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A FIRE OF LILIES

PERSPECTIVES ON LITERATURE AND POLITICS IN MODERN IRAN

AHMAD KARIMI-HAKKAK

LEIDEN
UNIVERSITY PRESS

A Fire of Lilies

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A FIRE OF LILIES

PERSPECTIVES ON LITERATURE AND POLITICS IN MODERN IRAN

by

Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak

Leiden University Press

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Acknowledgments, Notes, and a Dedication

This book would not have come together in this form, had it not been for years of insistence by my most esteemed friend and colleague, Professor Asghar Seyed-Ghorab. It was he who first thought that these writings of decades past may deserve the chance to be perused as a collection by a new generation of Iran scholars and students as well as general readers. He then graciously accepted my request and graced the volume with an insightful Introduction, which sheds much light on the historical and cultural contexts of all that follows his essay. And it was he who saw to it that this book would have an appropriate set of preliminaries as well as an index and a bibliography. As such my most sincere expression of gratitude should head the list of acknowledgments that I would like to register here: thank you most sincerely, Asghar.

Leiden University Press in general and Mrs. Anniek Meinders, Mrs. Kate Elliott, Mrs. Amber de Groot, and Mrs. Romy Uijen in particular, deserve my thanks for their part in making this book what it is, as did the two anonymous readers who made valuable suggestions toward updating these essays – thanks, one and all. Last but not least, I am grateful to the following for their permission to publish the essays as a book: *The International Journal of Middle Easter Studies* (IJMES), *World Literature Today*, *The Journal of Iranian Studies*, *Mazda Publishers* and *Iranbooks*.

The transliteration of Arabic and Persian words has been done in accordance with the Iranian Studies transcription guidelines. For proper names and Persian words commonly used in English I have used their more familiar forms. Also, I have used the Common Era dates throughout this book. As a small token of my appreciation and sympathy I would like to dedicate this work to all those who played a part in the making of the Iranian Revolution only to suffer its consequences.

Prologue

Fascinating thing, human memory, especially as it stares at certain moments of the past! Having had my youthful dream of becoming an academic fractured in 1973 in the form of the non-renewal of my contract with the Tehran college I was then teaching at, having then returned to the US to complete my education and gradually giving myself up almost entirely to the dream of an anti-monarchy revolution, and finally having returned to my homeland as soon after the victory of the Iranian Revolution as possible, I cherished the uncharted world of the possible that the revolution's potential offered much too dearly to let go of it because of so unimportant a set of incidents as the constant harassments the extremists in the revolutionary coalition exerted on academics like me to conform. Looking back on my tenacity now, forty years after the event of the revolution, I feel a certain uneasiness, at times in the form of a physical sensation.

The essays in this book began as barebone jottings in my journal contemporaneous with what was happening to me, around me, and to my homeland; what patterns the reader might detect were almost entirely after-thoughts a decade or two later, after I had had a chance once again to return to the safety and freedom of an exilic individual life as well as the security of a deeply cherished academic career. There was only one drawback: this was not a career in my country, as I had always assumed it would be, but the life of a professor and an exile. The result, as I see it now, is the gradual evolution of experiencing something, say a revolution, in an immediate way, moment by moment as if by breathing it in and breathing it out, followed by the slow simmering of putting it into writing about a place from a distance: a huge adjustment, though not only at a professional remove – psychological, philosophical, almost existential – from what I most loved about my home country, the Persian language and Iran's culture, and most especially the glorious literary heritage it has given to a world so desperately in need of some unmitigated wisdom and beauty.

Thinking anew some forty years later about the incidents and happenings that have been prime instigators for these essays, I still feel haunted by them. Having processed them away from the initial impressions they may have registered in me – as shocking, crazy, unreal – I recall them now as shards of my past life parading before me as I watch them in wide-eyed wakefulness; review them in my mind as compassionately as I can, often finding myself unprepared to have experienced them in the moment of their occurrence. I also almost invariably judge my initial responses as inadequate and myself as wanting in forming them. I question my part in processing them constantly. How could I even bear to see women around me subjected to cries of "put on your scarf or suffer blows on the head"? How would I take it to see foreign diplomats being paraded before cameras, collectively humiliated as spies? And how would I stand by and watch as hooligans ransacked the book collections in the Writers' Association of Iran? There is no end to such daily thoughts!

The scenes that most frequently disturb me in my dreams are those related to the arrival of the Ayatollah Khomeini in Tehran, and what I see is exactly what became the stuff of so many press photographs of the event – multitudes of adoring followers crowding rooftops and treetops, trying to get a glimpse of the man they were all too eager to pledge allegiance to. These are followed by a recurring nightmare featuring the photographs of the late Shah's longtime premier Hoveyda and three other top officials of the monarchial state, somehow juxtaposed in my mind to the responses I gave to my interrogators four years later, as they were trying to decide whether I must be purged from my academic position, which is what they decreed two weeks later. I recall the chief interrogator most vividly, as he pointed to the files in front of him as he asked me why I, an opponent of the monarchial state, had now turned into such a counterrevolutionary academic, such an ardent opponent of the Islamic republic. My response was uncompromising: the reasons are the same!

One memory I had suppressed completely until I was reminded of it many years later by the beneficiary as he recalled it in a public talk; it illustrates the concerns I had developed in the four years that I spent in post-revolution Iran. One early morning in the summer of 1983, over a year after the Writers' Association had been disbanded, many of its members opting to live underground – an episode which I refer to in one of the essays in this book – I showed up on the doorstep of my friend, the poet Esmail Khoi, to tell him that it was time for him to leave the country, adding "immediately, this very day in fact!" The situation had deteriorated much

too rapidly for us to develop mechanisms to protect the members. Some had fled the country, but Esmail was much too nonchalant about his safety, it seemed to me. A few days earlier our mutual friend, poet and playwright Sa'id Soltanpur, had been arrested at his wedding, and I had just heard that morning from the state-run radio station the official announcement that he had been executed along with a number of other prominent opponents of the new government.

The two men accompanying me – trusted smugglers, I had been assured – were there on Esmail's doorstep to get him out of the country. "Time to go, Esmail," I said in a tone of voice that made it clear I was not joking, and he did leave with the men. What most haunts me still is his last words: "Take care of these, they are my poems." And he handed to me the bag he had been carrying from one hideout to another, once or twice a week. I knew then his words would leave an unforgettable mark on me. We kissed and he departed, in the care of the men who had promised to get him out – fortunately they succeeded. The words from his poem entitled "People are forever right," which I cite in one of the essays still ring in my ears now and then, even when the context is no longer Iran but, say, the United States in 2019.

Easily summoning what immediate responses or reactions such experiences – such experiencing – are capable of instigating, I ask myself now what other lasting marks they may have left within me. I see the event grow distant in my mind's eye, yet I cannot help feeling overwhelmed anew when summoning my recollections of the enormity of the moments I have collected personally – and doubtless innumerable Iranians have witnessed collectively – the weight of our common responsibility in rendering them tellable in a more or less exact, or at least honest, manner begins to press upon our minds. And then the haunting yet inevitable feeling that I, for one, but perhaps many of us, may have failed time and again to register in the ledger of time. And that feeling of failure, I now think, was itself an inalienable part of the process I have gone through over the intervening decades.

Yet, I know instinctively – I have always known it seems – even at moments of absorbing unwelcome news or urging myself to maintain my sanity, if not my balance, or reminding myself of the urgency of jotting down something to enable me to write the fuller version later, that I cannot help but harness my emotional reactions to that which was external to me and develop an impression, however raw or passing, of the gravity of the moment, the texture of the lived experience. Each personal observation, each news item of one more atrocity happening around me grips me in its spell, making me sense

an overwhelming feeling of the impossibility of the task of reflecting it in anything close to a satisfactory way, and at the same time keeping my mental balance as I commit it to writing.

These essays are now before you, reader, elevated by a well-informed scholarly introduction aimed at clarifying the larger historical context that surrounded their genesis.[1] Overarching them are the processes which have given shape to my life, as I witnessed Iranian intellectuals, particularly Iran's poets and writers, assume the revolutionary posturing that formed the trajectory of my youth as well as that of millions of other young Iranians, longing for a free society. This is perhaps true of most other writings that reflect the history of some consequential event, as they trace the growing aversion to an existing situation that begins to swell within us as we contemplate the power systems around us. We certainly feel motivated by the sentiments that seem to express exactly how we feel towards certain power structures existing in our world. Then, as the first rumblings of the possibility of a change appears, we feel certain it would be a positive turn of events. Struggling to remain optimistic, even as we see revolutions launched by unlikely leaders go not to seasoned, politically tested servant leaders, but to leaders we have hardly grown to know or had reason to trust. The Iranian Revolution was happening whether people like me wanted it or not, and all young people like me could do was to submit to the process at hand and hope to be able to seize what possibilities might arise.

Speaking for myself only that is what pressed upon me the urgency to return to my country just as soon as I could and begin to observe what was happening at close quarters, and actively participate in them, as we might. The essays gathered in this book chronologically follow stages of a revolution after it happened, all the way up to the time when people like me, let's say I for one, lose all hope and decide to withdraw, reverse course, or leave the scene, as I did. By the summer of 1983, the Islamic Republic had managed to quash almost all resistance to its power and dash all hopes for gradual reform, as well as losing much of its legitimacy. I had most certainly lost all the hopes that I had tried to cling to for over four years, since my return to Iran in the early months of 1979, the season that had been affectionately dubbed "The Springtime of Freedom." I had also lost some of my most cherished friends, including Sa'id Soltanpur, whose cruel arrest, summary trial in an "Islamic" court, and execution I have alluded to above. The feeling that weighed most heavily on my heart was sensing that I might never see my home country again.

The Bleeding Pen

Literature and Politics in Modern Iran

Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, Leiden University

Introduction

In the blurb for his planned 20-volume *The History of Persian Literature*, the late Ehsan Yarshater (1920–2018), a Nestor of Iranian Studies, characterised Persian poetry as the jewel in the crown of Persian culture.[1] This is not an exaggeration; poetry plays a role in every domain of Persian culture. If Persian culture is the body of Persian-speaking peoples, poetry is the soul, the stamina, and the aura. This soul was breathed into the body during the renaissance of Persian culture in the ninth century when, after two centuries under the sway of Arabic, literate Persians asserted themselves by composing poetry in their mother tongue, and this poetry played an essential role in the revival of Persian culture.[2] One example is Ferdowsi's monumental poem, *Epic of the King* (*Shāh-nāmeh*). Encompassing over 50,000 couplets, the epic recounts the history of the Iranian peoples, from the creation myth to the arrival of the Muslim Arabs in Persia. One of its central themes is the ethics of good rule and true justice. The epic is still read, recited, performed and embroidered upon in Iran today.

In the early Islamic context, in which most of the ancient cultures of the region, including Egypt, had acquiesced in the dominance of Arabic language and culture, the rise of Persian as a literary and cultural medium was surely politically marked. The emergence of several local dynasties in Eastern Iranian lands which propagated Persian culture by inviting poets to the court greatly enhanced Persian culture. A history of the role of Persian poetry as a political medium remains a desideratum.[3] One could argue that in this classical and largely courtly tradition, literature is a twin of politics, since literature carries political messages, and politics provides new subjects for literature. Persian poetry was not only used at Persian courts (and later at Ottoman and Mughal courts and even at a court in China), it became a medium for mystics in a vast area from the Balkans to Bengal.[4]

In a country with a tumultuous political culture in which poetry functions as an icon of identity, it is not surprising that poetry, and literature in general, is still a chief medium for commenting on sociopolitical events. Basing himself on Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962), Roland Bleiker says that the poetic connects "the soul and the mind, thus giving us back our dreams and opening up possibilities for creating 'images which have not been experienced, and which life does not prepare.'"[5] Bleiker argues that poetry is the core of language and language is the essence of human beings, thus poetic aesthetics throw light on identities, such as the Korean national identity, on relations, including international relations, and on contemporary political events such as war, genocide, terrorism and climate change. His characterisation applies seamlessly to the Iranian case: "Poetry is, in fact, all about language, about engaging its core and stretching its boundaries so that it becomes possible to think and dream again. It is in this sense that poetry is a perfect illustration of an aesthetic engagement with politics: a kind of micro-biotope in which we can observe, in an experimental way, why and how the aesthetic matters to politics."[6]

Persian poetry became even more central to politics during the 'awakening' leading to the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911).[7] Poets ceased to praise kings and courtiers, and directed their attention to ordinary people and to communicating modern European political philosophies and the sociopolitical events of the period. Their poems, published in the newly-founded newspapers and recited in coffee houses and bazaars, were instrumental in Iranians re-evaluating their own culture in the light of technological and social innovations in Europe. The famous poets of this movement became models for contemporary Iranian intellectuals. Indeed, poets and writers are so essential in the turbulent history of twentieth-century Iran that any history of modern Iran neglecting the role of literature – poetry, short stories and novels, and more rarely drama – would be seriously incomplete.

There are many examples of literary engagement with the sociopolitical events after the Constitutional Revolution period. Bozorg 'Alawi (1907–1997) with works such as prison stories, *Waraq pāra-hā-ye zendān* ('The Torn Pages of the Prison,' 1941) and *Panjāh o se nafar* ('The fifty-three,' 1942), which reflect prison life during the Pahlavi period, comes to mind. 'Alawi's works were banned in Iran between 1953 and 1979.[8]

Basing himself on Arthur Rimbaud, Bleiker refers to the subjectivity of language and how our thinking is controlled by language, going so far as to change Descartes' "I think, therefore I am," to "I am thought."[9] This comes close to the link that Persian poets from Ferdowsi's time, in the tenth

century, have drawn between poetry and reason (*kherad*). For them, poetry is essentially thought inspired by the Unseen. The Persian word *sokhan*, speech, also means intellect, and the logos.[10] Modern Persian poets are deeply cognizant of the classical literary tradition when they comment on a sociopolitical event. Poetry being thought implies that poetry could also control people's thinking. Bleiker states, "The essence of poetry, then, is not located primarily in its formal aspects, such as rhyme or line breaks. The key, rather, lies in the self-consciousness with which a poem engages the links between language and socio-political reality."[11]

The Present Collection of Articles

This collection of articles is a must for any scholar of Persian literature who wants to study Persian literature from the 1960s to the first decades of the 1979-Revolution. Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, an authority in Persian Studies, has participated in the literature of the period and in the literary lives of the major Iranian poets and writers. In individual chapters, he shares his experiences with authors such as Ahmad Shāmlu, Akhavān, and Gholāmhosein Sāʿedi, writing about their lives, governed by the state's repression, censorship, and extortion. While Karimi-Hakkak brings this unique personal perspective into his analysis, he falls between an engaged participant and a critical scholar. He examines the activities of the authors, their establishment of the Iranian Writers' Association, and surveys the relevant sociopolitical events.[12] The chapters deal with a turbulent period of modern Iran, in which Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989) entered the political scene, was arrested, exiled and later returned to Iran as a leader. Iran witnessed a radical change from monarchy to theocracy, the longest conventional war of the twentieth century in which one and half million people were killed (i.e., the Iran-Iraq war 1980–1988), and the new era of international politics between Iran and its new allies.

Another unique quality of this collection is that Karimi-Hakkak is the first scholar to examine certain topical subjects. It is an honour and privilege to include this collection of articles in the Iranian Studies Series at Leiden University. It is not my intention to review individual articles in this short introduction. Rather I would like to direct the reader's attention to the significance of Karimi-Hakkak's scholarship on modern Persian literature and its close relationship to politics. Karimi-Hakkak persuasively shows that literature and politics are so much interrelated that politics deeply affected the

lives of a generation of poets and writers, some having their works banned, some being imprisoned or exiled, and some executed.

Karimi-Hakkak's subject touches the core of modern Persian history. Being part of that intellectual and literary generation himself, Karimi-Hakkak describes the literary activities, how poets and writers found ways to convey their ideas, and the writers' struggle with the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979). A key element is his meticulous analysis of the history of the Writers' Association of Iran (*Kānun-e Nevisandegān-e Irān*), founded in 1968. This essay perceptively discusses how the Iranian intellectuals, writers and poets had to live in a repressive society, constantly fearing arrest, imprisonment, and even execution. Karimi-Hakkak gives examples from first-hand witnesses. For instance, he cites Behāzin (1915–2006),[13] a prominent novelist, translator, and active Marxist, who says in one of his stories that, when he asked how (mere) writers could entice people to take up weapons to fight the Pahlavi regime, the military prosecutor told him "the concept of enticement to take up arms is not limited only to actual weapons. Rather, any spoken or written statement can provide a context for opposition because it arms them against the state."[14] This short citation shows how repressively censorship operated during the Pahlavi period. One of the main aims of the Writers' Association was to fight censorship, but the Pahlavi regime did not leave room for any fight. Censorship had a deep impact on intellectual life in Iran. Karimi-Hakkak shows how, according to official statistics, the number of annually published books "dropped from over 4,000 in 1969 to about 700 in 1976," because of strong censorship, while the "number of pirated editions and unauthorized publications in the same period grew tenfold."[15] The books of prominent writers were banned, and even ordinary words such as "winter," "night," "tulip" and "forest," associated with the guerrilla movement in the Caspian Sea area, became problematic. The term *gol-e sorkh* or "red rose" was suspect, as it could refer to the executed guerilla Khosrow Golesorkhi (1944–1974).

Karimi-Hakkak characterises the activities and place of the Association eloquently, "Its fortunes, consisting of periods of feverish activity and lifeless dormancy, epitomize the pattern of intellectual life in Iran, reflecting its problems and promises, its intellectual validity and artistic vitality, its ideals, achievements, and failures."[16] The Association was active in a period in which autocracy had reached a zenith. In the 1960s several consequential events happened. In 1960 John F. Kennedy (1917–1963) was elected President of the United States, and he criticised the Shah's regime. Following the death of the quietist Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi Tabātabā'i (1875–1961), who

had been the source of emulation for much of the Shiite world, Ayatollah Khomeini, then a cleric of average rank, came onto the scene. This coincided with the Shah's six programmes of reforms, including land reform and women's suffrage, initiated in 1963. The reforms were later named the White Revolution of the Shah and the People. Ayatollah Khomeini voiced his disagreement with the reforms, which generated demonstrations during which many people were killed. Khomeini himself was arrested, leading to more bloody demonstrations. In addition to his criticism of the reforms, especially women's suffrage, Khomeini strongly condemned the Shah for passing a law giving diplomatic immunity to Americans living in Iran. Khomeini was imprisoned and later exiled to Turkey, and then to Iraq. In 1965, the Prime Minister Hasan-ʿAli Mansur (1923–1965) was assassinated by a member of the fundamentalist group, *Jamʿiyat-hā-ye moʾtalefeh-ye Eslāmi*, which supported Khomeini's ideology. The Shah created an army around himself, and eradicated all political parties, establishing a one-party system.

The situation of poets and writers in the 1950s and 1960s under the repressive state remained frozen. Literary works of this period reflect the quiescence of intellectual life. Karimi-Hakkak's biographical essays could be characterised as remarkable eye-witness accounts of the lives, works, and regular daily activities of prominent figures of Persian intellectual and literary history, interlaced with unique personal memories. For instance, in his essay on Mehdi Akhavān Sāless (1928–1990), a poetic giant of twentieth-century Iran, he describes meticulously how he first met the poet:

> 'He sure has a peculiar way of looking at you,' I said to the friend who had taken me to meet the Iranian poet Mehdi Akhavan Saless in the summer of 1979. My friend, fellow poet Mahmud Azad Tehrani, nodded, and I tried to explain: 'It was as if he were eyeing me on two levels, a constant surface look that seemed simple and trusting, and a sharp occasional glance, skeptical and testing, that penetrated at times all the way down into my soul, fixing it as if at the point of a needle.'[17]

Observations such as the above are interwoven with erudite and sharp analyses of the literary works. Akhavān is one of the sophisticated poets of his generation, giving the 'new poetry' movement (*sheʿr-e now*) a "solid background in the classical tradition, an uncanny sense of dramatic storytelling, and a facility with words that distinguishes his style from all the other members of his generation." We do not have many scholarly works on Akhavān in English and this essay is a unique examination of the life and works of a poet

who is central in modern Persian literature, as well as giving us unique personal anecdotes. Karimi-Hakkak demonstrates how Akhavān could bridge the two literary camps in the period when he thrived as a young poet. There was at that time a literary battle between modernists, staunch supporters of New Poetry led by Nimā Yushij (1897–1960), and the traditionalists, who criticised New Poetry and remained faithful to the millennium-old tradition of Persian poetry.[18] In addition, the fall of the democratically-chosen Mohammad Mosaddeq (1882–1967) through the intervention of the CIA and the installation of a repressive regime created disenchantment in Iran, especially among intellectuals whose hope for freedom of expression was shattered. It took about thirty years for intellectual life to recover, in the open dissatisfaction in the 1970s which led to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Karimi-Hakkak depicts how Akhavān's iconic opening lines, known by heart by many Iranians, describe the frigidity, alienation, and impotence of the period, warning Iranians of an "intolerably repressive state":[19]

Salam-at ra nemikhahand pasokh goft,
sarha dar gariban ast.
Kasi sar barnayarad kard pasokh goftan o didar-e yaran ra
Negah joz pish-e pa ra did natvanad,
keh rah tarik o laghzan ast.
Va-gar dast-e mahabbat su-ye kas yazi
beh ekrah avarad dast az baghal birun,
keh sarma sakht suzan ast.
Nafas k-az garmgah-e sineh miayayad borun abri shaved Tarik
cho divar istad dar pish-e chashmanat.
Nafa k-in ast pas digar cheh dari chashm
ze chashm-e dustan-e dur ya nazdik.[20]

None will answer your hello, heads are bent in collars
none dares raise a head to respond, to meet your friendly face
your eyes cannot see but a single step ahead
for the path is dark and slippery
and if you extend a hand of love to someone
reluctantly will he move his hand out of his bosom
for the cold is scorching in the extreme
your breath, rising out of the warm hearth of your own chest
turns into a dark cloud
stands like a wall before your eyes,

this being your own breath, what do you expect
from the glances of near or remote friends?[21]

While many poets and writers remained engaged in sociopolitical developments, others wanted to disentangle themselves from politics, writing poetry or short stories for the sake of art itself, cherishing artistic and aesthetic values rather than conveying a political message. Persian poets of this kind have had a hard time escaping from the stereotype of the engaged literati, especially in the decades following the 1979-Revolution when people expected poets and writers to voice their opinions on political events. Addressing this subject in his treatment of Ahmad Shāmlu (1925–2000), one of the greatest poets of twentieth-century Iran, Karimi-Hakkak demonstrates how the poet began his career entirely engaged with sociopolitical developments. As the years went by, his poetic genius turned from an authentic social response to politics to filling the poetic space with imagination by evoking new images. As Karimi-Hakkak shows, this transformation is visible in Shāmlu's collections of poetry, from *The Fairies* and *Poetry that is Life* to collections such as *Aida in the Mirror*, *Blossoming in the Fog*, *Phoenix under the Rain*, *Elegies of the Earth* and *Abraham in the Fire*.

The present collection of essays highlights the political processes affecting Persian literature, emphasising how Persian writers and poets suffered imprisonment, threats and even execution both during the Pahlavi dynasty and after the 1979-Revolution. Karimi-Hakkak observes that even before returning from exile, Ayatollah Khomeini referred to writers as "'agents of the shah' and lackeys of the superpowers, and warned the faithful to steer free from their influence."[22] In such a vehement political context, the poets became rebels against totalitarianism. Shamlu, for instance, wrote a famous poem after the Revolution, which displeased the government, which then forced the poet to focus on scholarly research instead of writing poetry. The poem "In this Blind Alley" perceptively depicts life in post-revolutionary Iran, conveying how censorship, state control, and intimidation created a frigid and loveless life in Iran. The poem became instantly famous, even proverbial, on the lips of people who wanted to describe the repressive situation of Iran (see the chapter Of Hail And Hounds).

From the beginning, the Islamic Republic was unequivocal in its treatment of non-revolutionary intellectuals, as can be seen from the high statistics for books banned, prosecutions and imprisonments. In the West, Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie, authorising his murder, is well-known. In Iran, many writers lived under severe censorship and sociopolitical

restrictions. Karimi-Hakkak foregrounds such cases. A salient example is the arrest of ʿAli-Akbar Saʿidi-Sirjāni (1931–1994), an essayist, poet and writer who criticised the Islamic Republic of Iran. Sirjāni's talent lay in his satirical style, drawing on classical Persian poetry and applying it to modern times. For instance, he alluded to Hāfez's (1315–1390) treatment of the clerical class as dissemblers with double standards. A main reason for Sirjāni's arrest was that he had a huge impact on society. To silence him, the Ministry of Information charged him with trafficking in narcotics, sodomy, and contact with counterrevolutionary elements, all offences that can be punished with execution. His books were banned, as they were considered to be camouflaged criticisms and even an open assault on Islam. Through the example of Sirjāni, Karimi-Hakkak exhibits how totalitarian states resort to violence, imprisonment and execution to silence writers. In such states, sensitivity to authors' influence can become so intense that their settings, characters, ideas in anything they write are assumed to be directed at undermining the state's policy and legitimacy. In Sirjāni's case, the Islamic Republic inferred that his literary production was poking fun at Islam and the Islamic government. Sirjāni criticised clerics for their lack of historical awareness and even lack of knowledge of Persian, implying that some of the clerics were not even able to read a simple Persian text. An example that Karimi-Hakkak offers from Sirjāni's work relates to the book *Kurosh-e dorughin va jenāyat-kār* ('Cyrus, the Impostor, the Criminal') by Sādeq Khalkhāli (1926–2003), a low-ranking cleric who rose to a high position and became infamous for his executions at the beginning of the Revolution. To delegitimise the monarchy and support the new vision of an Islamic Iran, Khalkhāli critiques King Cyrus (600–530 BC), who in the Pahlavi period had been a pre-Islamic role model in the monarchy's nationalist ideology. In this book, Khalkhāli misreads the phrase *rāh-zani* ('highway banditry') as *rāh-e zani* ('the path of femininity'), and on that basis said that Cyrus was a homosexual. Sirjāni derides this misreading in an attractive teasing style.

Another topic Karimi-Hakkak discusses in these essays is the effects of the 1979-Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), which forced millions of Iranians to leave their homeland for Europe, Canada and the United States. In their first years of exile, these Iranians were still hoping to return to Iran. They focused on the Persian language, publishing in Persian for Iranian communities of the diaspora and at home. The situation changed as the return to Iran proved to be a mirage, and Iranians abroad learned the languages of their new homes and in several cases became active participants

in the literary life of their new homelands. Examples include Kader Abdolah, who wrote several best-selling novels in Dutch, and Azar Nafisi, who wrote *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.[23]

Karimi-Hakkak discusses the Iranians' experience of exile through the works of the prominent Iranian novelist Gholāmhosein Sā'edi (1936–1985). Most of the exiled Iranians, although young in heart, were not young when they left the country. Exile is a central theme in Persian mystical poetry, in which the expulsion of the human soul from its original abode and longing to return is depicted in spellbinding metaphors and allegories. The opening couplets of Rumi's (1207–1273) *Masnavi*, describing the reed torn from its reed-bed to form a flute, are used by Iranians to describe the emotions and experiences of exile. Karimi-Hakkak also refers to modern Persian authors such as Sādeq Hedāyat (1903–1951), Sā'edi's favourite author, who chose long periods of voluntary exile in Europe and in India. Karimi-Hakkak shows how the feeling of severance from 'home' led to works of art in which Iranians could find solace for their homesickness.[24] Exile generated anxiety and the fear of being torn apart, of not belonging to any community and being unable to communicate feelings and thoughts. Karimi-Hakkak describes this eloquently: "The result is a kind of writing in its helpless attempt to bring the world of an inner struggle to those who have experienced nothing of the pain that the struggle leaves behind, in its inadequacy to communicate, and consequently in the perception it gives to the reader of an unclear, inconsistent, and unstable relation with reality, reflects the trials and torments which plague the exilic mind."[25] Closely connected to the theme of exile are descriptions of the new environment, as well as the nightmare and memories of the offences and failures of the theocratic government, and worries about the uncertain future. These and other topics form the exile's existence. In his analysis of the stories, Karimi-Hakkak cogently examines how the author depicts the dehumanisation of the stories' characters, as a preparation for their torture and execution as "wild beasts," dangerous for the newly-founded Islamic state. The episodes in which Sā'edi depicts the skinning of live animals as a signifier for exile and his or her relation to home and to the new homeland are horrifying, but exemplary and significant for the way the Islamic government responded to dissidents.

A *leitmotiv* in Karimi-Hakkak's writings is his fascination with the continuity of certain topics in Persian poetry over a millennium, and how familiar motifs, metaphors, allegories and themes inexorably lead to the creation of new ones in a new situation, without losing their original sig-

nification.[26] In his "Revolutionary Posturing," an original essay in which he discusses poetry in the political context of the Iranian Revolution, he wonders "why under certain social conditions, attempts at fresh articulations of such oppositions in communal myths and metaphors succeed in creating new cultural artifacts, while under other conditions the system of cultural constraints prevents such re-articulations from breaking through the complexities of discourse and erecting new structures for cultural expression."[27] Such questions are essential to understanding the role of Persian poetry in Iranian society and how new significations can be added to a story. Among the fascinating examples Karimi-Hakkak offers is the myth of Kāveh the Ironsmith who rebels against the tyrannical mythical King Zahhāk, who had two serpents on his shoulders which he fed with the brains of Persian youths. Karimi-Hakkak demonstrates how such myths, transmitted in Ferdowsi's *Shāh-nāmeh*, were used during and after the Revolution, symbolising different persons and classes. While the Shah was at first seen as Zahhāk and Khomeini as a liberator of the Iranian people, the paradigm changed during the Revolution, as readers assigned different significations to the myth.

Reading Persian poetry in terms of continuity and creativity is a fruitful intellectual exercise for understanding its reception in a society in which poetry is part and parcel of everyday culture. Karimi-Hakkak's approach to literature is also hermeneutic, in the sense that he includes the many possible perspectives in which a literary work is created, disseminated and appreciated. In the Persian case, due to the sociopolitical agencies, all perspectives have become components of the literary works, shaping the literary output of a nation in crisis and expressing ideological exigencies. Characterising Karimi-Hakkak's work, K. Talattof rightly observes:

> believing in the intimacy between facts and interpretation in literature, Karimi-Hakkak … proposes an alternative hermeneutic for explaining literary preoccupations with social agencies, political activities, or cultural institutions in each specific text, a hermeneutic that does not necessarily start with reflection upon text-context relationships, a hermeneutic that takes into consideration the significance of literary social structures.[28]

As a participating scholar in the historical events in Iran, his writings show his ardent desire for change in essential matters such as human rights, freedom of expression, and the fair treatment of individuals irrespective

of their ethnic or religious backgrounds. For instance, his essay on the Writers' Association passionately and scrupulously chronicles the evil of censorship, the creation of the Association for the sake of freedom of expression, and the imprisonment of political writers. In these essays, Karimi-Hakkak shows how the literary activities, the intellectual role of literati, and their literary output played a cardinal role in creating a revolutionary discourse leading to the collapse of the monarchy and the rise of theocracy. The famous literary gatherings at the Goethe Institute in Tehran were instrumental in the formation of a revolutionary discourse. Karimi-Hakkak says, "A glance at the literary works written between the Ten Nights of poetry reading and speeches at the Goethe Institute in Tehran in October 1977 and the consummation of the Iranian revolution in February 1979 reveals that literature, especially poetry, became more kinetic, more image-oriented, and much more buoyant."[29] Perhaps nowhere in modern times was the relationship between literature and politics as close as in Iran in the two decades preceding the 1979-Revolution. The results were the flight of intellectuals and a more vigilant censorship after the Revolution. In Karimi-Hakkak's persuasive summary, "Defeated and drained, Association members were forced to choose between exile at home or migration abroad, between emotional or physical homelessness."[30]

Much more could be said about the individual chapters of this book, as each chapter unfolds a new aspect of modern Iranian political history and how the literati responded to political events despite oppression, censorship, threats, and even execution. As a member of the Persian Studies community, I should profusely thank Dr Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak for writing these invaluable chapters, which are now collected in one volume for the first time. I hope the reader will enjoy reading the book as much as I have enjoyed reading it and benefiting from it for my own research.

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Part One

CHAPTER 1

Revolutionary Posturing

Iranian Writers and the Iranian Revolution

During those eventful days of early January 1979, after Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran had finally announced his intention to leave the country and the revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini had made his return from exile contingent on the shah's departure, a hemistich by Hafez, the fourteenth-century Persian poet, suddenly appeared next to an array of revolutionary slogans on display in the streets of Tehran: "Div cho birun ravad fereshteh darayad" (When the demon departs, the angel shall arrive). The basic binary oppositions of demon/angel and departure/arrival fit the realities of the situation the country had found itself in; a perfect correspondence had been made between the simple, single idea enshrined in the abstract language of a medieval poetic phrase and the intricate political posturing involved in a modern-day revolution in the making. Furthermore, the stark discourse of antagonism underlying the opposition had become as absolute, as uncompromising as the idea of a total revolution.

This article explores the literary ground adjacent to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 in search of clues to the formation and later transformations of so simple and absolute a conception of the revolutionary process within the complex of social variables that determines the emergence and evolution of a community of literary meaning. The survey might make visible an essential function of literature as part of the system of signs that constitute a given culture. Finally – and this is my ultimate hope – the essay will address the question of why under certain social conditions attempts at fresh articulations of such oppositions in communal myths and metaphors succeed in creating new cultural artefacts, while under other conditions the system of cultural constraints prevents such re-articulations from breaking through the complexities of discourse and erecting new structures for cultural expression. By way of illustration, this article will focus on one failed attempt at myth revaluation in post-revolution Iranian society that stands as an isolated instance of a frustrated will at self-positioning.

I have argued elsewhere that the revolutionary movement of 1978–1979 in Iran was itself, in a profound sense, a work of the imagination.[1] To those Iranian writers who had come increasingly to position themselves on the side of that eternal object of social contestation called "the people" in the battlefield where the forces of an autocratic state were perceived and portrayed as having lined up against an entire society, the phenomenon of revolution had come to mean not only a sudden radical transformation of the society on political, economic, and cultural grounds, but essentially a leap towards the utopian notion of a society at peace with itself. I will try to demonstrate here how that notion itself had derived from the perception of a series of conflicts, contradictions, and oppositions on social, political, and cultural planes reflected with enhanced poignancy in the Persian literature of the decades before the revolution. Starting with the widespread perception – formed and fostered in the aftermath, and largely as a result, of the 1953 *coup d'etat* – that the monarchial state and Iranian people pursue fundamentally different visions and ideals, many Iranian poets and writers began to articulate their impression of this difference in their literary works in one form or another of opposite entities, positioning themselves with increasing self-consciousness against the state power structure.

As the state gradually consolidated its sway over society through the late 1950s and early 1960s, the dominant mood vested in literary works turned from one of forceful resistance to one of pessimistic despair. Such ideals as liberty, democracy, and social justice were portrayed as precious pieces of an "Iranian" identity being cruelly trampled in an inevitable collision between the people and the political power structure.[2] As the person of the monarch succeeded in bringing under his personal authority the various institutions of the state and the government, his image was ingrained in literature as an evil presence alien to popular ideals; he literally became the demon of the creative imagination, which the writer attempted to exorcise from his mind as obsessively as he held on to the hope that he would be expurgated from the social scene. The result was a single-minded obsession with the political present that, on the one hand, tended to paint the scene in sharply distinct black and white colours and, on the other, allowed little contemplation or articulation of the opposite ideal.

One can, of course, hardly envisage a more profound, yet simple archetypal opposition than that between the demon and the angel, or a more elementary and absolute notion of revolution than a departure and an arrival. Nonetheless, it is not hard to demonstrate the ways in which the contemporary literature of Iran mediates the intellectual perception of the entire

modern process as a great historical rupture, and predicts its imminent collapse and its rather automatic replacement by an "other" entity capable of reintegrating the diverse ideals of progress, freedom, and justice, as well as the re-establishment of social links with native – and traditional – ways and values in a novel social configuration. Literary ambiguity, linguistic polysemy, and endless possibilities of semiosis as essential vehicles through which vision is expressed and communicated tend to conceal the ontological simplicity of such images as "night," "winter," "walls," and "chains" – to name only a few of the images most frequently relied upon in post-World War I Persian literature – which, through semantic agreements in the intersubjective community that includes writers and their immediate readers, come to refer to aspects of the actual social condition.

Because of the polysemous nature of the literary discourse, such images disclose and hide at the same time. While they highlight and emphasise certain of their associations, they gloss over others. While they allow the reader to grasp one aspect of their meaning, they deny access to another. As a result, the language of contemporary Persian literature tends to conceal the structure of the argument presented by the writer.[3] Nonetheless, in historical periods when members of a community of meaning share a relatively stable cultural content, what a certain sign in a certain context hides and what it reveals become more or less the same for an entire social group. Thus, a reservoir of shared meanings is created, the specific content of which is determined by individual subjects, while the general contour determines the basis for subjectivity within the group.

In one of his most famous longer poems, written in 1952, Nima Yushij, the father and founder of the modern poetic discourse, depicts a phoenix-like creature that he calls *Morgh-e Amin* (The Amen Bird) as the ultimate arbiter of the political aspirations of a collective presence called, simply, the people. Together, the bird and the people destroy the demonic enemy named *jahan-khareh* (The World-eater) with the sheer force of their collective voice chanting "Amen." The closing stanza interweaves the diverse strands of the poem's imagery:

Va beh vairiz-e tanin-e hardam amin goftan-e mardom
(chun seda-ye rudi az ja kandeh, andar safheh-ye mordab angah gom)
morgh-e amin-guy
dur migardad.
Az faraz-e bam
dar basit-e khetteh-ye aram mikhinad khorus az dur

mishekafad jerm-e divar-e sahargahan,
vaz bar-e an sard-e dud-andud-e khamush
harcheh ba rang-e tajalli, rang dar paykar miafzayad.
Migorizad shab.
Sobh miayad.[4]

(And with the weight of the reverberations
of the people's constant amen
(resembling the roar of a river that overflows momentarily before
descending upon a swamp)
the Amen Bird flies away.
Upon a distant rooftop
in the sleepy expanse of a peaceful realm the cock crows.
The wall of dawn cracks open
and over the silent, smoke-filled horizon
all things manifest their new color.
Night flees. Morning comes.)

