

In Memoriam

Gilbert Lazard: Linguist and Iranologist (Paris, 4 February 1920–Paris, 6 September 2018)



Gilbert Lazard, as he liked to remind his friends, was a linguist above all else. Momentous as it was, his encounter with Persian and his brilliant career in Iranian studies came as a twist of fate.

Gilbert Lazard was born on 4 February 1920 to a modest Parisian household. His father was from a Jewish family of merchants in Lorraine; his mother was raised as a Catholic in Normandy. A gifted student, Lazard benefited from the French public education system and ascended to its highest tier. In 1940, he was admitted to the highly selective *Ecole Normale Supérieure*¹ in the most unusual circumstances: the German troops were invading France. After passing the written exams, Lazard was mobilized and attached to a battalion stationed near Pau in the Pyrenees, then transferred to the French Youth Camps (*Chantiers de la jeunesse*) in the Grande Chartreuse monastery, north of the city of Grenoble. The news reached him that he had passed the written exam, but it was too late as the oral exams had already taken place. Yet in these dire circumstances, an unlikely settlement was offered: acknowledged as one of the brightest candidates, a special session was organized for him alone. Admitted to the *Ecole Normale*, he studied there between the years 1941

¹A state-funded institute of higher education designed to train academics to serve in the French public education system.

and 1943. Paradoxically, the ENS proved a safe haven for Lazard, who, being Jewish, found protection from his mentors.

During his time at the Ecole Normale, Gilbert Lazard was involved in a branch of the French Resistance movement, the National Liberation Movement, by the director of the Maison des Lettres (and future administrator of the Comédie-Française), Pierre-Aimé Touchard.² In June 1943, the news was spreading that Jean Moulin (1899-1943, a high-profile member of the French Resistance) had been arrested. Lazard and four of his companions joined the Maquis (rural resistance fighters) in the Lyon region. In the Resistance, Lazard mainly served as liaison officer, operating between the Alps, the Cévennes, Lyon and Paris.

It was in these circumstances that Gilbert Lazard made his first Iranian friend. The future actor and film director Farrokh Ghaffari (1921-2006) was then a student in Grenoble. Moved by his sense of justice and by his Marxist leanings, this son of a diplomat had also joined the French Resistance, under the name François Garnier. Their friendship lasted a lifetime.

The student resistance network was eventually dismantled and Lazard arrested in Paris on 1 May 1944. He and his companions were detained in Fresnes, then Compiègne, before being deported, in July 1944, to Dachau, the concentration camp north of Munich. Many of his fellow detainees did not live to see the liberation of the camp by US forces on 29 April 1945. Lazard seldom talked about this period. He mentioned it once on a public occasion sixty-five years later; by that time, he was the only survivor from the group.

Lazard resumed his studies soon after the Liberation. In November 1945, he took part in the first Conference of the International Union of Students held in Prague, under the tutelage of the USSR. Yet his health was still fragile and he was hospitalized with pneumonia. There in Prague, a young literature student sat at his bedside and cared for him: soon thereafter, Madeleine Moisan would become his wife.³ Gilbert and Madeleine Lazard celebrated their seventieth wedding anniversary a few days before his passing.

After returning to the Ecole Normale Supérieure, Gilbert Lazard was admitted to the Agrégation,⁴ the national competitive examination in grammar, in 1946. He undertook a doctorate in linguistics under the guidance of Émile Benveniste. After contemplating African or Berber languages, he chose to enroll in Persian courses at the Ecole des Langues Orientales, following Henri Massé's advice. He started working as a junior researcher at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and, in 1948, he travelled to Iran as a research fellow of the Department of

²Pierre-Aimé Touchard (1903-87), French writer and theatre administrator, and a member of the resistance against the German occupation during World War II. The "Maison des Lettres," a center for students in the humanities, became a hub for the French Resistance movement under Touchard's guidance.

³See M. Lazard, *Vois se pencher les défuntées années*: *Souvenirs du XXe siècle* (Paris: de Fallois, 2016).

⁴The French competitive examination for civil service in the French public education system.

Iranian Studies of the recently established French Research Institute in Iran, founded by Henry Corbin.

In her memoir, Madeleine Lazard describes the difficult conditions the young couple had to face during their three-year stay. Iran, she writes, had “forsaken its exotic charm of old,” and modern comfort “amounted to utmost ugliness.” The Lazards were accommodated in a stark, bland room at Tehran University, and felt unwelcome in the French expatriate community, who treated them as “mere students.” Immersed in the Iranian community, however, Gilbert “was happy with his lot; he was busy perfecting his language skills and researching manuscripts and local publications.”⁵ At the time, the director of the Pasteur Institute, the epidemiologist Marcel Baltazard, was tracking the transmission of rodent-borne diseases in the countryside. He invited Lazard to join him on his fieldwork. In the villages, Lazard recalls, “he was busy chasing rats, while I was chasing dialects.” In Tehran, in addition to intensive contacts with Iranian scholars and academics, Gilbert Lazard became acquainted with Vincent Monteil. At some point, the two scholars entertained the idea of collaborating on a description of the contemporary Persian language. Ultimately, Lazard produced his *Grammar of Contemporary Persian* on his own, while integrating the rare material previously collected by Monteil.⁶ Lazard became the first linguist to account for language facts in contemporary Persian phonology, syntax and lexicon, which no one before him had described.

