



MOLÉ, MARIJAN

MOLÉ, MARIJAN (b. Ljubljana, 28 July 1924; d. Paris, 6 May 1963; [Plate I](#)), distinguished scholar of Middle and Modern Iranian studies. Molé, who died rather prematurely at the age of 39, was one of the most gifted Iranists of his generation. His father, Vojeslav Molé (1886-1973), was a Slovenian writer and historian of art, teaching at the University of Ljubljana. From there, he moved in 1925 to Krakow as a visiting professor, remaining in Poland, the native land of Marijan's mother. Ever since his childhood, Molé showed an interest in two scientific disciplines: linguistics and mathematics. When World War II broke out, his family escaped to Leopoli in Ukraine. During German air raids, Marijan remained oblivious to the danger, not entering bomb shelters; instead, his parents would find him studying Latin or in the midst of solving mathematical problems, thus already attesting to his incredible capacity for hard work (Scarcia, p. 320). Gianroberto Scarcia, who knew Marijan in Tehran, humorously recalls that Molé read all the newspapers and was more aware than him of the political situation in Italy!

From Leopoli, Molé returned to Krakow, but due to the deportation of university faculty, his father preferred to seek refuge in Ljubljana, where he became professor of Byzantine studies (Scarcia, p. 320). Between 1942 and the fall of 1943, Molé studied Slavic and Indo-European linguistics at the Faculty of Philosophy before the closure of the university by German authorities. Nonetheless, Molé secretly served as teaching fellow for a seminar on Indo-European studies. Once back in Krakow, Molé was able to continue his studies at the University of Jagellonica; however, in 1947 he once and for all



abandoned linguistics to dedicate himself mainly to Iranian philology and the history of religions (Scarcia, p. 321). It was in these two areas, as well as in Sufism that in slightly more than a decade Molé produced a considerable body of work, which has, alas too quickly, been forgotten.

Under the direction of Tadeusz Jan Kowalski (1889-1948), Polish scholar of Oriental Studies, he obtained his doctorate in Iranian philology with a thesis entitled “Gāršāsp-nāmā ‘Asadī’ego z Tūs a legenda o Kṛsāspi: Przyczynek do badań nad formacją i rozwojem epopei irańskiej” (Asadi Tusi’s *Garšāsp-nāme* and the legend of Kṛsāspi), which remained unpublished under the pretext that it was “... not from a mature person” (Scarcia, p. 321). At the time, Molé was a teaching fellow in Oriental philology and a reader in Slovenian. From 1949 to 1950, he received a scholarship from the French government to pursue his studies in Paris. There he attended courses taught by [Émile Benveniste](#), [Jean de Menasce](#), [Henry Corbin](#) and Henri Laoust (1905-1983); eventually settling permanently in France. For his qualifying degree at the *École des Hautes Études*, he presented “La troisième fonction dans le zoroastrisme” (Scarcia, p. 322). Since he was an ardent follower of [Georges Dumézil](#), he often, and even excessively, applied his theory on the tripartite structure of social functions to ancient Iran. Supported by a study grant, he subsequently spent three years in Tehran at the Institut Français d’Iranologie, where he worked passionately at the library without allowing himself any distractions whatsoever (Scarcia, p. 322). He completed his doctoral thesis, “Le problème zoroastrien et la tradition mazdéenne,” which he defended at the Sorbonne on 3rd July 1958 and eventually published in 1963 as *Culte, Mythe et Cosmologie dans l’Iran ancien*.

While in Iran, Molé became fascinated by Islam, and with his excellent knowledge of Persian, he was able to undertake several projects on Sufism. Scarcia later characterized Molé’s works as invaluable primarily because of his ability to focus sharply on key issues, rejecting inconsistent methods, and reframing questions in such a manner as to serve as a guide for future research which, due to lack of time, he himself could not continue. Exceptionally serious, Molé was a reserved, shy person who apparently had difficulty in social relations; yet, he was so adept that he performed a pilgrimage to Mashhad in complete disguise. In early 1963, he was due to travel to Syria and Lebanon (Scarcia, p. 322).

The present author vividly recalls the day in Neuilly, where he was studying at the time, being informed by a deeply shocked Jean de Menasce, that Molé had

just committed suicide. Surely excessive work was not a contributing factor to this tragic ending, as Molé was accustomed to working day and night. As his posthumous works bear witness, in his notebooks he had transcribed and translated substantial portions of the Pahlavi texts. Most notably, the little illustrated book *L'Iran ancien* (1965) and *La légende de Zoroastre* (1967), completed and edited by de Menasce, demonstrate Molé's ability, at the end of his all too short career, to focus on the essential points in Iranian history. The comprehensive bibliography prepared by Scarcia (1963), however, ought to be completed by the inclusion of Molé's posthumous publications. The diverse as well as numerous fields in which Molé distinguished himself bear witness to his incredible capacity for hard work and synthesis; his discoveries and innovations deserve to be highlighted because they inspired subsequent scholars in Iranology to embark upon original and new directions.