As an agent of action who helps to turn an instance of collective desire into concrete reality, the Amen Bird is depicted, not against any specific social background, but *in vacuo*. This, however, is not to say that the bird lacks individuality. On the contrary, it is presented in the course of the poem as a determined leader, now accompanying, now directing the people, and finally transforming the aspirations of hopeless masses by instilling hope in them. In this connection, it is worth noting that the bird's very name, "Amin" in Persian, is an inverted spelling of Nima. Still, the stylised abstraction of the bird belies its physical presence, and ultimately it remains a dreamy figure of thought that literally "flies away" at the moment of the actualisation of the ideal it stands for. The bird, in other words, is no more than a visual sign, signifying the collective energy instilled in – and articulated through – the people's chant. The most important single mover of the poem's narrative remains the word "amin" (amen), and in the end we do not gain access to any concrete mechanism of social action beyond the religious ritual of acclamation and assent through the chant of amen, by which the popular desire for the destruction of the demonic World-eater is fulfilled.

Following in the footsteps of Nima Yushij, Ahmad Shamlu relates in his famous narrative poem, "Pariya" (The Fairies, 1956), the story of a horseman journeying from *Qal'eh-ye Afsaneh-ye Pir* (The Castle of Old Legends) to *Shahr-e Gholamha-ye Asir* (The City of Captive Slaves). The quest is

thematised through the protagonist's encounter with innocent-looking but, as it turns out, evil fairies trying to sabotage his mission, his eventual triumph over the evil creatures, and his belated arrival in the city, now freed from the clutches of the evil Amu Zanjir-baf (Uncle Chain-maker). The poem achieved immediate success not only because of its masterful use of nursery rhyme, fairytale motifs, and dramatic elements in the service of presenting a vision of the social ideal, but thematically because in it the line between the story and its moral, between fantasy and reality, is deliberately blurred to enable the poet to replace the conventional didacticism of fairytales with his own vision. In the end, for example, the dreamy world of the horseman serves to corroborate the poetic dream of an egalitarian society viewed from the vantage point where the protagonist reveals the poet's ideal:

Davidam o davidam
bala-ye kuh residam
unvar-e kuh saz mizadan
hampa-ye avaz mizadan:
"delang delang shad shodim
az setam azad shodim
khorshid khanum aftab kard
kolli berenj tu ab kard
khorshid khanum befarma'in
az un bala biain pa'in
ma zolmo nefleh kardim
azadi ro qebleh kardim
az vaqti khalq pashod
zendegi mal-e ma shod
az shadi sir nemishim
digeh asir nemishim
ha-jestim o va-jestim
tu howz-e noqreh jestim
sib-e tala ro chidim
heh khunamun residim."[5]

(Once on the peak,
I looked down
and saw my old dear town.
Joyful in it people sang,
tolling the bells, ding dong dang:

Everybody dance and sing,
Justice is our beloved king.
Everybody sing and dance,
we've defeated ignorance.
Sun, o sun, o sun so bright
cast upon us all your light.
We've overcome injustice
worshipped freedom, sought for bliss.
Everybody raise your cup
for people have risen up.
We've done the deed, gone the mile
now we're homebound, all smile!)

Curiously, however, because of the machination of the evil fairies, readers are deprived of the knowledge of the exact way in which so wholesome an ending is achieved. While the poet assertively presents descriptive images of the city before and after its liberation, corresponding with his sense of the social reality and his vision of the ideal, he denies his readers the slightest glimpse into the process by which one leads to the other.

Although not all the literary works that attempted to subvert the power of the state conceived of that power in terms of such transcendental figures as the World-eater or the Chain-maker, the feelings generated by the presence of such figures on the social scene form a central preoccupation of this body of literature. Projected onto the populace at large, they would result in views of leafless groves ruled over by the king of all seasons, autumn (*padeshah-e faslha, pa'iz*),[6] decaying corpses submerged in swampy waters, sickly flora and fauna driven out of their natural habitats, and a host of other signs of degeneration, disintegration, and dislocation. By metaphoric representation or metonymic reduction, through elegiac or satiric utterance, modern Iranian literary intellectuals continued to communicate their deep dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in their country. Occasionally, of course, literature did reflect attempts at finding alternatives to the political present. In his polemical essay *Gharbzadegi* (Euromania, 1962), Jalal Al-e Ahmad had advocated a return to what he had come in his later years to view as the quintessence of Iranian cultural identity. Some years later, in a bold departure from the secularised posture of a great majority of the intellectuals, he went on a ritual pilgrimage to Mecca. The account he has left of this journey, *Khasi dar Miqat* (Lost in the Crowd, 1964), points to renewed attention to religion as a mobilising force capable of ending the nightmare of a disintegrating society:

> In the circumambulation around the house [of the Ka'ba], you go in one direction shoulder to shoulder with the others, and you go around one thing individually and collectively. That is, there's an objective and a system. You're a particle in a ray of being, going around a center. You are thus integrated, not released. More importantly, there are no encounters. You're shoulder to shoulder with the others, not face to face. You see selflessness only in the rapid movement of bodies of people, or in what you hear them saying … You can easily see what an infinity you create in that multitude from such nothingness. Like a particle of rubbish on the ocean, no, on an ocean of people, or perhaps a bit of dust in the air.[7]

A particle of dust in the air, presumably trying to find its way towards the sun (the source of all light and the archetypal sign of the universal unity of which the dust is the slightest manifestation), is of course an old trope in Persian mysticism for the place of the individual in the scheme of creation. In conjunction with the pronounced imagery of individuality and collectivity, of release (in the sense of disintegration and looseness) and integration, and reinforced by such modern political concepts as objective and system, direction and directionlessness, and shoulder-to-shoulder movement versus face-to-face encounters, the image complex enshrined in the passage comes to signify the state of total subjectivity conferred upon the questing individual by the ritual reiteration of belief through practice. The movement from the dead end of despair to the field of social reintegration thus passes through an absolute, yet seemingly simple, reaffirmation of belief in the collectivity of the masses circumambulating around a central cultural symbol.

Al-e Ahmad's forceful vision of the possibility of social reintegration had great appeal for the community of poets and writers still searching for ways of establishing broader contact with the masses – without whose mobilisation there would be no hope for change. With stunning speed, the idea of religion as a rallying point around which social energies could be mobilised began to permeate literary works. Although the portrait of the revolutionary leader that Forugh Farrokhzad, perhaps the most visionary poet of modern Iran, presents in one of her last poems, entitled "Kasi keh Mesl-e Hich-kas Nist" (Someone Who Isn't Like Anyone, 1964), is unique in the wealth of its detail, it nonetheless typifies the trend in its peculiar blend of utopian, egalitarian, and millenarian traits:

Man khab dideh'am keh kasi miayad
man khab-e yek setareh-ye qermez dideh'am.
…
kasi miayad
kasi miayad
kasi digar
kasi behtar
kasi keh mesl-e hichkas nist …
va mesl-e an kasi-st keh bayad bashad.
…
Va esmash anchenankeh madar
dar avval-e namaz va dar akher-e namaz sedayash mikonad
ya qazi al-qozat ast
ya hajat al-hajat ast.
…
Va sofreh ra miandazad
va nan ra qesmat mikonad
…
va sahm-e ma ra ham midahad.
…
Man khab dideh'am … .[8]

(I have dreamed that someone's coming
I have dreamed of a red star.
…
Someone's coming
someone's coming
someone different
someone better
someone who isn't like anyone …
and he is just like the one he should be.
…
And his name is
just as Mother says before her prayer
and after her prayer the judge of all judges
the End of all Ends.
…
And he spreads the tablecloth
and distributes the bread

…
and distributes everything that has been hoarded
and will give us our share too.
I have dreamed.)

The advent of the Iranian Revolution externalised the conflicting feelings that had given rise to such utterances. Many Iranian writers saw in the idea of revolution a unifying cause, a historic opportunity, and, above all, the possibility of their visions' fulfillment. While the exact shape of the world that might replace the existing one eluded them, the revolutionary situation still appeared replete with limitless possibilities. The spectacle that was marching before their eyes constituted a radically new type of phenomenon that demanded to be recognised and recorded as the realisation of a long-awaited intellectual fantasy. The key word here is "new" with all its connotations of novelty and strangeness, attributes dear to the literary imagination and rich in the possibilities of literary treatment. It was, in other words, the event, tangible and striking, that concealed many anomalies and incongruities inherent in the creative mind's portrayal of the Iranian Revolution and in the positions articulated in literary works.

The most notable outward sign of the literature conceived and produced, thematically and chronologically, around the Iranian Revolution remains – from our perspective over a decade later – its tendency to paint the scene, to gloat in the sight, to celebrate the event. Poetry, in particular, became at once perceptibly more kinetic and more buoyant. The image of a red carnation planted in the barrel of a wavering soldier's gun, as a metaphor for the wound his bullet might plant in the body of an innocent demonstrator, appears beside the more familiar sign of red tulips signifying the reincarnation of martyrs. A chorus of sounds, from the loud screeching of gunfire to the still louder roar of people with clenched fists chanting revolutionary slogans, breaks the long lull of the poetic line. The scents of rose water and burning incense – traditionally used by women when seeing men off before or welcoming them back after hazardous undertakings – mingle with the smell of blood in the gutter. Numerous new signs and symbols are invented to capture and record the moment when one more man falls in another encounter between the army and unarmed demonstrators:

Bu-ye baradaram ra darad
in na'sh
Bu-ye bardaranam ra darad.
Az kuchehha hanuz
faryad-e zakhm o khun o goluleh
bu-ye baradaranam miayad
khalq-e mobarakam
bar sarzamin-e khun
golha-ye laleh mikarad.[9]

(It has my brother's smell
this corpse
It has the smell of my brothers.
From side streets still come
bursts of wounds, blood and bullets,
the smell of my brothers.
My blessed people
are planting tulips
In the bloody land.)

A burgeoning sense of oneness, whose purpose remains unspecified, is celebrated in numerous poems whose abstract allegorical significatory processes have now given way to more or less direct expressions and whose images have begun to make sense in a new, almost reverse way. The poet who for so many years had lamented his isolation, his inability to act alone, and his consequent feelings of gloom and doom in the "night" of oppression, can now welcome the cover of darkness for reaching out, particle-like, in search of a long-forbidden quest for togetherness:

Shab-e ma cheh bashokuh ast
vaqti golulehha
an ra khalkubi mikonand
va del-e ma ra
delha-ye moz.tareb-e ma ra
dar do su-ye shah
bang-e Allah-o-Akbar
beham vasl mikonad.
shab-e ma cheh bashokuh ast
vaqti keh tariki
shahr ra mottahed mikonad.[10]

(How glorious is our night
when bullets
tattoo it
and cries of "God is Great"
bring together
our hearts
our anxious hearts
from the two sides of the night.
How glorious is our night
when darkness
unites the town.)

Similarly, the familiar sign of the autumnal garden, where the slow withering of flowers provided the natural analogue for the poet's feeling of despair and doom, now undergoes a reversal to provide an image for a sure, if slow, blossoming and growth. In the emblematic garden of Iranian society, in those autumnal days of the Iranian Revolution, tulips grow, jasmines bloom, and "*gol miseparad har shab/ dar khab-e marg, gardeh-ye tasmim ra beh bagh*" (every night the rose bequeaths on its death-bed/the pollen of the new will to the garden).[11] That uncharted world of "the possible," that undefined yet recognisable sense of "identity," typifies a mental attitude open to all potential futures and yet uncontrollably caught in the delight of the moment.

This is not to say that Iranian writers were somehow oblivious to the course of the revolution. But the unravelling of the revolutionary spectacle seems to have met in the secular intellectual's consciousness with a curious combination of public acclaim and private misgivings. It must have been easy for the predominantly secular intelligentsia to sense something inherently threatening in the gradual ascendancy of religious elements within the ranks of the revolution. Still, compelled by the force of their convictions, fostered over an entire generation, writers can be seen to marvel publicly at the event of a revolution in the making while murmuring their reservations in private. A little over two weeks after the "demonic" shah had left the country, crowds filled thoroughfares, streets and side streets, balconies, rooftops, anywhere a human body could place itself to welcome the "angelic" leader of the revolution home. The sight is described in a long poem entitled "Mardom Hamareh Haq Darand" (The People Are Forever Right) by Esm'ail Kho'i, now living in exile in London. The poem is structured on a series of dialogues between the poet's public and private selves, and incorporates such opposites as sight and sense, action and contemplation, realism and idealism, society

and self. Stunned by the sight of people seated on tree branches, the poet recalls the executions of the previous era through the image of bodies hanging from trees:

Mivehha-ye ensani ra
bar dar
dideh budam, dar owj-e baharani bi-bar,
mivehha-ye ensani ra
in bar
bar derakhtan-e zemestani sarshar
bengar.
Bengar
ay del
ay del-e ghafel
bengar.[12]

(I had seen, at the height of a barren spring,
human fruits
hanging from trees.
Look,
Look
Heart
O crass heart,
look
at human fruits
this time
on the branches of a fruitful winter.)

Pondering the power of the people's unquestioned allegiance to the man "whose portrait has become the sign of a victorious people's togetherness," the poet's public self concludes that "doubts and suspicions are useless," and that people are always right "because they are many" and "because they forever seek the 'shall be.'" Yet in a mood of isolated meditation, the poet's inner self utters the final sentence:

Man
bavar nemikonam
keh hich niru'i betvanad farda ra
az mayehha-ye diruzin
biafarinad.[13]

(I
do not believe that any force
can build tomorrow
out of the stuff of yesterdays.)

That poem provides a particularly vivid instance of Iranian writers' attitude towards the shape of the revolution. Caught between the revolution's increasingly obvious course and their resolute rejection of the existing social reality, many felt compelled by the force of their own mental structures to accompany it in spite of all apparent contradictions and complications. While the course of the revolution ran counter to their sense of historical direction, no synthesis had emerged that might transcend the dichotomy between their ideals and the social reality that surounded them. The picture they had painted of the existing power relations forced them to commit themselves to the future. However, as the signs of the new state's attitude towards the secular intellectuals surfaced through the awesome pageantry of revolutionary events, a new image began to appear in poetry and prose. Within a few months, with the appearance of black robes and veils, mass prayers and ritual funeral processions, those who had hoped that the revolution would cleanse itself of what impurities may have mingled with it found to their dismay that what to them seemed incidental to the idea of a liberating revolution constituted the essence of the world view around which the new state had already begun to organize itself.

It was fast becoming impossible for Iranian writers, even in what had affectionately been dubbed *bahar-e azadi* (the springtime of freedom), to hold onto the hope of reconciling their ideals with the emerging social reality. In the spring of 1979, Shamlu was already speaking of "*hofreh ye mo'allaq-e faryadha dar hava*" (the suspended hollow of cries in the air) in "Sobh" (Morning), a poem charged with an existential sense of disappointment. Here, he depicted an earthly rain of filth spattering a graveyard where professional orators are dozing off while, in their graves, "*golgun-kafanan be kesalat / … / gordeh ta'viz mikonand*" (those of blood-stained shrouds / wearily / … / turn their backs)[14] on the revolution. Shortly afterwards, in response to such punishments as public flogging for alcohol consumption, the stoning of adulteresses, summary executions of political opponents, and sporadic attacks on the publication and dissemination of printed materials, he once again resorted to the symbolic expression of his feelings. "*Dar In Bonbast*" (In This Blind Alley), a poem which attracted immense and instant attention, and which will be analysed at some length in a subsequent chnager

of this book, he once again expresses this mood in the form of an encounter between the forces of good and those of evil.

At the core of many literary works of the decade following the Iranian Revolution of 1979 lies an attempt at the cancellation of the revolution as revolution and its recodification in negative terms – a breach of trust, an illegitimate seizure of power, and, above all, an alien invasion of some kind. The analogy of the Arab invasion of Iran in the seventh century, which ended the Sasanian dynasty and brought Islam to the Persian Empire, emerges naturally as the historical analogue with the fullest potential for symbolic exploitation. On the surface, the all-too-obvious cast of revolutionary leaders, with their turbans and robes, their association in the mind of modern secular intellectuals with a supposedly archaic idea of salvation through religious faith and a formal belief system, and their language – consisting of long-discarded expressions and idioms deriving from texts of Shi'ite theology – provided grounds for the efficacy of the analogy.[15]

At a deeper level, the memory of that defeat, constituted by a strand of intellectual discourse as the prime cause of Iran's backwardness in modern times, guaranteed the receptivity of audiences of literature. In an angry outburst directed against the cultural attitudes of the new rulers, Kho'i refers to "these uncultured conquerors" (*in hakeman-e bi-farhang*) as "crossbred descendants from the seed of Genghiz and the house of Abu-Jahl" (*amizegan-e tokhmeh-ye Changiz o dudman-e Abu-jahl*).[16] He thus couples the names of two deeply despised alien figures, the Mongol invader of Iran whose name is virtually synonymous with unbridled brutality and an uncle of the Prophet Mohammad whose name actually means "the father of ignorance." What gives such poetic utterances their special significance from our point of view is neither the depth and efficacy of the historical and linguistic analogies they employ, nor the rhetorical efficiency with which the allusions are exploited. Rather, it is once again the tacit attempt on the part of the poet to salvage the ideal of revolution as a term of positive value by designating the situation at hand as something "other" than a revolution – something, in fact, not only different, but an aberration, an anomaly, and, ultimately, an instance of a dream turned nightmare.

This partial reappropriation of the nationalist discourse of the early Iranian modernisers of a century ago by the contemporary literary intellectuals was not without its consequences. That the reactions of Shamlu, Kho'i, and Vaqedi to a historical event that had failed to conform to their notion of where a revolution ought to lead drives them towards a formulation of an Iranian cultural identity reminiscent of that posited by such men as Mirza

Aqa Khan Kermani[17] further drives a wedge between their idealised notion of Iranian culture and the reality that binds their actual lives. On the one hand, what seems to motivate their creative impulse is a deep desire to salvage the idea of revolution from the actuality they perceive as abhorrent. On the other, however, they seem painfully wary of slipping into the state-sponsored nationalist cant of the 1970s glorifying ancient Iranian culture.

The fundamental incongruity of the situation in which the secular intelligentsia found itself at this juncture is articulated in several significant literary works as an inexplicable gap between the initial causes of the revolution and its subsequent course. Hushang Golshiri's "Fathnameh-ye Moghan" (The Magi's Victory Chronicle), perhaps the most artistically conceived short story written in the decade following the revolution, best typifies the thematisation of that gap.[18] It follows the fortunes of a group of characters in a provincial town from the noontime joy of popular revolt against the monarchy to the midnight of forced submission to the savagery of the Islamic revolutionists. As the story opens, the people have already broken windowpanes in cinemas and banks in protest against what such institutions represent. One observes, "When we shattered movie house windows we did not think that it was the movies we were breaking down. We were attacking the banality they symbolized as well as the perpetrators of that banality." What remains to be destroyed of the system of which films and banks have thus been established as outward signs is the imposing statue of the horseman at the Shah square. Obviously mindful of the actual fact that, besides these, taverns too were targets of attacks by the religious faction in the revolutionary coalition, Golshiri introduces a tavern owner called Barat as his protagonist and the man who finally enlists the townsfolk to help pull down the shah's statue. A cultivated, honest, and popular man who loves poetry and loathes hypocrisy, Barat possesses an innate capacity for leadership. He has been a civil servant who, having lost his job because of his leftist views, turned to selling books. It is only after his bookstore was raided and closed down by the shah's dreaded secret police, the SAVAK, that he opens a tavern, hoping his new profession will shield him from harassment by state security agents.

After a detailed description of how Barat, basking in the rays of a midwinter sun, succeeds in dislodging the statue from its pedestal and throwing the horseman and his horse to the cement surface of the square, the story turns, in a well-structured sequence of poignant dialogues, to typical scenes of drinking bouts in Barat's humble tavern, where conversation revolves around the course and objectives of the revolution. The story's main body deals with Barat's worsening situation as the Islamicisation following

the revolution begins, and the authorities of the new state turn against him because of his unholy occupation. Eventually Barat is arrested and flogged in public because he continues to sell spirits in defiance of the ban on alcohol consumption. His cache of wines and spirits is discovered and given to a local bulldozer driver for destruction. The driver buries the precious find in an open field, word goes from mouth to mouth, and at night the townsmen head for the site. There they partake in the sacred ritual of unearthing these symbolic remains of their worldly culture and, their bodies bruised, they begin to nourish themselves with this forbidden liquid of joy, this *ab-e hayat* (water of life) so dearly celebrated in Persian literature and lore, even though it has been proscribed by religious dogma as "*um al-khaba'es*" (the mother of all evil). For a brief moment, in the dim light of a lantern or a candle, the assembly becomes an image of the "native" Iranian culture reminiscent of so many life-and-death struggles through the ages. Soon, however, the Revolutionary Guards, clad in the Arabian *keffiyeh* and *akal* and guided by the flickering light and a human voice singing a sad, sinuous song, arrive on the scene. They surround the drinkers, violators of a most severe religious proscription. The commanding officer issues the inevitable verdict, "They ought to be flogged, every one of them! Start!"

The ending of the story provides a paradigmatic mélange of the literal and figurative layers of signification:

> They stretched one from our midst on the ground, two guards holding his feet, two others his two hands. They covered his head with a black cloth, gathered its rims into a knot, stuffed the lump into his mouth, and started to whip him. No noise was heard, from anybody. Then they, too, squatted all around us, encircling the borders of the light from our lamps, their heads covered in keffiyehs. We could see their eyes only. And we, all of us, lay down outstretched, humble and earthy, our backs turned on ancient stars – still ancient stars – waiting for these men, clad in keffiyehs and akals, to get around to us. We stretched our feet, waiting for our Islamic punishment. And while waiting we pressed the mouth of the bottle into our mouths and sucked the very last drops of that bitter-tasting mother-of-all-evil. And then, drunk, we settled our faces on the soil – the cold, frost-covered ancestral soil – and waited.[19]

Golshiri's men in Arabian headbands obviously recall Shamlu's mouth-sniffing, heart-searching men who knock at the door to kill the light, whip love at the roadblock, and chop smiles off lips. But the similarities – initially

of rhetorical structure, but ultimately of social purpose – go far deeper than that. Throughout the dialogue sequences in "The Magi's Victory Chronicle," the plural "we" spoken by Barat and others who perceive themselves as having participated in the revolutionary movement comes gradually to stand in ever sharper contrast to the "they" who are portrayed at the end as attacking the assembly of drinkers that by now has assumed a clear cultural connotation. The familiar rhetorical device operates similarly in Shamlu's poem. In fact, this shared rhetorical device gives the two works a structural similarity that eventually portrays the "we" – presumably the writer and his imagined readers – as presenting the real Iran now in the clutches of an alien demonic force of violence and destruction whose otherness is highlighted through its appearance as well as its actions. Whereas Shamlu's poem, ending in the image of Satan's feast, defines that otherness in cosmic, ontological terms, Golshiri's story, presenting guardsmen in Arabian headdress, delineates it in more concrete ethnic and cultural terms. In both, however, the device leads to a familiar conclusion: Satanic or non-human rulers whose men appear in *keffiyeh* and *akal* are ultimately non-Iranian, alien, outside the good and the beautiful that define the writer and his readers as representing the "true" Iranian culture.

As observers of past acts of communication organised around similar oppositions, Iranian readers will have no difficulty construing the secondary meaning implicit in these works. By placing themselves on the side of "Iranianness," these writers provide an opportunity for their readers to choose sides in a struggle that is framed, not as one between one social force and another, but between Iranianness and Arabness, with all the historical antagonism that surrounds that notion in the mind of contemporary Iranians; or, more inclusively, simply between good and evil. The feeling of being invaded by an evil alien force pervades much of the Persian literature of the 1980s. It is as if the writer, filled with a sense of cultural alienation, conceives his work under siege, in despair, expressing it in a posture of wide-eyed bewilderment. He seems, at times, to wish to communicate the feeling that in order to convey some impression of the unbelievable reality around him, he must plunge into hitherto unknown domains.

In a short story entitled "Dar Saracheh-ye Dabbaghan" (In the Skinner's Homestead, 1981), which had been conceived as an episode in a larger work, Gholamhossein Saʿedi allegorises his perception of the Iranian Revolution in terms at once more abstract and more complex than those set forth by Shamlu and Golshiri. The narrative, which depicts the passage of an Egyptian embassy on its way to the Tartar court through a green valley resembling "an

emerald bowl" vaguely located between those two geographical points, will be fully analysed in a later chanpter in this book.

Sa'edi's story, to which he later added several other episodes before his death in exile in 1985, thematises the Iranian writer's response to the revolution differently from the works surveyed thus far. By approaching the question of violence in the new Islamic state allegorically rather than mimetically, it creates a dynamic interaction of the actual and potential relationships between the story and the objective situation that has occasioned it along several lines. First, within the terms of the story, the skinner's purposeful, practical brutality is seen at once as entirely natural and utterly unreal, depending on whether we approach the craft from the viewpoint of the skinners or the travellers. This, in turn, leads to the possibility of a meaning, within the sociopolitical context of the story, that portrays violence as both an aberration and an indigenous heritage. Secondly, the peculiar condensation of a complex reality into a vivid image of mindless brutality allows a reading of the story that ultimately defies finality. Instead, the whole structure of the story begins to operate as a kind of sign giving rise to other signs in a seemingly unlimited chain of semiosis. Does the "naturalness" of the skinners' action make it more understandable to the narrator? Do their dexterity, precision, and grace make their profession less repulsive? Is there anything in the story that can possibly place the ritual skinning of live beasts in a context that would modify the travellers' – and the reader's – initial reaction? Certainly, the master skinner's genuine hospitality, his kindliness, and his final explanation that he and his colleagues have learned their craft from the emir of Tartary open up new vistas of signification for the story. At the same time, however, the offhand manner in which that statement is tacked to the narrative gives the story an inconclusiveness that, while encouraging speculation, seems to flaunt the indeterminacy of the status of that statement. Finally, as a result of all this, the whole structure of the story appears to keep the meanings it engenders in suspension, pointing to little beyond the incomprehensibility of the situation that has inspired it.

In all such instances of literary communication, Iranian writers had come to find their discourse conditioned and constrained by structures epistemologically dependent on the oppositional categories of a simple discourse of antagonism. Beyond the portrayal of those antagonistic relations – conceived in one or another variety of the we/they, Iranian/non-Iranian, progressive/reactionary formulas – lay the spectre of indeterminate structures connoting the perceived incomprehensibility of the social situation in which they found themselves. Either through the artful creation of supernatural

figures or through diverse metonymic, metaphorical, or allegorical devices, they had reduced complex patterns of social interaction to familiar patterns of dichotomous opposition. When those patterns lost their relevance because of the introduction of the more complex variables, more complicated patterns of cultural contestation aggressively advanced by an unlikely contender – i.e., the traditional religious leaders – the symbolic order began to appear as an impediment to the act of literary communication. The crisis brought with it a vague realisation that the mechanisms that bind artistic expression to a particular version of the symbolic grasp of reality, conceived and conducted within one social environment, may not operate in the same way in another. Thus, the number of literary works caught up in the dualities and dichotomies of the social structure before the Iranian Revolution is exceeded only by attempts to break through those dichotomous categories.

Often, the process of rethinking the problematic of literary communication initially finds expression in extraliterary discourse. In the case of the post-revolutionary literature of Iran, instances of efforts aimed at changing the bases of literary signification disguised as literary and social criticism, "true" historical accounts and re-readings of past cultural artifacts – particularly perennial myths perceived as possessing continued social significance – bespeak a wide variety of purposes and reveal an impressive diversity. They range from total redefinitions of the relationship between the individual and his or her social context to critical evaluations of the literary output of the previous generation, or bold new readings of diverse facets of Iranian history and literature. An analysis of the many ways in which such articulations reflect intellectual postures in post-revolutionary Iranian society lies beyond the scope of this essay. I will, therefore, concentrate on one attempt that I think in the depth and breadth of its conception, in the boldness of its aspiration, and in its vast ramifications provides a specially vivid instance of the intellectual desire to resolve the crisis of the symbolic order and thus merits particular attention. In its last major articulation about a century ago, the myth of Kaveh the Ironsmith, as canonised by the tenth-century Persian poet Abolqasem Ferdowsi, had played a major role in laying the groundwork for the social ideals of the Constitutional Revolution (1906–1911).

Popular revolt against tyrannical rule, restitution of legitimacy, and progress towards social justice, all elements present in the myth, had been thematised in the hands of a generation of Iranian reformers, modernisers, and revolutionaries in such a way as to serve the ideals of liberal democracy, individual freedom, and social justice. The myth's narrative structure is deceptively straightforward: the throne of Iran was once occupied by an

alien tyrant named Zahhak, who had grown two voracious serpents on his shoulders as the visible signs of the evil in his heart. He had to kill the youth of the land and feed their brains to the hungry serpents. Eventually, an ironsmith named Kaveh, having lost seventeen sons to the tyrant's affliction, revolted against the usurper, led an army of the people to his palace, and chained the tyrant up. Still followed by the people, he then proceeded to reinstate Feraydun, the rightful possessor of divine glory, as king. The latter ruled the country with the utmost justice and liberality for the rest of his long life.

The text containing the attempt at redefining this myth appeared, interestingly, in the form of an editorial footnote to an article about the new elementary school textbooks published by the Islamic state. Almost a year after the revolution in the twentieth issue of *Ketab-e Jom'eh*, by far the most influential cultural weekly of the period, a writer of children's fiction had written a scathing criticism of the new textbooks, stressing at one point that "in the fifth grade Persian reader the story of Kaveh the ironsmith, this symbol of work and suffering, which is one of the most epical and patriotic verse stories of Ferdowsi, has also been omitted."[20] The editor of the journal, the poet Ahmad Shamlu, had added a footnote to this observation, which occupies two pages of the journal. Here the poet, whose influence on the evolution of poetry in contemporary Iran has been unique, openly expresses his dislike for Ferdowsi, the medieval canoniser of the ancient myth, whom he accuses of singlehandedly and intentionally distorting the historical truth of Ajidahak's revolutionary movement against the Iranian monarchy and the Zoroastrian priesthood and in favour of a classless society. The monstrous face that Ferdowsi has given to Zahhak is, in Shamlu's view, a result of the poet's displeasure with a revolutionary leader who had disrupted ancient Iranian society's structure of social classes by overthrowing the king. Such radical changes, Shamlu observes, "run counter to the convictions of the poet of Tus [Ferdowsi] who has concealed his hatred of classless society underneath the ugly aspect he gives to the founder of that society."[21]

Equating such ancient terms as *dehqan* (landed aristocracy) with the modern concept of "feudal lords," *sepahi* (the soldiery) with "the army" of the ruling aristocracy, and the magi (Zoroastrian priests) with "the clergy," Shamlu observes that in an "unholy alliance" these forces of reaction eventually banded together and defeated the revolutionary movement of the emphatically "Iranian" Zahhak, and returned the monarchy and the class system to society. He then cites as evidence some lines from Feraydun's proclamation on the occasion of his reinstatement as king, in which the necessity of "order" in society is expounded.

Sepahi nabayad keh ba pishehvar
beh yek ruy juyand hardo honar
yeki karvarz o degar gorzdar
sezavar-e hardo padid ast kar
cho in kar-e an juyad an kar-e in
por ashub gardad sarasar zamin.

In the Warner translation, the proclamation runs thus:

Ye citizens possessed of Grace and wisdom!
Disarm and follow but one path to fame,
For citizens and soldiers may not seek
A common excellence; this hath his craft
And that his mace; their spheres are evident
And if confounded, earth will be so too.[22]

In his characteristically lighthearted manner, with an all too obvious sidelong glance at Iranian politics in 1979–1980, the modern poet interprets Feraydun's words in this way:

> The toiling masses must forget about the existing order (obviously cooked up by Zahhak). Hands of hooligans and thugs off the army which belongs solely to the exploiting classes, and serves as a club in their hands. In short, the society must revert to its previous (i.e., pre-Zahhakian era or the reign of Jamshid) class structure.[23]

"Well," Shamlu asks in a triumphant tone, "now what do you think about the epic of Kaveh? Will you allow me to say that this epic [Kaveh's revolt] depicts nothing but a reactionary movement and a political rebellion in the service of an aristocracy severely wounded and deprived of its privileges by Zahhak?" The upshot of the lengthy argument that follows is that Zahhak must, in point of fact, have been the leader of "a popular movement against the atrocities of an insane and tyrannical king," that Kaveh was "a toiling man unconscious of his class situation," and that Ferdowsi is no more than a reactionary monarchist who has deliberately transformed a historically obvious, determinate event, "the suppression of a toilers uprising," into "a national liberation movement."

In the new version, then, Zahhak undergoes a complete reversal and emerges as the hero who, having destroyed the monarchical order, is engaged

in a protracted battle for the creation of the classless society. Similarly, Feraydun's image is reversed completely. He is no longer the just, liberal possessor of divine glory, but rather a vestige of the old regime, waiting for a chance to return to power. Meanwhile, Kaveh, the popular leader of Ferdowsi's story, turns into the unknowing accomplice of the forces of reaction, eventually co-opted against the interest of his social class into the unholy alliance of the monarchy, the army, and the clergy. In this, he is the ancient Iranian prototype for the Marxist notion of a pre-proletarian labour force unconsciously serving its exploiters. I shall not dwell on the many historical fallacies that accompany this version of the ancient myth. Others have done that.[24] Nor, it may be worth mentioning, did the idea of a historic al Zahhak, substantially different from that portrayed in the late Sassanid Khutay-namag and adapted by Ferdowsi, originate with Shamlu.

My point is this: in light of the explanatory power of this interpretation of the old myth, why was it that it did not succeed in establishing itself as the historically true, textually demonstrable reading of the ancient myth? Of course no reading of any myth is neutral or innocent. In the case at hand, neither the reading of the late Sassanid compilers of ancient epics nor that of Ferdowsi composing his epic four hundred years after the fall of the Persian empire in the hands of the Muslim Arabs – nor yet that of the resuscitators of the myth in modern times – can be called in any sense objective. Late nineteenth-century Iranian reformers and revolutionaries, for instance, framed Ferdowsi's version within their own ideals of political authority and patriotic citizenry in the context of a nation-state. In so doing, they were able to make the myth function in terms of their historical struggle, while at the same time demonstrating the authenticity, continuity, and legitimacy of their cultural standpoint.

In the case of Shamlu's attempt at rereading that myth, however, the failure is, I think, tied directly to the rupture it demands with the view of the mythical past considered most socially appropriate by Iranian intelligentsia in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Almost a year after a revolution that, by creating the widespread perception of an alien invasion, had mobilised the advocates of the notion of a distinct Iranian culture historically besieged by alien forces – of which Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (and the central narrative of r bellion for the sake of justice enshrined in the story of Kaveh) formed a nodal point – any re-articulation that would present the national epic and its author in negative terms had obviously little chance of success. Appearing to debunk a prized weapon in the cultural contestation of many decades, Shamlu had, in fact, highlighted the distance that separated

him – and a new generation of Iranian leftists – from the very people they were trying desperately to reach out to.

On the other hand, the Marxist terminology Shamlu applies to his new reading of the ancient myth is unabashedly tied to the specific situation in which he finds himself shortly after the eventual overthrow of the Iranian monarchy, long considered by the Iranian left to form the last obstacle on the path to an egalitarian society. In fact, Shamlu's entire view of the history behind the myth appears to have been conditioned by the Marxist drama of revolution/counterrevolution that has formed an essential part of the political culture of Iranian society in recent decades. In 1980, the Iranian leftists' view of the revolution was not that of the "angelic" Ayatollah Khomeini having brought the revolution to its fruition by overthrowing the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Rather, the Left's reading of the revolution was that the masses, having overthrown the most visible symbol of a reactionary political system, were being deceived by the machinations of the forces of reaction into submitting to a more powerful symbol of the same system by the religious faction. This had in turn given rise to a reading of the ancient myth in which the revolutionary hero (the emphatically Iranian Ajidahak of the myth), having overthrown the institution of the monarchy, could be portrayed as struggling to bring about the classless society.

The forces of reaction, consisting of the army and the clergy (the villains of the drama), would then naturally be seen as desperately looking for a new alliance to bring about a counterrevolution. The new reading of the myth could thus be made to work as a warning to the intellectuals that those forces may indeed find an innocent ally in the working class of Iranian society that, because of its historical situation, is in danger of being co-opted into a movement that aims to bring about its doom. It is, in the poet's view, the urgent task of the leftist intelligentsia to prevent such an outcome by making the working class aware of that fact by laying bare the historical "truth" behind the myth. Otherwise, the forces of reaction may well succeed in enlisting the ignorant working classes (just as in the myth there is the unmistakable inference that the forces of Feraydun and the magi instigated Kaveh the Ironsmith to rebellion) in their cause and undo the revolution. Is that not why Shamlu's whole argument is framed in the form of an appeal to the intellectual community? "And I do not understand," remarks the poet, "why at least our intellectuals do not take into account such a blatantly anti-masses theme in their encounter with the episode of Kaveh's revolt."[25]

Myth demythologised, or myth rearticulated? Clearly, in Shamlu's version of the myth of Kaveh there is still the angelic hero and the demonic villain,

as well as the gullible fool over whose soul the antagonists wage their war. True, the ultimate prize (Shamlu's ideal of a classless society in contrast with Ferdowsi's notion of lranianness) is portrayed in the new version in terms of an intrinsically emancipatory entity, a new absolute value. But even though mythical elements have changed place and new – and presumably higher – values have been introduced, the structure that sustains them has remained essentially the same. The reactive nature of Shamlu's reading of the myth has, in other words, locked it into an epistemological dependence on the very thing it criticises. As a result, although the ultimate meaning assigned to the history that may have been perceived as having underlain the myth is constructed as antithetical to the previous articulation, the social significance derived from the story remains ontologically identical. This essential sameness becomes more obvious when we consider the circular motion of such archetypal concepts as configurations of social forces, mechanisms of mass mobilisation, and the notion of political change transmitted through the two versions, although such considerations add a whole new dimension to the discussion well beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, one conclusion seems inescapable: the constraints of a revolutionary society have conspired to turn Shamlu's imaginative retelling of the ancient myth into an instance of frustrated desire revealing the intellectual will as self-positioning in the midst of social flux.

Finally, like so much else in the literature of the Iranian Revolution, Shamlu's attempt at rearticulating an old myth reveals his genuine and well-founded fear that the popular understanding of the meaning embodied in the old version might, in fact, prove once again to be operable in the new historical setting. In this sense, the new version ultimately provides us neither with an intrinsically emancipatory myth nor with an alternative blueprint for preventive political action, but rather with a sort of measuring faculty of the sociopolitical ambience that generated it. The Iranian Revolution had obviously eliminated the distance between the modern poet and the ancient myth. The perennial structures enshrined in national mythologies and the cultural dogmas that motivate generations of mythmakers can be seen most clearly at crucial junctures in the complex unfolding of historical processes. A literary culture's condition can be gleaned most easily as it stands face-to-face with its own heritage.