Back in France, in addition to his research position at the CNRS, Gilbert Lazard began to lecture at the Ecole des Langues Orientales, where he succeeded Henri Massé in 1958. In 1966, his appointment to a professorial chair at the Sorbonne allowed him to establish a full undergraduate curriculum and supervise an increasing number of doctoral students in Iranian studies.

An interlude in the United States nearly changed the course of Gilbert Lazard’s career: in 1961, a year after he had defended his habilitation thesis, he was invited to teach as visiting Professor at UCLA. A visa problem deferred his departure: the US authorities took issue with a visit he had once made close the Soviet border while researching Iranian dialects. It was the cold war, and the Red Scare was rampant at the borders.⁷ Regardless, Gilbert and Madeleine Lazard enjoyed their year in California. Long after their return, they recalled the unique teaching conditions and the genuine kindness of their colleagues. Ultimately, however, they turned down the offer to take on permanent positions in Los Angeles and returned to France instead.

In addition to his research on dialectology, Lazard’s first major project in Iranian studies yielded the *Grammaire du persan contemporain* (1957), followed by his *Dictionnaire Persan-Français* (1990). His second project, conducted concurrently, focused on the origins of literary Persian in the ninth to tenth centuries. It is epitomized in two important monographs: *La Langue des plus anciens monuments de la prose persane* (1963) and *Les Premiers poètes persans*, a collection of poetic excerpts cited in

⁵Lazard, “*Vois se pencher les défuntés années*”: *Souvenirs du XXe siècle*, p. 110.

⁶V. Monteil, *Le Persan contemporain. Textes et vocabulaires* (Paris: C. Klincksieck, 1954).

⁷Lazard, “*Vois se pencher les défuntés années*”: *Souvenirs du XXe siècle*, p. 145.

ancient sources, introduced, edited and translated by him (1964). An additional aspect of this project is illustrated by the EVLIA, a sequence of thirteen articles dedicated to the “Study of versification in the Irano-Aryan languages” published over the course of four decades (1970-2007).⁸ These forays prompted Lazard to research the early stages of New Persian further. To this topic he dedicated several decisive articles, which were later collected as a book: *La Formation de la langue persane* (1995). Drawing on his combined expertise as a philologist and a dialectologist, Lazard was able to trace the origins of New Persian back to Judeo-Persian, and to disentangle the semantic conundrum contained in the term “Pahlavi.” He demonstrated that literary Persian initially sprung from Khorasan and Bactria, to the northeast of the Iranian plateau. Thinking back over his journey in his introduction to the volume, Lazard pays tribute to his master: he owed it to Émile Benveniste to have spurred him to research early New Persian, back in 1948. Forsaking this theme for a while, Lazard had devoted his efforts to the study of early prose and poetry; ultimately, however, he was lured back into his original quest.⁹

Gilbert Lazard’s career does not end there. Owing to his efforts, the Institute for Iranian Studies at the Sorbonne, merely a “hollow shell” under Louis Massignon’s chairmanship until 1951, gained new impetus. It even expanded to include James Darmesteter’s personal library, later enriched by that of Jean de Menasce. Gilbert Lazard further succeeded in securing that the Institute be hosted, temporarily at first, then permanently, at Sorbonne nouvelle, a university which he helped co-found in 1969.¹⁰

The Institute’s library, which expanded considerably over the years, has since found a permanent home in the BULAC,¹¹ where it benefits from excellent operating conditions. The Institute for Iranian Studies also launched two publication series: the “Travaux de l’Institut d’études iraniennes,” supervised by Gilbert Lazard, followed by the “Travaux et mémoires de l’Institut d’études iraniennes,” inaugurated by his collection of articles, *La Formation de la langue persane*. In 1972, Lazard co-founded, with Jean Aubin and Philippe Gignoux, the journal *Studia Iranica*, the editorial board meetings of which he barely ever missed.

Between 1972 and 1990, while still lecturing at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO) and the Sorbonne nouvelle, Gilbert Lazard was appointed to the Chair of Iranian linguistics and philology at the École pratique

⁸Although issued in unrelated publications, the EVLIA (Études sur la versification dans les langues irano-aryennes) were all duly identified and numbered by Lazard. They have recently been translated into Persian and collected in a single volume that Lazard himself helped revise: G. Lazard, *Barresi-e vazn-e shēr-e Irāni*, trans. L. Ziamajidi (Tehran: Hermes, 1395/2016).

⁹G. Lazard, *La Formation de la langue persane* (Paris: Peeters, 1995), p. 15 ; G. Lazard, *The Origins of Literary Persian* (Bethesda, MD: Foundation for Iranian Studies, 1993) is the published version of a conference, also available online: <https://fis-iran.org/en/programs/noruzlectures/literary-persian>.

