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Cover photo by Fabiola Ledda:

*“ I’ve been in Mostar twice.
The first time, before the war.
In the Turkish neighbourhood bunches of slippers were
hanging from the doors of the little shops.
I bought a pair of them. Red.
I came back after the war. I tried to buy a new pair.
But the elders who run the shops had disappeared. Young
vendors found my request was weird.
Later on, walking through the woods, I saw them: a dum-
ping ground of slippers.
I wanted to take some photos of them.”*

Fabiola Ledda

alberto masala

TALIBAN

the thirty-two precepts for the women

translated by Jack Hirschman

INTRODUCTION

This brilliant and momentous poem, which counterpoints the awful prohibitions against human lives - especially the lives of women - under the Taliban government of Afghanistan, with the reception of the voices of despair, resistance and an almost unspeakable hope, is the creation of one of the most important poets lately crossing the stages of Italy's new society of spectacle, Alberto Masala.

Masala is a poet of exhortation, an anarchist of consciousness at a culturally international level, and a product of such inspiring and catalytically "avanti" forebears as Antonin Artaud of France and Julian Beck and the Living Theater of the U.S. In short, he is involved with a poetry of provocation - as, say, Pasolini - but with this difference: where Pasolini took his provocative ideas to the screen and was otherwise intently and intensely an intellectual activist, or an activist of the intellect, Masala has insisted on the oral charge of the public performance of his works, many of which are hommagic and litanic in form, and, yes, exhortative is the apt word.

There's a fundamental reason for his approach: Masala is a Sardinian by birth, and though he has lived in Bologna for more than a generation, he has

both Sardo pride and Sardo memory, and both are connected to the great tradition of oral poetry and poetizing that, unlike the mainland itself, is part of the very bedrock of Sardinia's history.

To give voice to words is of Sardinian essence. And Masala has always allowed that essence to be essential to the way he looks at life and expresses himself.

Thus, combining Sardinian esprit, Italian brilliance and a culturally political awareness at home and abroad, it's little wonder he should have chosen to engage the situation involving the Taliban.

The prohibitions that precede each of the 32 short poems read like a litany of horrible decrees. The poems which follow each prohibition are almost dialectic responses to the decrees, whether in fear of them, or submission or resistance to them.

The whole is a gem of a work, like a dark diamond whose light comes from so far within the voices uttering the poems that it (the light) appears as if shaped by whispers.

This, in dramatic contrast to the continual verbotens that seem to bludgeon down on the poems themselves.

I first Alberto in Bologna seven years ago, when he read my poems translated into Italian alongside

my reading of them in American, at the now defunct but terrific Masaorita Gallery run by Gianni Venturi. Showing me around the Bologna quarter where he lived at the time (he and his musician-partner, Fabiola Ledda, have recently moved to the countryside around Bologna), he gave me the first impression that he was a little like myself in North Beach, San Francisco: he was at home in the cafes, with the workers of the district; he spoke of the American poets who'd come through the city through the years (warmly, especially, of Gregory Corso, with whom he'd read), and of his reading in France (he knows French fluently and has read many times with Serge Pey, a performance poet whom Masala respects deeply).

In subsequent years we have read together at the international festivals of poetry that Multimedia Edizioni in Salerno have been organizing in different cities. Alberto's performance of his poetry has always been electrifying, always leaving the listener, as this book will I'm certain leave the listening reader, with the sense that one has been presented something indispensably contemporary, made of the courage of confrontation, the ingenuity of poetic expression and the abiding sense of engagement that characterize this important Italian poet.

TALIBAN was written by Alberto Masala many months before the suicidal attack on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. (on the UN-declared International Days of Peace, no less) destroyed thousands of lives and led to the total mobilization of Nihilistic war consciousness that still grips the people of the world.

The nihilism of the West is nothing new. It was deeply seeded in the war with Nazism, after which the victorious impotence of its capitalists aimed munitions and profits at the communist and other poor countries of the world. Led by the United States, capitalism force-fee arms to the most reactionary religious elements in its drive to destroy the reach and resonance of the Soviet Union.

And it succeeded.