CHAPTER 2

Protest and Perish

A History of the Writers Association of Iran

The Writers Association of Iran, called *Kanun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran* in Persian, was founded in 1968 and was in many ways a unique experience in Iranian intellectual history. Its fortunes, consisting of periods of feverish activity and lifeless dormancy, epitomise the pattern of intellectual life in Iran, reflecting its problems and promises, its intellectual validity and artistic vitality, its ideals, achievements, and failures. While it did not succeed in its historical fight against censorship, it nevertheless played a major role in the course of the Iranian Revolution. While it could not transcend the factionalism that has historically plagued the Iranian elite, it nevertheless made an indelible impact on the intellectual community and on Iranian society at large. Between us and an objective account of this important intellectual institution stands the barrier of the Iranian Revolution itself. But if we can surmount this obstacle we will not only be able to view the intellectual history of modern Iran in a new light, co-opt but we may also gain new insight, from a new vantage point, into the uneasy relationship between the creative minds and the ruling body of a changing society.

The history of the contacts between intellectuals and rulers, of course, goes back to the time when Plato acted as adviser to Dionysius of Syracuse and Aristotle was engaged as a tutor for the young Alexander of Macedon. But in the same culture we also have the example of Diogenes, the founder and archetype of the sect of the Cynics who, when urged by Alexander to name a boon which the mighty emperor might bestow on him, asked him only to remove his shadow and let the sun shine upon him. In Iran itself, the story of successive literary generations is in large part the story of the non-conformist or rebellious writer, and this is at no time more true – or more significant socially – than in the last two decades.

During the decade that followed the fall of Mohammad Mosaddeq's government in August 1953, and with the gradual ebbing of intellectual hopes for the establishment of constitutional democracy in Iran, the Pahlavi monarchy proceeded to consolidate its power bases. By the late 1960s, when

our history commences, the state had succeeded in consolidating its sway over both civilian and military power structures. An armed force loyal to the person of the monarch had been created, remnants of the country's political parties, however docile and sheepish, had been all but eradicated, and the move towards a one-party state was well underway. The bureaucracy was fast growing out of proportion to the country's capacities or needs. The White Revolution, while failing as a vehicle of meaningful socioeconomic transformation, was nevertheless progressing as a political ploy to bring to an end the feudal and aristocratic, or even parliamentary, resistance to Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's vision of Iran's future. None of this sat well with the non-establishment intellectual community which, on the one hand, had been exposed to modern ideologies of nationalism and Marxism and, on the other, still cherished the unachieved ideals of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911. Clearly, the state and the intellectuals, eyeing each other askance, were bracing themselves for a long complex period of mutual distrust and outright antagonism.

In the meantime, the diversification and intensification of artistic and literary activities had pushed a new generation of *engagé* writers to the foreground of public attention by the late 1950s. The expansion of a modern network of mass media, including radio, television, and the press; the growth – however haphazard – of a vast system of higher education; and the proliferation of literary and cultural periodicals had focused the attention of literate Iranians on the cultural scene as a new battleground between the state and the intelligentsia. Indeed, in terms of artistic and literary creativity, the decade of the 1960s was unique in the modern history of Iran: a new generation of writers had come of age. Advocates of modernism in literature were beginning to feel secure about the theory and practice of their art, and the Iranian readership thought itself sophisticated enough to demand literary expression. The number of collections of poetry, novels, short stories and plays produced and published in this decade is nothing less than bewildering. The state felt compelled to bring the writers into congruity with its own politics and policies.

Throughout the 1960s, grappling with ambivalence, divided loyalties, and uneasy revolt, Iranian writers were subjected to a classical state policy of rewards and punishments, and a growing, increasingly visible pressure to take one or the other. The country's censorship apparatus was modernised, reorganised, and expanded just as the allure of state sponsorship of literature and the arts produced hundreds of tempting, eye-catching volumes of books. Writers and poets, essayists and translators were being employed

and promoted in the bureaucracy, the universities, and mass media even as a growing network of surveillance led by the SAVAK secret police organisation kept an eye on their individual and collective activities as well as on their writing. As these pressures were making it more difficult for the writer to steer a free course, such patron saints of literature and the arts as the Empress Farah, Mehrdad Pahlbod, Reza Qotbi and Shoja'oddin Shafa were always ready with open arms to embrace anyone who took one small step in their direction. Those who were co-opted began to devise cultural and artistic programmes for the government which soon found their manifestation in colourful festivals lavishly sponsored by the Royal Court. Others, a great majority, wavering, defenceless, unorganised in the face of the encroachments of the state, grudgingly adopted a wait-and-see attitude.

One of the most significant government offensives aimed at bringing the writer into further conformity with the will of the state exhibited itself in a plan, announced in February 1968, for the monarch to inaugurate a "Congress of Iranian Poets and Writers." The government was doubtless motivated by a desire either to neutralise this nagging bunch by publicising its acceptance of – if not allegiance to – the status quo, or else identify the untamable few and deal with them accordingly. The writers had to react if they were to preserve hopes of intellectual independence, remain untainted by the stigma of association with an increasingly unpopular political order, and attempt to launch a counteroffensive and blunt government censorship which was fast becoming intolerable.

Two previous attempts, both unsuccessful, had already been made to stem the tide of censorship.[1] In 1966, when *Baru*, a literary periodical under the joint editorship of Ahmad Shamlu and Yadollah Ro'ya'i, had been banned, a group of writers signed a letter of protest addressed to Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveyda, but nothing came of it. Then about six months before the announcement of the imminent congress, another effort had been made to ease censorship. According to Gholamhosein Sa'edi, later a founding member of the Writers' Association of Iran, the story begins early in the summer of 1967 when, on a visit to Nil Publishers, he loses his temper as he notices that the proofs of one of his works have been altered to accommodate the demands of the Ministry of Culture and the Arts' "Composition Bureau," the principal agency of censorship. As he is cursing at the high and the low of the government and SAVAK, a well-dressed middle-aged man approaches him politely, introduces himself and assures him that the unfortunate incident must be the result of a regrettable misunderstanding. He then invites Sa'edi to visit him at the

prime minister's office to discuss the matter with him. Suspicious of the whole encounter, Sa'edi rushes to Cafe Firuz where he is supposed to meet with Jalal Al-e Ahmad and a few other writers, and recounts his adventure. All present, according to Sa'edi, agree that the opportunity must be seized upon. Sa'edi meets with the man three or four times, informing him that all writers have serious complaints about censorship and that they all wish to discuss the situation. The matter is eventually referred to Premier Hoveyda himself.

One meeting takes place between a group of writers and Hoveyda at the latter's office. Among those present were Dariush Ashuri, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Nader Naderpur, Eslam Kazemiyeh and Gholamhossein Sa'edi himself. Al-e Ahmad speaks for the writers, recounting in detail instances of direct and indirect censorship. The prime minister responds that if the censors are driven to excess in their supervisory work, it is because they are not familiar with the nature of literary expression. He suggests that the writers themselves set up a commission to review requests for publication and make recommendations as to which works are not fit to print. To this Al-e Ahmad responds that the writers are there to rid themselves of the evils of censorship and not to become censors themselves. Predictably, discussions lead nowhere, a commission is promised that will hear writers' complaints about censorship, but it fails to materialise. The episode, however, generates a series of discussions in the informal Monday afternoon gatherings of the writers at Cafe Firuz, Cafe Naderi, and Cafe Tehran Palace. It is against this background that news of the court-sponsored Congress reaches the writers; and it is in response to this new development that, after a few gatherings in various homes, on 20 February 1968 the writers draft the "Statement Concerning the Writers Congress."[2]

The statement consists of an opening sentence, a concluding clause and three numbered paragraphs. It begins simply: "Since the news of the inauguration of a congress named 'The Congress of Writers, Poets and Translators' has been announced, we the undersigned deem it appropriate to inform the people and state authorities of the following." Then follows the opinion that since such gatherings ought to aim at bringing together the writers of the country in an atmosphere conducive to free exchange of ideas, certain preconditions must exist if the effort is to achieve its end. These conditions include freedom of expression and publication, whereas direct and indirect government interference in cultural and intellectual processes has destroyed those freedoms. The realisation of such freedoms, in turn, depends on "total adherence to the country's constitution as it relates to

freedom of the press and of expression, as well as to the relevant articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights." The signatories, therefore, declare the formation of such a gathering at the present time neither useful nor appropriate.

The statement next asserts that government interference in intellectual affairs has always and everywhere proved detrimental to the growth of a "genuine and healthy" body of literature, which fact has been put down to experience both in Iran and in many other countries. Finally, the statement points out that since the only proper authority to undertake the call to a congress of this sort is "a free and legal guild" representing the writers and protecting their rights – and not any official institutions of the state – the formation of such a guild must precede the call to any gathering of writers. Since at present, the statement continues, "no free organization representing the country's writers" exists, the signatories find this arrangement unacceptable and therefore neither useful nor appropriate. The statement closes with another simple declaration: "For these reasons, we the undersigned hereby declare that we shall not take part in any gathering which would not conform to the above stipulations."

Clearly, the writers who signed this document viewed it as a multi-faceted protest against the government's initiative. They were objecting, first of all, to government interference in their professional affairs through the existing censorship apparatus and the expansion of state authority over the press and other means of mass communication. Secondly, they were articulating grievances over the resultant situation – i.e., the emergence of an indirect system of reward and punishment for desirable and undesirable stances. Finally, and most significantly, in making explicit reference to the Iranian constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ratified by the Iranian Government, as the ultimate authority on questions of intellectual freedom, they were creating a frame of reference for the conditions they sought to bring about. In this connection, it is worth noting that they addressed the statement to "the people and state authorities," rather than to any individual. They could not have addressed the shah since they obviously believed that under the constitution the person of the monarch is immune from all responsibility. At the same time, they refused to address any other authority, thus making it known that they did not regard the prime minister, the various ministers, the Parliament, or other officials as the wielders of actual political power. The rejection of all state interference in intellectual affairs is also noteworthy in light of possible official and unofficial charges, inferences, or innuendos that the banned pro-Soviet Tudeh Party might be

behind the move. In sum, the "Statement concerning the Writers Congress" was a well-thought-out document which could have become the focal point of future intellectual endeavours, as well as a vehicle of political struggle against state repression in the 1970s. It certainly provided a firm foundation for the activities of the Writers' Association of Iran.

The text of the statement was typed in nine copies, each signed by all the nine writers present: Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Dariush Ashuri, Nader Ebrahimi, Bahram Bayzaʾi, Mohammad-ʿAli Sepanlu, Eslam Kazemiyeh, Feraydun Moʿezzi-Moqaddam, Esmaʾil Nuri-Ala, and Hushang Vaziri. Each signatory was then entrusted with a copy and charged with the responsibility of contacting other literary figures in an effort to collect their signatures. A total of 40 other signatures were thus collected and kept without being made public. In spite of the relative secrecy surrounding this effort, nevertheless the government must have become aware of it, for in March 1968, a few days before the Iranian New Year holidays, Radio Iran broadcast a communiqué to the effect that the scheduled Congress of Iranian Writers had been postponed.[3]

The first meeting of the forty-nine writers who later referred to themselves as the founding members of the Writers' Association of Iran took place on 14 April 1968. In this and four subsequent meetings, the Association's charter and a second statement entitled "On a Necessity" were drafted, discussed and ratified, and elections to the first Executive Board were conducted. After Al-e Ahmad and a few others declined nomination for Executive Board membership, Simin Daneshvar, M.E. Behʾazin, Nader Naderpur, Siyavash Kasraʾi, and Dariush Ashuri were elected as members of the first Executive Board of the Writers' Association of Iran. Behʾazin then submitted a motion to the members to name a president for the Association, and Daneshvar was elected to that position. Another motion, put forward by Al-e Ahmad, stipulated that the Association contact such religious intellectuals as the Ayatollah Mahmud Taleghani and Ali Shariʾati in an effort to co-opt them into the process. The proposal instigated much heated debate and led to little agreement. Finally, in the interest of unanimity Al-e Ahmad withdrew his motion. Apparently, the members must have decided to go public at this point, for in the spring 1968 issue of *Arash*, a literary journal edited by Eslam Kazemiyeh, the first seven pages were devoted to the news of the Association's formation written by the editor, himself a founding member, and selected portions of the proceedings as reported by Nuri-ʿAla, the Association's secretary, including the names of the forty-nine founding members, as well as those of the members of the Executive Board, the President, the

Treasurer, and other elected officials of the Association. Most importantly, the Association's second document, a statement entitled "On a Necessity," stood at the head of this report.[4]

In comparison with the earlier statement, "On a Necessity" is at once more detailed, more direct, and more political. It begins by delineating the dichotomous behaviour of Iranian officialdom towards writers, consisting of "nurturing and putting to use tame and hand-maidenly thoughts," on the one hand and, on the other, an attitude marked by "fear, suspicion and vengeance toward dynamic, path-breaking thoughts which scan horizons of the future and promise tomorrow." This dual attitude which "runs blatantly counter to recognized human rights" is bound to result in a stagnant intellectual environment, and this "is a great loss both on the individual and on the national level." The people and the officials of the country, especially those dealing with intellectual affairs, "must learn to tolerate ideas expressed by others, whether in agreement or disagreement with their own." They must learn "not to limit freedom to themselves, not to be governors and guardians, or – what is worse – constables" to others. Intellectual and artistic freedom is "not a luxury but a necessity," and that is why "the Writers Association of Iran, composed of all Iranian writers, … has begun its activity on the basis of … two principles." The first principle is defence of freedom of expression within the framework of the Iranian constitution – articles 20 and 21 of the amendment to the constitution are named – and articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The statement further specifies that freedom of expression includes all types, means, and media – written, oral, or graphic – and that "every individual has the right to present his ideas in any and all forms he chooses, and to have them printed and disseminated." The second principle is defence and protection of the professional interests of the authors, on the basis of the current or future laws of the land. The statement closes with a plea to all writers who believe in these principles and are willing to endeavour to actualise them to join the Writers' Association of Iran.

That this statement on the urgent necessity of intellectual and artistic freedom was a more assertive formulation of the principles outlined in the statement of three months earlier is all too obvious. If the "Statement Concerning the Writers Congress" was the negation of an unwanted effort, "On a Necessity" contained the affirmation of an alternative course of action within the same legal framework. Whereas the earlier statement simply rejected the state's involvement in the formation of a writers' organisation, here the writers indicated the kind of organisation they sought to set up. It

would therefore be illuminating to analyse this statement from that angle as well. In its opening, immediately after the point about the dichotomous attitude of the officials towards writers, the statement adds: "and it seems that if no barrier is erected in its way," the state will continue for years to pursue the same course. The Association is then projected as an agent of change, a barrier in the path of the law of continuation – in this case, further official incursions into the realm of the writer. If the present state of affairs is allowed to continue, the statement notes, it may eventually stifle the society's ability to judge what is good for it, to stop any exchange of opinion, healthy criticism, and the emergence of new ideas altogether, bringing about total stagnation and inaction. It is against the backdrop of such an eventuality that the establishment of the Writers' Association of Iran looms as an urgent social necessity. Thus an all-encompassing intellectual institution is heralded to act both as a safeguard against doom and a professional guild with a defined responsibility to protect and preserve the rights and interests of the Iranian writer.

Two other related points contained in this statement must be mentioned if the flow and ebb of the Writers' Association of Iran in later years are to be understood in their proper contexts. First, the universal, absolutist character of these early pronouncements assumed special significance in the course of the Association's activities, culminating in the factional battle between it and the Tudeh Party in 1979. Secondly, the two-pronged character and orientation of the Association's objectives gradually made of it at once a political intellectual institution and a professional writers' guild. A point of contention from the start, this duality would turn into an underlying cause of a series of desertions from the Association which brought its first active phase to an end in 1970, and would turn into a more formidable obstacle in the way of the Association's attempts to reclaim all its members in its drive for revitalisation in the late 1970s.

To turn back to the course of events in the spring of 1968, the newly born institution faced several challenges: financial, logistical, and legal. Although voluntary contributions, the most generous coming from Al-e Ahmad, temporarily solved its financial difficulties, other problems did not lend themselves to easy solutions. The first revolved around securing a permanent place where the members, whose number was expected to increase substantially, could meet regularly. More importantly, the Association had to secure some legal status. Finally, if and when other problems were solved, a strategy had to be devised for combating censorship and related restrictions imposed by the Pahlavi state over affairs relating to writers and their rights.

The first problem was finally resolved when the proprietors of Ghandriz Art Gallery, located across the street from the campus of Tehran University, agreed to host the Association's meetings, which subsequently took place at least once a month, beginning in August 1968. Issues of immediate concern, in the meantime, were addressed at meetings of the Executive Board and in private homes as a precautionary measure. In public meetings at Ghandriz Gallery broader topics of intellectual concern such as freedom and the artist, Iranian society and Western influences, and the like, were discussed in the form of lectures or speeches followed by questions and answers.

Perhaps the greatest cultural accomplishment of the Association in this phase was the memorial celebration for Nima Yushij on 6 February 1969 at the auditorium of Tehran University's Faculty of Fine Arts, attended by over five hundred writers, teachers, students, and poetry lovers. Association President Daneshvar referred to Nima in her opening remarks as "a pioneering poet to whom modern Persian poetry owes so much." She thanked Tehran University for hosting the celebration and made a cryptic reference to academic disregard of Nima's poetic achievement, asking rhetorically, "If colleges and universities do not hold discussions on contemporary Persian literature … where else can one go?" The most political speech in this gathering was given by Siyavash Kasra'i who, in his assessment of Nima's relevance to his age, called him a poet of "dark colors and unceasing motion, trying to break through the colors of the night." Then several poets, including Naderpur and Shamlu, read selections from Nima's poetry. Finally, Al-e Ahmad entertained questions from the audience, mostly about the issue of the social and political function of poetry.[5] The gathering was, of course, in no way comparable to the nights of poets and writers at the Goethe Institute almost eight years later. Nevertheless, it gathered sufficient official heat to foil plans by the Association to hold a similar gathering in memory of Forugh Farrokhzad, and doubtless contributed to the antagonism of Iranian officialdom towards the Association.

On another front, in its efforts to play a role in protecting the rights of authorship and win a measure of official recognition in the process, the Association seized upon the opportunity of ongoing parliamentary debates over a copyright bill pending before the Iranian Parliament. In June 1968, Association members obtained a copy of the bill, studied its details, and notified the Majles in a letter that in the view of the Association the bill contained many loopholes and pitfalls which had to be corrected if the law was to respond in some measure to the long-neglected need to protect Iranian writers from print piracy and related problems. The Parliament's

Commission on Culture and the Arts, perhaps without checking the question of the Association's legal status or acceptability, invited a representative for further discussions. One was sent and "a laundry list of the shortcomings and inadequacies of the bill were discussed one by one."[6] However, either the views of the Association were ignored, or the Majles or its commission were belatedly tipped off about the nature of the Association, for the invitation was never renewed and the views of the Association were in no way reflected in the ensuing law. Nevertheless, the attempt was no small accomplishment for a fledgling intellectual institution of uncertain legal status, especially in view of the restrictive policies of the state vis-à-vis intellectual demands. At any rate, considering the later radicalisation of the Association, the effort also highlights the moderate stance of the Association at this stage, and its desire to work within the existing political framework.

The Association, however, was totally unsuccessful in its more important battles to achieve legality and combat censorship. Efforts on the former point continued throughout 1968 without any success. In its report to the general assembly on 14 March 1969 the executive board stated, "The request for the registration of the Writers Association of Iran has encountered opposition in the Intelligence Bureau of the Police Department, and that view has been conveyed to the Association's representative orally without the slightest mention of any reasons."[7] On the basis of the board's report, the general assembly approved certain organisational reforms and changes in its charter. It also elected a new Executive Board, retaining Kasra'i, Naderpur, and Beh'azin, and naming Vaziri and Sepanlu as new members. Various commissions were also set up to pursue previous efforts for recognition more forcefully, and to devise new strategies to fight censorship.

For another three months, the Association continued its efforts on both fronts, but the government refused to budge. On 27 May, the board communicated its feelings of frustration and helplessness on the question of censorship to the assembly:

> The existing institutions of censorship cannot be countered through such approaches as private negotiations and activities – i.e., informal conversations with agents of censorship and personal initiatives like seeking mediation by influential authorities and organs that have no legal mandate.[8]

All along, the government kept steadily mounting pressure on the Association. It not only did not relent on the central issue of censorship and refused

to grant legal recognition, but also began actively to sabotage the Association's normal activities and harass its members. First, it warned the proprietors of Qandriz Gallery to stop hosting the meetings of the Association. Then in March 1969, it suppressed *Arash*, the quarterly which less than a year earlier had published the Association's statement "On a Necessity" as well as its later occasional statements and documents, the speeches delivered at the Ghandriz Gallery and the news of the gathering in honour of Nima. Next, it prevented Tehran University from fulfilling its promise to host a gathering in memory of poet Forugh Farrokhzad. The effects of these pressures are all too obviously reflected in the increasingly militant tone and frustrated mood of the Association's statements in 1969.

But worse was yet to come. Al-e Ahmad's sudden death in September 1969 deprived the Association of its most prominent member and the staunchest supporter of its activities. From the beginning of the Association's activity, two distinct and divergent factions, one led by Al-e Ahmad, the other by Beh'azin, were visible in it, and many members feared that the former's death might tilt the balance towards the latter, and eventually deliver the Association into the hands of the Tudeh Party. Furthermore, more than a few people, both inside and outside the Association, saw the hands of state security forces behind Al-e Ahmad's death,[9] just as a year earlier many had perceived in the mysterious circumstances of Samad Behrangi's death a dark plot conducted and carried out by the SAVAK. All this had a deleterious effect on the morale of the members. By the autumn of 1969, the meetings had already become less frequent and more irregular in the absence of a regular place to host the gatherings. The last public meeting of the Association's general assembly was held in March 1970 in a secondary school auditorium in Narmak, an eastern suburb of Tehran. The members had been unsuccessfully debating another statement protesting censorship. When the majority finally voted on a toughly worded text, a minority dissented, moving to require individual signatures under the statement in place of the collective rubric of "the Writers' Association of Iran." The motion was tabled, the meeting adjourned, and the Association was not to meet again until seven years later.

Three months after this meeting, Feraydun Tonekaboni, a founding member and a member of the Association's executive board, was arrested, presumably because of his trenchant attack on Iranian society in his recently published collection of stories, *Yaddashtha-ye Shahr-e Sholugh* [Memoirs of the Chaotic City]. The move signalled to the writers the start of a much tougher government policy in dealing with intellectual dissent. Failing to initiate any collective response within the framework of the Writers'

Association of Iran, a group of fifty-four writers signed and issued in June a protest statement in which Tonekaboni's arrest had been pronounced "contrary to the principles of liberty and the rights of the writers." The statement then added, "This unjustified arrest is cause for shame in a country where the people have always extended their protection and respect, their gratitude and sympathy, to their writers and poets."[10] Within a few days three of the signatories, Sa'edi, Bayza'i, and Ashuri, were summoned to the SAVAK separately and interrogated for several hours. Sa'edi was summoned a second time, and reportedly beaten. During the latter part of June and early July three other signatories, Sepanlu, Naser Rahmani-Nejad, and Sa'id Soltanpur, were arrested and incarcerated. On 12 July, Beh'azin was also arrested and incarcerated for four months in Qasr prison. He has left a graphic account of this experience in a book entitled *Mehman-e In Agayan* [Guest of These Gentlemen] (1970). It is in this narrative of incarceration that we learn how the signatories of the statement protesting against the imprisonment of Tonekaboni had been charged with enticing people to take up arms against the state. Beh'azin relates here that when he asked how such a charge had been trumped up against the writers who had simply protested against the incarceration of their colleague, he was told that "the military prosecutor believes that the concept of enticement to take up arms is not limited only to actual weapons. Rather, any spoken or written statement can provide a context for opposition because it arms them against the state."[11]

The writers were eventually released on bail through the autumn of 1970, but because several had appealed their sentences, they had to appear in the military court again, which met on 12 and 13 April 1971. Beh'azin's defence in this court is typical of the writers' determination to pursue their professional aspirations. It ends with these words:

> Writers, like all other professionals, have the right to assemble in a gathering whenever the situation demands … and collectively to defend their professional rights, whether an institution by the name of the writers' organization, guild or association may or may not be permitted to exist.[12]

Finally, on 8 February 1971 a group of thirteen armed guerrillas raided and disarmed a gendarmerie outpost in the village of Siahkal in the northern forests of Gilan. The incident exploded with the force of a powerful bomb in Iranian society and brought the full weight of opposition to the state, both armed and peaceful, to the foreground of public attention. It was then that the government, determined to crush all opposition, unleashed SAVAK.

Demoralised by a combination of external pressure and internal discord, the members of the Writers' Association of Iran felt cowed before this daring new development on the political scene. Thus the state's heavy-handed attitude was sufficient to put an end to the first phase of the activity of the Writers' Association of Iran. With the rise of a new, potentially explosive guerrilla movement, whose links with a new, far more radical generation of Iranian intellectuals were just coming to the surface, the government could take no chances. At the same time, it increased its efforts to co-opt the more moderate members of the intellectual community in an expanding network of cultural and artistic institutions, activities, and events. The carrot and the stick were both getting heftier and harder to resist. Six crucial years were to pass by before anyone would again hear the name of the Writers' Association of Iran.

During the intervening years, the Pahlavi monarchy pursued several policies which at once wrought major changes in Iranian intellectual life and started an irreversible trend towards the total alienation of the writer from the state. Such political measures as the creation of a one-party state in 1975 underlined the general perception of the monarch's lack of regard for the country's constitution, while his "love it or leave it" attitude towards the political opposition frustrated all attempts at compromise. The official arrogance born of the monarchial regime's newfound sense of wealth and power, coupled with the shah's megalomania, which manifested itself in such ludicrous acts as the changing of the origin of the country's calendar in 1976, deeply offended Iranian people's sensibilities. The official policy of the glorification of the pre-Islamic Iranian past meant that history had to be interpreted in accordance with the state ideology. Iranian writers could not communicate in their writing their understanding of the country's history. "For years," Bahram Bayza'i would complain in 1977, "we have been told that we have had a glorious history, have been a brave nation … have loved one another dearly … have been as brothers to each other … Now if the writer's reading of Iranian history were different, he would be told: 'this you cannot express, because from the official viewpoint it does not serve a useful purpose.'"[13]

Obviously, censorship was not letting up. The bill governing copyright, on which the Writers' Association had tried to cooperate with the Majles, had already been enacted into law with no changes under the eye-catching title of "Act for the Protection and Defence of the Rights of Writers and Artists." It was later further diluted through the enforcement of several bureaucratic regulations imposing further restrictions on freedom of speech.

As if this were not enough, in 1971 SAVAK initiated annual checks of public and school libraries with the purpose of removing from the shelves what it considered "misleading" books. A week after the first such check, over sixty publishers and booksellers were arrested, some held for over a year with no formal charges. Such arrests were to continue and expand through 1977, when the first cracks in the power structure of the monarchial state began to appear.

The effects of all this and other governmental policies in the 1970s on the writer and his market and on the dissemination of culture through literature were debilitating. According to official statistics, the number of volumes published and marketed annually in Iran dropped from over 4,000 in 1969 to about 700 in 1976. The number of pirated editions and unauthorised publications in the same period grew tenfold. Fictitious printing presses or shadowy publishing enterprises, in other words, simply reprinted emasculated editions of literary works along the guidelines established by the Ministry of Culture and the Arts' Composition Bureau, a euphemism for the main organ of censorship. Works by such popular figures in contemporary Persian literature as Hedayat, ʿAlavi, Al-e Ahmad, Saʿedi, Akhavan and Behrangi were placed on a long list of banned books sent to elementary and secondary schools and other educational institutions with instructions to "remove them from the libraries and send them to the Security Office of the Ministry of Education."[14] Words like "winter," "night," "tulip," "forest" (because of its association with the guerrilla movement in the northern forests of Iran) and "gol-e sorkh," meaning "red rose" in Persian, had to be banished from contemporary writing, this last one because it evoked the last name of executed revolutionary guerilla Khosrow Golesorkhi, a journalist and poet who had played a leading role in the foundation of The Organization of People's Feda'i Guerrillas executed in 1973.

The cultural implications of this unprecedented tightening of censorship were no less destructive. As the writers one after the other would recall in the autumn of 1977, it impoverished Iranian culture, alienated the contemporary culture from its past, separated more than before the masses from the intelligentsia, making each suspicious of the other, severed the intellectuals from international cultural currents, kept the people ignorant of their surroundings, stifled creative energies, brought promising talents to early deaths, distorted standards of artistic and literary judgment, turned words into hollow shells, fostered duplicity and insincerity and, worst of all, subjected writers to self-censorship.[15] In an interview in New York in June 1978, Saʿedi would sum up the evils of censorship in these words:

> Not only does the government directly censor literary works ruthlessly and stupidly, it also compels its affiliated organisations and local agents to censor such works. It further uses self-proclaimed state-sponsored professional guilds to censor works of literature. Eventually, every intellectual, every writer, and every artist will have to censor himself. Self-censorship has assumed frightening proportions in Iran.[16]

Bahram Bayza'i would elaborate further on indirect censorship. For a playwright, a director, there is a double censorship to contend with: one "an agency of direct supervision," the other "a flowing invisible force … rearing its head now as an economic threat, now as a local influence, now as the head of an office, now as an old maid guarding female virtues." The playwright or theatre director would be told that in his play a physician had been cast in a negative light, and the gentlemen of the Medical Order have objected to that. Or "in your play, there is a woman with no sense of sacrifice, and the Women's Organization is in uproar. Thus any guild can stop you in your tracks with a complaint or an objection save, of course, the local bully and the prostitute who have no guild."[17]

It would be erroneous, nonetheless, to conclude from all this and numerous other instances that Iranian writers were reduced to silence as a result of this situation. To begin with the person of the writer, several of the more prominent ones – Shamlu, Sa'edi, Golshiri, and Baraheni – had left the country either to agitate against repression of the intellectuals in Iran, or simply to register protest by their absence. Secondly, adept as they were in cryptic references, esoteric allusions and ever deeper layers of symbolic or allegorical expression, many created works which reflected their attempt to reveal to their readers – or at least to a few kindred spirits – what they had to conceal from the censors.

Whether they were successful in this is open to question and, at any rate, falls outside our concern here. Suffice it to mention that, in prose as well as in poetry, Persian literature of the early 1970s digs in, moving its devices and bases of cognizance below the surface. Thirdly, there appeared in this period an abundance of "timely transplants," a treasure trove of translated literature from no fewer than forty cultures whose situation and concerns were judged by a growing consensus among Iranian intellectuals to be akin to those of Iran. Translated more because of their topical relevance to the actual native situation than because of any intrinsic artistic or literary value, these works enjoyed tremendous popularity in Iran during the early 1970s.[18] Finally, one founding member of the Writers' Association of Iran, 'Ali Asghar

Haj-Sayyed-Javadi, singlehandedly launched a daring crusade in defence of political and intellectual freedom in Iran. A noted journalist and fiction writer, Haj-Sayyed-Javadi, wrote and disseminated, within these half-dozen years, numerous letters to state authorities, constantly challenging official policies with reference to the country's constitution and the principles of human rights.[19]

Under these conditions, something akin to a cult of the *opposé* intellectual began to take shape, further complicating the web of relationships between writers and the state on the one hand, and between writers and the literary audience on the other. Naturally disillusioned with the monarchial regime, younger Iranian readers had glorified the writer as the champion of resistance and dissent whose pen was aimed directly at the heart of the common enemy. It is true that among the new generation of poets and writers, there were courageous individuals committed to radical political change, but the reality of the writers' capability for leadership certainly did not measure up to the popular image, and both writers and their audiences had to be reminded of this fact through the event that came to be known as the *Dah Shab*. The political establishment, on the other hand, had moved to prove its artistic vitality. A myriad of colourful official celebrations was held, ranging from the annual Shiraz Festival of the Arts to the Tus Festival, the Culture and Arts Festival, the Folklore Festival, and the like. In combination with the intensification of official government censorship, these instances of state patronage of the cause of literature and the arts gave birth to a phenomenon on the intellectual scene which Gholamhossein Sa'edi refers to as the pseudo-artist, and describes as a rootless, hollow, crafty, double-dealing, and mercantilist individual with great artistic or literary pretentions and little achievement and a social parasite disguised as an intellectual. "Clear the air," Sa'edi would demand, "and this lifeless octopus would no longer be able to breathe."[20]

As the second half of the decade unfolded, Iranian writers found the political stage set for another, more decisive effort to win state recognition and legal status for the Writers' Association of Iran. Of the complex of reasons – both domestic and foreign – behind the new situation two appear by far the most noteworthy. Domestically, by 1976, certain groups and individuals within the state itself were already demonstrating some concern about the decline of intellectual activity in Iran. In the course of that year, several universities held seminars to investigate the reasons behind the slackening book market. Such questions as "why don't Iranians read books?" or "why are so many translations on the market?" inevitably brought forth issues of

censorship and the author's rights. Time after time, the censors would be censured for their insensitivity, for shallowness and ineptitude in dealing with contemporary literature. Naturally, such probing could not go far before trespassing on permissible boundaries set by the state. Solutions proposed, formulated, and submitted to authorities ranged anywhere from relaxing censorship just a little bit to recruiting more and more educated inspectors to evaluate works submitted for permission. In its forward march against the writer, the state had reached an impasse of its own making.

Meanwhile, a far more significant development was taking place on the international political scene. The emergence of human rights as a central issue in the 1976 American presidential campaign, and the election of its champion to the presidency of a country without whose support the shah had little chance of survival, went a long way in galvanising Iranian writers into launching a fresh drive to turn their feelings of deep frustration and righteous wrath into positive social action. Clearly, an opportune moment was at hand to attempt to revivify the dormant Writers' Association of Iran.

Two months after the inauguration of President Carter, the resumption of the Association's activity within the framework of its original charter was being discussed as Iranian writers paid each other customary visits on the occasion of the Iranian New Year. In March 1977, before the Association could announce its re-emergence, signatures of some of its prominent members had appeared under several statements and open letters protesting about various aspects of the government's activities. Kazemieh and Beh'azin were the prime movers of the drive towards the reactivation of the Association. These and a growing number both of old members and others expressing an interest in the idea held meetings in private homes and began to debate the issue. Towards the end of spring a provisional Executive Board, consisting of Kazemieh, Beh'azin, Moghaddam-Maragheh'i, Kasra'i, and Tonekaboni, was elected. Over the summer months, the Board made a number of statements and wrote several open letters to Prime Minister Hoveyda and his successor Jamshid Amuzegar. Interestingly, all these initial statements and letters dealt with the Association's request for recognition or instances of official violence against peaceful protests and demonstrations demanding the observance of human rights in Iran. In them, Iranian writers made repeated references to the evidence of cultural decline and decadence which they believed had set in as a result of the state's cultural policies. Significantly, none contained any new objectives beyond reiterated references to the country's constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as the Association's original

charter of 1968. Obviously, the new Association acted on the assumption that it was simply pursuing its previous objectives, albeit with renewed vigour and in a more visible way.

It was at this time that the Iran-Germany Cultural Society in Tehran, known as the Goethe Institute, decided to host a series of poetry readings and speeches, an event which it had sponsored with less public attention during four of the six preceding years. When invitations were extended to a few members of the Association, a consensus was quickly reached that membership should participate only in the name – and as members – of the Writers' Association of Iran, and only if the Association were given the joint responsibility of hosting the event. After agreement was reached, the provisional Executive Board appointed Golshiri, Kazemiyeh, Parham, and Hezarkhani to a committee to make plans, solicit members, and oversee the conduct of the event which came to be known as *Dah Shab* (The Ten Nights), held in Tehran's Goethe Institute from 10 to 19 October 1977.

During these evening gatherings, a total of fifty-nine writers, poets, playwrights, critics, and translators addressed overflow crowds for close to fifty hours, at times arousing them to a peak of emotional communion unprecedented in recent Iranian history. A glance at the poems and speeches recited or delivered during *The Ten Nights*, as recorded in a book of the same title published by the Association in 1978, reveals the gradual unfolding of a startling event of tremendous cultural and social significance. From the carefully crafted words of the German director of the Goethe Institute, emphasising that society's tradition of hosting Iranian poets and writers and stressing the cultural nature of the event, to Shams Al-e Ahmad's evasive remark on the third night that since the institute's director had requested that the word censorship not be used, "I, therefore, will speak of 'Momayyezi' (a Persian word denoting the same concept)," to Sa'id Soltanpur's "greetings to you, broken by those black years, thirsters after freedom," to Parham's speech in which he read a listener's note bidding him utter the last word without further hesitation, and to Golshiri's closing request that the crowd leave the gathering peacefully so as not to provide the oppressors with a pretext to "uproot us before we can spread out our branches," one feels in the electrifying presence of a surging tide of social protest, about to sweep aside all pretension to a cultural gathering and ready to turn into the flood of social revolt. In this, at least, the event heralds the emergence of popular revolt against the monarchial state that manifested itself through the following year.

Its cultural and social significance aside, *The Ten Nights* phenomenon provides a basis for determining whether The Writers' Association of this

year was a new intellectual organisation going by an old name or was basically the same institution operating in a different social milieu. A comparison of the list of the fifty-nine individuals who took part in *Ten Nights* with the list of the forty-nine founding members of the Association shows that nineteen founding members participated in the Goethe Institute evenings. Al-e Ahmad had passed away in the meantime, several had exiled themselves from Iran, and a few, most notably Naderpur and Haj-Seyed-Javadi, had declined to participate in the latter event. These had been replaced by a few writers, well-known sympathisers of the Association in 1968 who had in the meantime moved to Tehran and were thus able to join the Association in 1977. However, the main body of the new members, over twenty, had in the meantime risen to public notice. Younger and generally more radical, these writers and poets were significantly the main object of the new audience's attention. As such, even though the executive organs of the new Writers' Association had remained in the hands of some old-timers, the new generation was assuming a more significant voice in the Association's affairs.

At any rate, *The Ten Nights* is beyond question the most significant group event in Iranian intellectual history and must be considered an early milestone in the Iranian Revolution. It not only provided an occasion for young literate Iranians to see and hear in person and for the first time those writers and poets who had for years remained wrapped in a reverential halo of intellectual opposition to a repressive regime, but, what is more, it dispelled much of the popular fear of assembly and peaceful demonstration of that opposition. And that opportunity was simply too precious to be missed. Soon invitations were extended by a growing number of emerging student organisations in various universities and colleges to Association members to read their works or otherwise address student gatherings. Several such assemblies turned violent, one particularly bloody incident leaving behind several dead and scores of wounded students.