¹⁰The Sorbonne nouvelle was created after the split of the University of Paris, in the aftermath of the events of May 1968. See G. Lazard, “Histoire de l’Institut d’études iraniennes,” in È. Pierunek and Y. Richard, eds., *Louis Massignon et l’Iran* (Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 2000), pp. 7-11.

¹¹The Bibliothèque universitaire des langues et civilisations was inaugurated in 2011, on the new premises of the Institut national des langues et civilisations, rue des Grands Moulins, in the 13th arrondissement in Paris.

des hautes études (4th Section): this was an opportunity to introduce scholars and students to a gamut of ancient Iranian languages (Old Persian, Avestan, Sogdian) and to such recent findings as the inscription of Surkh-Khotal.¹²

In 1980, Gilbert Lazard was elected to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, for which he served as president for the year 1990. Until the very end, he took an active part in the weekly meetings, discussing the work of his colleagues or presenting his own.

For Lazard, who considered himself first and foremost a linguist, Iranian studies was never the sole, or primary, scholarly target. He had pledged to return to general linguistics, the field in which his master Benveniste had left his mark, at the age of forty, after building sufficient background in Iranian languages and typology. It was, in fact, in his fiftieth year that he gathered a group of scholars of comparative linguistics to address the long-standing issue of “actancy.”¹³ For over a decade, Gilbert Lazard ran the team within the framework of the CNRS, and the group published a dozen volumes.

The last major contribution of Gilbert Lazard to comparative linguistics was a collaboration with the Eurotyp research team, a large-scale European research project focusing on the typology of European languages. At Lazard’s request, one volume in the series was published in French, which included a paper he had penned.¹⁴

With his fine literary translations, Lazard also contributed Iranian studies from a different angle. His first French rendition of Khayyām’s quatrains—a genre most suited to his spirit and humor—was issued in 1953; it was reedited twice, with additional translations, in 1979 and 2002. Together with Roger Lescot and Henri Massé, he translated selections from Zabihollāh Safā’s great anthology of Persian poetry, *Ganj-e sokhan*.¹⁵ Lazard also offered a revised edition of selected excerpts from Jules Mohl’s translation of *Le Livre des rois de Ferdousi* (1979). His last published translation was a selection of poems by Hāfez: *101 ghazals amoureux* (2010). Lazard’s earlier translations also include modern prose, with short stories by Sādeq Hedāyat and the novel *Hāji Āqā*.

As much as this choice of texts, the sharp elegance of Lazard’s translations speaks to the special fondness he nurtured for Persian culture and its free spirit, in a quest for truth all too often obscured by religion and fanaticism. A man of rigor and a humanist, Gilbert Lazard lived by his word, and by the rules of *gaya scienza*. Committed to freedom, secular at heart and respectful of others, he was relentless in his search for

¹²See G. Lazard, F. Grenet and C. de Lamberterie, “Notes bactriennes,” *Studia Iranica* 13, no. 2 (1984), pp. 198-232.

¹³Actancy, otherwise known as “morphosyntactic alignment,” identifies the grammatical relationship between arguments in the sentence, specifically, between the verb—transitive or intransitive—the subject and the object. On the research team RIVALC (Recherches interlinguistiques sur les variations d’actance et leurs corrélats), see: <http://lacito.vjf.cnrs.fr/actances/> and G. Lazard, *L’actance* (Paris: PUF, 1994) ; English trans.: *Actancy* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1998).

¹⁴G. Lazard, “Esquisse de typologie actancielle des langues du Caucase,” in *Eurotyp 2: Actance et Valence dans les Langues de l’Europe*, ed. Jack Feuillet (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1998), pp. 939-960.

¹⁵*Anthologie de la poésie persane (XIe-XXe siècles)* (Paris: Gallimard/UNESCO, 1964).

knowledge and infinitely caring as a mentor. With his passing, Iranian studies has lost a great scholar and a dear companion.¹⁶

Besides receiving the Légion d'honneur, the French War Cross 1939–45 and the Resistance Medal, decorations awarded as an acknowledgment of remarkable acts of courage that contributed to the French Resistance, Gilbert Lazard was the recipient of several prestigious French and international academic awards and distinctions throughout his career. Lazard was also recognized by the Iranian academic community. He was an Honorary Member of the Association for Iranian Studies and was a recipient of its Lifetime Achievement Award in 2010, was made an Honorary Member of the Iranian Academy in January 2017, and was the recipient of the Mahmud Afshar Foundation Literary and Historical Prize, also in 2017.

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¹⁶An international tribute appeared in 1989, edited by C.-H. de Fouchecour and P. Gignoux: *Études irano-aryennes offertes à Gilbert Lazard* (Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 1989; *Studia Iranica*, Cahier 7). A full list of Gilbert Lazard's publications up until 2011 can be found in A. H. Ibrahim, ed., *Du persan à la typologie. L'apport de Gilbert Lazard* (Paris: Faits de langue—Ophrys, 2011).