Works. The body of work left behind by Molé consists of seven books and some fifty articles. It truly seems that for their author, more than any other, these articles were written in preparation for grander works to follow, notably his great work by which he was able to establish the structures of Zoroastrianism in its ritual and mythical components. This explains why Molé began the analysis of these components as a proof of the interests which he manifested in the myth and the different religious currents of the Sasanian period.

His interest in Sufism may be considered a pastime – a field of study that he no doubt pursued under the influence of Henry Corbin who was the director of the Institut Français d'Iranologie in Tehran until 1954 (Shayegan, p. 269).

In his article, “L'épopée iranienne après Firdōsī” (1953), Molé analyzed what he called the “secondary epic”, i.e., epic poems subsequent to the Sistanian tradition of the *Šāh-Nāma* exemplified by [Ferdowsi](#) and influenced by the Alexander Romance. In “Un poème persan du comte de Gobineau” (1952), he examined a relatively unknown work by [Count de Gobineau](#) showing how the latter adapted it from a Persian epic poem to suit his theory of the inequality of the races. The *Kuš-nāma* which Molé studied had been a source for Gobineau who had already begun translating a part of this massive work. In the conclusion of the same article Molé had promised a “comprehensive study on secondary epics” which apparently was never realized. Yet he revisited this theme in “La guerre des Géants d'après le Sūtkar nask” (1959), where Molé provided a commentary on a long passage from [Dēnkard IX](#) which deals with a foundation myth of Iran and its three prototypical kings: [Jamšid](#), Dahāg (see



Aždahā) and Ferēdūn. As a disciple of Dumézil, whose reconstruction of Indo-European social structure he largely accepted, Molé demonstrates that a parallel to this royal triad is found in Vedic India and Greece. In this study, Molé defines and develops the real character of the Iranian Yama (i.e., Yima). Rather originally, he provides an explanation for the *vara*, ‘enclosure’ constructed by Yima as compared to the cattle-men who housed their livestock in winter shelters to protect them from the severe cold (p. 291). Such is the practical reality of this term that had not been considered previously. Molé does not, however, deny the eschatological aspect of such a reality that projects an earthly phenomenon onto the hereafter. So, unlike most other interpretations, he refuses to associate this myth with the Babylonian version regarding the Flood. At the end of time, a more severe winter than ever will inaugurate the Renovation. Thus the myth of the *vara* “belongs both to cosmogony and eschatology, or rather, it transcends both” (p. 293). This truly original exegesis by Molé deserved to be mentioned here.

As part of his research on triadic structures, Molé published several articles in the *Journal Asiatique*. Analyzing the “structure of the first chapter of the Vidēvdād” (1951), he attempted to demonstrate that the principle at work in the establishment of the list of countries is threefold: sovereign, warrior and farmer, but he acknowledges that the order is above all geographical; the successive social functions being related to geographical distribution. This article provoked numerous debates, including the latest reaction by [Gherardo Gnoli](#) (1980, p. 4), who correctly rejected this Dumézilian interpretation along with previous readings by [Nyberg](#), [Wikander](#), [Christensen](#), and [Herzfeld](#). According to Gnoli, only the historical and geographical reality can account for this list of Iranian countries.

In another better-received article, “Le partage du monde dans la tradition iranienne” (1953), Molé set forth the tri-functional division of [Ferēdūn](#)’s three sons as a parallel to the Scythian legend reported by [Herodotus](#).

Another one of Molé’s concerns was the “Zurvanite problem” – the title of one of his articles (1959) – among others that he devoted to the issue. This was his response to [R. C. Zaehner](#) who in two significant monographs, i.e., *Zurvan A Zoroastrian Dilemma* (1955) and *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (1961) attempted to defend the existence of a Zurvanite religion. Molé rejects this in large measure. He refuses to accept the idea that two religions originated from Zoroastrianism, for according to him, [Zurvanism](#) is only one form of the Iranian religion (1960-61, p. 28), and as Shaul Shaked has shown, it



is a form of popular religiosity (1992; 1994). With highly developed and convincing arguments, Molé rejected the idea of three forms of Zurvanism put forth by Zaehner, namely, materialistic, fatalistic, and classical on the basis that “the differences between Zurvanism and Mazdean orthodoxy are minor” (1962a, p. 190) and in any case, “Zurvanism is not an established fact, but a hypothesis still to be proven” (1962a, p. 205).