The occasion was the third of a series of weekly student-sponsored events where each time a few writers and poets were to read their works. Sa'id Soltanpur was to speak and recite his poems to the students of Aryamehr Institute of Technology (now renamed Sharif University of Technology) on 15 November 1977. The police assumed control of the entrances, asking for student identity cards. When some were refused admission, students engaged the police and the speaker warned that, should police harassment continue, the audience would stage a sit-in and refuse to leave the gathering. The organisers then called Golshiri, Beh'azin, and Kasra'i, who appeared on the

scene and mediated between the audience and the police. When the students were leaving the lecture hall, however, a force of security agents in civilian clothes surrounded and beat them violently with clubs and chains. The event occasioned one of Haj-Seyed-Javadi's best-known letters, in which he condemned official violence as part of state policy aimed at stifling dissent.[21]

It was immediately after that incident that Beh'azin was once again arrested, and Homa Nateq and Ne'mat Mirzazadeh were taken to an empty lot in western Tehran by security agents disguised as taxi drivers and beaten unconscious. Following the efforts of Baraheni, Shamlu, and other Iranian exiles, cables were dispatched by Richard Howard, president of the American PEN Society, to President Carter and Iran's Prime Minister Amuzegar. Indeed, throughout this phase of the Association's activity, many European and American intellectuals, among them Jean-Paul Sartre, Louis Aragon, Simone de Beauvoir, and Arthur Miller, gave generous moral support to their Iranian colleagues in their struggle to win recognition and greater freedoms. In those few cases where Iranian authorities responded to pleas from international intellectual organisations, the uniform answer was that several legal artistic and literary societies which writers could join freely were active in Iran. As for the Writers' Association of Iran, Amuzegar claimed in one cable, "we know of no such organisation."[22]

On 7 January 1978, the Association wrote another letter to the prime minister where, in a playful reference to the "open political atmosphere" in the country under his leadership, it listed all the Association members who had been beaten by security agents in recent months as those who had benefited from the "striking advantages" of the new political climate. "Nevertheless," the letter concluded sarcastically, since the Iranian Constitution "regards the executive branch and the person of the prime minister as the ultimate authority responsible in the matter of … security, we hereby inform you that the Writers' Association of Iran will hold its General Assembly on Friday January 13 … We expect to have no disturbances from your security forces, whether in uniform or in civilian disguise."[23] The ironic, half-jocular tone of this letter and the fact that the Association simply announced its intention to conduct its business regardless of government harassment indicate that the writers, basking in the sunshine of public support, no longer seriously sought recognition from the state. This open letter is noteworthy in another respect, too. It carries ninety-eight signatures and the notation "on behalf of all the members of the Writers' Association of Iran." The Association's membership had not only grown substantially within two months, but no one could now hazard a body count of its members. In any case, such organisational details

do not seem to have mattered in the volatile political atmosphere of the last year of the Iranian monarchy. Nor did censorship seem to matter any longer. Floodgates were giving way one after another and a steady stream of suppressed works flowed into the bustling book market of Iran throughout the year 1978.

Still without any legal status or even a meeting place of its own, the Association had now grown into a fully fledged intellectual organisation with many irons in the fire. In March, a new Executive Board, composed of Feraydun Adamiyat, M.A. Beh'azin, Bagher Parham, Manuchehr Hezarkhani, and Fereydun Tonekaboni, was elected, and carried out the task of the previous one with renewed rigour and energy. Between March and December the board issued nearly fifty letters, some early ones addressed to the prime minister, but increasingly to, and in the name of, the people, with certain recurring themes: successive governments were accused of official disregard for the laws of the land, of tightening the screws of censorship in practice while paying lip service to liberty, of attempting to keep the people ignorant about the burgeoning movement against despotism, and of a host of other wrongdoings. In them, the democratic and revolutionary aspirations of the people are defended, and such actions as strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins, desertions, and other forms of sabotage are supported. Significantly, explicit reference to the Iranian constitution is gradually omitted from the pronouncements of the Association without any mention of the grounds for such an important omission, although the Association rarely missed am opportunity for another statement of support or solidarity, celebration or commemoration at every turn in those eventful months prior to the February insurgency.

On the other hand, in the one year that had elapsed since the revitalisation of the Association, unfavourable response to its activities and positions was not limited to that of the Iranian state. Two other social forces consistently and adamantly opposed the stance taken by the Writers' Association of Iran, particularly in its earlier statements demanding a return to constitutional rule. The first was the camp of religious revolutionists led by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini himself. In his famous 6 May 1978 interview with *Le Monde*, Khomeini referred to Iranian intellectuals and writers as "agents of the shah" and lackeys of the superpowers, and warned the faithful to steer clear of their influence. Later, he issued a religious proclamation addressed to university students in which he accused the country's intelligentsia of seeking only ministerial or parliamentary posts. "These writers," he said, "who have thus far neither taken a step nor done anything for Islam have now found, in the name of patriotism and love of freedom, an opportunity … have picked

up their pens and are hypocritically scribbling certain things."[24] The second, the Confederation of Iranian Students Abroad, had other reservations about a revived Writers' Association. "The roots of censorship in our country," it opined in October 1977, "lie in the compradore capitalist system … Given that, how can the Writers' Association of Iran combat censorship?" It is of course "the democratic right of writers to have an association of their own. The question is, what kind of an association? And what would its nature be?" Do these writers want, the article asked rhetorically, an association that would "embody the movement of the Golesorkhis, or … these individuals who … do not even have the right to speak about the likes of Golesorkhi and Daneshian because of their bourgeois liberal tendencies. It is, therefore, the duty of all democratic writers to reject this movement totally."[25]

From the summer of 1978, and particularly after the Black Friday (8 September 1978) massacre, the Association's statements and declarations began to appear in daily newspapers. Simultaneously, over a hundred previously censored literary works by its members appeared in print. These events, coupled with the Association's impressive record, gave it tremendous social clout and currency. When a Solidarity Week was held at Tehran University in the autumn, the first day was given over to the Association to address the students gathered on the campus. As strikes became widespread, strikers almost always sought, and often won, the support of the Association in the form of a speaker or a statement. Association speakers were as popular in this period as the clerical revolutionists, and as willing to address any opposition gathering. In their speeches they now emphasised the revolutionary and democratic aspirations of the people and called for an end to all forms of despotism. Naturally, they also made references to the emerging leadership of the revolutionary movement, although more as lip service than as expressions of genuine support for the clerical faction. The central thrust of the Association's demands, in other words, remained focused on cultural and intellectual concerns, while its circumference was broadening to embrace all spheres of national life, including the government's conduct of economic and foreign affairs. Thus it was that the Writers' Association of Iran rode the rising tide of the revolution towards a post-monarchial Iran.

With the Iranian Revolution as a fait accompli, the Writers' Association of Iran entered the most visible phase of its activity, stretching from March 1979 to June 1981. Soon after the February uprisings which brought the revolutionary government to power, it rented an office at 175 Moshtaq Street, one block south of the Tehran University campus, and began to hold weekly Tuesday afternoon meetings. In March, a group of the members

arranged for an audience with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, then residing in a semi-religious school called Madreseh-ye Refah in central Tehran. According to Bagher Parham, Esma'il Kho'i, and Nemat Mirzazedeh who were present at the meeting, Simin Daneshvar, the group's representative, began by congratulating the Ayatollah on his return from exile and his successful leadership of the Iranian revolution. She then recounted for him the history of the Association's opposition to, and struggle against, the monarchy, and concluded by pointing out the hopes of the country's writers and the position of the Writers' Association of Iran in connection with intellectual and artistic freedoms. In response, the revolutionary leader bade the writers follow the path of Islam, for, he said, Islam is the best protector anyone can wish for. As he would do on numerous other occasions, Khomeini thus conveniently circumvented the writers' plea for some sort of commitment to freedom of expression.

During these early months after the revolution, the Association's members were as active as before outside and much more active inside the organisation. Between February and April 1979, it elected a new Executive Board consisting of poet Ahmad Shamlu, Fiction-writer Gholamhossein Sa'edi, Essayist Bagher Parham, poet Esma'il Kho'i, and playwright Mohsen Yalfani, and issued scores of statements, open letters and expressions of support covering a whole range of national political and artistic issues. On 21 April the most significant document, and a cornerstone of the Association's activities in post-monarchial Iran, was approved by its General Assembly. Known as "The Position of the Writers' Association of Iran," this document contains a preamble and five numbered principles. The preamble cites articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and articles 8, 15, 18, 19, and 22 of the United Nations' International Treaty on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. To reiterate the continuity of intellectual struggles in Iran, the statement of position also makes reference to the Association's original statement of February 1968. It then adds: "and inspired by the democratic ideals of the Iranian revolution, aimed at safeguarding individual and civil liberties and at fostering cultural growth and enrichment of society, as well as strengthening the foundation of national unity by actualizing the potential cultural creativity of all the Iranian peoples," the Writers' Association of Iran declares the following principles as the foundation of its endeavours: (1) defence of freedom of thought and opinion for all individuals and ideological or ethnic groups without any exclusion or exception; (2) defence of freedom of expression, publication and dissemination of artistic, cultural, and philosophical works through all possible means; (3) opposition

to all forms of discrimination and cultural exploitation; (4) independence from all political groupings, parties, and organisations; and (5) co-operation with like-minded institutions and societies devoted to the cause of cultural and social liberties.[26]

Under the second principle it is stated that the Writers' Association of Iran opposes all forms of censorship, and demands that the revival of agencies of censorship in any form or shape, under any name or pretext, be outlawed. Other than this professional concern, the Association, as can be gleaned from this statement, had now engaged itself in a complex of social, ethnic, and cultural causes which would eventually undermine its effectiveness in the highly emotional climate of opinion in 1979 and the ensuing years. In June, the General Assembly met and approved the executive board's draft of a new charter. Compared with the original charter of 1968, the new one is far more inclusive, more detailed and more specific, reflecting the much broader concerns outlined in the Association's statement of position, on the one hand, and the requirements of a major intellectual organisation with impressive social clout and expanded membership, on the other.

The diversity caused by the sudden rise in membership was indeed a two-edged sword. Within a few months about 120 new individuals had joined the Writers' Association of Iran, causing a drop of about twelve years in the average age of the members. A majority of these younger members were activists of or sympathisers with the Feda'ian Guerrilla or the People's Mojahedin organisations; many had only recently been released from prison. Others, by no means an insignificant minority, consisted of Iranians educated abroad who had returned to Iran in the months immediately preceding or following the Iranian Revolution. Although little known as writers inside Iran, these two groups brought to the Association both their radical political leanings and a vigorous determination to express and debate their political views with a deeply felt sense of conviction, often in an emotion-packed tone. The third group, older writers and poets who had lived most of their lives in Iran and had earned themselves a literary reputation, naturally harboured a genuine feeling for Iranian society and an intuitive knowledge of its past, but was by and large less versed in political theory. All this made for lively exchanges in the new Writers' Association of Iran, now younger, more radical, and more politicised than ever before in its history.

The Association's public stance, as reflected in numerous documents issued within the first year of the Iranian Revolution, confirms the broadening scope of its concerns about all aspects of social and political life of the country. Apart from several open letters to such revolutionary and religious leaders

as Khomeini, Taleqani, Shari'atmadari, and Mehdi Bazargan, dozens of its statements touching upon various facets of the conduct of the revolution appeared in the many newspapers and periodicals which had sprung up in the "springtime of freedom." When women took to the streets for the first time to protest against restrictions on their dress and appearance, the Association issued a statement supporting their cause. When the government decided to move into Kurdistan to quell an emerging rebellion there, the Association, together with other professional unions and organisations such as the Lawyers' Association, the National Organisation of University Professors, the Teachers' Guild and the League of Iranian Journalists, began to plan a joint response. When the daily newspaper *Ayandegan* was suppressed, the Association issued a bitter protest. When groups of *hezbollahi* youths attacked print houses, bookshops, and the stalls set up along that stretch of Shahreza Avenue (now renamed Revolution Avenue) that faces the front façade of the campus of Tehran University, the Association issued another terse warning.

It was, however, in the Association's weekly meetings, when the members would come together in a loosely structured format to hear a colleague's speech or reading, or simply to discuss current affairs, that the earliest signs of factionalism began to appear. On one such occasion in July, a group of members submitted a request to the Executive Board to plan a series of poetry readings and speeches for the coming autumn, similar to *The Ten Nights* two years earlier. The Executive Board approved the notion and began to petition the Ministry of National Guidance (later renamed the Ministry of Islamic Guidance) for a suitable place and security arrangements for the projected event. The ministry referred the matter of security to the Ministry of the Interior which, after considerable foot-dragging, eventually declared that it could not guarantee the security of the gathering. Initially, Association members were unanimous in their support for the idea, but as plans for the event were put to discussion in a committee appointed by the Executive Board, several members, all Tudeh Party leaders, objected to the idea on the ground that the country's situation did not warrant such an undertaking. They had previously expressed their displeasure with the course and content of discussions in the Association's weekly gatherings on several occasions. They had been offended by certain members' characterisation of the government action in Kurdistan as an act of "occupation," for instance. They had submitted dissenting opinions concerning the Association's position vis-à-vis women's demonstrations and the suppression of *Ayandegan*. They had felt that the Executive Board's

statement in support of some leftist students who had staged a sit-in at the Ministry of Justice had been unjustified. They had complained time and again about the Association's alleged connections with certain political groups.

The opposition to the reading nights project, however, was much more serious and the effort in launching an orchestrated assault to foil the plan more calculated. Basically, those opposing the event argued that the social conditions which had prompted the event of *The Ten Nights* had now been reversed. A revolution had come to fruition, the people were in charge, a national anti-imperialist struggle was underway, and the country was moving towards the ideals of freedom and independence. They argued further that the revolution was under siege by an alliance of westernised liberals, the Bazargan Government, and other moderate groups opposed to the leadership of the revolution. As such, they concluded, a gathering of this nature would undermine the effort of the revolutionary leaders and was sure to be viewed as a counterrevolutionary act. Furthermore, it blatantly ran counter to the principles on which the Association ought to be based and the purposes for which it had been founded. What the Association should have done instead was to issue a pledge of allegiance to the revolution and its leadership and support it with all its might.

Such was not the view of the great majority of the members, who stressed that the Association was a free, democratic institution with no allegiances whatsoever. The ideals of the Iranian Revolution, to which the Association had committed itself, had not been realised as yet. This was not to say that the leadership of the revolution or the provisional revolutionary government was insensitive to intellectual and artistic aspirations. The Association, therefore, did not think that another series of literary events would in any way be construed as opposition to the Revolution or the government. The consideration that the revolution's leadership was supported by vast majorities of the Iranian people should not have meant that the Association would not be heard. The Association, in sum, wanted to proclaim by the mere fact of another gathering that the idea of freedom of expression included all and excluded none, and to accomplish that, it could do nothing better than stage another series of readings and address the people.

Throughout this internal debate, basic ideological orientations interfered, eventually overshadowing the significance of the event itself. As arguments and counterarguments dragged on and emotions ran higher and higher, compromise seemed ever less likely, and eventually external events of vastly greater import overtook all else. Towards the end of October, in response to the Association's repeated requests, the Ministry of the Interior announced

that it could not guarantee the security of the proposed reading nights. Within a few days the American Embassy in Tehran was seized and fifty-three Americans were taken hostage, Bazargan's government resigned in protest and a reshuffled Revolutionary Council took over the affairs of the country. A crisis of such magnitude obviously swept aside all discussions of the poetry reading plans inside the Association for a while. In the meantime, however, Tudeh Party members had taken the matter to their newspapers and journals and had begun to agitate against the executive board and increasingly against the Association itself. In response, acting on the basis of the provisions of the Association's charter, the board suspended five members: Beh'azin, Kasra'i, Ebtehaj, Tonekaboni and Borumand.

In a statement dated 14 November 1979, the Board declared:

> Simultaneous with the announcement of the response of the Ministry of the Interior, and four days before the previously agreed upon date of the event, a new wave of opposition, led by a five-member pressure group inside the Writers' Association of Iran, rose against us. Some of the key members of this groups were themselves members of the planning committee and had requested to make speeches and read their poems in the reading nights. However, in the wake of the Ministry of the Interior's opposition, and after they had failed in imposing their one-sided political views on the committee, they suddenly began their agitation.[27]

That in the same statement the Board found it necessary to pay homage to "the relentless wave of struggle against international imperialism, especially the bloodthirsty American imperialism, advancing in the country owing to the efforts of our dear students" points to the perils of excessive involvement by an intellectual organisation in the daily political affairs of a country in the midst of the flux and chaos embedded in a revolutionary situation. At any rate, many notes, memoranda, and letters were exchanged between the five suspended members and their supporters, on the one hand, and the Executive Board on the other, during the ensuing months until over two-thirds of the members who had witnessed the growing rift petitioned the Board for an extraordinary meeting of the General Assembly to resolve the crisis. On 2 January 1980, the General Assembly met and heard arguments from both sides on the causes and consequences of the factional war in the Writers' Association of Iran. After wrangling for about seven hours, the Assembly decided by a vote of 81 to 42 to expel the five suspended members.

After the purge, in light of the manner in which the crisis had been handled, together with the impressive support which the rank and file membership had expressed for the Executive Board, hopes remained that the Association could finally settle down to the task of preserving and protecting intellectual and artistic freedom in a revolutionary situation by fostering a climate of dialogue between Iranian writers and the society at large. Of the utmost significance in this regard was the publication of a journal that would reflect on a regular basis the views and concerns of the Writers' Association of Iran. For many months, *Ketab-e Jom'eh*, a social, cultural and literary weekly edited by poet Ahmad Shamlu had been serving as the unofficial organ of the Association, playing much the same role in this phase of the Association's activity as *Arash* had played some eleven years earlier under very different social conditions. Apart from that, the Association published the quarterly *Nameh-ye Kanun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran*, but events were moving at much too rapid a pace to be reflected within the pages of that journal. Finally, late in February 1980, *Andisheh-ye Azad*, the fortnightly journal of the Writers' Association of Iran, began to be published and ran for six issues before being banned because of its reporting of the clashes between university students and supporters of the so-called cultural revolution in April 1980. In spite of its short life of a little over three months, *Andisheh-ye Azad* provides the clearest view of the nature and character of the Association in this period, both in its outright political overtones in opposition to the state and the hectic pace of its internal life.

By this time, new clouds were darkening Iran's political horizon, however. The Islamic Republican Party, lionised by its successful manipulation of the masses of the people in its "anti-imperialistic" battle, was moving on all fronts to consolidate its position in the bureaucracy, the mass media, and the institutions of higher education. Even as Abolhassan Banisadr, Revolutionary Iran's first president, was being sworn in the clerical faction within the revolutionary coalition was mobilising its forces for a fresh assault on bookshops, print-houses, and university students. In an open letter to the newly elected president dated 5 February 1980, the Writers' Association of Iran complained of a new drive towards the restoration of censorship, particularly in the mass media. It warned that "censorship and repression constitute a real evil … which must be eradicated."[28] A little over a month later, groups of club-wielding *hezbollahis* attacked the campus of Tehran University and other colleges. Ostensibly protesting against the continuation of Western-style education and the fact that female students had as yet not been made to conform to Islamic standards of modest dress and appearance, they demanded that the universities be Islamised.

This was the latest and most serious in a succession of seemingly spontaneous, yet highly organised and well-orchestrated attacks on college campuses. In a toughly worded proclamation, the Revolutionary Council lent its support to what it called natural popular outrage at a misguided educational system, a legacy of the old regime. It then declared that all political groups must evacuate their campus offices within three days, and that on 5 June, after the end of the spring term, the universities would be closed to prepare the ground for "fundamental changes in the educational system, reorganization of the institutions of higher learning, and admission of students in accordance with new criteria" commensurate with Islamic precepts. The Writers' Association of Iran once again issued a statement of protest in which it expressed its dismay and shock at the Council's action and stated flatly, "Once again we are faced with a sweeping assault by the forces of reaction … whose objective is the eradication of the ideals of the Iranian Revolution and the … absolute domination of reactionary elements in all cultural and civic facets of Iranian society." It then cautioned all segments of society, particularly the academic community, to "take such encroachments seriously and spare no effort in salvaging the democratic achievements of the Iranian Revolution."[29]

Shortly after this, the Islamic Revolutionary Court of Tehran issued a decree stipulating that in order to print, offset, or mimeograph any book, booklet, periodical, journal, newspaper, pamphlet, tract, or any written statement, a print-house must first inspect the seal of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance on the paper on which the statement is written. "Censorship and repression govern all aspects of our social existence today," the Writers' Association wrote to president Bani-Sadr in a tone of desperation. It asked the president:

> Is it conceivable that all the struggles, sacrifices, and heroic fight of the Iranian people against the previous regime's repression and censorship should result in this situation? Did thousands of Iranians shed their blood in their struggle against tyranny to usher in a new form of oppression, harsher, more violent and more encompassing than the old one? … What do those who promised freedom and Islamic justice to Iranian people want to prove by such repressive measures? Is it their confusion and bewilderment at free thoughts and the awareness of the masses or the baselessness of their promises and their duplicity with the people?[30]

But events were moving in one direction only, and with staggering speed. The new Executive Board, installed in April 1980 and composed of Manuchehr Herzarkhani, Naser Pakdaman, Sa'id Soltanpur, Nasim Khaksar, and Ne'mat Mirzazadeh, was no more successful in its efforts to regain permission for *Andisheh-ye Azad* than it was in attempting to publish the Association's professional organ, *Nameh-ye Kanun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran*, on a regular basis and without government harassment. Two weeks after the publication of the 10 May open letter to President Bani-Sadr in *Ketab-e Jom'eh*, that periodical, too, had to buckle under mounting government harassment. The Association was thus being effectively silenced, isolated from the people it most needed to reach out to. Weekly meetings in effect constituted the only occasion on which to come together and discuss, in a manifestly muted tone, the issues facing the country, the intellectual community, and the beleaguered Writers' Association of Iran.

The story of the last year of the Association's active life in Revolutionary Iran can be quickly told. With the start of the war between Iran and Iraq in September 1980, the Writers' Association, now deprived of almost all its forums for communicating its views to the people, decided to launch a last-ditch effort for survival. It issued a statement condemning the Iraqi aggression and supporting the government's war efforts. The statement called for massive resistance to the aggressor and mass mobilisation for procurement of war equipment, and encouraged the Iranian Army to stand firm in Khuzestan Province, the country's most immediately affected region. It further called upon world public opinion, particularly the international intellectual community, to condemn the aggressor. The Association then collected donations for war victims and asked its members, especially those from the war-stricken areas, to travel to the region and bring back eyewitness accounts of the war situation. Finally, it devoted a special issue of *Nameh-ye Kanun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran* to the war with Iraq. The Association was desperately searching for some common denominator that could possibly save it from certain annihilation in the hands of the Islamic Republic without compromising the ideals and aspirations which it had come to symbolise.

For a while it seemed as though the fact of the war might provide a rallying point towards which both the writer and the state could channel their energies. The Association's efforts elicited no favourable response from the government. Even its views on the war were not reflected in society at large. In fact, by now most of the literate society of Iran was beginning to point a blaming finger at the intellectuals for the situation the country found

itself in. All this slowly but steadily exhausted the energies of the Association, so much so in fact that when Sa'id Soltanpur, now a member of its Executive Board, was arrested in April 1981 on the trumped up charge of smuggling foreign currency, the Association could not even publicise adequately the news of his arrest and incarceration.

All along, of course, the country's political situation was worsening steadily. In May 1981, the year-long rivalry between the two factions of the ruling order, one headed by President Bani-Sadr, the other directed by the Islamic Republic Party Secretary General Ayatollah Mohammad-Hossein Beheshti, came to a head. Shortly after the impeachment and ousting of Bani-Sadr, Islamic Revolutionary Guards raided and ransacked the office of the Association and seized all of its documents, including membership records, taped proceedings, and its library holdings. On 29 June 1981, two days after the explosion that took the lives of Beheshti and over one hundred other top officials of the Islamic Repulic, Sa'id Soltanpur was executed in Evin Prison. When the news of this event was broadcast over the Voice of the Islamic Republic, most of the active members of the Association thought it advisable to leave their homes and go into hiding. Pakdaman, Hezarkhani, Yalfani, Hesam, Nateq, Parviz Owsia, Mirzazadeh, Rusta, Nirumand, Khaksar, Kho'i and others did not surface again until they had crossed the country's borders into safety, many to end up in France.

Clearly, a chapter in the intellectual history of Iran was coming to an end. Throughout the summer of 1981, while bloody demonstrations were taking place in the streets of Tehran, the effort of the Writers' Association, now something of an underground organisation, was directed towards housing and hiding those members whose lives were thought to be in imminent danger, and to find ways and means to send them abroad. The last published statement of the Association, issued in July and entitled "Repression, Despotism, Strangulation," was surreptitiously published in a journal called *Bustan*, of which only one issue appeared in print.[31] Between September 1981 and August 1982 almost all members of the Association still in Iran had either been arrested or purged from their academic or other positions. In its clashes with the new theocracy, the Writers' Association of Iran had not only lost its dream of a better future, it had lost its *raison d'être*. Whereas the battle against the monarchial state had been mainly a political fight, the struggle against the Islamic state was uniquely existential. Defeated and drained, Association members were forced to choose between exile at home and migration abroad, between emotional and physical homelessness. Those who have stayed are trying hard not to allow the prison-house of the

world to close in upon them; those who have left are increasingly becoming aware of the need to open up new vistas of activity, new ways of making themselves heard.

Consequently, in Paris during the summer of 1982 efforts got under way to form a Writers' Association of Iran in exile, but given the objective facts of life in exile and the expatriate mentality plaguing this particular group of Iranian exiles, the effort has not met with much success, and at any rate falls beyond the scope of this essay. One thing will have to be said, however, before this account is brought to a close. No Iranian writer who lived through the 1978–1983 Revolution remained unaffected by the history of the Writers' Association or Iran. The Association's soul-searching over questions of national identity and cultural integrity, over limits of literature and politics, and over the nature of intellectualism in the national life of a third-world country, its doubts about the character and purpose of the Iranian Revolution itself, its initial joy and eventual despair, were all of immense importance both in and of themselves and as part of a bitter national experience.

CHAPTER 3

Authors and Authorities

Censorship and Literary Communication in the Islamic Republic of Iran

In attempting to understand the complex of variables that governs the often adversarial relationship between writers and the political power structure in any society at any given moment, we can begin by describing and analysing the laws and regulations that determine the characteristics of the activity commonly called censorship by chronicling actual instances of encounters between those who choose to exercise their right to free expression of opinion through writing and the state censorship apparatus, or by examining the impact of censorship on the strategies devised and implemented by writers, editors, and other individuals involved in the print process.[1] We will thus arrive at a study of the phenomenon of censorship on the sociological plane. Within the context of Iranian society in modern times, I have demonstrated this approach elsewhere.[2]

In this essay, I intend to tackle the problem from a different angle. I will first attempt briefly to conceptualise censorship as a ubiquitous social phenomenon whose shape, intensity, and consequences differ only in relation to the sociopolitical context. Next, I intend to explore the issue of censorship in the Islamic Republic of Iran in relation to the dynamics of literary signification and communication. This requires me to approach the issue in two different ways. Initially, I will list a few specific instances of ideological or political acts of censorship, each of which may serve to illustrate the form, function, and severity of prohibitive and punitive measures taken to restrict freedom of expression in the years following the revolution of 1978–1983. Finally, I will shift my focus to examine the manner in which literary communication may have been affected by the political power structure and the ways Iranian writers may have conceived and portrayed the activity of censors in their works in the same period. I do so in order to move towards an understanding of the relationship between literature and censorship on the aesthetic plane. What I hope to achieve by this shift of focus from the formal, factual, and legal to the interpretive, perceptual, and subjective viewpoint is a better appreciation of the intricacies of interpretive processes under

constantly changing sets of external constraints such as Iran has experienced in recent decades. The adoption of such an approach, I believe, constitutes a necessary aspect of any examination of so complex a social activity as that of social communication in many societies undergoing rapid change.

To demonstrate the contextual relationality of all the strategies and mechanisms involved in censorship let us try to imagine a situation of absolute censorship. One such attempt, with specific reference to censorship of the press, has been made by Christian Metz in his brilliant theoretical work, *The Imaginary Signifier*:

> If censorship of the press under a given political regime … were really absolute, no one would ever know it existed. It would not leave the term "Censored" (which would be an uncensored term) on the blanked out rectangle of the newspaper, obviously. Nor would it tolerate the blank itself as a blank, this would also be an uncensored mark of censorship. It would bring together the remaining lines and paragraphs till the empty space was filled, and nothing more could be got on the page. Moreover, it would take care that the end result of this "bringing together," this stretching out of convergent elements, should not be to make the text incomprehensible, since any manifestly incoherent, poorly articulated passage would again tell us that censorship was present, that it was therefore, uncensored.[3]

Leaving aside such social questions as those that determine the need felt by censors to conceal their acts of censorship or the issue of the censors' estimate of reader sophistication in detecting "coherence," the passage retains its significance for our purposes in illustrating the difficulties of detecting acts of censorship and, therefore, of describing and analysing it. Obviously, the passage depicts a purely hypothetical situation, an impossibility in the world of real writers and realistic censors. Something close to this, however, did happen a few years after the Iranian Revolution. Having violently quashed the intellectual resistance to its rule, the Islamic Republic of Iran saw itself confronted with the near total silence of the poets and writers whose presence on the scene was associated in the mind of a significant portion of the reading public with the climate of relative freedoms which prevailed in the years immediately preceding and following the events of 1979. An empty social space was emerging which the state did not see itself capable of filling. In the period between 1981 and 1984, after a number of Iranian writers and poets were executed, fled the country, or were otherwise reduced to silence, the silence (like Metz's notion of the blank on the page of a newspaper) became

meaningful in itself, indeed more significant by the standards of the state than what writers were thought of being able to communicate through their works.

As the Islamic state came to judge such a situation detrimental to its self-definition, a few independent journals – *Donya-ye Sokhan*, *Adineh*, *Kelk*, and most recently *Gardun*, come to mind most readily[4] – were allowed to publish, wherein the works of writers and poets associated with opposition to the state or otherwise perceived as not having been co-opted into the state ideology were permitted publication without prior censorship. By then, however, the intellectual community had sobered up to the reality of the violence of which a revolutionary Islamic state was capable. The resultant prudence was what officials would count on in allowing the voice of the opposition to be heard. The strategy seems to have worked, for Iranian intellectuals began to assimilate some essential components of the state ideology into their discourse. To begin with the most visible, Islamic formalities are observed regularly by these journals through such gestures as the printing of the all-important Islamic salutation, "Besmellah-er Rahman-er Rahim" (in the name of God the merciful, the compassionate), at their masthead or the ritual commemoration of the various religious and political occasions that mark the calendar of the Islamic Republic. More substantively, some of the traits of the ruling ideology are being popularised by individuals not associated with the Islamic republican state. Such traits as national chauvinism, anti-Western propaganda, and general xenophobic sentiments find expression in the pages of these and many other journals either through editorial intrusions or as part of the ongoing debate among the writers or in sundry other ways. Interestingly, today, every time such journals fail to appear on the expected day as a result of technical difficulties or shortage of paper and other print materials, the editors are quick to dispel the fear of suppression and censorship from the minds of their readers. Iranian writers seem to be wasting no time in moving towards some sort of accommodation with a religious state whose very thought appeared abhorrent to them only a few years before. In short, the community of secular intellectuals in Iran is in danger of losing its voice, either through transgression into forbidden territories of expression or by echoing the ideology in power, however unconsciously.

There is little doubt that the censorship of the Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the most comprehensive, most aggressive, and harshest systems of censorship that that country has experienced since the introduction of the printing press in the nineteenth century. The state exercises control

not only through the educational system, the bureaucracy, and the mass media but also by a variety of other overt and covert means. It not only metes out severe punishments for the publication of undesirable or offensive materials but also brings to bear a plethora of pre-emptive measures and devices as well. It attempts to cover all public spaces – city walls, the human body, the printed page – with messages propagating its ideology, so much so that little visible territory is left to oppositional expression. It exercises control not only through the print and publication processes and procedures but also has, for the first time in the history of the country, openly used state monopolies over the production and importation of paper and other essentials of the printing process to control public access to potentially subversive materials.

Censorship in Iran today goes far beyond the political content of a text under scrutiny to pry into its moral and philosophical premises as well as its social implications. It embraces not only all secular oppositional utterances but also a variety of differing interpretations of Islamic texts that are judged to deviate from the latest version of the ideology of the state, trying to substitute a unitary narrative of the Iranian Revolution for the still visible diversity of the political movement against monarchial despotism. An instance of the act of censorship aimed at creating an imaginary narrative for the revolution can be illustrated in the changes made in the words of a revolutionary song thematising the necessity of unity among all the political forces. When the song was first broadcast on the national television and radio in March 1979, its opening exhortation ran thus: "Ay Fada'i, Ay Mojahid, Ay Baradar!" (O Fada'i, O Mojahed, O Brother). Through juxtaposition, these words bring together the leftist tendency, whose main organisation was called the People's Fada'i Guerrilla Organisation (*sazeman-e cherikha-ye fada'i-ye khalq*), the Islamic socialists gathered in the Organisation of the Iranian People's Mojahedin (*sazeman-e mojahiedin-e khalq-e Iran*), and a variety of fundamentalist Islamic groups whose rank and file members addressed each other as "brother."

Sometime in the following year, as the Ayatollah Khomeini mounted his attacks on the leftists, the word fada'i was changed to the more generic and more abstract word mobarez (militant). The communist People's Fada'i Guerrilla Organisation was thus symbolically expelled from the revolutionary coalition. Two years later, as the clash between the Organisation of the Iranian People's Mojahedin and the ruling Islamic Republican Party was coming to a head, the second part of the address was also censored, giving its place to the word "brother." Eventually, the song's opening line was transformed to

"O Brother, O Brother, O Brother." On a symbolic plane parallel to that of political actions and occurrences, the story of this song, broadcast numerous times from the state-owned media, has come to symbolise the step-by-step but systematic annihilation of organised opposition groups by the Islamic Republican State.

The state even censors texts previously produced by its leaders, some of whom are still among the highest echelons of the Iranian officialdom.[5] I recall a televised instance of this, involving the broadcast of a speech by the late Ayatollah Beheshti, a prime leader and intellectual force behind the revolution in its early years. In the summer of 1983, I watched one of Beheshti's speeches being broadcast posthumously on television. As he spoke the words "Majles-e Showra" (the Consultative Assembly, or Iranian parliament), he seemed to approach the end of the phrase with languour before bringing it to a jerking end. Only after the sudden break in his voice and the accompanying snap of the image had been repeated a few times was I able to realise what was happening. The word "national" (melli), and the ezafah sound "ye" before it, had been cut out of the film. For those familiar with the state's decision sometime in 1981 silently to change the name of the country's legislative institution from the National Consultative Assembly (*majles-e showra-ye melli*) to the Islamic Consultative Assembly (*majles-e showra-ye eslami*), the act of censorship committed against one of the revolution's greatest leaders seemed perfectly natural. Like the rest of the country's top leadership, the deceased Ayatollah Beheshti had to comply with the latest policy of Islamicising the country's political culture, and the renaming of the parliament was only a small part of that campaign. In his case, however, since he could not have done it himself, the censors had to change the visual text of his televised speech.

I found the textual parallel years later. A few months after the country's first Experts' Assembly (the equivalent of the Founders' Assembly in the Monarchial Constitution) had ratified the original text of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the members of the Guardians' Assembly had gone to see the Ayatollah Khomeini. The text of the negotiations reflects the debate on the parliament's name change in this way:

> At this point one of the theologians of the Guardians Assembly mentioned the name change in regard to the Consultative Assembly. The Imam said that this was not a name change because no article had been ratified. Rather, just now the Majles wishes to choose a name for itself. How many more times shall I tell you not to be afraid of all this talk …?[6]

From then on, without further debate or explanation, the phrase National Consultative Assembly was replaced by Islamic Consultative Assembly. The change is reflected in all the texts of all the Constitutions published since, as well as in all official speeches, proclamations, and pronouncements which have been published subsequently to that date, even when the text may have originated before the official changeover.

On the positive side, the Islamic Republic has devised a variety of ways to propagate definitive readings of Iran's literary heritage, an object of contestation between the clerics and the secular intelligentsia throughout the country's modern history. Whatever its other uses, the publication of the late Ayatollah Khomeini's ghazals must be seen ultimately as an attempt to force a determinate religious reading on the entire tradition of lyrical poetry in the Persian language. To have the name of a supreme religious leader on poems that, superficially at least, resemble the ghazals of Hafez is tantamount to an appropriation of that tradition's discourse as the expression of religious sentiment.[7] From there it is only one step to declaring all secular readings of such poets as Hafez not only as ill-conceived and invalid but also, more consequentially, as deviant, a sure sign of sacrilege. The chain of inference leads directly through the publication of articles in state-run newspapers to prohibitions of all literary research, however scholarly, which tends to cast doubt on the religiosity of the great thinkers of the past by branding anyone who may have dared to propose such sacrilege as an apostate. And thus it is that the discourse of power speaks through such seemingly innocent acts as an old ascetic despot writing mystical lyrics in the style of the classical lyrical poetry.

It is important to note, however, that such radical reinterpretations are possible only where no stable view of the past – literary, political, or otherwise – has been allowed to rise to the level of national consensus. Under conditions of constant fluidity in social interactions, concentrating on the interpretive processes at work at any given moment may allow us to arrive at a stable locus of perception. To come to know something of the process by which censors arrive at a judgment about the texts which they have been given the authority to judge as suitable or unsuitable, or of the way contemporary Iranian writers may view their social adversary – the censors – may eventually lead to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of cultural communication that make possible seemingly contradictory accounts of a single event such as a political revolution or irreconcilable, even contradictory, readings of a single text in a rather stable literary discourse, such as that of the ghazal. It may, moreover, tell us something of significance about the expressive

strategies we encounter in the literature of certain societies and ultimately about the privileged position that "literature" has always occupied in certain cultures.

