, destabilize, or challenge the claims stated by either. Satrapi’s having juxtaposed such clashing visual and verbal texts within the frame exploits the capacity of the graphic narrative to bring the depth of a story’s complexity into the light.

Marji’s homecoming is marked by immediate submission, bi-textually represented, to an Islamic social order that cannot accept her, and to a kind of depressed paralysis into which she sinks immediately, despite being thankful to return home. She quickly begins to lose her grip as she confronts the cultural barriers that have grown between her and her family and friends. Veering from suicide to self-reinvention attempts, she is not much more successful at resuming her life back at home than she was at rooting it anew in Austria. Then Fortune – if not society - takes a hand in directing her life, when she meets Reza, the man she will eventually marry, and they are both accepted to art school. She begins to find both a way in and a way out. As Said notes: “Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience” (147). She begins to be fearless in drawing a bright line between her successes in the graphic arts and her failures to be sustained by her marriage: life as a particular wife or as any Persian woman finally becomes

intolerable, despite the fact that life as an artist allows her to practice her grandmother's best advice – to always be herself. The moral disjoint of being a female human being in an Islamic state fills her with rage, disgust, disdain, but the visual skills that she is steadily acquiring give her license to express her true self, if not in Iran, almost anywhere else in the world. She ends her marriage to Reza and informs her parents of her plan to depart from home one final time, for the School of Decorative Arts in Strasbourg. She says goodbye to her homeland over slow and peaceful months, and to her beloved family with a resolved heart. The last panels of *Persepolis 2* stand in high contrast to those that end *Persepolis 1*. The sorrow and other desperate emotions of the first book are assuaged by the accepting facial and gestural expressions of the second. Both ending panels feature the darkness of required Islamic dress, but the difference can be seen in the calm, relaxed, even joyful body positions and facial expressions of Marji, her parents, and her grandmother. Even the tears depicted on their faces are clearly shed to mark what is irrevocably lost, but never forgotten. Marji is at last mature enough to have earned what Said has called the moral advantage of exile – the “originality of vision” to imagine living according to her own values and being free to express them, to see her beloved Persia and her life as a Persian artist living permanently in Europe through a defiant, yet dispassionate, critical lens (Said 148). In her own way, she comes to understand that, as Said observes, “... what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both” (148).

Interviewed in 2008 by Simon Hattenstone in the Guardian, Satrapi insists on her identity as an artist, a constantly moving and seeing eye that picks up every irony, every cruelty, every idiocy. Hattenstone notes that “while *Persepolis* is scathing about the hypocrisies and

cruelties of Iran's theocracy, she is equally critical of George Bush's Christian fundamentalism. ...

What she wanted to do in Persepolis was tell her story and show what it means to be Iranian for her." As her creative successes have multiplied, she considers herself to be in some senses lucky in exile because she can be the person she understands herself to be: "I'm this woman coming from Iran, I've succeeded in what I wanted, I live in the city I want, I live with the man I want, I make the work I want, and they pay me for it, which is incredible. How many people in the world have this luck?" She has survived the loss of home by embracing statelessness, by being at home in the world of complex, rich, imperfect human cultures. *Persepolis and Persepolis 2*, bitextual and therefore dialogic, reveal with authority and moral passion the experiences of exiled people. Satrapi's success in this work is also a strong demonstration of the graphic narrative genre as one of the most successful narrative forms for the dramatic statement, through powerful configurations of words and images, of our world's most complex and uncomfortable truths.

Questions for *Persepolis*

The Novel Club meeting of January 8, 2019

Joyce Kessler

1. Along with many other scholars before her, Lorraine Kooistra has analyzed the by-play of words and images in illustrated texts. Her premise in so doing is that the reader is encouraged to become more critically engaged with the narrative by the ways in which images and words can be made to comment on one another. In the panel labeled 1., what are some of the ways that you, as an individual reader, read the images to be saying something different from the words? How do these differences set up your expectations and perceptions of the narrative, as you begin to pursue it?
2. What are some of the purely visual effects that dramatize the image labeled 2.? How do they operate in our interpretations of this part of the narrative? Do you agree with Kooistra that bitextual narratives provide for a more engaged reading experience, or with Henry James that the picture over-determines the meaning of the word?
3. The image labeled 4. is one of a pair embedded into Satrapi's graphic narrative sequence. What is your evaluation of the effect of this repetition of images? Do you feel that they contrast meaningfully, and if not, do you feel that they can move the narrative forward? What other effects do you read in them?
4. Satrapi's "history lessons" are often advanced with the help of images in which human figures are numerous repeated against a dark background, each one looking almost exactly the same as the others, and each caught up in a scene of event documented, in part, by the similarity of their gestures. What do images 5., 6., and 7 tell us about the events narrated that the words do not? In images 8. And 9., what other visual elements enhance our understanding of the narrative moment? How do these images "say" more than the words?
5. How would you characterize Satrapi's graphic narrative "style?" What is distinctive about her drawings for this work? What is specifically unique in the ways that she brings images and words together?
6. How would you evaluate the relative success of Satrapi's color choices? Do you think she should have introduced a broader color palette? What elements of her drawings in different parts of the narrative do you think compensate for the starkness of the limited palette she has chosen for this work? What effects do these color limits have on your reading of it?