In “Un ascétisme moral dans les livres pehlevi?,” an article written in Tehran in 1956, but published in 1959, Molé considered the phenomenon of moral asceticism in Pahlavi books (p.189). Supported by a wealth of textual references, he later rejected the notion of two distinct moral systems, i.e., one pessimistic and ascetic and the other optimistic and hedonist. Zoroastrian morality is optimistic even if the human condition remains harsh in its battle against forces of evil. Contemporaneously with Helmut Humbach, and to his credit, Molé properly identified the *Gathas* as a work of liturgy or ritual. This proved critical for his definition of ancient Zoroastrianism as presented in his monumental work, i.e., *Culte, Mythe et Cosmogonie dans l’Iran ancien*, the result of his doctoral thesis. To his thesis, one may append his *La légende de Zoroastre* which is essentially a collection of translated texts in support of his argument. Published posthumously by Jean de Menasce, this collection includes a transcription and translation with extensive commentary (pp. 139-254) as well as a glossary (pp. 255-320) of *Dēnkard* VII; the beginning of Book V of the same; Chapter 47 of the *Pahlavi Rivāyat*; and chapters from *Vizīrkard ī dēnīg* referring to the legendary life of the prophet.

Acknowledging its originality, Gnoli remarks that *Culte, Mythe et Cosmogonie dans l’Iran ancien* constitutes the “most extensive anthology of religious Pahlavi texts” (1965, p. 335). In this pioneering effort, Molé argues that *Zoroaster*’s accomplishment was not an anti-ritualistic ethical reform; it was rather the result of a gradual evolution of elements essential to Indo-Iranian religiosity in which the ritual of sacrifice plays a major role. Though criticized by Gnoli for its lack of historical perspective, Molé’s introduction to the structure of Iranian religion presents original perspectives on the relationship between the *Achaemenid* and Gathic religions. Next, Book I deals with ritual, the doctrine of sacrifice and the Gathic service. Not denying the prophet’s historicity, Book II focuses on the character of Zoroaster which is based on myth (hence one cannot situate him in time). The prophetic legend – (Zoroaster is not a prophet of the Semitic type) –, his dialogues with *Ahura Mazdā*, and the conversion of Vištāspa (see *Kayāniān ix.*) are examined in this



section; Molé continues to maintain that a “life of Zoroaster” is purely mythical. Book III deals with [Mazdean cosmology](#) as depicted in the [Yašts](#) and [Vidēvdād](#). Here Molé emphasizes the pre-eminence of Man in the Cosmos and provides a definition of “The Perfect Man”, best exemplified by Zoroaster. Finally, Molé demonstrates that Mazdaism is not strictly dualistic since Ahura Mazda’s creations are more lasting than those of [Ahriman](#) who will be perished at the end of time.

In *L’Iran ancien*, a small volume published posthumously, the author provides a well-illustrated panoramic survey with special emphasis on religions. And as Molé took interest in the theme of the Perfect Man ([Ensān-ē Kāmel](#)), one is hardly surprised that he published *Ketāb al-ensān al-kāmel (The Book of the Perfect Man, 1962)* by ‘Aziz al-Din Nasafi (7th/13th cent.) in a critical edition based on three different collections. This forms part of his research on Sufism which includes several articles on the Naqšbandi and Kobrawi Orders (see [Kobrawiya i. The Eponym](#)) as well as a small volume, *Les mystiques musulmans* (1965), in which he examines the controversial origins of Islamic mysticism and Sufism. In a fresh style, he describes the most emblematic personalities of this noteworthy spiritual movement.

Finally, Molé collaborated on three collective works for the series “Sources Orientales”: “The Birth of the World” (no. 1, 1959); “The Judgment of the Dead” (no. 4, 1961) and “Sacred Dances” (no. 6, 1963). In the last work, Molé published a lengthy article of 120 pages long on ecstatic dances in Islam. Armed with a wealth of texts from Islamic literature, he analyzed the polemical debate between the proponents and opponents of the *samā’* and *dekr*. Molé examines the Shi‘i denunciation of what is usually accompanied in these séances, i.e., music, clapping, cries of ecstasy, and the loss of consciousness. In sum, the knowledge that Molé had acquired of Pahlavi and Islamic literature rendered him an incomparable historian of religions with new and original ideas which posterity must acknowledge.

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