An early indication of the attempt to forge a new condition of signification and interpretation emerges in a remarkable document published in the sixth and last issue of the Journal of the Writers' and Artists' Council of Iran (*Nameh-ye Showra-ye Nevisandegan va Honarmandan-e Iran*), a quarterly journal of literature and the arts that brought together the intellectual members of or sympathisers with the Tudeh Party of Iran just before that party was suppressed in 1982. The document consists of a series of four letters exchanged between Gholamhossein Matin, a minor poet, and an unnamed "cultural advisor" to Ali Khamene'i, the third president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the first letter, the poet is responding to a complaint by the state president in a televised speech that the poets of the country have failed to celebrate the momentous events of the revolution in their work. Enclosing a poem of his own on the martyrdom of a "comrade" (*rafiq*) in the Iran-Iraq war, the poet states that he and his comrades (presumably of the party) have always supported the revolution even in the most perilous of times, but are now being ignored in favour of a new breed of poets (sha'eran-e now'-e jadid) who have emerged recently in the safe climate of post-revolutionary times. He adds:

> Mr. President! We are not silent, although some make it seem as if we are. No event has befallen this oppressed nation, but that you will find its reflection in our poems. We are writing poetry actively, on the revolution, on the Imam, on the war, on the unprecedented bravery of the armed forces defending the revolution. And we send them to the press, but they do not publish them. How painful it is for a poet to sing of his nation, his country, and his religion, only to see that his voice has failed to reach the ears of his society. This is the part of which you are unaware.[8]

The poet emphasises that even though he and his comrades may be followers of a different ideology (*degar-andish*), they are still Muslims, "for our Islam is not a dried-up and empty creed. Rather, it is our nationality, our culture, the engine of our revolution." He then complains that "the revolutionary brothers" do not reciprocate the feelings that he and his comrades hold towards them, that they isolate and discourage them in various ways and under different pretexts.

The response to this letter, which opens with a disclaimer – "This is not an analysis and criticism of your poem" – consists essentially of the cultural

advisor's reading of the commemorative poem which the poet had enclosed. This reading is highly relevant to our concern here in that it goes to the heart of the problem of literary communication in the midst of discursive flux. In the poem entitled "Springtime of Victory" 'you' have addressed the "martyr" in this way:

> Razm-e to ra edameh deham ta sepideh-dama an zaman keh sobh shavad in shab-e siah.[9]
>
> (I shall continue your battle until the dawn until the moment when this black night would turn into morning.)

Which "morning" and which "black night"? Even as the masses in their millions feel the presence of the dawn of a bloody revolution and see the rising of auroral arches, their poet sings of "this black night!" What can be expected of the people who differ so greatly in political outlook from the poets of their time? What response would the presentation of such a poem provoke?[10]

The official then reminds the poet that, of course, "seeking refuge in allusions and metaphors" is a vestige of periods of repression and asks the poet how he would respond if the people questioned him about what he means when in his poem he speaks of "all the beasts and snares that await our Iran." Next, the official moves from specific meanings attached to conventional tropes such as night and day, darkness and light, and sleep and wakefulness to the social function of poetry in revolutionary times. He asserts that these days poetry is sung and read in the trenches and asks the poet how he would feel if a revolutionary guard who has "pierced the chest of the night ruling over his land with a shower of bullets and has seen the blood of his trench-mate (hamsangar) paint the canvas of the dawn in red" should chance upon a line of verse which speaks of "this black night" and ask himself "which black night?" Or if, after a nocturnal incantation of the name of God, that same revolutionary guard should, on his way back to his trench under a barrage of enemy fire, hear that line broadcast from the radio? And what would he say if he should see the following line printed in the newspaper which at times he uses as a tablecloth to break his fast: "Now, although the garden is in ruins, ravaged by autumn …"? The official concludes:

> No, Mr. Matin! The people's poet must learn that in the minds of the people the war, the economic blockade, the machinations of foreign enemies and

> the plots of domestic mischief-makers and hypocrites are not ruination and the trampling of autumn, because in the people's beliefs the spring has arrived, and there is a difference between the autumn and the plundering hand that is stretched to pick the rose in springtime.[11]

In the second round of correspondence, the poet attempts to dispel fears of any ill-intended allusions to the present state. Soliciting the aid of various events such as the American attempt to rescue the hostages in April 1980, the fall of President Banisadr a year later, and the bombings of the Islamic Republican Party headquarters and the Prime Minister's office shortly afterwards, he stresses that what he meant by "wild beasts and snares," far from referring to the state, refers to its enemies. "Are not the criminal Imperialists," he asks, "headed by the criminal America, its puppet the traitor Saddam, the forces of domestic and foreign reaction, etc., etc., beasts, snares, and scourges?" The poet closes his letter by asking that he and his comrades be permitted to visit the war front so that they may be able to experience war first-hand and record it in their poems.

The letter that follows attempts to minimise the significance of the poet and the social group to which he belongs, as well as the kinds of activities Iranian intellectuals pursue. It challenges the poet and his comrades to find out why, even on cold winter nights, prayer gatherings are attended by hundreds of thousands of people and why such gatherings are so much warmer than "all the evenings of poetry reading given or to be given by all the poets." The letter ends on another noteworthy observation concerning the relationship between poetry and its audience:

> Any time they open the windows of their rooms, poets can receive an impression of the people's concerns from their daily slogans. These days "poetry" knocks on the poets' doors by itself. Poets should be grateful, and admit such a blessing into their lives.[12]

Several avenues of inquiry concerning the relationship between authors and political authorities find their focus in this correspondence. Most relevant to our concern here is first to examine the manner in which the Iranian president's cultural advisor reads the poet's allusions to such dichotomous, mutually exclusive entities as night and day, autumn and spring, beasts and humans. In such cases, the poet tries to redirect the official's attention away from an unfavourable reading and towards a favourable one. The official shrewdly foresees the poet's defence strategy and rejects it. However, his own

favoured way, that the country's enemies ought properly to be described as the plunderers of the garden's vernal beauty rather than the ruination of the autumn, fails to break the dichotomy. Because "in people's belief springtime has arrived," the official argues, poets should cease using the imagery of prerevolutionary times. The imagery that he would like to see in the era of the Islamic Republic would acknowledge the arrival of spring, depicting the enemies of the state as demons and monsters who work towards bringing back the night or likening them to the hand of a thief trying to steal a rose from the joyful garden of the present time. As adept as the poet in the conventional imagery of classical and contemporary poetry of the country, the advisor attempts to change it in such a way as to make it reflect his own ideology.

Second, even though the difference articulated in the two images of autumnal ruination and the rose-plucking hand at springtime signals opposing attitudes towards society, they bespeak a shared notion of poetic communication. Whether one laments the ruination of the garden in autumn or the presence of the hand ready to snatch the rose from the garden, one is still continuing the discourse of seasonal change which portrayed the impression poets sought to convey in the decades preceding the revolution. The poet and the presidential advisor share in a poetic heritage which, for generations, had thematised social change in terms of temporal shifts between day and night, spring and autumn, and the like. Consequently, the alternative imagery prescribed by the advisor, while acknowledging the arrival of the desired springtime, does not deliver the cultural activity of writing poetry from its discursive practice of conceiving social situations in terms of ontological opposites.

Finally, the possibility of designating two contrasting signifiers for the sign that is "autumnal ruination" or "beasts and snares" does not alter the structure within which the two ontological entities of good and evil are constructed. In both cases, textual entities point beyond the text to the social context for the status of their meaning in the poem. In both, there is no determinate concept in the two sets of images proposed to clarify the text's state of being. It is the interaction between the text and the ideological space surrounding it that determines the meaning of individual allusions and ultimately that of the text.

The concern expressed by the cultural advisor with regard to the poem's effect on the people is also relevant to the question of social communication through literature. How would the soldier in the trench feel if he should hear or read the lines composed by the poet? Being a firm believer in the

Islamic Republic, the soldier would naturally feel very disappointed, for he had thought that the spring has arrived indeed, that such problems as the war and the economic blockade are to be seen not as evidence that he still has to struggle to make his ideal a reality but as a means to protect the reality that was and is his ideal. At least that is how the state, in the person of the presidential advisor, would like him to think. To speak of the reaction of the soldier in the trench is to offer a definition of him and, through him, of an entire society of such soldiers and defenders of the revolution. This in turn is no less an achievement than the assignment of other possible categories of ideology to the realm of the non-existent. Just as in more overt acts of censorship walls are whitewashed and words are altered, here, too, differences are covered up in the service of a supposed unity that, because it exists in the mind of the authority, is articulated as having real presence in the phenomenal world.

The important thing that emerges in this regard from the letters exchanged between the poet and the official is that the poet does not counter the official's account of the soldier's state of mind. For him, the official typology of the soldier in the trench is both real and valid. It is the sheer presence of a definitive political ideology, rather than the nature and direction of that ideology, which makes it necessary to impose a non-existent unity on group identities like the soldier or, more generally, the people. It is here that the battle over words and their meanings, images, and referents can best be seen as ultimately a battle over the hearts and minds of an eternally contested entity called "the people."

In a fundamental way, the success of the Iranian Revolution depended in large measure on the success of the oppositional discourse in branding the state in opposition to "the people." Having risen to power in the name of the Iranian people, the new state was obviously keen on linking its practices to the will of the people. The whole future of the state would depend on the success or failure of the state to accomplish that, for its claim to legitimacy was constantly being challenged. Within the context of the texts and ideologies involved here, the poet is seen as desirous of portraying the Iranian Revolution as a stage in a process which has begun, but is yet to reach its culmination. While confirming his faith in the possibility of revolutionary change, the event of a religiously motivated political revolution nonetheless does not conform to his notion of the ultimate socialist victory. He reflects this in his poem through such images as the ruined and ravaged garden awaiting the arrival of spring, the presence of wild beasts and snares in the midst of human society. Rhetorically, the official's letter makes as much use

of poetic devices as the poem it addresses. Both texts use the indeterminacies of poetic speech to press their points of view. In so doing, they both strive to find terms of discourse for the creation and communication of political ideas through poetry.

To speak of the instabilities and indeterminacies of poetic speech, however, is neither to imply that interpretation is anarchical nor to claim equal validity at all times for any number of diverse readings of a single text. It is, rather, to reiterate the sociality of literature by pointing out the fact that under certain social conditions such texts as poems and fictional stories achieve a new and heightened degree of indeterminacy and instability, thus turning into entities whose meanings are determined not with reference to any textual evidence but based on contextual proclivities and ideological motivations. When a set of unwritten codes of communicative conduct between authors and authorities is perceived by one or both parties to have altered as a result of such sociopolitical events as a revolution, formerly fixed meanings are once again made subject to negotiation and contestation, new claims and disclaimers are exchanged between the parties, and attempts are made to forge new relationships out of old ones. The specific shape and direction that such an activity takes in actual social practice is ultimately bound not only with the structure of the ideologies involved but also with a variety of external and self-imposed constraints.

Given that, how is it possible for a writer to arrive at a fairly reliable notion of the criteria that censors bring to bear in the process of separating the permissible from the illicit? In the absence of laws and regulations clearly understood by all parties, the attempt to answer this question is, of course, often fraught with tragic consequences. Fully to comprehend the intricacies involved in such an activity in the case of Iranian society, however, we must take a step backwards and contemplate the sets of relationships that governed the transactions between the writer, the censor, and the general reader in the decades before the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the effects of those interactions on the hermeneutic process. Roughly from the middle of the decade of the 1950s, we witness the emergence and gradual evolution of an oppositional aesthetic discourse dependent largely on such devices as equivocation, ambiguity, and double meaning – strategies of considerable communicative power throughout the history of Persian literature. As this system of communicative strategies developed, Iranian authors of the period began to add new and increasingly subtle devices to the traditional canon, thus, on the one hand, enhancing the communicative power of literary texts and, on the other, giving rise to novel possibilities of interpretation beyond

the literal or traditional capacities of the text. That a certain poem depicting a garden in autumn or recounting the difficulties of finding one's path on a dark night could come to mean something political to a generality of its readers was due to the communicative strategies invented or utilised by Iranian poets of the 1960s and 1970s.

At the same time, these same writers were able, in their encounters with the censorship of the monarchical state, to maintain that a certain poem or story was only the account of a real, literal experience and not an allegory of political repression. The posture thus maintained was at once naïve and effective. While the poem lived a life of its own as an allegory of the repression and gloom that governed society, the writer could, when necessary, defend it as no more than the expression of a personal experience with no sociopolitical significance whatsoever. At times, the same writers who complained vociferously that censors subjected their works to over-interpretation because of an allegorising tendency in the reading community simultaneously dropped hints about possible political meanings read into their latest collection of prose fiction or poetry. This code of communicative conduct among writers, readers, and censors enabled Iranian authors to communicate their ideas without provoking unnecessary confrontation with authorities. To the censor, the authors' very acceptance of this encoding conduct would perhaps be seen as sufficient to signify deference to political authority. Thus, a kind of modus vivendi had been found which not only made literary life possible but also allowed writing to flourish.

What had thus been formalised socio-politically through a series of bureaucratic procedures, aesthetically led to a condition of writing and reading, agreed upon by the writing and reading community as well as by the state, that ensured the orderly articulation of dissent through writing. Of course, there were still unwritten rules that both sides assumed or violated as to how far a writer could go in explicitly addressing contentious political issues of the day, how he or she could encode his or her opinions so that his or her work would not be banned, and so on. Nevertheless, writers had learned in general terms to make constructive use of the myths and metaphors of the tradition, the nodal points of language, and the rather universal analogues that relate the phenomenal world to human emotions in such a way as to allow both literal and allegorical readings. For its part, the state had ensured the survival of the notion of literature as a privileged form of communication while restricting the accessibility of the message to an elite which it perceived as incapable of effecting change without the co-optation of the masses who had remained separate from the writing community by

such things as widespread illiteracy, inadequate interpretive skills, or general lack of familiarity with the new modes of signification.

As the agreement between authors and authorities moved steadily towards greater stability, literary meaning was being perceived more and more as residing in the text rather than in its social context. The greater the clarity of the social contract the more natural the movement in the literature towards a universally agreed upon fixation of meaning. As certain signifiers came to be ingrained in the minds of a generation of readers with certain sorts of signifieds, as words recalled concepts automatically and unconsciously, more and more meanings were seen as present in the words themselves. In this way, an intersubjective literary code emerged which, if not desirable, was at least acceptable to state authorities. In the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, the monarchical state's censorship apparatus, on the one hand, and Iranian writers, on the other, became participants in the creation of a commonly understood, mutually acceptable oppositional artistic discourse which allowed the latter to encode their messages in such a way as to be judged inoffensive by the state and decipherable (given the social circumstance) by the reader. When the cultural advisor to the third president of the Islamic Republic speaks of allusions and allegories being a survival of regimes of oppression and censorship, that is precisely what he is referring to. Similarly, when poets use images like autumnal ruination or speak of the presence of demons and monsters, they are trying to apply the poetic speech current in the years before the Iranian Revolution to the situation at hand.

This arrangement broke down as a result of the Iranian Revolution. Iranian writers of diverse secular tendencies brought to their post-revolution writing activity both their expertise in oblique communication through literature and their desire to rise above such obliqueness and create a literature unencumbered by such constraints. Naturally, they attributed the obliqueness of their idiom to the presence of a regime of censorship and repression. The most obvious manifestation of their desire to deliver their creativity from such external constraints can be seen in the repeated attempts of the Writers' Association of Iran, the country's main institution for intellectual and imaginative activity between 1978 and 1981, to persuade various governments to commit themselves to the principle of freedom of expression.[13]

However, this meant that a new kind of social pact had to be negotiated between authors and authorities of the Islamic Republic, one that would recognise the presence of a new social reality and work towards the creation of a new environment for social interaction of all kinds. The outcome would determine the nature of the relationship between the intellectual community

and the state authorities in post-revolution Iran. But this failed to materialise, and writers were gradually subjected to a regime of censorship far harsher and more powerful than possible under the previous state. In response, they began once again to fall back on the resources they had accumulated during the monarchical regime of censorship. The entire interaction between the poet and the cultural advisor I have depicted above can be explained in light of the poet's inevitable refuge in a kind of discourse which he has learned in the climate of communication before the Revolution.

Iranian writers have made extensive use of such strategies in the past decade or so. For my purposes, however, I will cite a few examples of the use of what has come to be known, in its specific application to Russian and East European literatures, as the Aesopian Language – that is, the deliberate installation in a literary text of the possibility of multiple interpretations.[14] Fortunately for the writers forced to resort to such systems of expression, Persian language and folklore have a tremendous reserve of myths and metaphors, figures, and fables which contemporary writers can put to their own service. As such, if it is not possible to speak of the clerical establishment as initially having portrayed itself as subject to the injustice of the previous regime while subsequently presiding over far worse injustice, one can resort to the figure of the *Davalpa*, an ogreish creature in Persian folklore. Literally meaning a creature with belt-like feet, the *Davalpa* is believed to appear to lone walkers in the desert at midnight in the guise of an old man. Feigning feebleness, it asks the passer-by to give him a ride on his back for a short distance. If he is foolish enough to agree to this request, the passer-by will soon find himself tied in the belt of the creature's feet, with no way to save himself. One can therefore tell the story of the Iranian Revolution in a parable that pretends to no status other than a modern retelling of an old folk tale. Similarly, if it is not prudent to speak explicitly of a revolutionary leader turning his back on the movement that has brought him to power, one might tell the story of an unfaithful man who, after taking a second wife named Qodrat Khanom (lady power), betrays his previously established household. And if one cannot express the opinion that the new state is alien to what one considers the spirit of the native culture, one might wrap one's statement in the Marquezian allegory of a plant imported from a foreign land that a naïve protagonist has innocently nurtured in his study only to end up watching helplessly as it devours his whole collection of treasured books.

Viewed from a perspective which appreciates the powers of equivocation, the censor who allows such works to pass through is not necessarily unversed in "reading between the lines," so to speak, much as writers might like to

believe this to be the case. Conscientious, astute, and insightful as such censors may be, they simply provide pragmatic affirmation of a basic rule in the theory of literary communication, namely, the impossibility of complete purgation of language from indeterminacies, equivocations, and double meanings. The line of censorship, far from resembling an iron curtain, an impenetrable wall, or a solid dam, comes in reality to resemble a transparent curtain, a wall riddled with holes, or a makeshift sluice where water gets through one way or another.

If in the above I have confined myself to a general discussion of the allegorising tendency under conditions of censorship and suppression in the Islamic Republic of Iran, this has been deliberate. Inasmuch as the simple fact of the existence of censorship in Iran today is common knowledge, one can discuss the general outline of the structures and mechanisms that govern the phenomenon as well as the broad strategies and mechanisms that enable writers to fulfill their mission even under the most adverse of circumstances. At the same time, I feel I must refrain from imprudently delving into particular works or individual writers. I have tried to resist the temptation to cite specific cases since they, however illustrative or revealing, may touch on the activities of individuals who are rightly concerned about their lives as well as the mission they feel they have to fulfill as writers and intellectuals. Instead, I have confined myself to instances and examples that do not tread upon individual works and writers even though they may be far less dramatic or demonstrative. The phenomenon itself is worth considering as a constraint constantly felt by researchers who make it their concern to tackle the issue of censorship under current conditions of power and creativity. My perception of the severity of state censorship in Iran and my fear for the consequences my writing may have for individual Iranian writers, books, or journals limit my choice of topics and instances through which to carry forth my argument. The censorship in Iran has specific implications for the activity I am involved in even as I live and write half a world away.

As I have done in my previous references to specific writers and texts, in what follows I have selected a literary text which, while enabling me to make this general sketch of the dynamics of censorship in Iran more specific, does not present a danger to anyone because its author, the late Gholamhossein Saʿedi, is no longer with us. In one of his last works, a play entitled *Othello in Wonderland*, Saʿedi presents a wonderfully lucid image of censorship at work in post-revolution Iranian society.[15] Because he wrote the play in exile[16] Saʿedi succeeds in presenting an uncensored image of one Iranian writer's perception of the censors of the Islamic Republic. The

play thematises the difficulties of staging a dramatic performance in an Islamic setting. A theatrical group, having decided to stage Shakespeare's "Othello," has submitted the work to the censorship of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance (*Vezarat-e Ershad-e Eslami*), one of the state institutions overseeing the dissemination of ideas through literature. The would-be director firmly believes that he can communicate the message of the play within whatever constraints the state ideology might impose on its production and staging. A trio of censors, consisting of the minister and two experts, arrive at a rehearsal to review the results.

Predictably, the effort leads nowhere, ending symbolically in an unresolved confrontation between the actor playing the part of Othello and the person of the minister, the ultimate censor in the play's depiction of state authorities. What the play communicates above all is the fundamental ontological incompatibility of the state ideology with theatre as an art form. In the process, the play simulates in caricature certain moral issues, political problems, and artistic attitudes that most concern a religiously motivated system of censorship as it confronts imaginative texts. Unable to distinguish between the play's characters and the actors and actresses playing their parts, the revolutionary guard accompanying the censors makes the latter submit to a breath test every time one of them utters a word which might make him or her suspected of having drunk alcoholic beverages. In strict adherence to the injunctions of the Islamic Republic against the intermingling of the sexes, the actress playing Bianca is made to marry Casio on the spot to prevent contact between persons of opposite sex without religious sanction. And finally, after much wrangling, all the actresses are required to wrap themselves in attire deemed by the state to be appropriate for women as they appear in society.

In matters of principle, when the minister of Islamic Guidance is asked to issue his general guidelines concerning theatrical productions, he offers a ludicrously convoluted statement about the necessity of Islamising drama in the same way as other aspects of life are being transformed. According to the minister's logic, because the Islamic theatre, like the Islamic Revolution itself, must be exported to the rest of the world, every theatrical enactment viewed by the public must include three basic character types: namely, a revolutionary protagonist, a counterrevolutionary (or an infidel, or, best, a hypocrite, a term referring to a member of the Islamic Socialist Organization named the Mujahidin) antagonist, and a repentant (*tavvab*) or reformed former counterrevolutionary who would mend his ways as a result of the guidance administered by "the brothers," meaning the followers of

Ayatollah Khomeini. In his zeal to satisfy these demands, the director introduces Othello, Iago, and Casio as the players respectively fulfilling those requirements. By the time the censors are satisfied, the entire play, as well as its playwright, have been integrated into the Islamic culture of the Iranian state. Thus, Othello becomes a Moroccan whose roots go back to Iranian Azarbaijan and whose real name is found to have been Atoqlu, Emilia is renamed in Arabic as Um Layla, and Shakespeare himself turns out to have been Shaykh Zobayr, an illustrious Muslim writer whose true identity has been falsified by infidel Westerners as part of an international conspiracy to deny Muslims their true cultural heritage.

The play reaches the height of its communicative power in the matter of our concern here when one of the "experts" likens the act of altering the play to make it conform to Islamic cultural criteria to a doctor's efforts to restore health to an ailing body. Just as in olden days a sample of the patient's urine was taken to the doctor so that, judging by its colour, odour, and texture, the latter might diagnose the illness, so must the authorities of the Islamic government attempt to diagnose the illness which has come to afflict the Iranian intellectual community. Just as doctors in olden days prescribed "red sugar" enemas in an attempt to help the patient regain health, the authorities must inject new principles into the minds of Iranian artists to help them correct their attitudes and consequently regain their rightful place in Islamic society. The actors, Othello in particular, take the remark literally, thinking that they are about to be subjected to the indignity of an enema. When they protest by their nervous laughter, Professor Khorush, the "expert" who has proposed the analogy, explains himself:

> No, Mr. Othello. Please pay attention to the allegoric revolutionary aspect of this comparison. We take the urine sample to find out whether our artists may be royalists (*taghuti*), hypocrites (*monafeq*), or communists. This is most definitely not censorship. This is a doctor-like act; we must take the urine sample. As for red sugar, a substance which in old medical texts has been described as full of beneficial qualities, it reduces the fever, restores spiritual rigour, and leads to a healthy attitude towards, and an everlasting faith in, our republic. And red sugar enema here means political and ideological guidance, for if we are to stand firm against international oppression and resist the hegemony of the East and the West, there is no other way. And as in other spheres, in the case of the dramatic arts, too, this is an obligatory procedure, or, in other words, compulsory.[17]

The medical analogy for the act of censorship is ancient indeed, and the authorities and supporters of the Islamic Republic have made extensive use of it. On several occasions, Ayatollah Khomeini had himself spoken of the widespread executions of political dissidents as surgical action aimed at the removal of cancerous cells from the body of society, and a leftist apologist of the Islamic Republic had likened bad art to holding harmful drugs under innocent people's noses.[18] Apart from that, what is most striking in the passage is the rather novel idea of the inability of the artists, in this case the play's director, actors, and actresses, to distinguish the metaphorical from the literal. Whereas by the analogies of a urine sample and an enema the censors mean the process of purging undesirable qualities, replacing them with desirable ones, the actors and actresses take them literally. Iranian intellectuals, adept in the use of oblique allusions and assignment of metaphorical meanings to the widest variety of words, are portrayed here as incapable of grasping from the analogies of the urine sample and the enema the notion of being subjected to a process by which they must first shed their undesirable characteristics and then be filled with what qualities the new state considers salient in artists.[19]

The expert's words signify the possibility of misinterpretation in adversarial situations as much as the reality of censorship, so much so that the minister has to reiterate again that he has not brought any of the medical tools necessary for taking the artists' urine or for administering an enema. "And these gentlemen, too," he goes on, pointing to the other two experts, "have nothing in their briefcases other than books of guidance."[20] What the scene ultimately communicates is the superior expertise of these particular censors in constructing double meanings through linguistic manipulation in contexts which remain forever ambiguous, open to literal as well as metaphorical interpretation. This superiority in turn achieves its full meaning when we compare the historical experience of modern Iranian intellectuals as creators of new literary texts as well as interpreters of old ones with that of the traditional religious leaders. Before the secular writer became a significant social force in the past century, for almost a millennium the activity of text creation and text interpretation was almost exclusively the province of a social elite whose education and experience anchored it deeply in the religious culture of medieval Iran.

Farcical as Sa'edi's portrayal of the processes and purposes of religious censorship may be, it nonetheless points out an important aspect of the communicative structures that govern the relationship between the writer and the censor in Iran today. By using opaque language, Sa'edi's censor in

effect hands over to his audience (the director and actors within the play and the play's viewers outside it) the responsibility for interpreting the words that he has just spoken. This formal transfer of the interpretive responsibility and the subsequent stress on the breakdown in communication between the censor and the subject of his censorship signify something beyond the appearance of the play: just as there is such a thing as over-interpretation, there is also a phenomenon we can call, for our purposes, overreliance on the literal meaning. By depicting a censor who outperforms the artist in his own craft, Sa'edi ultimately communicates his impression of the difficulties involved in countering the censorship apparatus of the Islamic Republic.

As the scene I have been analysing indicates, censorship in Iran today resembles an intricate game which, its intricacies aside, in the end produces distinct winners and losers. At a higher level of abstraction, too, censorship falls structurally within that group of social practices that produces difference rather than identity. At the same time, it gives rise ultimately to a notion of texts as either acceptable or unacceptable to the guardians of society, either fit or unfit for public consumption. There is a difference here, too. Unlike a game, the rules of censorship are far from fixed and universally known. The game of writing and reading under censorship, therefore, requires a far greater degree of discretion and discernment by all parties involved. To linger a moment longer on the game analogy in the hope of producing a more precise metaphor, censorship can be said to resemble more a bullfight or a game of cat and mouse than a game, say, of soccer, in that in it one set of abilities faces a comparable, yet differently oriented, set in an encounter where rules are by and large made up as the competitors pursue their separate yet intertwined ideological goals. Just like a game, however, censorship has a disjunctive effect in that it ends in the establishment of the difference between the useful and the harmful, the edifying and the corrupting, the genuine and the fake in the literature of a certain culture.

At the same time, through every instance of censorship, both the censor and the writer being censored move a step closer to a better understanding of themselves and of each other. As an agent within the broader power structure of which he is a part and which he represents, the censor moves ever closer to clarifying the principles which guide him. Through such activities as those conducted by its censors, the state moves steadily towards a more stable relationship with its opposition by offering ever clearer self-definitions. Writers, too, by continuing to write and to submit their work to the supervision of the censors, not only accept the presence of another order of power in society but also agree, however reluctantly, to submit to its

authority. Doing so, writers not co-opted into the discourse of the state find a chance to communicate something about their own ideology through the work which obtains permission to circulate in society.

The interaction, viewed in each specific social context, brings us back to the view of the relationality of individual acts of censorship glimpsed at through Christian Metz's depiction of a situation of absolute censorship. To deny the presence of another entity, an ideology different from and opposed to itself, the Islamic Republic of Iran would ideally have liked to pretend that no censorship is at work under its tutelage. Secular Iranian writers of the 1980s, however, would have liked to expose the presence of censorship by communicating to their audience a sense of the external constraints on their activity. They have done so, and I hope I have demonstrated, in a variety of ways, packing their texts with allegorical allusions and ambiguous metaphors which may at one and the same time give rise to a multiplicity of interpretations, testing the limits of official tolerance by violating the rules they can only guess at and writing about censorship in their homeland even when they work and live abroad. To this we might add such well-known practices as writing under pseudonyms or publishing works abroad.[21]

To observe the game of censorship from the perspective of attitudes presumed and nullified, rules assumed and altered, and lines drawn and violated, is ultimately to come to know something of the structure of ideologies engaged in a social contest for the hearts and minds of the masses. The writer's efforts at caricaturing, ridiculing, or otherwise debunking the rules of the state ultimately signify a determination to demonstrate the possibility of defiance and, thus, the vulnerability of the state. For the writer opposed to the ideology of the state, in other words, devising new ways of getting an oppositional message past the censor is to wage a covert war with the state while accepting the obvious fact of its control over the resources of society. For its part, the state's exercise of judgment in the act of censorship indicates at once an enhanced feeling of security, a growing cultural sophistication, or an attitude of tolerance towards individual oppositional expressions while aiming to minimise the chances for the emergence of an oppositional discourse.

My emphasis throughout this essay on the ambiguity of the terms of censorship naturally led to an exploration of the terms of creativity under a specific regime of censorship. Forced back upon its diminishing resources by a sustained system of external constraints, the language of the Persian literature of the 1980s became increasingly hermetic, escapist, or parochial. At best, such language fosters an esoteric kind of communication through

literature that can be decoded only by an intellectual vanguard. At times, it might be transmuted into a voice without an echo. If it goes on for too long, censorship eventually leaves its corrosive effect on the process of literary communication, rendering it increasingly obscure, eventually depriving it of all traces of shared experience. Such allusions as night, the chain, and the wintry cold, to name some of the most prevalent tropes of a previous generation, are already losing much of their suggestive power. They will eventually turn into lifeless relics of a long gone literary culture. Much as writers may revel in the efficacy of their stratagems, their ideas will not catch on unless their works are read, understood, and incorporated into a rhetoric of resistance. If the game of cat and mouse continues long enough, the cat will eventually get the mouse.

CHAPTER 4

Of Hail and Hounds

The Image of the Iranian Revolution in Recent Persian Literature

One year floods rose
One year they fought in the snows
One year hail fell, breaking the trees and walls
Down here in the marsh they trapped him in one year
And he stood in the water up to his neck to keep
hounds off him
Ezra Pound, *Canto IX*

The Iranian revolutionary movement in 1978–1983 was at one level a historical event that found its way into the private imaginations of almost all Iranian writers. In a more profound sense, however, the revolution was itself a work of the imagination. To comprehend the manner in which the creative writers of the country both contributed to its consummation and responded to its various aspects, the idea of an Iranian revolution in the minds of the Iranian writers of the pre-revolution decades must be charted. To Iranian writers of the mid-twentieth century, as to many Third World intellectuals of the time, the phenomenon of revolution connoted not only a sudden radical transformation of the society on economic, political, and cultural planes, but essentially a historical leap forward, a rapid cultural advance, and a push towards the future. This connotation assumes further significance regarding the possible effects of revolutionary events on the creative intellect.

Given the complex and wayward pattern of the growth of intellect in modem Iran and its intricate shape at the moment of the revolution, a general survey of the contemporary intellectual and artistic landscape in that country must of necessity be simplified by reducing the many diverse currents into a few main streams. Nonetheless, as an initial generalisation it would not be wrong to state that, as the first signs of a popular revolt against the Iranian monarchy became visible, the break between the country's creative minds and its ruling body was very nearly complete. The legitimacy of the monarchial system had been open to question for nearly a generation,

because the Shah had been returned to power by foreign intervention in a coup d'état that toppled a democratically instituted government. He therefore was no longer considered a constitutional monarch. Moreover, he enforced a series of flagrantly unconstitutional laws, thereby abandoning any pretence to constitutional legitimacy. He did increasingly attempt to claim a new kind of legitimacy based on economic success rather than constitutionality, but his economic programmes resulted in serious social dislocations and an ever-increasing gap between rich and poor. Faced with this situation, Shah Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi increasingly relied upon repressive apparatus of surveillance and censorship to keep the mounting opposition in check. Thus, he effectively eliminated all possibilities of open political dissent within the system. Under such conditions, Iranian writers of the 1960s were subject to growing social pressures, regardless of their individual political views, to dissociate themselves from the political establishment.

Among the writers who strove in their works to combine popular discontent with their own attitudes, interests, and aspirations, basically three groups are distinguishable. First were the younger, more radical writers whose vision was grounded in one or another Marxist interpretation of history, society, and literature. These authors set forth their views with relative explicitness and clarity in works that, whether banned by censors and the secret police before or after their publication or distributed clandestinely, or in most cases both, brought the author instant fame. This group assumed an increasingly defiant posture and tone in the late 1960s and came to full public attention when open guerrilla warfare was undertaken by a group of young leftist intellectuals in 1971. Their works, rarely of high literary quality, generally portrayed the Iranian monarchy as a final obstacle on the path to an egalitarian future just around the corner of history.

Second were those more mature writers whose foremost commitment was to intellectual integrity and artistic excellence. Even though a great majority of the members of this group were politically left-leaning, they endeavoured to be men of ideas without illusions or dogmas. In their works they aesthetically pursued those human values that elevate social consciousness and deepen the imagination. Like their more moderate liberal, democratic or progressive compatriots, they resented the rulers' lack of cultivation and the political system's refusal – indeed, inability – to acknowledge their right to free expression of opinion.

Finally, a few influential writer-intellectuals fundamentally objected to the directionless departure of state and society from what they viewed as the quintessential components of the national cultural identity, of which

Shi'a Islam was both a central symbol and manifestation. These intellectuals viewed meaningful historical development towards greater freedoms and genuine commitment to progress as functions of a return to a sense of national identity. This vision soon found staunch advocates among almost all intellectual groups, mainly because it exposed and highlighted the growing rift between the culture of a corrupt, complacent minority and that of the general populace, thus creating an immense potential for mass mobilisation against the Iranian monarchy's self-serving sense of national identity. As this idea permeated intellectual circles, a considerable number of literary works emerged in which a more or less distinct sense of lost identity, together with its attendant feelings of alienation and *ennui*, began to underlie one or another of the modern ideologies of nationalism, socialism, or Marxism.

Even those few writers who were deemed by public perception to be establishmentarian, non-aligned, or uncommitted – whether due to their careers, institutional affiliations, or freewheeling attitudes towards politics, or to the non-*opposé* posture reflected in their writings – were not free from grudges against the ruling order. Not only had the regime's immense unpopularity isolated them from the rest of the intelligentsia, thus discrediting them in the eyes of the public, but its lack of cultural sophistication and mediocre literary taste deprived them of any hope of recognition or reward. Above all, the gradual politicisation of literature resulted in their permanent exclusion from the community of "true intellectuals" – i.e., those who recognised the new relationship between politics and literature. All of this ran counter to the very meaning and value of their work. They, therefore, occasionally found roundabout ways of expressing their dissatisfaction with the existing situation, mainly through sarcasm or satire. Ebrahim Golestan's cleverly conceived novel of adventure and intrigue, *Secrets of the Treasure of the Haunted Valley*, is a prominent example of such works.

Under such conditions the relationship between writers and the state could not have been free from tension and occasional eruptions. In fact, during the last decade of monarchial rule, many writers of diverse political persuasions clashed with the Shah's police state. Many were harassed by the censorship apparatus; others were arrested, tortured, and forced to denounce their works and their views. Nonetheless, out of the long coexistence of the two, a *de facto* code of conduct had emerged – an informal *modus vivendi* of sorts – whereby the writer could embed in his work clues that were recognisable to readers as signs or statements of opposition to the regime. Through encounters with the state, the government, and the secret police, writers learned what would and would not be permissible, and on that basis

developed a codified diction, a canon of allusions, metaphors, symbols, and myths – a poetic language, almost. Paradoxically the relationship even grew willy-nilly into a symbiotic one. The state could boast of having allowed sufficient freedom for the intellectual opposition to pursue its calling, while the writer could reap the benefits of his or her *engagé* stance with only a minimal degree of friction with the regime and its SAVAK.

Persian literature over the last decades of monarchial Iran reveals the slow but steady rise of a rebellious stance framed by such seemingly discordant ideals as the vision of an egalitarian future, a yearning for greater artistic freedom, and an undertone of nostalgia, all clad in esoteric language at odds with objective reality. Indeed, the most successful literary works of a whole generation of Iranian writers were those in which a *mélange* of these tendencies is presented in a persuasive *ensemble*. Most Persian poetry of the era falls within this category; examples are Ahmad Shamlu's "The Fairies," Mahdi Akhavan-Saless's "The Ending of the *Shahnameh*" or Forugh Farrokhzad's "I Pity the Garden" and "Someone Who Isn't Like Anyone." In prose literature, Jalal Ale-Ahmad's *The Curse of the Land*, Simin Daneshvar's *Suvashun*, Gholamhossein Sa'edi's *Club-Wielders of Varazil*, and Hushang Golshiri's *Prince Ehtejab* typify this trend. Beneath their anti-establishmentarian posture, these works reflected a deep-seated ambivalence or uncertainty about what may lie beyond the political present.

The advent of the Iranian revolution externalised these inner conflicts. Many Iranian writers saw in the idea and possibility of revolution a unifying cause, a historic opportunity, and an idea into which they could channel their creative energies. The revolutionary situation seemed to offer new possibilities. However, the substance of these possibilities, the exact shape of that bold new world eluded them. But if revolution as an ideal appeared too complex to grasp, what happened on the streets of Tehran and other Iranian cities throughout 1978 definitely could be grasped, and offered a new subject about which to think and write. That is, the revolution itself constituted a radically new type of phenomenon which seized the writers' imagination with striking immediacy and force, demanding to be recognised and recorded as a long-awaited intellectual fantasy. Its crucial feature was its very newness, its connotations of strangeness and novelty, for during the initial stages of the revolution these very attributes, so dear to the literary imagination, concealed many anomalies and incongruities inherent in the intellectual response to the Iranian revolution.

A glance at the literary works written between the Ten Nights of Poetry Reading and Speeches at the Goethe Institute in Tehran in October 1977[1] and

the consummation of the Iranian revolution in February 1979 reveals that literature, especially poetry, became more kinetic, more image-centred, and much more buoyant. The most notable outward sign of the revolutionary poetry remains its tendency to paint the scene, to gloat in the sight, to celebrate the event. Gradually the revolution itself came to occupy a central position in a multitude of poems, stories, dramatic dialogues, and other writings that came to be known as the "Xeroxed literature" of 1978.[2] In their work during this period, Iranian writers gave the impression that they were witnessing something dazzling, momentous and extraordinary.