In doing so, however, it has given birth to elements it cannot control, elements that are paradoxically the mirror of its own Nihilism, by which I mean that the fanatical capitalism the world is living under is a form of murder and self-destruction, so many deaths in the name of martyrdom were the intensest reflection of the suicidal and murderous heart of capitalism itself. The rip-offs of every poor person, the

streets of shame, the ghettos, the garbage-dump eateries, the walking or under-cardboard dead are everywhere testimonies of its continuing attacks. Talibanic Afghanistan, a product itself of the West's Nihilistic drive to destroy communion, has instituted decrees that, behind religious masks, are nothing short of Nazistic. And Nazism is the most overt form of murder and suicide. But it should always be remembered that the engine driving such desperate obedience is Made in Capitalism, and the high "moral" ground of religion's anti-capitalism, like national socialism, is headed nowhere but to the state of nothingness so clearly revealed in Alberto Malsala's poem.

Jack Hirschman - Yorkshire, England

ABOUT POETRY

Some years ago dear Gilberto Centi (and I take the opportunity here to remember him) asked me to take part in a heated debate on poetry that was increasing in the newspapers. I told him that I found it boring to discuss literary forms and that I wasn't involved in the tensions that animated such discussions.

“Western” writing (I use this ungeographic term for convenience), and Italian to begin with, so umbilical and umbilicated, so rolled up in their own little ego, provoke me to silence and distance. To me, as I've always said, poetry is something else: it's the voice of one who has seen the voices.

The poet picks up impeded ones, protects them during their transport, pays witness to them along the way of essential syntheses, close to the spirit. He speaks the inexpressed and the inexpressible, he tells things in anticipation of their definition....

I only spoke on December 31, 1997 when the discussion was by then at its end. Now I report what at that time found space only in a small militant edition published by “La Volpe e l'Uva” under the title “tell me where poetry is sold”.

Today I dedicate these words to the innocent people fallen in New York.

I don't cite the text here but simply the introduction and the final note that I added in order to translate the last part, which was written in Spanish.

Introduction:

In the past days in Bologna there has developed a hot debate on writing poetry that has involved everyone's opinionating. My silence on the question, born not out of a presumption but from a strong artistic and existential discomfort with respect to the literary thematics of the West, was broken only when news appeared in the press that defenseless people had been exterminated while helping in the functions of a catholic church in Chiapas. The awful news suddenly disappeared, devoured by the velocity of media processes. It was then I felt the need to get involved in the 'debate' on poetry, in order to clearly determine the choices and directions of my writing. I find that poetry, as every form of art, is today guilty of the gravest complicity by supporting an unreal image of the world useful only to those who ask that you don't raise questions that disturb the 'civil' system of a social body whose hands are dripping with blood

Therefore with this writing I distance myself and symbolically

- I discharge myself from western culture declaring my un-involvement in its sterile and arrogant self-celebration

- I discharge myself from western culture exposing the ethical poverty of its art and the cowardice of artists who tacitly make themselves useful to it

- I discharge myself from western culture in the name of a love for all beings and, out of respect for the dignity and autonomy of thinking, I declare myself from a cultural point of view an outlaw

note:

Being Sardinian, that is from another language and culture, I don't want to have to be suffocated by forms that pertain to me only from a bureaucratic point of view.

However, as I've done for a long time, I use and mix linguistic tools as an ethical sign, an indication of a choice and, marginally, aesthetic as well, an indication of liberation from an apparently necessary superstructure, in order to try to reach the beauty transported by the rhythms and sounds of "differences"...

On the other hand the current Italian lexicon (like a kind of nemesis in the face of those who are killing my language) is crammed with American terms that strongly denote a sense of expressive impotence, typical among the colonized, an impotence that prevents words from striking at the roots,

from having rapport with the etymon and its millenarial ways, in order to slip into the superficiality of linguistic neo-formalism that distorts and abolishes sound (as well as meaning.)

In order not to give rise to affectation or misunderstanding, I translate:

"...It's for this that today

I write for all the loving sisters and brothers, for all the comrades who, without fear or guilt, still have the difficult destiny of seeing stars born on disasters like traces of sense lost as time passes.

I write for all the Mayans of Chiapas who still have to cover with weary hands those now lifeless eyes, which know the sadness that mourns from deep inside.

I write for all the illiterates who only know what you read in wartime - what you hear in wartime - what you can see in wartime – carrying desperation and deaths to be buried.

*Also those murderers
Will come here
Covered with shame
And they'll find us here still
At your side
Intacts*

Nothing's changed through the years.

Yesterday's words are dramatically present, only the scenario changes. As I'm writing, they're preparing a war that, as every war, finds me distant. Still, innocent victims fall in Rwanda as in New York, in Chechnya as in Kurdistan, and religious madness or insane ideas of ethical supremacy still traverse the world in order to stash the money of exploitation, trafficking, and the multinational mafia. And still some madmen are calling for war. But look: they're not insane. They're just coolly defending their profits.