Examples illustrating this change provide a constellation of images and symbols reflecting every aspect of the events leading to the February 1979 insurgence. Powerful images such as red carnations planted in the barrel of a wavering soldier's gun were a metaphor for the wound his bullet might plant on a demonstrator's body. Appearing beside them was the more familiar metaphor of red tulips suggesting the reincarnation of martyrs. A chorus of sounds, from the loud screeching of gunfire to the still louder roar of people with clenched fists, chanting revolutionary slogans, broke the long lull of the poetic line. The scent of rosewater and burning incense – traditionally used by women when seeing off or welcoming back their men before or after grave undertakings – mingled with the sharp odour of blood in the gutter. A host of new signs and symbols was summoned to capture and record the moment when one more man fell during another encounter between the army and the demonstrators.

Similarly, the familiar picture of the autumnal garden, where traditionally the slow withering of flowers and plants provided the poet with an occasion for social comment,[3] is reversed to promise a sure if slow blossoming and growth. Indeed, the abundance of vernal growth, life-giving breeze, and Mayday joy in the poetry of those autumnal days of the Iranian revolution is nothing short of stunning. In the emblematic garden of Iranian society on the eve of the revolution tulips grow, jasmines rise, and "every night a rose yields / on its deathbed / the pollen of the new will to the garden."[4] Even a bare solitary tree in the distance could delight the poet with the thought of an imagined true identity. In his collection of poetry M.A. Sepanlu sums up the poet's vision of that miraculous power of transformation:

Khosha derakht keh dar enzeva-ye chashmandaz
beh rishehha'i momken eshareh darad
va dar nehayat
beh ma shenasnameh-ye ma'lumi mibakhshadd.[5]

(Blessed is the tree which in the landscape's solitude
points to roots of the possible
and in its extremities
shall give us a recognisable identity card.)

That uncharted world of "the possible," that undefined yet recognisable sense of "identity," typified the mental attitude behind much of this period in Persian literature.

Intellectual ambiguities and uncertainties were neither resolved in the minds of the poets nor overcome in their poetry. Rather, they were either buried under the delight of the moment or clad in vague generalities. The only certainty contained in this poetry was that an order which had condemned the poet to lifelong despair – or so it seemed – was fast approaching its end. The vision beyond was open to all possibilities. The revolutionary literature, of course, does contain countless red flags, spun of the flame of popular wrath, raised against the backdrop of the fading night to herald the approaching dawn. Red stars, red gallows, red hands, red feet, red throats, and an ever-present red horizon also highlight the landscape of this literature, accompanied by the loud clanking of the breaking chains of slavery and the noisy onrush of the masses running towards the palace of the paperman. A mere raising of clenched fists makes many walls crumble, a simple chanting of a revolutionary slogan causes rotten doors to give way, and the sight of massive demonstrations is more than enough to scare the cowardly demon out of the sacred motherland. Mechanical in flow and metallic in flavour, this tendency in the revolutionary literature of the decade that ushered in the Iranian Revolution is too propagandistic to contain any engaging intellectual reflections on the meaning of the revolution. It is forged out of political dedication rather than creative impulse, and its main function is to incite immediate action rather than contemplation.

Iranian writers could, of course, not close their eyes to the religious cast of the revolution, but many did misinterpret it or underestimated its portents for the future. As the role of religion unravelled in the intellectual consciousness with a combination of public acclaim and private misgivings, it affected literature in curious ways. It introduced, above all, new historical vistas, novel ethical concepts and a fresh sense, given the place of religion in Iranian society, of the relevance of religious fervour to social action. People were clearly willing to enlist their faith in the service of bringing down a detested order. To fan the flames of popular faith, writers and poets drew from their knowledge of myth and history to summon up moments when religious faith

appeared to have contributed to social leaps forward. Figures embodying the happy marriage between religion and progress – from Salman Farsi to Mansur Hallaj and from the Sarbedaran to Mirza Kuchek Khan Khiabani, as well as the clerical constitutionalists of the turn of the century – were dragged out of their historical seclusion to adorn poetic lines celebrating the advent of the revolution.[6] Religious rituals also achieved a new symbolic significance. As unlikely as a revolutionary act of praying might appear to a non-believing poet like Shamlu, it nevertheless seals his poem entitled "The End of the Game," written on the occasion of the Shah's departure from the country. The poet summarises the monarch's long rule as one of silenced patriots and the disgraceful retreat of a defeated soldiery. He then addresses the man who could only "speak with honeysuckles in the language of the scythe," and ends the poem with this curse:

Bash ta nefrin-e shab az to cheh sazad,
keh madaran-e siahpush –
daghdaran-e zibatarin farzandan-e aftab o bad –
hanuz az sajjadehha
sar barnagerefteh-and.[7]

(Wait to see what the curse of the night shall make of you
for mothers, clad in black,
mourners for the most beautiful children of the sun and the wind,
still have not raised their heads
from prayer-rugs.)

Even the more philosophical poets, who could see something deeply threatening in the ascent of the religious fundamentalists, felt compelled by the force of events to marvel at its role publicly even as they murmured their reservations privately. A little over two weeks after the Shah had left the country, Ayatollah Khomeini came home to a hero's welcome after a fifteen-year exile. The spectacle surpassed anything recorded in Iranian history or imagined by Iranian intellectuals. Crowds estimated to be in the millions filled thoroughfares and main streets, side streets and little alleys, even balconies and rooftops – in short, anywhere a human body could plant itself and hope for a momentary glance at the frail old man who had become the leader of the revolution. The sight was graphically described in a long poem entitled "People Are Forever Right" by Esma'il Kho'i, a poet in his forties.

The poem's structure, built on a series of dialogues between the poet's public and private selves, leads towards dualisms between sight and sense, action and contemplation, realism and idealism, society and the self. Stunned by the sight of people seated on tree branches awaiting the arrival of their idol, the poet's public self concludes that "doubts and suspicions are useless," that people are always right "because they are many" and "because they forever seek the 'shall be'." And yet the poet's inner self, in a mood of isolated meditation, utters the final sentence: I / do not believe / that any force / can build tomorrow / out of the stuff of yesterdays.[8] As such the poem offers a particularly vivid illustration of the response of Iranian writers to the progress of the revolution. Caught between the revolution's course and cast of characters and their utter disgust with the status quo, they finally threw their lot in with the revolution. For this reason the literature of the period lacks any enthusiastic affirmation of or commitment to the revolution. Its mood is rather towards long, painful soul-searching that combines a resolute negation of the past with a lack of commitment to the future. In sharp contrast to the revolution, the literature of the post-revolution years responded to the politics of the new rulers with sweeping statements. The revolution neither affirmed the writer's sense of historical direction nor offered a synthesis that might transcend the dichotomy between ideals and social reality. Instead Iran's writers by and large were compelled to respond instantaneously to the events that brought in the new situation without examining the ideas of its leaders. In the heat of the revolution literary themes expressed the writers' reaction to this or that moment in a continuum of events, the totality of which comprised the revolution itself.

In spite of all contradictions and complications, Iranian writers and poets were thus drawn into the course of the revolution. For radical leftist writers, it represented a crucial moment in the historical trend towards social justice and an egalitarian society. To those hoping for greater political and civil liberties, it epitomised the national will to achieve these very goals. To those who dreamed of a meaningful balance between modernity and national identity, it was a movement in precisely that direction. The common philosophical denominator in the community of creative writers was nothing more specific than a general humanitarian desire for creating a world in which poverty, misery and injustice might be eliminated, the nation's potentials be realised, and greater freedoms be achieved. The intellectuals' deep-seated feelings of distrust, anger, and hatred towards the inept, uncultivated, and complacent ruling elite were at the core of reasons

that attracted writers to the revolution. For them the revolution had been transformed into a mirror in which each individual citizen saw the image of her own ideals.

When the revolution was a *fait accompli*, and as the earliest signs of the new order's culture began to surface through the awesome pageantry of revolutionary events, the misgivings of writers began to be expressed in poetry and prose. With the appearance of black robes and veils, mass prayers performed in public thoroughfares, ceremonial funeral processions for the revolution's martyrs, many began to suspect threats to their ideals. Within the first few months after the downfall of the monarchy, those who had hoped that the revolution would cleanse the impurities of the past found to their dismay that what to them were the most abhorrent features of the revolution were the essence of the worldview of the religious leaders, now consolidating their power. The fundamentalists installed their cadres in the bureaucracy, media, press, universities, and cultural institutions. They purged non-believers, restricted access to the media and the press, controlled cultural and intellectual activities, and revived censorship, primarily through pressure groups roaming streets that came be known as club-wielders (*chomaqdaran*). Simultaneously, a cult of personality began to take shape around the Ayatollah Khomeini who, proclaiming the mandate vested in him by the people's revolution – but in sharp contrast to his pronouncements before the revolution – used his impressive charisma to establish his dream of a theocracy based on the letter of the Quranic texts and pronouncements provided by the prophet and the Imams some fourteen centuries earlier.

Although they seemed too tangential to the course of the revolution and too anachronistic to pose any threat to intellectual ideals, three developments, within a year after the revolution, proved to be part of a well-orchestrated drive towards total clerical rule by the newly founded Islamic Republican Party. Every policy announced or enacted by the emerging theocracy created new divisions among the intellectuals. First, a rift emerged between the pro-Soviet Tudeh party members and a majority of the members of the Writers' Association of Iran; the former justified as exigencies of the revolution policies, the latter decried as contrary to the revolutionary ideals of liberty and independence.

Soon an unexpected alliance began to take shape between the clergy and Tudeh Party intellectuals; the latter used heavy-handed methods in devious ways to stifle demands for freedom of expression, while the former provided the theoretical justifications that condemned demands for freedom as liberal,

western in origin and therefore alien to the revolution, and ultimately counterrevolutionary. Writers who insisted on the ideals of freedom, democracy, social justice, and pluralism became even more intolerable by taking firm stands every time a new segment of the revolutionary alliance came under attack, or a new restrictive policy was advanced towards women, religious groups, and ethnic minorities, or when another newspaper or periodical fell victim to attacks by the Hezbollah partisans. In the absence of any tradition of intellectual groupings such as guilds, syndicates, and unions, and with the sudden politicisation of an unsophisticated general public that demanded a radical political stance from its intellectual leaders, fresh schisms appeared among uncommitted intellectuals until, shattered as a group, they had nothing left but their lives to protect.

For the visionary poet and writer, on the other hand, it was impossible, even in the so-called "springtime of freedom," to hold onto previous hopes of reconciliation between their ideals and the new political establishment. By the spring of 1979, Shamlu was already speaking of "the suspended hollow of cries in the air." In "Morning," a poem charged with feelings of deception and disappointment, he depicts an earthly rain of filth spattering a cemetery where professional orators are dozing off while, in their graves, "those of blood- stained shrouds / wearily / … / turn their backs" on the revolution.[9] In rigidly symbolic language, the poem communicates heartfelt discontent at the course of events during the months following the official birthday of the revolution. As a statement from a literary lawgiver with an impressive following among the younger generation of poets, the poem's almost exclusive reliance on old devices for addressing the new situation assumes further significance: it established a trend in post-revolution Persian poetry of Iran, which in lesser hands gradually degenerated into sterile attempts to apply old ambiguities to a new reality.

Shamlu soon realised the inadequacy of veiled expression in the face of such aberrations as public flogging as punishment for alcohol consumption, public stoning of adultresses, summary execution of political opponents, and sporadic attacks on the printing, marketing, and sale of unacceptable books, pamphlets, tapes, and the like. In a famous poem entitled "In this Blind Alley," perhaps the most successful single poetic depiction of life in post-revolution Iran, he reveals a fresh determination to confront these abominations as straightforwardly as possible. The poem is translated here in its entirety:

Dahanat ra mibuyand
mabada keh gofteh bashi: dust midaram
delat ra mibuyand.
Ruzegar-e gharibi-st nazanin!
Va eshq ra kenar-e tirak-e rahband
taziyaneh mizanand.
Eshq ra dar pastu-ye khaneh nahan bayad kard.
Dar in bonbast-e kaj o pich-e sarma
atash ra beh sukhtbar-e sorud o she'r
foruzan midarand
beh andishidan khatar makon.
Ruzegar-e gharibi-st nazanin!
An keh bar dar mikubad shabahangam
heh koshtan-e cheragh amadeh ast
Nur ra dar pastu-ye khaneh nahan bayad kard.
Anak qassabanand
bar gozargahha mostaqar
ba kondeh vo saturi khun alud
Ruzegar-e gharibi-st nazanin!
Va tabassom ra bar labha jarrahi mikonand
va taraneh ra bar dahan.
Showq ra dar pastu-ye khaneh nahan bayad kard.
Kabab-e qanari bar atash-e susan o yas
Ruzegar-e gharibi-st nazanin!
Eblis-e piruz-mast
sur-e 'aza-ye ma ra bar sofreh neshasteh ast:
Khoda ra dar pastu-ye khaneh nahan bayad kard.[10]

(They smell your mouth
lest you might have said: I love,
they smell your heart.
    Strange times, my dear
        and they flog love
by the road-block.
We should hide love in the larder.

In this crooked blind alley, at the turn of the chill
they feed fires
with logs of song and poetry.

Hazard not a thought.
    Strange times, my dear.
He who knocks at your door in the noon of night
has come to kill the light.
    We should hide light in the larder.

There, butchers
posted in passageways
with bloody chopping blocks and cleavers.
    Strange times, my dear.
And they chop smiles off lips
songs off mouths.
    We should hide joy in the larder.

Canaries barbecued
on a fire of lilies and jasmines.
    Strange times, my dear.
Satan, drunk with victory
squats at the feast of our undoing.
We should hide God in the larder.)

The poem begins by presenting a series of visions depicting facets of daily life, but the presentation is interrupted by an almost involuntary refrain expressing the ineffable nature of the situation: "strange times, my dear." At the same time, scenes of naked violence, unbounded oppression, and the most flagrant invasion of the most private corners of human existence are interspersed with statements that express the poet's sense of an imminent threat to cultural values. The two threads, one lyrical, the other elegiac, culminate in the feast of Satan celebrating the defeat of intellectual dreams. The defence mechanism on which the poem stands is based on a dialectical movement towards God as envisaged in Persian mysticism. The poet bids his absent beloved – and of course his larger audience – first to hide away love, then light, then joy, and finally God Himself. Thus, in a sort of poetic peripeteia the poem points to the basic principle of transcendence and mystic alliance with God in the face of evil.

Bringing together a series of abstract images recalling scenes of daily life in the first year of the establishment of the Islamic Republic, interspersed with an almost involuntary refrain expressing the ineffable nature of the situation: "Strange times, my dear," Shamlu's poem parades a number of signs of naked violence and unbounded cruelty to communicate the

speaker's feeling of imminent threat to his system of values. The poem culminates in the feast of Satan celebrating the collapse of democratic ideals. An analysis of the poem's rhetorical structure reveals the way the poet positions himself and his readers against the evil forces he depicts here. This posturing in turn reveals the fact that the process of constructing discourses of antagonism through the depiction of figures of absolute ontological opposition in this poem bears a striking resemblance to that in a number of pre-revolutionary Persian poems, including Shamlu's own "The Fairies." The "they" who smell mouths, burn books of poetry, and chop smiles off lips are contrasted to the "we" who suffer those atrocities, whose dreams have been shattered, and who are depicted as undone in the end. Such privileged notions as "love," "joy," and "smiles" belong, of course, to the collective "we," consisting of the poet and his readers, in whom these ideals reside.

Meanwhile, the poem's prescriptive mechanisms – immediately present to the intended reader – rest on a dialectical movement towards God, envisaged here in terms traditionally belonging to Persian mysticism. The poet bids his absent beloved – and his larger audience – to hide away love, light, joy, and finally God. The reader is thus enlisted as a participant observer in a series of defensive actions aimed at the preservation of the good and the beautiful that take the transcendental form of mystical alliance with God in the face of evil upon the earth. Through a process far more complicated than that embodied in Hafez's hemistich as it was made to relate to the historical situation at hand, the poem arrives at the same basic opposition between the demonic (here Satan) and the angelic (here God himself) to express the feelings of a certain social group which had begun to see the dissipation of its hopes in the revolution. Shamlu's "In This Blind Alley," then, provides a means of analysing an act of literary self-positioning vis-à-vis the Iranian Revolution, but it could also involve us in a broader investigation of the ideological function of such postures.

It would be erroneous to think that the nascent theocracy succeeded quickly and quietly in stifling artistic expression. In fact, the period between February 1979 and June 1981 must be considered a most exciting and fertile intellectual period in recent Iranian history. Many works written earlier in the 1970s but never published because of the old regime's censorship were published during these years. Such noteworthy works as Mohsen Yalfani's *The Lone Runner*, some of Reza Baraheni's shorter stories, particularly "Eternal Rancor," as well as several collections of poetry, made their appearance after the revolution. Also published were a great num-

ber of works dealing with aspects of life in the monarchial era. Among these the most outstanding include Ahmad Mahmud's *The Story of One City*, Reza Baraheni's novella *From Well to Well*, Nasim Khaksar's collection of short stories entitled *Steps of Treading* and Ali Ashraf Darvishian's *Cell 18*. In these works, the reader is given a fresh look at the past, a new interpretation of life as it perhaps could not have been imagined during the monarchy. Aspects of that autocratic rule and its impact on the texture of Iranian society, untold stories of popular resistance to the ruling order, and the gradual control of the country by foreigners are portrayed in these writings. The dominant themes, however, involve strikes and demonstrations, incarceration and torture, and, following the gradual suppression of lawful political dissent, the emergence of a guerrilla movement in the 1970s. Apart from rare moments when such heroes of popular resistance as premier Mohammad Mosaddeq, wrestling champion and philanthropist Gholamreza Takhti, revolutionary guerrilla leader Khosrow Golesorkhi, and others are celebrated, the overriding mood of these retrospective works is one of eternal torment set off against fleeting moments of hope.

Dramatic writings occupy a unique place in the bustling marketplace of post-revolution topical literature. A short list of the plays published or performed within a year after the revolution contains over seventy items. Of these, three are of particular interest to our concerns in this essay. *The Long Runner*, written and printed in 1973 but not allowed distribution until the very last days of the Shah's rule, deals with the commercialisation of education and its gradual subordination to autocratic rule. Rahim, a non-conformist high school teacher, is faced with the challenge of remaining human in an increasingly brutalised system. The misadventures and the eventual demise of this noble misfit underscore the impossibility of clinging to a humane value system in the face of the gross official neglect that abandoned education to uninhibited commercialism. Sa'id Sultanpur's *Abbas Agha, "Iran National" Worker* depicts the life and travails of a typical industrial worker sacked for his insistence on fair play and proper pay and for his struggle against petty nepotism in the industrial plant where he works. After a lengthy prologue designed to capture the attention of what the author must have thought was a new theatre audience, the play assumes a tone approaching documentary presentation of life with the aid of elements drawn from native dramatic forms and folk theatre. The central message – that the revolution is not responding to the needs of the working class – is driven home through both irony and sarcasm and through broad and serious reflections. At one point,

the revolution is likened to a bus whose driver changes its course and heads for the Bazaar instead of the slums of southern Tehran. Of Bahram Bayza'i's *The Death of Yazdgerd*, I shall speak presently.

The state of theatre in post-revolution Iran also provides a convenient case-study of the fate of artistic activities in recent years. The sudden outpouring of creative energy occasioned by the revolution resulted in the sprouting of scores of cultural and artistic institutions with little more than noble intentions to sustain them. Gradually, internal factionalism caused by the politicisation of the intellectual community, coupled with the accelerating ascent of fundamentalists bent on extending their control over all artistic activities to positions of power, led to its disintegration. The most active political group in theatre were members of the Tudeh Party and their ideological associates. Plays with such telltale titles as "Down with Imperialism," "The Bloody Preparations of Uncle Sam," or "After the Shah, It's America's Turn" reveal the thrust of this group's concerns. A second group applied concepts based on Iranian or Islamic historical episodes to the situation at hand. Typifying this tendency were *Zahhak, The Passion of Hallaj*, and *The Horufieh Movement*, successful plays performed within the first year of the revolutionary era. Independent performing arts groups succeeded, for a brief moment, in fostering the growth of an artistically superior, genuine dramatic art.

In these artistic endeavours there was a distinct mood of optimism, a sense of boundless opportunities to be nurtured, and a spirit of rebellion in search of a purpose. The old order had collapsed, an entire society had burst open, and the new rulers had yet to strengthen their grip over intellectual activities. Believing that they had a decisive role to play in building a new social order, writers and artists responded to the demand for personal involvement in the revolutionary process. At the core of this creative outpouring was an intellectual desire to comprehend the unfolding reality. What was the historical stage through which Iranian society was passing? What was the essence of the Iranian revolution? What cultural identity did the religious faction belong to? The search for answers to these questions lay hidden through the entire corpus of literature produced in post-revolution years.

The typical answer suggested by the all-too-obvious cast of characters in Iran's intellectual community alluded to the analogy to the Arab invasion of Iran in the seventh century which ended the Sassanid monarchy and brought Islam to the Iranian empire. Bahram Bayza'i's play, *The Death of Yazdgerd*, the story of the last Sassanid king's escape from his capital city of Ctesiphon and his death at a miller's humble shack at the northeastern end

of his kingdom, is based wholly on this analogy. Written in 1978, the play was staged in Tehran a few months after the fall of the Iranian monarchy and had a successful run. It begins with an engaging attempt to reconstruct the circumstances surrounding the Persian king's escape and tragic death, but soon deepens into a series of complex questions regarding national identity and political ideology, and shows the relevance of that past to the present. In its conclusion, the play rejects the tragic mood of defeat and doom that hangs over the collective mind of Iranians from the memory of its past.[11]

Apart from the emphasis on religion as such, what most reinforced the image of the revolution as a second Arab invasion was the language of the religious revolutionists. They used forms of speech that had long since disappeared from public usage. Having survived in texts of Shi'i theology, exegesis and jurisprudence, this language was weighted with long discarded Arabic expressions and idioms that were once current in the Persian language but had since retreated to spaces such as mosques and pulpits or the old religious madrasas or seminary schools, with semantic and syntactical cadences that sounded ludicrously archaic in light of the profound changes in the Persian language in modern times. These usages evoked an avalanche of emotional responses from secular writers. In an angry protest against the cultural attitudes of the new rulers, Esm'ail Kho'i refers to "these uncultured conquerors" as "crossbred descendants from the seed of Gengiz and the house of Abu-Jahl."[12] He thus couples the names of two despised alien figures, one the thirteenth century Mongol invader of Iran whose name is virtually synonymous with unbridled brutality, the other an uncle to the prophet Mohammad whose name actually means "the father of ignorance." Asghar Vaghedi, a younger poet, treats the theme more explicitly in a poem entitled "Elegy for Poetry and the Motherland":

Hezar gur-kan-e pir
beh kavosh-e jasadi mumya'i az del-e khak
ze jadehha-ye tavahhosh obur mikardand
va dar ghobar-e qobur-e kohan
tamam-e ma'bar-e dehliz-e jaheliyyat ra
beh khashm kavidand.
…
Shegeft bud vali didim
mosaferan-e qadimi ra
keh baz migashtand
va mordeh-i keh az a'maq-e gur bar mikhast

ze labela-ye ghobar-e qorun nemayan shod
beh hay'at-e arabi az qabqyel-e badavi
savar bar shotori lang
to gu'i az del-e sahra-ye najd miayad
va rudkhaneh vo darya
do vajeh'i-st keh hargez
beh gush-e u naneshastast –
va rudkhaneh-ye tarikh niz … .[13]

(A thousand decrepit gravediggers
passing over paths of savagery
arrived in search of a mummified corpse
hidden in the heart of the earth
and in the dust of ancient sepulchers
dug their way
through the chasm of ignorance
…
It was astounding, but we did see
these ancient travellers
returning
and the dead man risen from the depth of a grave
emerging from the dust of the centuries
in the guise of an uncouth Arab
riding on a lame camel
as if he had crossed the desert of Neged
and the river and the sea
were the two words
that had never entered his ears –
nor the river of history.)

Different from the new rulers' cultural orientation was their attitude towards the existing culture. Many secular writers were now beginning to present religious dogmatism and zeal as well as cultural callousness as the ruler's natural motivation. Diverse literary techniques, devices and forms were employed to demonstrate the basic incongruity between the religious revolutionaries and modern-day Iranian culture. Political satires in verse or in prose, allegorically conceived with the use of myth, history, or parable, picture the brutality, adventurism and Machiavellianism of the revolutionists in sullying the revolution on the cultural front.

Some writers directly confronted the contradictions between the initial causes and the subsequent course of the Iranian revolution. For example, Hushang Golshiri's "The Magi's Victory-Chronicle," perhaps the best short story written during the period, follows the fortunes of a group of characters in a provincial town from the noontime joy of popular revolt against the monarchy to the midnight of utter submission to the savagery of a religious revolution. As the story opens, the people of the town have already broken windowpanes in cinemas and banks in protest against what such institutions represent. As one observes, "… When we shattered movie house windows we did not think that it was the movies we were breaking down. We were attacking the banality they symbolized as well as the perpetrators of that banality." What remained to be destroyed then were the taverns and the imposing statue of the horseman at the Shah square.

In a masterly *tour de force*, the author introduces the story's protagonist, Barat, a tavern owner, as the one who finally enlists the townsfolk to help pull down the Shah's statue. A cultivated, popular, and honest man who lives poetry and loathes hypocrisy, Barat has an innate capacity for leadership. A civil servant who lost his job many decades ago because of his leftist ideas, he had first turned to selling books, but since the bookshop was raided and closed down by SAVAK agents, he has opened a tavern, hoping this will shield him from harassment by the secret police. After a detailed description of how Barat, basking in the rays of a midwinter sun, succeeds in dislodging the statue from its pedestal and throwing the horseman and his horse to the cement surface of the square, the story turns in a thoughtfully structured sequence of pointed dialogues, to typical scenes of drinking bouts in Barat's humble tavern, where conversation revolves around the course and objectives of the revolution. The story's main body deals with Barat's worsening situation as the Islamisation process following the revolution begins and the revolutionists turn against him for his unholy occupation.

Eventually, Barat is arrested and flogged in public because he continues to sell spirits in defiance of the ban on alcohol consumption. His cache of wines and spirits is discovered and given to a local bulldozer driver for destruction. The driver buries the precious find in an open field and at night the townsmen head for the site. There they partake in a sacred ritual of unearthing these symbolic remains of a worldly culture and, with their fingers cut, their hands scarred, and their bodies bruised, they begin to nourish themselves with this forbidden liquid of joy, this "water of life" so dearly celebrated in Persian literature and lore. For a brief moment, in the dim light of a lantern or a candlestick, the circle turns into a simulacrum of Persian culture reminiscent

of so many life-and-death struggles in Iran's history. Soon, however, the Revolutionary Guards, clad in Arabian keffiyeh and akal headgear, arrive on the scene, guided there by the flickering light and a voice that is singing a sad, sinuous song. They surround the drinkers, violators of a most severe religious proscription. The commanding officer issues the inevitable verdict: "They ought to be flogged, every one of them! Start! Even if it takes until doomsday!"

The ending of the story provides an archetypal *mélange* of the literal and figurative layers of meaning:

> They stretched one from our midst on the ground, two guards holding his feet, two others his two hands. They covered his head with a black cloth, gathered its edges into a knot, stuffed the lump into his mouth, and started to whip him. No noise was heard, from anybody. Then they, too, squatted all around us, encircling the borders of the light from our lamps, their heads covered in keffiyehs. We could see their eyes only. And we, all of us, lay down outstretched, humble and earthy, our backs turned on the ancient stars – still ancient stars – waiting for these men, clad in keffiyehs and akals, to get to us. We stretched our feet, waiting for our Islamic punishment. And while waiting we pressed the mouth of the bottle into our mouths and sucked the very last drops of that bitter-tasting Mother-of-All-Evil. And then, drunk, we placed our faces on the soil, the cold, frost-covered ancestral soil – and waited.[14]

Holy zeal, that fanatical devotion to dogma and a profound innate aversion to anything worldly, was so alien to the cultural sensibilities of modern Iranian intellectuals like Hushang Golshiri as to compel him to portray it frequently in his work with a feeling of primal awe. Golshiri's men in Arabian headbands almost involuntarily recall Shamlu's presentation of men who smell your mouth and heart, knock at the door to kill the light and whip love at the roadblock. Indeed, Persian literature of these years is replete with this feeling of being invaded by an alien force, a sense of being exiled at home, of being a foreigner in one's own native land. It is as if writers, filled with a sense of cultural alienation, conceive their work under siege, in despair, expressing it in a posture of wide-eyed bewilderment. At times, they seem to feel that in order to convey some impression of the unbelievable reality around them they must plunge into perennial domains, and one such domain, which will be the subject of full treatment in a later chapter in this book as we chronicle the career of Golsamhossien Sa'edi, is that of naked physical violence.

The heritage of violence in Iran is the locus of Sa'edi's story. And indeed, cruelties of such magnitude conducted with such natural ease may strike an outside observer as horrendous in this new aspect and abominable in light of the expectations born of a supposedly liberating revolution, but in fact they have been an integral part of Iranian history. Therein lies the significance of the message of the story. That violence can be legitimised as a natural psychological state indistinguishable from life's daily activities alludes to the possibility – and the fear – of perpetration of identical historical patterns of behaviour in new forms. The full relevance of this view of the Islamic state's conception of power was demonstrated in the summer of 1981 and afterwards. In June, a series of bomb explosions killed scores of top officials of the Islamic Republic, and throughout the summer a number of armed demonstrations nearly succeeded in paralysing the clerical grip over the country. In response, the regime unleashed an unprecedented degree of official violence. In order to justify such acts as on-the-spot killing of wounded demonstrators, the murder of underage children if their actions were deemed a clear and present threat to Islam, and the execution of pregnant women guilty of a capital crime against Islam, officials and apologists of the Islamic Republic resorted to the text of the Qur'an, the lives of the prophet and the Imams, and sacred religious traditions. Thus the Islamic state viewed as natural to history and traditions what the intellectuals saw as savagery irreconcilable with modern ideas of the relationship between a state and citizens.

At once natural and monstrous, the Islamic regime was still largely judged as transitory, as much for the alien aspects of contemporary Iranian culture as for its intrinsic anachronism. The ironic title of the short story, "It's a Perfectly Common Plant,"[15] by Javad Mojabi reflects that consoling impression. The narrative tells the story of the prodigious growth and eventual decay of a mysterious plant whose green branch creeps one autumnal afternoon into the unsuspecting narrator's study. "This is a hardy plant," the narrator observes, "resilient, penetrating, destructive, all-encompassing …, an apparently undying, unending growth." In an obviously Marquezian sequence of events, the plant begins to cover walls, encircle bookshelves, and devour in turn the narrator's collection of ancient manuscripts, his books of poetry, and finally his texts of history and geopolitics. The narrator/protagonist begins to chide the intruder, telling it to behave as is expected of a welcome guest, mindful of its host's most valued possessions. The plant whose seed the narrator discovers has come from India – an obvious reference to Khomeini's reputed Indian origins – continues its brazen growth. Too late, the narrator discovers

that the scourge has in its grip not only his room and apartment complex, but the whole city and beyond. People are unable to do anything; nature must run its course.

With the coming of a metaphorical spring the plant begins to wither away, although not too surprisingly, "the more it withers, the more it devours." Throughout the story, allusions are contrived to reinforce the analogy between the plant and the Islamic theocracy. Apart from the reference to Khomeini's ancestry, the green colour associated with Islam, the natural animosity of the religious revolutionists to secular culture, the inability of the people to exert their will over the course of the revolution, and the different names by which segments of the population refer to the obtruding plant, all provide patent correlatives between the literal and the figurative aspects of the author's interest. The story ultimately reflects the Iranian intellectual community's feelings of disgust, anger, and helplessness towards the power of the state rather than any clear understanding of its nature and character. Whereas during the monarchy a literary protest expressed conviction by simply stating the author's feelings towards the political establishment, that method had now become useless: no mutual ground existed between the writer and her audience or the state.

Stated differently, the touch of old familiarity had disappeared, leaving behind an exasperating sense of the inadequacy of perennial symbolism and hoary devices to address the new situation. Very few writers in those tumultuous years managed to form an accurate perception of the new, ontologically different relationship between themselves and the clerical power structure; very few even realised the need to attempt to modify their approach in the face of the altered relationship. As a result, even though the scope of mythical allusions and historical correspondences expanded greatly, and even though a new range of metaphors, symbols, and other devices was employed, little success was achieved in imaginatively and objectively portraying the ideology of the new Iranian state. The anti-intellectual, anti-artistic nature of Khomeini's fundamentalist theocracy filled post-revolution Persian literature with such venomous hate as to make it extremely unreliable as a vehicle of social comment.

The outbreak of the war between Iran and Iraq in September 1980 provided the perplexed and beleaguered writers with a new challenge and a new chance: they could at once regain their lost social balance and come to terms with a concrete reality. The body of Persian literature that deals with this war is too impressive to be examined here. Insofar as the war was viewed as a crucial link in the chain of events beginning with the onset

of the Iranian revolution in 1979, the way it is portrayed in literature can be considered briefly. In spite of the rift between writers and the state, the war sparked patriotic feelings in a great majority of writers. At the same time, this was Iran's first experience with modern warfare, and it brought to the Iranian consciousness the meaning of modern war. Literature on the war contains a strain of sad, sudden realisation of its horrors. By and large, younger writers of leftist orientation saw the conflict as a fresh instance of an imperialistic plot against the historical evolution of the working masses of both Iran and Iraq. By contrast, the works of less ideological writer-intellectuals include impressionistic accounts of the human miseries caused by the war, often wrapped in a prevailing mood of gloom and doom. Overall, the war literature of Iran reflects the writers' feelings towards national identity and the country's integrity in the face of enemy aggression. It is noteworthy in this context that despite the historic racial animosities between Persians and Arabs, little trace can be found in this literature of the chauvinistic attitude of the Iranian bourgeoisie towards the Arabs during the Shah's rule.

The suddenness and vehemence of the war as experienced by ordinary people, combined with personal feelings about war as a human tragedy, form the dominant themes of Iran's war literature. Occasionally eyewitness accounts of life in the war-stricken area are found:

Shabha-ye Mehr
Shabha-ye kar dar makhazen-e atash
shabha-ye chahha-ye naft o badanha-ye tekkeh-tekkeh
shabha-ye sayd-e adami dar abha-ye nafti-ye Khalij,
va kargaran-e bandar
    Keh mahmulehha-ye barut ra
        Bar dush mibarband.
Khompareh dar movajeheh-ye khushehha-ye khorma
va saqfha-ye hasiri ad divarha-ye gorosnegi.
Shabha-ye kudakan-e shalamcheh
va ghorresh-e modavem-e tupha
    Keh qalbe darya ra dar ham midshekanand.

Va kusehha keh beh khoshki amadehand
va zir-e taqha-ye geli ta'meh mitalaband.[16]

(October nights
nights of work in reservoirs of fire
nights of oil wells and ripped bodies
nights of manhunt
in oily waters of the Gulf.

Port workers shoulder
    crates of gunpowder.
Shells hit clusters of dates
ceilings of reed atop walls of hunger.

Nights of kids from Shalamcheh
and the ceaseless roar of artillery
rending the heart of the sea.
And sharks swim ashore
    to seek prey under arcades of mud.)

In several notable works of prose literature the same themes occupy a central position. Massoud Minavi's "Blood-Mill in the Trench" deals with a local shipowner's heroic decision to attack an enemy gunboat at the mouth of the Persian Gulf with his small merchant ship, his only possession after a lifetime of toiling at sea, to counter the common belief that because he is an Arab Iranian he might be an enemy collaborator. Mohammad Ayyubi's "Passage of Soil and Blood" is structured on bitter-sweet remembrances of a teacher returning to the city of many memories now in the throes of a devastating war. The one novel of note on the theme, Ahmad Mahmud's *The Scorched Land*, attempts to reveal the tragic consequences of Iraq's invasion of south-western Iran in the war-torn city of Ahvaz in the autumn of 1980 – i.e., the first three months of the war. The novel provides glimpses into the war's impact on the social fabric of the city and ends with the hero's severed arm, caught in the branches of a palm tree, pointing a finger of blame at the surviving narrator.

The war gave the Islamic government a much-needed chance to consolidate its hold on power by pushing people into further conformity. The most obvious targets in this new wave of assault included intellectual institutions, including universities, publishing enterprises, and scores of cultural, political, and literary periodicals that had sprouted in the springtime of the revolution. *Ketab-e Jom'eh* the most influential weekly of the early post-revolutionary years, had already succumbed to apparently spontaneous but highly effective barriers placed against its printing, distribution, and sale.

Within the first year of the war several other important journals fell victim to the newly reorganised censorship apparatus. In May 1980 the seventh issue of the *Journal of the Writers' Association of Iran* was taken directly from the printing house to a paper-recycling plant. Similar fates befell numerous books deemed undesirable either by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance or by one or another of the many revolutionary organs that seemed to act on their own initiative but in fact had prior authorisation of the ruling clergy.

The chaotic situation arising from the Islamic state's war on the secular intellectual community has been further complicated earlier by the factionalism among the rulers. In June 1981, shortly after the ouster of Abolhassan Banisadr, Iran's first president, who had become intolerable to the clerical elements because of his outspoken stance against official repression, the Revolutionary Guards raided and ransacked the offices of the Writers' Association of Iran, confiscating all the files, membership records, tapes of the proceedings, and the books in its small library. A few days later, the long-expected assault on the anti-establishment writers began in earnest. The most active members of the Association were either arrested and held without formal charges or purged from the bureaucracy, the universities, and the mass media. Sa'id Soltanpur, a poet and playwright, arrested three months earlier, and a member of the Association's Executive Board, was executed on 29 June 1981. When the news was broadcast over the Voice of the Islamic Republic, many other members recognised the advisability of going underground, some not to surface again until they had crossed the country's borders into safety, many to end up in Paris. In the battle against the forces of reaction, repression, and obscurantism, Iranian writers had lost not only their dreams, social functions, means of communication, and personal voices; they had also lost their *raison d'être*.

Iranian writers are now in a period of clandestine life or forced exile. Literary writings in exile and the unpublished works of the last few years occupy a significant place in the annals of twentieth-century Persian literature. Within the former category such collections of poetry as Nader Naderpur's *False Dawn* (Paris, 1982), Esma'il Kho'i's *Blood-Molded Nightmare of the Wakeful* (London, 1984), Ne'mat Azarm's *Longing for the Fatherland* (Paris, 1983) and Mohammad Sahar's *Lyrics* (Paris, 1984), as well as most of the literary works published in *Alefba*, a periodical edited by Sa'edi and published in Paris, are only the most outstanding among scores of volumes of poetry, plays, and prose literature published outside Iran in recent years. As for unpublished works, I have heard many of these read to me in what would otherwise have been long, gloomy nights in various hideouts. I have also had the opportunity

during my exile to review large amounts of the literature produced abroad by Iranian writers. Therefore, I can hazard a few general observations on this literary corpus, whose true value will only be fully known in the future.

Literary creation cannot and does not undergo, in manner or in matter, the kind of sudden, radical change that imposes itself on the social scene. Unlike the social order, it cannot be revolutionised. No sudden thaw can therefore be expected in the symbolic landscape, esoteric diction, ambiguous allusions, formal rhetorical postures, and general frigidity of the literary temperament of a generation. Many of today's writers are among the makers and practitioners of the modern tradition in Persian literature. The conventions and conceptions of that tradition have become so instilled into the modern Iranian imagination and form such an integral part of contemporary Persian literature of Iran that any radical departure from them would make a literary work appear shockingly rootless. In addition, the formal and structural characteristics of modern Persian literature developed historically from a need to tackle social issues and have, therefore, shown great resilience, vitality, and flexibility in dealing with the revolution. Finally, insofar as the Iranian revolution has failed to bring about any fundamental social transformation, the existing literary approaches have been and are being reinforced in the creative mind of the post-revolution generations of Iranians.

Even so, changes can be seen in the literature of the Iranian revolution. The idea and experience of the revolution have affected the outward characteristics of contemporary literature, at times broadening, deepening, or strengthening its scope, meaning or social function, and at other times negating the very premises on which it rests. Occasionally, for example, one comes across bold attempts at direct expression in the face of an unambiguous but very complex situation. Substantively the widening field of individual, collective, aesthetic, and social experience has resulted in an expansion of the range of moods, messages, and meanings canonised and communicated in literature. Faced with violent assaults on intellect, imagination, and culture, Iranian writers have recorded greater fears, anxieties, hopes, and anticipations than ever before. A new and more self-assured sense of the dialectical shape of the imagination, dynamics of history, and the ritual ordering function of literary creation in the midst of chaos are fast entering literary works of the 1980s. Once again, the idea of social change is incorporated into the creative process by an acceleration of the rhythms behind the work of literature, this time combined with a realisation that collective will is necessary to fight for a new, more humane order. The desire for change is beginning to unite with the pounding beat of the national will to forge a new reality.

Finally, even though contemporary Iranian writers remain visionary idealists capable of turning any idea of social transformation into a mirror image of their dreams, they no longer seem to view the causes and consequences of such complex phenomena as political or ideological revolutions mechanically. Now more than ever before, Iranian writers seem conscious of the need to anchor their dreams in the roots of the history they have inherited and the depths of the society they are living in. The literature of these trying years reflects the writer's determination to set out on a long new journey in search of a novel sense of self, society, and world. Provisions for the journey consist of a more nourishing faith in the power of the individual to stand upright and continue on the pathway even after they have foundered. In this lies the chance for painful growth, as palpable as pain and as mysterious as growth itself.[17]

Part Two

CHAPTER 5

A Well Amid the Waste

An Introduction to the Poetry of Ahmad Shamlu

A Moment's Halt – a momentary taste
Of BEING from the Well amid the Waste –
And Lo! – the phantom Caravan has reach'd
The NOTHING it set out from – Oh, make haste!
Edward Fitzgerald, *Rubáiyát* 48

In his recent visit to the United States, the leading Iranian poet Ahmad Shamlu told me, with a tone of sober reflection, that he would rather be remembered and judged as the poet of collections such as *Aida dar Aineh* (Aida in the Mirror), *Shekoftan dar Meh* (Blossoming in the Fog), *Qoqnus dar Baran* (Phoenix under the Rain), *Marsiehha-ye Khak* (Elegies of the Earth) and *Ebrahim dar Atash* (Abraham in the Fire) than as author of the earlier and much more famous poems, particularly "Paiya" (The Fairies) and "She'ri keh Zendegi-st" (Poetry that is Life). To those who have always turned and returned to Shamlu's poetry as documents of political and historical significance, this statement may be surprising. However, for those who in the past thirty years have attentively watched the evolution of this free spirit in an increasingly unfree society, the poet's estimation of his own work may come as an illuminating revelation. At any rate, all those who are familiar with the development of contemporary Persian poetry will perhaps agree that Shamlu's long and successful career, both as a poet and as a public intellectual, is inseparably linked with the social and political conditions in modern Iran. His life has paralleled the life of his country, inspiring its future direction, reflecting its ups and downs, and at times even caught in the middle of such extrinsic conflicts as World War II and the turbulence of the early 1950s.

Born in Tehran in the fateful year of 1925 when Reza Khan finally seized the throne, bringing many intellectual hopes for a democratic government to an end, Shamlu spent his childhood in various provincial towns. The remembrance of his early years still makes the 51-year-old poet visibly

uncomfortable, and from the little that he has written about his childhood and youth one gets the picture of a helplessly unhappy youngster trying to understand the misery and suffering surrounding him:

> A filthy pension in the tiny city of Khash … I see a mattress which one more starving Baluch boy has wetted the night before, perhaps from fear of approaching death. This is almost a daily scene … In Mashhad, a sickly, disgusting and ill-tempered teacher … The agonising memory of his whip-strokes still fills my body and soul with pain … Villages with no trees, fields with no water and no shady spots … The tears of my mother who had to wash the dead body of her son, my brother, with her own hands … This is the context of my perceptions, the mirror which is supposed to reflect in itself all external reality![1]

On one occasion, however, the young boy overheard a neighbour playing Chopin on the piano. The experience drowned him in a thirst for music which poverty gave him no chance to quench. It had to be suppressed. Years later he refers to this memory in a statement which holds the key to understanding the most peculiar feature of his mature poetry, its music:

> My poetry, I think, originates from my suppressed longing for music in the same way that the dance-like patterns of Persian rugs have their origin in a national desire for dance and music which Islam had suppressed.[2]

Shamlu then turned to reading as a diversion from his hopeless love for music. He soon was so addicted to reading that he had to leave school in order to devote all his time to it. For the next twenty years of his life his reading took him through the field of national politics to the realm of poetry, before landing him first in an Allied prison during the post-war years and then in government prisons after the coup of 1953. In the past twenty years or so Shamlu's poetry has gone through many stages of development. The variety of his experiments with the language, the diversity of his poetic music, the multifariousness of his imagery and the stubborn independence of his poetic ideas demonstrate his refusal to fall into any easily identifiable category. In recent years the world of the Iranian intellectuals has come under increasingly forceful demands for conformity from the political establishment. As the possibilities of independent thought and free expression shrink more and more, only polar alternatives remain available

to a living Iranian poet. Shamlu's reaction to this situation has been a grand internalisation of his poetic message and a growing attitude of ambivalence towards his public. The sparkles of protest are still prevalent in his poetry, but whereas in his early poems he tended to confront the social system, in his later poems it is the healing power of poetry which soothes the anxieties of the poet and the reader.

Shamlu began his poetic career at a time when Persian poetry had been remoulded and given a new dynamism in the hands of a dynasty of men who gradually broke through the stagnating traditionalism and the consequent decline into which Persian literature had fallen in the nineteenth century. The opulent, ornamented language of the Persian poetry of the previous century had made it virtually incomprehensible to the masses, and this, of course, reflected the gradual isolation of the ruling elite from the realities of the common man's life. The growing familiarity of the Persian intelligentsia with rapidly changing European societies caused a wave of reawakening which finally resulted in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. The reforming spirit in the works of such socially motivated poets as Bahar, Iraj and Dehkhoda and the revolutionary zeal in the poetry of Farrokhi, Eshqi and Lahuti played key roles in this process and in the subsequent struggles.

Following in their wake came Nima, a solitary man of unusual genius who, in his rustic simplicity, single-handedly challenged and systematically changed almost all the traditionalistic tendencies in Persian poetry. In his hands poetry became the most profound means of an artistic expression whose order is organic rather than plastic, imposed from within by the dictates of the poet's feeling rather than from without by the tradition of poetic precepts. The excellence of the poet is measured, according to Nima, not by the degree of his success in strict adherence to traditional ideas of diction, decorum, rhyme and rhythm, but by the sincerity of his expression:

> The more sincerely you express yourself, the more poetic you become … This is true for the poets of the past, too … Whoever has reflected his time better is a better poet … One has to be the essence of his time, without pretence, without falsity … First comes life.[3]

Of all the disciples of Nima, none has put the words of the master into poetic expression as astutely as Shamlu in his "Poetry that is Life," a poem which he himself once considered his *ars poetica*. This is how the poem opens:

Mowzu'-e she'r-e sha'er-e diruz
Az zendegi nabud.
…
Emruz mowzu'-e she'r mowzu'-e digari-st,
emruz she'r harbeh-ye khalq ast,
Zira keh sha'eran,
khod shakheh'i ze jangal-e khalqand,
nah yasamin o sonbol-e golkhaneh-ye folan.[4]

(The subject of poets of yesteryear
was not life.
…
Today the theme of poetry is a different thing.
Poetry today is the weapon of the masses.
For poets themselves
are branches from the forest of the masses,
not the jasmine and hyacinths of someone's greenhouse.)

The post-World War II generation of Iranian poets, including Shamlu, was fascinated by Nima's poetry and poetic philosophy. What he taught these young poets was not to feel dwarfed by such great names as Ferdowsi, Rumi and Hafiz, to open their eyes to the world, to observe the social realities keenly and to speak without affectation. But above all he taught them, by his own example, never to cease their quest for new experiences, new spheres and the New Poetry. The result was staggering. In the past thirty years Persian poetry has given rise to poets like Mehdi Akhavan Saless, Forugh Farrokhzad, Sohrab Sepehri and, of course, Ahmad Shamlu, each of whom would perhaps be sufficient to make our time one of the most glorious eras of Persian literature.

What Shamlu owes to Nima above all is the ever-searching spirit of his poetry, always ready to plunge into new domains for the true poetic experience. A cursory glance at such youthful works as *Ahangha-ye Faramush-shodeh* (The Forgotten Songs, 1947), *Qat'-nameh* (Manifesto, 1951) and *Ahanha va Ehsas* (Steel and Feeling, 1953) in comparison with Shamlu's later poetry reveals the extent of his debt to Nima. In these early collections, written before the poet could fully comprehend the message of the master, a bewildered young man constantly seems to be trying to manage the unmanageable. An uneasy language, uneven rhythmic patterns and cumbersome rhyme schemes create an enervating atmosphere in which the poet's

indeterminate attitude towards his art hinders him in the noble intention of singing the suffering of the masses. By contrast, in later works, particularly in *Hava-ye Tazeh* (The Fresh Air, 1957), *Aida in the Mirror*, *Phoenix under the Rain* and *Blossoming in the Fog*, Shamlu is always in command. Whether in a folk-inspired work like "The Fairies" or in an entirely lyrical song such as "Aida in the Mirror," or even in his meditative poems, the excessive emotionalism of youth has hardened into a romantic belief in man, a mature outlook on life and a genuine faith in love. The easy-flowing rhythm in these later poems follows the poet instead of dragging him along; the softened music of the lines eases the movement of the poem, and strongly visual images reveal a penetrating power of observation. Most importantly, a happy marriage between Eastern and Western mythology and symbolism often gives a universal character to his poetry.

"I, an Iranian poet," Shamlu has written and is fond of emphasising in his conversation, "first learned about poetry from the Spanish Lorca, the French Eluard, the German Rilke, the Russian Mayakovsky … and the American Langston Hughes; and only later, with this education, I turned to the poets of my mother tongue to see and to know, say, the grandeur of Hafiz from a fresh perspective."[5] And indeed, Shamlu's poetry and poetic philosophy reflect an even more deeply rooted western influence than he can perhaps be conscious of. In many of his lines one can detect direct echoes of Lorca and Aragon. His images are sometimes as visual as Pound's, sometimes as abstract as Breton's. Like Eluard and Aragon, whom he has translated, Shamlu believes that poetry is first and foremost language, and as such nothing is more essential for the poet than to begin by trying the language on all its levels. Like Pound and Yeats, he considers the visual experience of the poet the base on which the poem is made to stand or fall. His belief in the profound will of poetry, in its deep memory and in action as the ordering principle underlying any poem links him with many of the great contemporary poets of our time such as Mayakovsky, particularly in his early poems.

Shamlu is one of the few Iranian poets who have read both the Bible and the Koran as poetry. His lyrical poems are remarkably influenced by the Song of Songs, which he has also rendered rather successfully into Persian. Christ's character and his Passion have always held a fascination for Persian poets. His life can easily be identified with the lives of thousands of nameless heroes who were betrayed and tortured because of their free spirits and their love for humanity. Shamlu's richly lyrical "Marg-e Naseri" (Death of the Nazarene), for example, pictures a Christ who is liberated from within by his own compassion and purity. In "Lowh" (Tablet) Christ is identified with

the poet whose message goes unheeded, while at the same time the nature of his mission vis-à-vis modern martyrs provides the poet's basic view of history. Here the poet descends from heaven viewing "the square and the streets / an octopus stretching a languid leg in every direction / towards a black swamp." When the crowd refuses to recognise and respect his mission, the poet reminds it that this is the very last Coming:

Faryad bardashtam:
Shod an zamaneh keh bar masih-e maslub-e khod beh muyeh
mineshastid,
keh aknun
har zan
maryami-st,
va har maryam ra
isa'i bar salib ast,
bi taj-e khar o salib o joljota,
bi Pilat o qazian o divan-e Adalat:
Isayani hameh ham-sarnevesht,
isayani yekdast,
ba jamehha hameh yekdast,
va papushha vo papichha'i yekdast – ham bedan qarar –
va nan o shurba'i beh tasavi.
[Keh barabari miras-e geranbaha-ye tabar-e ensan ast, ari!]
Va agar taj-e khari nist
khudi hast keh bar sar nehid,
va agar salibi nist keh bar dush keshid
tofangi hast.
Asbab-e bozorgi hameh amadeh,
va har sham cheh basa keh sahm-e akher ast,
va har negah
ey basa keh negah-e yahuda'i.[6]

(I cried out,
Gone are the days of mourning some crucified Christ,
for today
every woman
is another Mary,
and every Mary
has a Jesus upon the cross,

albeit with no Crown of Thorns, no Cruciform and no Golgotha;
no Pilate, no judges and no court of justice.
Christs all of a destiny,
clad similarly,
uniform Christs
with boots and leggings alike, alike in everything,
with the same share of bread and gruel,
(for equality is indeed the true heritage of the human race).
And if not a crown of thorns,
there is a helmet to wear upon the head;
and if not a cross,
there is a rifle to bear on the shoulder.
[means of greatness all at hand],
every supper
may well be The Last,
and every glance
perchance that of a Judas.)

In his more tranquil poems Shamlu preaches love not as an eternal allegory with cosmic significance but as a moment of internal harmony. Here a balanced, harmonious form often becomes the mirror reflecting the deep tranquility and nobility which love is capable of bestowing upon humans:

Labanat beh zaerrafat-e she'r
shavanitarin busehha ra beh sharmi chonan mobaddal mikonad
keh jandar-e ghar-neshin az an sud mijuyad
ta beh surat-e ensan daayad.[7]

(Your lips, delicate as poetry,
turn the most voluptuous kiss
into such coyness
that the cave-animal uses it
to become human.)

Shamlu's love poems are many and varied. In some, notably the earlier love lyrics, the poet pursues a sunlit, joyous kind of love which refines and ennobles the lover. Its benefits and ill effects are supreme joy and sorrow. In others love prompts the poet to meditate on the nature of

man, a process which often leads to thoughts of *vanitas vanitatum*. In more recent love poems the poet expresses his feelings with dazzling immediacy and memorable drama. As one reads these love poems, most importantly the Aida cycle, one cannot help but notice a gradual movement towards simpler expression and, at the same time, an increasing desire for isolation which is occasionally accompanied by a disquieting attitude of condescension towards the outside world. Lately Shamlu has written a number of poems which on the surface appear to be love poems. However, a close reading of these in conjunction with the poems of the Aida cycle reveals a movement from love to solitude, from essential harmony with the other to an existential loneliness. The poet desires complete imprisonment in the self:

Piazineh pust-var hesari,
keh ba khelvat-e khish chun beh khali benshinam,
haft darbazeh faraz ayad
bar niyaz o ta'alloq-e jan.

Foru basteh bad,
ari, foru basteh bad o
    foru bastehtar.
Va ba har darbazeh
haft qofl-e ahanjush-e geran.[8]

(A fortification like an onion-skin,
that with my solitude when I sit in secret,
seven gates shall slam shut
upon the body's longings and belongings.

Shut may they be,
yes, shut may they be
    and shut may they stay,
and on every gate
    seven heavy locks of steel.)

Passages of this kind may indeed seem at best unlikely from the poet of such socially committed works as "Poetry that is Life," "Dokhtara-ye Naneh Darya" (The Daughters of Mama Sea) and, above all, "The Fairies." When it exploded on the Persian literary scene in 1956, "The Fairies" brought great excitement to the literary community of Iran. Even disregarding the meaning

of its story and simply looking at it as an exercise in language, bringing together the literary and the common modes of speech, it was a triumphant achievement. It stirred the minds of the avant-garde literati with its sweeping force and profound implications. Finally, a way had been discovered to create literature of social significance in the language of the masses. Now, in all languages we find two modes of speech: common speech, the normal, everyday means of communication among individuals; and literary language, a refined medium of expression for the intelligentsia. In societies where the masses are illiterate the latter tends to become a lifeless plant gradually withering at its root. The former, on the other hand, extends its roots to the source of all life, namely the people. As such it remains a more intense, more primitive medium, appropriate to the collective acts of ritual. The people's heartbeat becomes its rhythm, their music its melody, their dreams its fantasy, their power its magic. Since poetry is an act in which poet and people commune, a successful combination of the two modes of speech is nothing short of magical.

This was the magic of "The Fairies." The poem begins with lines reminiscent of the old nursery rhyme with which children's stories begin:

Yeki bud yeki nabud
Zir-e gonbad-e Kabud
Sar-e kuh, Tang-e ghorub
setta pari neshasteh bud.
Zar o zar geryeh mikardand pariya,
mesl-e abra-ye bahar geryeh mikardan pariya.[9]

(Once upon a distant past
under heaven's dome downcast
at sunset were fairies three
sitting, sobbing silently.)

In this fairy-tale nowhereland, under a darkening sky, the story of the fairies is told while they sit "weeping ceaselessly like a spring cloud." They have left the Fortress of Old Legends behind and have found their way to the real world, whose profound miseries are making them weep so. Before them is the City of Captive Slaves, whence the clanking of chains fills the horizon. Soon a lone horseman, on his way to the city, appears and inquires about the cause of their deep sorrow. Being a mere human, his frame of reference is human needs:

Pariya goshnatuneh
Pariya teshnatuneh
Pariya khasteh shodin
Morgh-e par-basteh shodin

(Fairies fair, are you hungry?
Fairies fair, are you thirsty?
Fairies, are you tired and beat?
Have you had something to eat?)

He tells them that if they stay outside at night in their nakedness, snow, wolves or, even worse, a monster might descend upon them. He invites them to ride on his horse to the city, where the slaves are about to free themselves from long suffering. The fairies meanwhile go on shedding their endless tears, keeping their unbroken silence. Their refusal to get excited with the horseman about the future of his city makes him suspect their nature and their intentions. These may not be the friendly fairies of the fairy tales he has heard.

The horseman asks the fairies why they have bothered to come to this world of harsh realities. He explains how human beings have accepted their world and life with all its shortcomings. He admonishes them for having left the Fortress of Old Legends, where everything, according to fairy tales, is rosy and beautiful. Again, trying to entice them to come and witness how men too eventually make their own destiny and free themselves from the bonds of ignorance and the chains of slavery, he describes the imminent uprising:

Tonight all over the town
Homes of devils crumble down,
…
Everybody, sing and dance,
This is real people's chance:

Ours is the day, devils die!
Sing, dance and say devils die!
Bright's our day, devils die!
Darkness, away! Devils, die!

Still having heard no answer, he remembers that fairies are said to be sensitive to human touch. He immediately touches them on the shoulder to get them

going, when, in a grand metaphor of metamorphosis, the fairies change into elemental symbols time after time, emphasising the mutability and transience of the world. Finally one turns into a jug of wine, another into a sea of water, and the third into a formidable mountain obstructing the path to the horseman's destination, the City of Freed Slaves. The horseman, thus enlightened, realises that these wicked fairies were all along plotting to detain him and becomes more determined than ever to free himself from their machinations. He drinks the wine, crosses the sea and climbs the high mountain. His trials over, he can now see the city, basking in the generous rays of the sun. There people have destroyed injustice, worship freedom, share the toil and the blessings of life and live happily ever after. The poem thus ends with another nursery rhyme recited at the end of many a children's tale.

"The Fairies" remains a landmark in modern Persian poetry. In it dance, song, music and poetry merge, while a deceptively simple and childish story becomes the vessel containing a far-reaching allegory. The poem tells a story with an internal coherence of its own, almost entirely independent of its rhythmical variation. Thus the poem derives its unity from the story it tells and its diversity from the rhythmical structure. As an exercise with the capacities of folk and popular language, it is a superb experiment – one that none, including Shamlu himself, could ever again equal. As an allegory of political change, it drives the point home despite certain ambiguities which tend to make it rather difficult to comprehend without a line-by-line dissection. The images of light and darkness, in their literal and metaphorical opposition, create a dimly lit atmosphere in which such polarities as legend and reality, master and slave, fairies and men assume allegorical significance. The fairies, alien to the world of historical realities, are completely timeless creatures. They are not characters but symbols whose existence is justified by their function. The journeying horseman, on the other hand, can only be seen in his movement through time and space. When he describes what is about to happen in the City of Slaves, he assumes a degree of historical specificity that no one slightly familiar with the contemporary history of Iran can fail to interpret as the prophecy of an imminent revolution:

The slaves gather, torch in hand
to burn the night off our land,
to force the chain-maker out,
chain him, drag him all about.

And it was, above all, a promise of such magnitude which made "The Fairies" a stunning success and perhaps one of the most lasting poems in the mind of the Persians.

The success of "The Fairies" stunned even the poet himself, who for twenty years has insistently discounted its importance. He once wrote:

> "The Fairies" was little more than what you can find in our popular folksongs and children's rhyme games. It belongs more to people than to me. All I did was make a little hut with the material of popular songs.[10]

However, "The Fairies," I believe, is much more of an imaginative work than even Shamlu recognises. The structure and pattern of ritual, the meaning of the metamorphosis of the fairies, the imagery and symbolism of the poem and the mythical basis of the story each can be the topic of a separate study, to say nothing of the narrative and descriptive technique, the folk elements, the extraordinary diction and the hypnotic rhythm of the poem. To mention but one feature, the rhythm of this unusual work is designed to change in harmony with the movement of the narrative and consequently with the heartbeat of the reader. When events overtake the horseman, the rhythm quickens breath-takingly and the reader is made to gasp, whereas the moment the hero regains the mastery of his own mind, the poem changes pace and the reader is calmed down by the serenity of a peaceful rhythm.

"The Fairies" was the product of a historical moment – one of those poems which cannot be created without the help of some indefinable magic, like that of the fairies themselves. As the political environment of the country turned more venomous, and as the establishment quashed the intellectual ideal of a democratic society more and more brutally, it became next to impossible for the poet – any poet – to reflect such dreams. In the past fifteen years or so Shamlu has published half a dozen volumes of poetry in which not a single attempt has been made to revive the language and the rhythm of "The Fairies." To be sure, Shamlu has constantly been trying to create a harmonious world of the image and the idea in which the only music is the sound and the meaning of the word echoed in silence. It is a much more subtle, much more abstract poetry. Images such as "the height of the abyss," the "depth of solitude," "silence speaking with a thousand tongues," "the bloody tumbling of the dawn" and many others of this kind abound in his later poems. Often the unity of the poem depends on the symmetry and parallelism of its stanzas. A short poem entitled "The Dark Song" may serve as an illustration:

Bar zamineh-ye sorbi-ye sobh
savar khamush istasdeh ast
va yal-e boland-e asbash dar bad
parishan mishavad.
Khodaya, khodaya!
Savaran nabayad istadeh bashand
hangami keh
hadeseh ekhtar mishavad.
…
Kenar-e parchin-e sukhteh
dokhtar khamush istadeh ast
va daman-e nazokash dar bad
tokan mikhorad.

Khodaya khodaya!
Dokhtaran nabayad khamush bemanand
hangami keh
mardan nowmid o khasteh
pir mishavand.[11]

(In the leaden backdrop of the dawn
the horseman stands in silence,
the long mane of his horse
dishevelled by the wind.
O Lord, O Lord!
Horsemen are not to stand still
when the event is brewing.
…
By the burnt hedge
the girl stands in silence,
her delicate skirt
waving in the wind.
O Lord, O Lord!
girls are not to remain silent
When weary and despairing,
men grow old.)

The fleet-footed, sure-minded horseman of "The Fairies" has now been lulled into the flat-footed, still-minded man of this poem in which silence reigns

supreme. The poet's own feelings and emotions, which build and occupy many of his poems, have undergone a parallel transformation. For instance, thirty years ago when the young poet was in prison, his father repeatedly urged him to secure his release by signing a letter of remorse. In answer the 19-year-old poet wrote a poem entitled "Nameh" (A Letter) in which he speaks as one filled with conviction:

Mara to dars-e forumayeh budan amuzi
keh towbeh-nameh nevisam beh kam-e doshman bar,
nejat-e tan ra zanjir-e ruh-e khish konam
ze rasti beneshanam farib ra bartar,
ze sobh-e taban bartabam ay derigha ruy,
beh sham-e tireh-ye ru-dar-safar separam sar?
…
To rah-e rahat-e jan gir o man moqam-e masaf
to ja-ye amn o aman guir man tariq-e khatar.[12]

(You teach me to be a coward, father?
To register repentance at my enemy's will,
to enchain my soul in order to free my body,
to seat deceit higher than truth,
to turn away from the rising dawn, Oh,
to accompany a passing night on its death journey.
…
Take your soul to safety, father, and I my body to the battlefield,
Shelter yourself in comfort, and leave me in my great danger.)

The speaker of these lines is haughty and proud. He knows – or he thinks he knows – his own will and way. His defiant conviction, oozing from every line, can hardly be contained in the simple vessel of his poem. Thirty years later the same man summarizes himself in relation to the enemy in these lines:

Zadeh shodan
bar neyzeh-ye tarik
hamchon milad-e goshadeh-ye zakhmi.

Sefer-e yeganeh-ye forsat ra
sarasar

dar selseleh paymudan,
bar sho'leh-ye khish sukhtan
ta jeraqqeh-ye vapasin
bar sho'leh-ye hormati
Keh dar khak-e rahash yafteh-and
bardegan
    inchonin.

Inchonin sorkh o lavand
bar khar-buteh-ye khun shekoftan
v-inchonin garden-faraz
bar tazianeh-zar-e tahqyr gozashtan
va rah ra ta ghayat-e nefrat boridan.
Ah, az keh sokhan miguyam:
ma bi-chera zaendegaim,
anan beh chera-marg-e khod agahan-and.[13]

(To be born
on the dark spear
like the open birth of a wound.

To travel the unique exodus of opportunity
    throughout
        in chain,
to burn on one's flame
    to the very last spark
on the flame of a reverence
    found by the slaves
        in the dust of the way,
            thus.

Thus red and coquettish
to blosom on the thorn-bush of blood
and thus, tall and proud,
to pass through the scourge-field of degradation
and to travel through to the extreme of hatred …

Oh, who am I speaking of?
Living with no reason are we,
conscious to the reason of their death, they.)

A possible misconception must be dispelled before this brief account of one of the most influential living poets of the Persian language is brought to a close. I do not intend to lead the reader to believe that the early Shamlu is a better artist. On the contrary, Shamlu's later poems are likelier to determine the future trends in Persian poetry than are his earlier ones. The degree of cohesiveness which Shamlu has achieved in some of his recent poems such as "The Song of Abraham in the Fire," "The Song of the Man of Light who Passed into Gloom" and "I am still thinking of that raven" can only be compared to such poems as Mallarmé's "Le cygne," Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" and Alexander Blok's "The Twelve." His lyrical poems are already approaching Pound's most lyrical moments in the *Cantos* or Cavafis at his best; and the poet, one must remember, is still in mid-career. What this essay proposes is that, in a world of shrinking possibilities of expression, Shamlu has perforce been separated from his audience and made to turn inwards. He has moved from action to reflection, from certainty to doubt and from quest to solitude. Many of Shamlu's latest poems remain completely within the domain of intense personal experience, hardly venturing outside the poet without becoming blurred and vague. The poet who once expressed the dreams and aspirations of his society now tends to distill them into intense and pure feelings which he hopes will signify to the reader the underlying vision which the poet can no longer express as freely as he used to. By telling his reader about his weariness and despair, he hopes to prompt us to inquire about the reasons behind them. Thus the mere expression of this despondency becomes a gesture of protest in itself.

Early Shamlu is a man of power, persuasion and determination; later Shamlu is very much a poet of pen, paper and deliberation. As such, while the verisimilitude of his early works demands a basically historical response, the abstraction of his later poems evokes a primarily imaginative one. He has come more and more to view poetry as a mirror which the thinking poet, in an uncertain world, holds up to his own soul. The sweeping energy of the young dreamer has gradually subsided into the brooding pessimism of the white-haired poet who knows – or believes he knows – that change will come only if thought accompanies action. His struggle, like that of his countrymen, now goes on below the surface.

CHAPTER 6

Up from the Underground

The Meaning of Exile in Gholamhossein Sa'edi's Last Short Stories

It was in our third meeting, shortly after my arrival in Paris in August 1983, that I finally asked my friend, the Iranian writer Gholamhosein Sa'edi, to tell me the story of his border crossing. "You will read about it someday," he said. He already knew that whatever his story, I was going to urge him in the end to write it. Then he changed the subject. He was putting the finishing touches to the third issue of *Alefba*, a journal he had once edited in Iran and that he had resumed in his exile in Paris. What did I think of it? I insisted, and, as was his unfailing habit, he eventually relented.

He had left Iran a year before, at the height of the repression that had followed the final confrontation of the Islamic Republican state with the intellectual community. "I was drunk when they picked me up," he started. He was already cringing before the memory. "I really don't remember the whole thing." He had come to know, and I suspect like, my love of detail. "But I'll tell you the good part." After the group had cleared Iranian territory, entering Pakistan, a guide had turned to him and, "relax, Iran is now behind you," he had said, pointing to a hill over the horizon. Sa'edi had already started to walk back before the guides could realise what he was doing. "There was a real wrestling match, fist fight, and karate," he said, sipping his beer. Eventually, one guide had blocked his way, his revolver drawn. "I knew he meant it by the look in his dark eyes. And I sat down and cried like I had never done before in my life."

To all who have experienced it, exile always means more than a physical separation from the homeland. Home, after all, is not just a little hill over the horizon. But beyond that, how can we get a glimpse into the emotions that the fact of severance from the place to which the exile perceives himself or herself as belonging instigates in his or her mind. What factors – personal, political, and universal – go into the making of those emotions? In the case of exiled writers, how can we relate the fictional works they produce to their condition as exiles? There certainly is the kind of separation from the homeland – benign at least in terms of the creative impulse it gives rise to – of

which Edward Said speaks in the introductory chapter to *The World, the Text, and the Critic*.[1] In a broader context, this can be called the condition of the expatriate: the kind of separation that fosters a stronger sense of filiation in the subject's mind – Dante outside Florence, Henry James and Tom Eliot in England, "The Lost Generation" in Paris. Within the Persian culture itself, the medieval mystic's sense of severance from the original wholeness of creation has provided the impulse for a great amount of creative imagining.[2] Among modern Iranian writers, Sadeq Hedayat, Sa'edi's favourite modern Iranian fiction-writer, had experienced long periods of residence in Europe and in India. In fact, I hope to demonstrate that a variation of the same condition had occurred in Sa'edi's life as a creative writer of fiction.

The kind of exile I have made the focal point of this essay, however, is in a real sense the opposite condition. It is perceived as uprootedness in an almost literal sense, in that it gives the exile a sense of separation of one part of his or her soul from the rest, from what provides it with all the nourishment it needs to sustain its existence as a living organism. It breeds not so much the power to recall the homeland but a deep anxiety about forgetting it and therefore a desperate desire to return to it. In a creative mind, it probably produces the irresistible urge to conjure up images of the homeland as well, but this feeling is stifled and the image distorted at every manifestation by the fear that one's world may be helplessly slipping away. The result is a kind of writing in its helpless attempt to bring the world of an inner struggle to those who have experienced nothing of the pain that the struggle leaves behind, in its inadequacy to communicate, and consequently in the perception it gives to the reader of an unclear, inconsistent, and unstable relationship with reality, reflects the trials and torments which plague the exilic mind. Unlike Hedayat, Sa'edi had not left Iran until 1978, rather late in his career as a writer. Consequently, the effects of his brief stays in the United States and England in that year, as well as his three-year life in exile in Paris, can be more directly traced in the works he produced during the last years of his life.

Sa'edi's fiction had from the beginning been marked by a terse sense of verisimilitude and a profound commitment to realism. Although the point seems too obvious to require documentation, I am thinking more particularly here of Sa'edi's technique of characterisation in 'Azadaran-e Bayal (The Mourners of Bayal) and Tup (The Canon), as well as in such short stories as "Do Baradar" (The Two Brothers), "Sa'adatnameh" (The Book of Happiness), and "Aramesh dar Hozur-e Digaran" (Calm in the Presence of Others).[3] Sa'edi travelled to the United States at the invitation of

The American PEN club in 1978 after he had been imprisoned, reportedly tortured and forced to denounce his writings by the Iranian secret police, the SAVAK, in the early 1970s. His release and his trip to the U.S. came about largely as a result of the efforts of American writers and the work of the Committee for Artistic and Intellectual Freedoms in Iran.

The short stories Sa'edi wrote after he was forced to flee the Islamic Republic, first going into hiding in Tehran and then being driven into exile, contrast sharply in their methods and mechanisms of signification with his total output throughout his life as an Iranian writer, and particularly with the stories he had written immediately before those events.[4] Culminating in his Parisian trilogy, consisting of "Jarukesh-e Saqf-e Aseman" (The Sweeper of the Celestial Ceiling), "Sofreh-ye Gostardeh-ye Rosum-e Nahofteh" (The Set Table of Hidden Customs), and "Talkhabeh" (The Bittern), they contain at their core two projects: they aim, in the first place, to communicate the enormity of what the writer perceives as the crimes of the theocracy ruling over his country through the phantasmagoria of their thematic concerns and narrative method. Secondly, in order to do so, the writer conjures up a series of references to primordial images drawn from diverse contexts and cultures with little regard for any sense of internal coherence among them. The result is a series of more or less disjointed episodes within each story which are held together by no more than the writer's ever-present obsession with the depiction of unbridled brutality. At the centre of the world in these narratives stands a series of ideologically motivated legendary tyrants surrounded by individuals interested in supporting and serving tyrannical powers for their own petty interests. At the other end of the power relations depicted in these stories one comes across the vague silhouette of a mass of people who, through their docility and sheepish acceptance of their lot, perpetuate the situation endlessly. This is at times contrasted with the lonely defiance of an occasional hero who, even though he leaves a memory of resistance in the communal mind, fails to change anything. Together, the concentric circles of tyrannical systems wreak havoc upon masses of people utterly incapable of changing their condition.

By contrast, the stories that Sa'edi had written at the height of the revolutionary movement in Iran reveal their author's lifelong search for psychological depth through understatement and economy. "Ashofteh-halan-e Bidar-bakht" (The Deranged of Wakeful Fortunes), "Vagon-e Siah" (The Black Wagon), and "Ay-vai To Ham!" (Ah, You Too!) all attest to their author's concerns about, and reflections upon, the immediate environment which surrounds his consciousness. In them Iranian intellectuals' struggles to break

free from the tyranny of the monarchial order, and the threat presented to human relations by conditions of revolutionary chaos are treated with exactitude and care. The meanings produced through these stories epitomise a wider world and enhance the reader's vision of that which they point to in a way that the gargantuan dimensions of the later stories cannot even remotely approximate.

Of these latter group of stories, "The Deranged …" is particularly appropriate to the point I mean to make in this essay, and I shall confine my discussion to that story as illustrative of its author's approach to the production of meaning through fiction. Conceived during Sa'edi's earlier stay abroad, the story depicts foreign characters in a foreign environment. Nevertheless, because the writer did not view himself as an exile, his approach to subject-matter, to theme and to the methods of communication does not reflect a break with the past. However, in the stories he began to write in response to his deep disillusionment with the revolution he had wholeheartedly supported, Sa'edi seems to have adopted drastically different methods of signification and communication in order to convey the ontological newness of what he felt his country was experiencing. The result is a series of stories that reflect the debilitating preoccupations of the exilic mind through their failings as works of fiction designed to conjure images of the situation in the writer's homeland. Accordingly, I intend to analyse Sa'edi's exilic stories, particularly the Parisian trilogy, contrasting the processes of signification employed in them with those used in "The Deranged …," a work unique among Sa'edi's fictional writings in many respects. Such a contrastive study may ultimately reveal the debilitating effects of what I would like to call the real exile – the kind that paralyses the mind by binding it to irreconcilable preoccupations – on the creative process.

Sa'edi had conceived of the idea for a short story on the theme of Eliot's "Prufrock" during his stay in the United States. In the summer of 1978 at my home in a suburb of Washington, D.C., he asked me to read T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" to him. He had read a Persian translation of the poem, and thought very highly of it. I did read the poem for him, and we discussed it as well as Eliot's life and art briefly. "You will have to read more Eliot to me," he said, "especially his *Wasteland*." And a little later, alluding to another remark I had made that day, he said: "Now, there's a good reason for learning a foreign language." We parted a few days later, for Sa'edi had decided to go to London to assist the poet Ahmad Shamlu in the publication of *Iranshahr*, a weekly that had been launched on the eve of the Iranian Revolution.[5]

Two years later in Iran, Sa'edi told me that he had written a story on the theme of Eliot's "Prufrock." Published in spring 1981, the story depicts, according to its opening sentence, "the very loving and historic meeting between A.J. Prufrock and Miss Lampton," a tragicomic encounter that takes place at End Groove Pub, located in London's remote district of South Wimbledon.[6] In this meeting Prufrock, utterly fascinated by the intellectual power and emotional detachment and nonchalance of his beloved, is first bullied, then insulted, and finally humiliated by Miss Lampton, a domineering woman whom he loves desperately. However, the story tells us in its closing section, "the derangement of A.J. Prufrock had an auspicious ending." A few weeks later, when Prufrock spots his beloved at a table in the same pub, as usual smoking a cigarette and absorbed in a crossword puzzle, he passes her by without pausing for a drink at the pub. And the narrator closes the story by commenting, as if from inside Prufrock's psyche, "and he felt that, now that he had assumed a distance for his selfhood, he could write his love song."