I will not fight for them.

Alberto Masala

TALIBAN

the thirty-two precepts for the women

OBLIGATION TO WEAR A BURQA*

to think dreams deformities
then hides them against her heart

you are shadow to me
you surround me with darkness

with you I can go down
a black path
entering
where continually I strive
where tirelessly I strive

to behold the black dreams of the silence

*burqa: a veil worn from head to toe

TOTAL PROHIBITION
OF MOVEMENT OUTSIDE THE
HOUSE UNLESS ACCOMPANIED
BY A MEHRAM
(father, brother or husband)

at the center of my soul
my father's planted
the rule of desire

the will resists

I wait for the day
and all arrive
enter
stay

my father comes to deliver me to him

from today on I belong to a child

PROHIBITION AGAINST
SPEAKING OR SHAKING
HANDS WITH MEN
OTHER THAN MEHRAM

dirty
I'm dirty

in the slow and inaccessible abstinence

aphasic
yet I bring
my words intact

every happiness is a whore

OBLIGATION
TO BLACKEN WINDOWS
SO THAT THE WOMEN NOT BE
SEEN FROM OUTSIDE

waking to the breath of the light
that continues arranging
memory's flies
everywhere
in my closed room

getting to my feet in front of the window
that slowly grows old with the landscape

I stroke the pane

the wall

PROHIBITION AGAINST
APPEARING ON THE BALCONY
OF HOUSES OR APARTMENTS

I don't see will

if a bird crosses my sky
a tribunal says
I've seen too much overhead

knowing into the body's limits
makes people crazy

FLOGGING, BLOWS AND
INSULTS FOR THOSE NOT
ESCORTED BY THE MEHRAM

my son's the keeper of the garden

I'm proud of him

he's the faithful gardener
of stones

of the branch
that breaks my back

in my guts I've bred the condemnation
spitting out the blood of the truth

TOTAL PROHIBITION
AGAINST WORKING
OUTSIDE THE HOUSE
(including teaching and health-care)

the oven's empty

the cemetery grass
has already been torn out
even the charity of the dead
doesn't help me

tonight
in secret
I'm heading back to the field

PROHIBITION AGAINST
RIDING BIKE AND
MOTORCYCLE EVEN IN THE PRESENCE
OF THE MEHRAM

my fate is in fixation
if I leave it's to come back to obsession

I stay

One eats even the bark of renunciation

but breath doesn't pass through
if my teeth come together

and grab hold
and wear out

PROHIBITION AGAINST
TAKING A TAXI
WITHOUT A MEHRAM

it happens
sometimes
one leaves

about a trip we know

the waiting
in a feast of sudden fevers

the arrival
as motionless change

and always crossing transforms us
into space passed through

PROHIBITION AGAINST DEALING WITH
MALE SHOPKEEPERS

I followed a shadow
it gave off a perfume
of unknown bread

I didn't understand far

entering

I saw the reflection on my shoulder

there was a merchant behind

he was speaking

it wasn't enough
to right off deny

PROHIBITION AGAINST
MALE TAILORS TAKING
MEASUREMENTS OR STITCHING
WOMAN'S DRESSES

I flower on fabrics with my heart
sew them with my mind
wear them with the silence
look at myself in the mirror of my hands

no one can see them

PROHIBITION AGAINST
MEN AND WOMEN
TRAVELING
ON THE SAME BUS

my leg
isn't separable from its other
and if one falls
the other won't stay put

they'll die off together

only one can be cut

and when everything's divided
waiting for the fall

PROHIBITION AGAINST
RECEIVING CARE
FROM MALE DOCTORS

I always have a god nearby
truth is his greatness
often he sleeps at my side
and protects me

he dries up desire
driving knives into my dreams
so they can't see the light

I'm not sleepy anymore
I'm not sleepy anymore
I'm not sleepy anymore

I've got a belly full of knives

PROHIBITION AGAINST
WASHING CLOTHES
IN RIVERS
OR PUBLIC PLACES

our god spies on us

surrounds me

conceals himself in dogs
he's in the flowing water

every day
you need to wash your intentions

ALL PLACE-NAMES WITH
THE WORD WOMAN (IN THEM)
ARE TO BE CHANGED

I don't need to eat

just to name
this my blind name
that I wear
like infamy in stone
to transport it intact

and it not lose memory

PROHIBITION AGAINST
LEARNING IN SCHOOLS,
UNIVERSITIES
AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS

we don't know how to count
but every day and every night we tie in knots

three times
three times
three times

three times the fear
of the buried life
of the smell of tomb

PROHIBITION AGAINST
REPRODUCING IMAGES
OF WOMEN IN NEWSPAPERS
AND BOOKS OR DISPLAYING
THEM IN HOUSES OR SHOPS

at night I'm scared
of my shadow lengthening on the wall

by day I'm scared
of the bones that though my flesh

if I recognize something breathing
if a breath reaches me
in order to keep me opaque
I darken my being

PROHIBITION AGAINST
MEETINGS, EVEN
ON HOLIDAYS OR FOR
AMUSEMENT PURPOSES

when the scar is open
like dissatisfied sex
its inhabitants come out singing

I believe in the hereafter

because

they won't come to look
even into my tomb

PROHIBITION AGAINST
ALL MEN AND WOMEN
LISTENING TO MUSIC

here
every alley's a begging river
every hand waits for money
and the music lights up
sorrowful clots of ruins

but you can't
touch a woman who dances
if she allows you the shadow of her steps

PROHIBITION AGAINST
ANYONE LOOKING AT FILM, TELEVISION,
VIDEO

we don't give time to the distance
to desert silence
to become time

and
given that time doesn't exist
to become the debt
movies has with time

the representation of its doubt

PROHIBITION AGAINST
APPEARING
ON TELEVISION, RADIO
OR SUCH GATHERINGS

only one kind of black
is forbidden us

the one that leaves tracks

only one kind of white
is allowed us

the one that destroys the black

a wall attends us at every turn

its limit
eradicates consciousness

PROHIBITION AGAINST
PRACTICING SPORTS
ENTERING A GYM OR
A SPORTING ESTABLISHMENT

I know the time
that laughs
at a useless body closed up in the flesh

time
makes every year slower

in the meantime they're subtracting us from history

I want to grow old

PROHIBITION AGAINST
USING
PUBLIC BATHS

my sister who lives in the rain
when she comes to find me
coming down
slowly intones a rhythm

her song
washes me

and fondles me

PROHIBITION AGAINST
BEING PHOTOGRAPHED
OR FILMED

look at me
here's the fire
it's burning above

I envy the light

stolen by time
instants have the color of life

PROHIBITION AGAINST
LAUGHING LOUDLY
(no stranger should hear women's voice)

listen
we've nourished this voice
in the hostile mouth

but when one sees without a tongue
nothing further is found

and when one sees beyond the tongue
one finds nothing

only further on
could beauty be possible

tongue beyond tongue

PROHIBITION AGAINST
WEARING HIGH HEELS
(it forbids hearing the sound of a woman's steps)

I can't walk

I'm ashamed
of the noise of my being

of this sorrow that drags along
with intolerable step

and the reason that dances
doesn't sleep

PROHIBITION AGAINST
USING MAKE-UP
(amputation of the fingers for women who
polish their nails)

I'm young
and already I
know I'm imperfect

I have lips to forget

today I asked my mother
why
the difference shines

PROHIBITION AGAINST
WEARING WIDE-SLEEVED
DRESSES, EVEN
UNDER THE VEIL

to fly away
without being seen
making the most of the moon's absence

the smoke
is my witness

because every time
I have to cross fire

PUBLIC FLOGGING
FOR WOMEN
WITH ANKLES UNCOVERED

“do you know that woman?”

I run away

I run away to disappear
down a wrong street

the sand I tread is cursed
it reveals my trail

I run

I couldn't end slowly

PROHIBITION AGAINST
WEARING SEXUALLY
ATTRACTIVE
COLORFUL CLOTHES

we affirm this body that opens
in the duration of the former desire

and still swarms
at the fire of every mistake
still
across its name

we affirm the mistake
at the price of the truth

again we affirm even death

FLOGGING, BLOWS
AND INSULTS FOR WOMEN
WHOSE DRESSES
DON'T ADHERE TO
TALIBAN REGULATIONS

my daughter
will be a mother
and I will teach her
how to kill the children

PUBLIC STONING TO DEATH
FOR THOSE WHO HAVE
SEXUALS RELATIONS
OUTSIDE OF MARRIAGE

tonight my eyes loved each other
incestuous
amid images of dust
with the pride
of an unmarried couple

drink
to their health

To Nina, my mother and Nina, my daughter
to all the women of my life
to Sardinia, which for my good luck is female
gratefully

the woman who sleeps in the sky
appears in fleeting births
points to lightning-flashes every springtime
scatters colors
weaves love's rhythms
becomes a litany of melodies
and afterward she rests sottovoce

and we are happy
because human beings can't see her

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Alberto Masala
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