The principal theme of the story, the struggle between the intelligent, introspective and caring Prufrock and the superficial, pretentious, and unfeeling Lampton, is developed with great attention. The subtleness of the combat is emphasised through the abstraction of the combatants from the protagonists, and the delegation of a mental space for their constant posturing. Early in the meeting, we are told, Prufrock begins to feel a sensation creeping into the intricate, soot-covered hollows of his mind "much like a little lizard." The animal begins to chide Prufrock for his excessive self-abnegation, admonishing him to preserve his dignity and reminding him that love contains an element of self-respect as well as mutual courtesy and consideration. Gradually, the lizard assumes a life of its own in the narrative. The reader is guided through the labyrinthine world of Prufrock's psyche through its movements, the wiggling of its body, the slinging of its tail, and various other motions providing clues to the state of the lover's mind.

Similarly, we become aware of the presence of a "white, long-beaked bird constantly fluttering about behind Miss Lampton's forehead." Throughout the Scene in the pub, the predatory bird and the agile lizard advance the plot from inside the two characters' minds. Thus, the leaps and stops of the lizard, the rapid nervous twirling of its tail, and the sinuous gestures of its body, tongue and mouth become signs of a desperate lover's attempts to reconcile love with human dignity. In a parallel process of abstraction, the nameless bird's patterns of flight and playful manoeuvring come to signify the various strategies of domination and control devised by the masculine Miss Lampton.

As Prufrock's situation deteriorates outwardly, the alert reptile first scolds the lover, then instructs him, and finally entices him to action. At one point, we are told, it wags its tail and bids the consciousness which it objectifies "take care of yourself, my dear," while at another it lashes out its tail incessantly, an action designed, the narrator tells us, to remind the lover that "some whips never cease to flog you." The flogging works. Prufrock, vaguely realising that he must have misinterpreted love all along, acts to save his dignity. Feeling "a vague pain illuminating his chest," he follows Miss Lampton to a telephone booth where he overhears her promising somebody that she would "get rid of this little bore in a few minutes." The lizard wriggles at the discovery. Prufrock, satisfied that the woman he loves does not love him, buys a single rose on his return to the pub, and places it in front of him in an empty glass before resuming his drinking. In the end, when Prufrock begins to think that he can write his love song, the lizard's applause ends the story: "Bravo!"

Like his characterisation, Sa'edi's technique of description in "The Deranged …" is economical and multilayered. The device of cataloguing, a familiar one in all of modern Persian fiction including many of Sa'edi's previous stories, is used here to provide a tourist's eye view of London for the contemporary Iranian reader. End Groove pub faces the mouth of an underground station, we are told, one stop north of Morden, the terminal point on the Black Line. An item of old news, which the reader may recall having read in the newspaper, is related to provide some background to the place. Morden has achieved a degree of notoriety, the narrator reminds us, ever since a brake failure caused an underground train to slam into the tunnel wall, killing hundreds of passengers. The morbid memory of that tragic accident may be one reason why many passengers alight at South Wimbledon, go up in the lifts, and visit one or another of the little shops lined up along the street. A few inevitably hit the pub, glancing on their way at various little shops somehow all named Holly Rose: Holly Rose Burial Services, Holly Rose Matrimonial, Holly Rose Antiques, Holly Rose Apparel, Holly Rose Indian Food, and an empty bookshop with a holy book on display "inevitably named Holly Rose." Already, it seems, stereotypes like the "nation of shopkeepers" are at work in this initial description, combined here with the estrangement that begins with the perception of unfamiliarity of the language and finds expression here in the juxtaposition of such discordant activities as burial services and matrimonial arrangements being conducted from neighbouring shops as well as the familiar food/book dichotomy, here emphasised through the adjacency of a well-stocked Indian food shop and an empty bookshop.[7]

The pub itself quickly becomes a miniature community containing in it elements clearly associated with British society in the contemporary Iranian imagiunation. The owners, managers and customers of nearby shops comprise its regular visitors, and before settling on Prufrock and Lampton, the narrator provides us with a long-shot view of the whole pub crowd: sombre-looking undertakers from the nearby Holly Rose Burial Services accompanying a confused next-of-kin, an elderly man flanked by two one-eyed dogs, a look-alike father and son. As the catalogue continues, the reader begins to get a glimpse of what in the author's mind may be most identified with the Britishness of the pub. Among the regular customers there is an old man "reputed to have frequented the pub since the days of Dickens." Another, a middle-aged, "wrinkled" man, has the habit of starting a monotonous giggle as soon as he sees his glass of lager before him, giving out a noise much like that of a running sewing machine. The last two images, one working on the cultural plane, the other on the political level, are particularly significant. Dickens, of course, is considered the quintessential English realist. His descriptions of the industrial society are often perceived as epitomising the consummate art of remaining faithful to reality. The image of the "wrinkled" man combines the notion of reification – of men literally "turning into" the machines which they operate – with the widespread belief that British domination of many "oriental" countries, including Iran, was made possible by its textile industries. Thus, the image of the man sounding like a sewing machine comes to represent the Iranian writer's view of the effects of industrialisation on man, and consequently his critique of contemporary British society.

To cite only one more example, the commonplace phrase "the sinking ship of the empire", journalistic jargon current in many third-world countries in reference to the declining status of Great Britain in recent decades, has here been turned into the picture of a sailing ship caught in a storm framed and hung on the tavern wall. "If they had only taken the dust off the painting, the ship might not be sinking," the narrator observes, "it might have been able to continue its voyage indefinitely." The visual metaphor of the painting thus mediates between the stereotypical notion of the British Empire in decline and the pub scene as grounds for immediate observation. The verbal and the visual complement one another, as the image of the sinking ship reinforces the writer's attempt to evoke an image of English society through his description of the pub. The techniques of characterisation and description I have outlined here are neither exclusive to Sa'edi nor novel in this particular short story. In his earlier fiction, too, Sa'edi had made ample use of metonymic

reductions and metaphoric representation to communicate meaning through his fictional works.[8] What is new about "The Deranged …" is that here that familiar technique is employed as a distancing mechanism marking an environment in which the Iranian writer has lived for a while, but feels himself emphatically an outsider. In description as well as in characterisation, Sa'edi remains an Iranian writer – all his cultural stereotypes intact – looking in at English society with the eyes of an outsider. Through the act of writing a story with a London setting and British characters, he ultimately defines himself and his own culture.

The story is unique among Sa'edi's fictional works in one important respect. Never before had the author ventured to write on the theme of a foreign character type. Nor had he even ventured outside familiar scenes of rural and urban life in contemporary Iranian society. But whatever Sa'edi's understanding of Eliot's poem, Prufrock's problem, or the state of English society, the degree of precision, economy and signifying power he achieves in this short story can be seen as the direct result of his lifelong habit of attention to detail and an eye for those little objects and phenomena that can potentially provide sources for fictional meaning. Thus, in spite of the fact that he had never before fictionalised so unfamiliar a setting or had explored so uncharted a mental territory, his approach to the production of meaning remains substantially the same. The fact of his physical presence in his native setting or fictional excursion away from it proves irrelevant to his approach to the production and communication of meaning. In this case, in fact, the writer's physical absence from his homeland gives his fiction an added dimension, one which aligns him even further with his own culture by depicting an-"other" culture.

It is hard to envisage a sharper rupture in a writer's career anywhere in modern Persian literature than that apparent in Sa'edi's fictional writings before and after he had come to face the prospect – later the haunting reality – of exile. Even before he had been forced to leave the country, the fate of the revolution in which he had invested a great amount of mental energy and heartfelt hope had begun to work on his mind. The first manifestations of his attempt to address a reality which he saw both as fearfully novel and yet alarmingly familiar began to show themselves in "Dar Aghaz-e Safar," a short story written in 1980 as the first rumours of the reinstatement of torture as an instrument of state policy in revolutionary Iran began to circulate in the country[9] Already, Sa'edi must have been thinking of it as an episode in a longer work. When it was first published in spring 1981, the story carried a note at the end, identifying it as "a chapter from a book", presumably to

be published shortly thereafter. The book has yet to be materialised at this writing, although other episodes have been published, two a few months later in Iran, two others in the following years in Paris.[10] In an interview with the BBC, as well as here and there in his own writings, he referred to these as his "grand allegory of the Iranian revolution."[11] It is these stories that I would like to analyse as symptomatic of a mental attitude towards the fact of separation from the homeland very different from that which we associate with the mentality of the expatriate.

"Dar Aghaz-e Safar" (At the Journey's Beginning), the story that begins that "grand allegory," depicts an embassy about to be dispatched from the court of the Egyptian Khedive on a mission to the court of the Emir of Tartary. As the caravan prepares to set out, the Khedive, fearful of the threat posed by his powerful eastern neighbour, insists that his gifts should be chosen in such a way as to arouse awe and wonderment at the court of the Tartars. To that end, he has just added six ostriches and a giraffe to his already dazzling list of gifts. A suggestion is made that, in order to make the animals even more impressive, they should be given the names of the greatest men of the past. Plato, Aristotle, Farabi, Avicenna and Averroes are all honoured by having the beasts of the Khedive's kingdom named after them. When a learned attendant recommends the name of poet Naser-e Khosrow for one of the swift-footed, safety-conscious, and double-natured birds (the Persian word for an ostrich is shotor-morgh, literally camel-bird), another protests. That poet, he argues, never served a sovereign, and has turned many believers into free-thinkers. The idea is rejected and the impudent courtier duly punished. Finally, when the naming ceremony is completed, the Khedive and his court return to the city, and the caravan prepares to leave camp. As the mission sets out, the narrator, one of the three leaders of the convoy, sees a "young, happy serpent" coiled on a slab of rock, singing "a happy, strange tune not unlike the chirping of birds in springtime." The convoy heads for the port.

Already that final metaphor contrasts with the lizard and the long-beaked bird of "The Deranged …" in the indeterminacy of its connotations. What precisely is signified by the chirping serpent beyond the mixed emotions of joy and fear with which the two components of the creature – the bird and the snake – are associated remains uncertain. Nor is the image supplemented by any thoughts or actions that might lead the reader towards a more controlled reading of it as a literary sign. The central event of the narrative, the ritual baptism of animals as great men, is no more precise, certainly far less anchored in any psychic or mythical ground. The reader is free to surmise that the revolutionary attempt to rename everything from streets and

cinemas to government institutions and historical events, aimed naturally at the reconstruction of the past in the service of the present, may be what the writer aims to convey through it.

The Khedive's motive in adding the animals to his gifts can likewise be related to the efforts of the leaders of the Islamic Republic in portraying their culture, their destiny and their vision of the world – ultimately their revolution – as unique and different in fundamental ways from anything others might imagine. In both cases, the desire to fend off danger by startling the outside world can be identified as the motive behind actions that strike the others as incomprehensible. The writer's technique of distancing the narrative from the present and his refusal to situate it in any historical past beyond what is suggested by such titles as the Khedive and the Emir, or some details of the journey itself, gradually help the reader in reordering his sense of the relationship between the structure of fictional occurrences and that of the historical events which it may signify. The looseness of the significatory processes thus instills in the reader an expanded sense of the connections between the events of the story and the specific history in which an Iranian reader may see him- or herself situated. Obviously, the move towards an allegorical presentation of reality is well underway in this first episode.

The second episode concentrates on the practice of skinning animals alive in order to preserve the freshness and lustre of their hide. In their passage through a wonderland of fantastic sights and sounds, the Egyptian functionaries experience what can only be called an accompanying inscape of intense emotions. They are moved to elation, awe, anguish and pure dread, before being abruptly overwhelmed by a noise "much like the yawning of a newly awakened dragon." The dreadful noise brings the convoy to a halt. It is variously interpreted by the travellers as "a strange shriek boiling up from the depths of the abyss, the death-throes of a gigantic creature being beheaded by a fiery axe," and an uproar "reverberating inside the human soul." Petrified, the other two caravan leaders, Hashem and Ebn-e Rashid, counsel the narrator not to proceed. But in as loud a voice as he can muster, the latter reminds the entire caravan of the ordeals they have left behind:

> We have gone through thousands upon thousands of misfortunes and scourges, never admitting fear. We cut a swath across that incredible tempest in the Dead Sea where we saw ghosts of all kinds of living creatures swinging upon the waves. We made our way out of the scorched desert where a gigantic star flitted up and down ceaselessly like a burning mace, threatening to annihilate us all. We broke free from the grip of a pack of

> spectral, grinning beasts which had surrounded us, intent upon burying us in the desert. Now we must not allow fear to take hold of us, for we will rescue ourselves from the clutch of these shrieks, too, just as easily as we have done in other ordeals.[12]

As the narrator and his assistants charge their horses in the direction of the noise, they begin to realise that the shrieks come not from any particular side but from all around, "filling not just the earth but the kingdom of heaven as well." At the foot of a short mudbrick wall, the three come to a halt "like three human busts mounted on statue horses," for they see, from that vantage point, a landscape of indescribable beauty, resembling "an emerald bowl," shrouded in a foul stomach-churning stench. In the midst of this valley, they see the source of the confounding noise, a grotesque beast wearing no skin upon its flesh, covered here and there with patches of clotted blood from which streams of the red liquid run down the beautiful curves of the beast's body shining under the sun. Running directionless, the animal continues to emit the deafening noise the spectators have been hearing until it collapses lifeless upon the ground. The onlookers then begin to spot the many shining carcasses that litter the landscape of "the emerald bowl."

A description of the actual skinning of an ox brings the narrative to its culmination. The beast is hung on a tree, its neck caught in a rope "as thick as a giant's brawn," and the master skinner goes to work:

> Brandishing his sharp, shiny bodkin, the dark muscular man ran forward, leaped in the air, and, turning around full circle, his tongue hanging out like a bloody cut of meat, began to slice the skin around the beast's neck with expert craftsmanship. So exquisitely was this done, with such ordered grace, that it looked as if in the blink of an eye the animal had been adorned with a wreath of white flowers interspersed with red bulbs.[13]

Towards the end of the narrative, the travellers ask the kindly, hospitable, bearded skinners whether they know the glorious Emir and his court. "We have learned the art of skinning animals alive from him, and from his courtiers," explains the master skinner, "especially from the glorious Emir himself." The embassy continued along its way.

The structure of events in this action-packed story strengthens the impression that Saʿedi has indeed begun to convey his messages on the basis of his perception of a fundamental change in the relationship between the external and the internal, between reality and its fictional representation.

If we can surmise the theme of the story to be related to the numerous tortures and executions which were taking place in Iran at this time, we begin to feel that the writer must have judged the situation too grave, the crimes committed and perpetrated by the new state too heinous, to allow any mimetic presentation sufficient communicative force. Moreover, the reader may be reminded, as this reader has been, of the many statements made by the leaders of the Iranian state in this period that far more drastic measures can be justified if they are undertaken with the intention of ensuring the survival of the faith. One such statement, made by the Ayatollah Khomeini himself, maintained that the opponents which the Islamic state was being accused of torturing were not human at all. These are the "soba'" (wild beasts) he had asserted in one of his speeches.

If then the central action of the story – i.e., the skinning of live animals – is indeed meant as an allusion to the fact of widespread torture and execution of political opponents by the Islamic state, then other signifiers such as the locus of the action, the narrator's reference to previous ordeals, descriptions of the men involved in the action, and other details of the narrative begin to release new meanings based on that initial assumption. The exhortation to advance without fear is then seen to stem from the narrator's awareness of the group's (the Iranian people?) capacity for survival, "the emerald bowl" is associated with the colour of the Iranian sky as it is depicted in Persian poetry, and the "kindly, bearded skinners" are identified with the bearded clerics who had risen to positions of political power in the new Iranian state. But by refusing to relate these images to any recognisable reality of political life in the country in any more perceptible way, the writer apparently signals to his readers his intention to draw attention to the inadequacy of any pre-constituted sign system.

In this sense, Sa'edi's choice of what he has called his "allegorical" account of the revolution in Iran is itself turned into a signifier.[14] But the mass of floating signifiers Sa'edi presents here ultimately runs the risk of losing much of its force at the sight of consumption. Doubtless as a political writer, Sa'edi may have been motivated primarily by a desire to underscore the enormity of the crimes he has set out to portray through his fictional narrative. However, this should not blind us to the literary risks involved in such attempts. Here at least we see the clarity that arises out of understatement, economy and verisimilitude abandoned in favour of the desire to make an impact upon the reader's mind that would somehow match the theme. The final remark about the skinners having learned their art "from the glorious Emir himself" provides a case in point. What precisely is meant by it is far

from clear. Throughout the story, the narrator himself confides that at times his fascination with the master skinner's exquisitely skillful operations and tranquil movements had prevented him from "hearing the black shrieks of the beast, arising from the depths of his being." Is this then to be read as a statement directed at detached observers of the political atrocities of the Islamic Republic in Iran? Can we turn this fictional message into something akin to this statement: fascination with the political savvy which the Iranian clerics were demonstrating to ensure their survival as rulers prevented some people from concentrating on the human sufferings they were causing in accomplishing that goal.

One thing is certain, though. As the allegorical dimension of the stories begins to expand in the subsequent episodes, the reader familiar with the preceding stories begins to feel the enhancement of his ability to attribute new meanings to the increasingly ambiguous signs that appear in each subsequent one. At the same time, it becomes more and more difficult to know with any degree of certainty whether these meanings are intended by the writer. The process culminates in the trilogy which the writer published in his Parisian exile,[15] and which I intend to discuss in the last portion of this essay. Here, we see the exilic mind in the act of conjuring up images of what is thought to be going on in the homeland the exile has left behind. "Jarukesh-e Saqfe-e Aseman" (The Sweeper of the Celestial Ceiling), "Sofreh-ye Gostardeh-ye Rosum-e Nahofteh" (The Set Table of the Hidden Customs), and "Talkhabeh." (The Bittern) thus continue the search for episodes and incidents, as well as vehicles and methods that show the gravity of the situation in the writer's homeland. With an ever-greater push toward the extraordinary, the excessive and the bestial, the exiled writer produces a series of narratives wherein no final meaning can be attached to each sign, although a clear impression is left on the reader's mind of the state of the mind behind the fiction. These stories emit a sense of dual pulse where extended connotations are established and denied at the same time, where actions and events are shot through with obscurities, and where the reader's search for coherence is sabotaged at every step by the writer's design to trespass reality wherever he can.

"The Sweeper …", first published separately before the other two, but reprinted as the second story in the trilogy, continues the narrative of the Eastward journey through the presence of the narrator we have come to know in the preceding stories. He tells the story of the embassy's arrival in a city of magnificent churches and civilised citizens. The travellers are surprised to note that, unlike with other cities, here their arrival is barely even noticed. People seem focused instead on a lone tree in the middle of the

central square. From its branches a single shoe and, further down, a small bundle can be seen hanging. He becomes curious, and eventually hears the story of the following narrative from an old man in an empty park. The city's peaceful life is abruptly interrupted by the arrival of a priest from Rome who issues a proclamation making attendance at church services compulsory on pain of flagellation. The lone sweeper of the city, an old ascetic man known to the people as Baba, is the only man who defies the edict resolutely. He continues to appear in the city early each morning, sweep the entire place clean, and retire to his hut, tent or cave (nobody knows which) outside the city walls at night.

Angered by the sweeper's refusal to obey his ruling, the priest one day informs his congregation, now composed of the entire citizenry, that the old sweeper is to be flogged at the city square the next morning. The city gathers to watch, and the sweeper appears on the scene at the appointed time. He walks up to the tree in utter dignity, climbs it, takes his broom from among the branches, and flies off to the sky, riding it. As the narrator listens to this story in wide-eyed amazement, a young man approaches him, holding the old shoe in his outstretched hand. "Take this to the Emir of Tartary," he says, "and tell him that there have been many like him before, even in priestly robe, even living within church walls." The narrator hangs the shoe around the neck of Avicenna the Giraffe, and the caravan moves on. A few stone-throws from the gate the emissaries are stunned by the sight of a broom sweeping all filth from the entire surface of the heaven's ceiling.

"The Set Table …" concentrates on the ritual stoning of adulterers, an ancient practice sanctioned by Islam but rarely resorted to in modern times until the Islamic Republican State in Iran revived it early on after the revolution. Having ordered the convoy to pitch camp outside a nameless city in order to procure provisions, the narrator introduces his new guide, a well-travelled man prone to exaggerating his experiences, at times turning them into fantastic tales. "Although he was a seasoned story-teller who at times could captivate you," the narrator observes, "he did not always tell his stories well, sometimes growing impatient with the story, sometimes at a loss how to end a tale which he had begun so well." One such story-telling séance between the narrator and his guide is interrupted by the return of a group of procurers from the nearby city. They bring the news of an impending event far more fantastic than anything the storytelling guide might be able to broach together: that very afternoon an old man, reputed to have lived more than a hundred years, is to be tried by the mufti on charges of adultery; if convicted, he would be punished on the spot by a crowd of the faithful. The

narrator decided to see the event with his own eyes, thinking all the while that this would surely make a tale worth the Emir of Tartary's while.

As the leaders of the convoy, accompanied by the tale-spinning guide, approach the city Square, they spot a few turbaned men surrounded by a group of bearded youths mingling congenially with one another and with a third group of men holding whips in their hands, prowling the square back and forth, trying to keep the crowd in check. Eventually the emaciated body of the old man accused of adultery in his youth is carried to the square. Simultaneously, a mob of decrepit old hags, some crawling on the ground or struggling forth on crutches, others being carried on the backs of more bearded young men, assembles on the scene. When the proceedings begin, first the man is asked by the mufti to confess to his sins. Unable to talk, the defendant issues forth a series of howls before falling into spells of coughing and hiccupping. He does, however, manage to deny the charges by moving his bony skull back and forth. He is ordered to be whipped first for refusing to respond to the charges brought against him. Then the women are summoned to present their evidence, which they offer loudly and clearly, albeit with no evidence save the reiterated claim that the person of the defendant was indeed the man who violated their chastity years ago. One by one, the testimonies grow more and more ridiculous, one coming from a dead corpse, the other from a living witness claiming that she was not only violated but most ruthlessly murdered afterwards. By the time the functionaries begin to transport the accused to the place of punishment, they realise that he too is dead. Nevertheless, the order must be carried out. Accordingly, the man's head is first severed and then stoned in accordance with the practice of "rajm," or ritual stoning of adulterers. The first stone, cast by the mufti himself, makes various circular motions in the air before landing smack in the mouth of the severed head. Other believers cast stones too, and the crowd begins to disperse, leaving the haggish accusers to their loud shrieks of joy. To the narrator still contemplating the scene, the noise begins to sound indistinguishable from the screeches of "vengeful ravens," the noise of "suddenly awakened bats," or the cries of "a pack of jackals" in a faraway valley.

Although thematically the story recounted as the "The Bittern" fits in with the allegorical episodes outlined above, the seasoned caravan leader whose presence provided a link among the disparate events is absent from it. By now, of course, we have come to know of his habit of recording accounts of his encounters with individuals who tell him their strange stories, and the narrator of this episode may be one such man, although the story makes no

mention of his connection with the frame narrative of the eastward journey. He is visited one fine day by a young historian-priest "riding on a wise old donkey." The priest wishes to find his way to certain abandoned synagogues in the mountainous region surrounding the village. The narrator accompanies him as his guide. As the young priest settles in one synagogue, he offers a bulky manuscript to his guide, opening it at a certain chapter. "Read this," he says, "it will entertain you." The narrator takes the book and reads what amounts to a story within the story: the account of the miraculous birth, marvellous life, and mysterious death of the great rabbi Jashua b. Noon.

Born with teeth in his mouth, Jashua causes holy terror in the entire community, for he is thought to be ill-fated and ill-omened. He is thrown from the rooftop to the ground, and proves by his survival that he will one day become a great man of religion. Extraordinary events happen to the great rabbi in his lifetime, events which, as we shall see shortly, form the kernel of the writer's allegorical conception of the state of affairs in the homeland from which he has been driven away. Eventually, the rabbi is thrown to his death in a ritual ordeal similar to that which he was subjected to after his birth. The episode ends with a summary account of the questions that have puzzled succeeding generations of Jashua's biographers. Some believe the whole legend to be fictitious, based on a plausible error whereby the name Jashua b. Noon has been confused with that of Jashua b. Jonas. Others dispute the notion that his remains were consumed by hungry hounds, maintaining instead that ravenous lepers have devoured his scattered limbs. In an authoritative account, it is emphatically asserted that the rabbi was magically metamorphosed into a hooded crow seated upon a nearby branch waiting for "another eclipse" to return to the holy synagogue. "The Bittern" closes with the village guide's recollection of his fever on the way back from the synagogue, and the description of a delirious vision he has had about the return of the rabbi as he has been watching the departure of the historian-priest whose appearance on the scene has begun the episode:

> Halfway up the hill I turned around and looked behind me. I saw the skeleton of the donkey darkened by the shadowy colours of the beginnings of an eclipse. I saw the priest, his lower jawbone under his arm, rushing to reach … a dead, dried-up tree standing erect at the bottom of the dell. Thousands of old hooded crows were sitting on its branches.[16]

The moves the reader has to make to see any principle of coherence in these stories are many. Nevertheless, the drive towards a new manner of

making and communicating meaning deserves close scrutiny primarily because it may shed some light on the effects of exile on the creative powers of a contemporary writer. Perhaps the easiest point of entry into such a massive compilation of phantasmagoria as we have here would be to explore the desire of the writer to draw attention to what he has doubtless perceived as monstrosities in his homeland by filling his fictional world with monstrous characters and events. As carriers of meaning, the personages and occurrences recounted in the three stories are obviously meant to communicate something extraordinary. The correlation, however, is worth contemplating. Would it be impossible to tell the story of an extraordinary event through "ordinary" fictional devices? What does a writer require to make that which is happening in the world of human beings concretely manifest in his fiction? Why is it that the analytic method used by Sa'edi to investigate the processes of Prufrock's mind are perceived as inadequate to the task of investigating the going-on of Iranian Society in the 1980s?

In attempting to provide tentative answers to these and other related questions, we must relate the internal mechanisms of the stories to the condition of their author's exile and the feelings and perceptions that attend a writer's keen awareness of his severance from the locus which has provided an essential source of meaning for him. In space and time, the stories roam all over an unspecified erstwhile world which includes three of the greatest religions of mankind: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.[17] The inclusion of multiple inner spaces gives these narratives an inner dimension that ultimately complicates the reader's attempt to relate the episodes to external reality. Furthermore, these inner spaces create a labyrinthine world wherein attention to details of the inner episodes replaces attention to the operations of the frame narrative. Temporally, Sa'edi's refusal to place the episodes in recognisable historical times signifies, I think, his view of the antiquity of the practices revived by the Islamic state. But in the end this runs counter to his notion, also embedded in the episodes, of the uniqueness of the same practices as giving rise to an existentially new cultural experience.

Beyond these, representation in these episodes tends towards the iconic, but again the theatricality conveys little more than a certain staginess. It is as if bodies and objects are arranged on display to help illustrate the writer's mental preoccupations. They have no life of their own beyond what they depict Just as actors in a play act as signifiers of other people, such characters as the old sweeper, the ancient defendant, and the legendary rabbi are created to fictionalise Sa'edi's view of the Ayatollah Khomeini's birth and background,

the effects of his arrival in Iran, and the administration of justice in the Islamic Republic. We never get to know these fictional personages themselves. In "The Bittern", for instance, the life of Jashua b. Noon is "staged" principally to interest readers in the legends that were being spun around the life of the Ayatollah Khomeini by his followers and opponents alike. Such characters as the sweeper and the adulterer are similarly constituted not as flesh and blood characters in fiction but as stock figures of thought drawing attention to the nature of repression and the idea of justice in the Islamic state. In short, all arrangements in these stories are used as vehicles of communicating something that appears to the author as essentially ineffable. Consequently, just as characters in these fictional worlds point the way towards the external world, the existence of the stories turns into an index of the inner workings of their author's mind.

However, the author's very approach leaves the process of signification fraught with a variety of contradictions and inconsistencies. In "The Sweeper …," we may ask who, what social type or group, is signified by the old protagonist. How is the reader to interpret the act of sweeping the city clean of filth? And what could the idea of the man's lonely defiance, so dramatic in the face of the facile submission of the general citizenry, mean? Such signs are simply referred back to the reader's imagination. Initially, the old sweeper is described in mythical terms by the story-teller in the park:

> And when I say an old sweeper, what I mean is that nobody knew his age. My grandfather had heard from his grandfather that, in his childhood, he too had seen the sweeper with the same aspect we used to see him until yesterday: a tall stature, large, shy eyes, an ever-present smile on his lips, and a thick white beard that looked like a sail when he walked, a sail that guided a heavy vessel on a calm, utterly unruffled sea. All of us, generation after generation, knew him simply as baba. He was an intense man with strange habits. First of all, he lived outside the city in an unknown spot. Nobody has ever seen his home. His behaviour did not permit anyone to follow him like a shadow and find out where and how he lived, whether he was alone or had a mate or companion, whether he had a roof upon his head, slept in a tent like gypsies, took shelter in a cavern, or – and this befitted him best – simply rested under the umbrella of the heavens.[18]

Given the Iranian revolution as the context of the story's signification dynamics, this description raises the possibility that the sweeper might be a fictionalised version of some sort of authority, a Shah or an Ayatollah perhaps.

The trappings of physical and behavioural features, the old man's age, his deliberately mystified private domain, the nickname daddy, associated with such figures in a strongly patriarchal culture with a long history of absolute power, all tend to confirm this. However, with the appearance of the priest on the scene one possibility is explicitly laid to rest. We begin to see the silhouette of an account of Khomeini's ouster of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in the struggle between the priest and the sweeper. Does the latter then signify the institution of monarchy? The possibility remains open in terms of the story although it runs blatantly counter to Sa'edi's lifelong opposition to – and struggle against – the monarchial order preceding the revolution. The question this incompatibility raises is worth contemplating: are we as readers entitled to utilise our knowledge of a writer's beliefs in our attempt to decode a fictional work's processes of signification?

A final possibility is suggested by the old sweeper's profession. Through the past century or so in Iran the image of "sweeping filth away from the city" has been most closely associated with the calling of the modern secular intellectual. Modern Iranian culture has constituted the intellectual as the social group responsible for waging battle against superstition, ignorance, and blind obedience – presumably the filth that is perceived as having made possible both monarchial and religious notions of authority and exercise of political power. This reading appears both compatible with Sa'edi's long-held and oft-stated views, and consistent with some details of the preceding episodes. The suggestion about the name of the poet Naser-e Khosrow in the story "At the Journey's Beginning" comes most readily to mind. But then other problems arise. Why would the sweeper's abode have been placed in an unknown spot outside the city? Why should he refuse to interact with the citizens of the city which he so meticulously cleans every day? And what are we to make of his response to the oppression that has plagued his beloved community? Ascent to heaven is certainly not the response to behove the descendants of Naser-e Khosrow. Similar observations can be made in regard to such images as the broom, the tree, and the old shoe. To give only one more example, the crowning vision of the sweeper's ghost sweeping the celestial sphere from side to side does serve to establish something of a happy ending to the story. But is that its purpose? And does this not defy the narrative's thrust towards tragedy? Regardless of which direction we take in the act of interpretation, the inner workings of the stories place obstacles in our path. Just as the old sweeper's "behaviour" has probably forced back many curious individuals determined to discover his abode, the author's narrative behaviour does not allow us "to follow him like a shadow."

I shall not dwell as long on the other two stories. The story of ritual stoning of the old adulterer attempts, as the title suggests, to lay open this "hidden custom," whose roots go beyond all religious systems, before the eyes of modern-day readers like a "set table." The manner in which the central character is brought on the stage quickly transforms his status in the story from that of a person to that of a figure of thought. Because he is acted upon without acting, we cannot link him with any of the actors in the drama of the Iranian revolution. His only "act," the vehement gesture of denial, can be said to relate to his individual sin as accurately as it can be generalised to the rejection of the full circumstances behind the crime with which he is charged. His person can be generalised into an image epitomising the general sufferer in the Islamic state, a kind of everyman. The act of narration itself bespeaks the writer's desire to communicate something of the extraordinary reality he has made his subject matter by juxtaposing fact and fiction. The prefatory reference to the lively fantasising of the local guide and the narrator's decision to take him to the scene of an event before which all his tall tales are dwarfed reveal the writer's attempt to persuade his readers that his stories contain reality as he perceives it. A similar strategy brings the story to its close. Here the narrator insists that he saw muscle movements in the severed head which nobody else saw, that he heard the sound of laughter from it that nobody else heard, and that not one person has ever since wanted to believe his story. Here again it is not really the reader who does not wish to believe the story, but the writer who seems at a loss, not knowing how to end the story which he has begun rather skillfully.

The making of the great man forms the theme of the inner story of "The Bittern." Having survived the ritual of the fall, even as an infant, the fanged hero begins to assume supernatural qualities in the eyes of the believers. Many boast that their forefingers have felt the sting of the blessed teeth and thus "a drop of the blessed saliva has been mixed with their blood." Not only are many people cured by the touch of his blessed forefingers, but numerous individuals claim "to have seen the Star of David at the tip of their fingers thereafter." The great rabbi is still a child when his village is transformed into a mecca for the diseased, the crippled and the needy. Many villagers are promoted to high office around his abode. Some "attain great skill in manslaughter" through their training as killers of sacrificial beasts. Universal renown brings with it important professions of faith. Grand rabbis head for the "Shrine of the Fall" with hordes of followers, claiming to have predicted his coming or to have seen his ferocious aspect in their dreams. At age one, the great rabbi has already learned to raise his hand to the lips of

men lining up to kiss it. At age three he begins to show an incurable penchant for violence, first targeted at animals, later turned into a habit of throwing stones at shining stars in the sky. As he assumes political power, he trains his court of rabbis in the art of worshipping death. Those who despise death are forced gradually to leave the realm of death-preaching rabbis. They are replaced by bestial executioners. Eventually, when chaos reigns and the great rabbi has fallen sick with "an incurable cough," the very men he has fostered to prominence bring about his death by throwing him down from his own rooftop.

What does this staggering array of action and incident signify? Historical reality comes into view here through the mist of fantasy. Diverse incidents of the life and adventures of the great rabbi parallel the succession of a bewildering number of events, rumours, stories, and hearsay that began to make the rounds about the time of the Iranian revolution. The strongest parallel relates to the widespread claim by a great number of people that they had seen the Ayatollah Khomeini's face in the moon. Then there were stories about the revolutionary leader's humble beginnings, his extraordinary acumen as a child, and his pledge at the death of his father, reportedly killed by the order of the late Shah's father, that he would avenge the murder. Finally, the revolutionary leader's emerging support of the central role of the clergy in Iranian political life, the gradual ascent of the clerics to political office after the revolution, and rumour of the old man's deteriorating health and impending death, of the imminent collapse of his regime, and of constant infighting in the inner circles of his close associates and advisors over the question of succession. But how each of these events and occurrences may be related to the world of human thought and action we simply do not know.

Once again, the writer's emphasis on the collective and communal does not allow us a glance at the internal dynamics of character portrayal. Modelled as a Bildungsroman, "The Bittern" might have provided an opportunity to explore mass psychology as well as the psychology of leadership behind the story of the Ayatollah's rise to prominence and political power. But the writer's desire to say it all, to paint a picture of a community in the grip of superstition, to emit a sense of ever-present destiny, does not afford him much depth of characterisation. Interestingly, the ultimate question here is not who or what is being allegorised but rather what the significance of the act of the allegorising may be. To disguise in a work of fiction what is whispered by an entire group of people without much sense of perspective or proportion is to hover around a zero point of fictional signification. In doing so, a writer may, indeed does, turn fact into fiction, but refuses to

assign any significance to the signified. As a result, the exchange between writer and reader appears meaningless, no more than an act of spreading a rumour or repeating a hearsay. Dislodged from the ground on which literary communication takes place, the reader is given no assignment beyond the establishment of links between historical incidents and their equivalents in the work of the fictional work he is reading. Once he decides which episode is an allusion to what rumour, fact or event, the reader is not guided back with any instructions as to how the discovery can be effectively utilised.

I do not mean here to offer solutions to the problems raised by the stories I have been discussing. My point throughout the foregoing has been that in their lack of specificity, in their open-endedness, and in the possibilities and problems they raise before the reader, such features themselves come to signify the writer's loss of control over his fictional material. When readers cannot determine what significance to attach to fiction, when they are left to wonder what to do with the knowledge gained through the act of reading, or when they feel unable to decide with any degree of assurance what the fictional personages and incidents are intended to convey, literary communication cannot be said to have taken place. Now, the break in communication may itself be, indeed is, ultimately meaningful in appreciating the mental preoccupations that have produced it. However, in terms of the fictional work in which they appear, the signs transmitted here remain ambiguous, contradictory, inconsistent, or all of these at one and the same time. The fact that as readers we cannot know what such signs as a sweeper's old shoe hung around the neck of a giraffe named Avicenna, a mufti's stone caught in the severed head of a dead adulterer, or the constant sound of the coughing of a dying despot mean is in itself significant in providing a glimpse into the effects of exile on the creative mind. When they are piled up one on top of the other, such indeterminacies, I think, ultimately communicate the peripheral vision of a writer attempting to conjure up images of a homeland which he perceives as constantly slipping away from his grasp.

Sa'edi lived for three years after the last episode he had added to the narrative of the Egyptian embassy. Although he often spoke of his preoccupation with his allegory of the Iranian revolution in his remaining years, he did not seriously attempt to bring it to a conclusion.[19] In answer to an interviewer's question about the relationship between these stories and the situation in Iran, he did, however, reiterate his conviction about the manner in which he had conceived of his work:

> If you are referring to the allegorical aspects [of the Parisian trilogy], yes, I believe very much in allegorising. It is the same allegory, the allegorical language, that makes Kalila va Demna valid for me. And I believe that I must write in such a way that my writing shall be understood ten, twenty, or thirty years hence.[20]

And when asked in the same interview to read a passage from his allegory, he read a segment from "The Bittern" dealing with the great rabbi's coughing spells. The difference between the classical collection of animal fables known in Persian as *Kalila va Demna*, on the one hand, and Sa'edi's allegorical stories, on the other, is that the former had been written in a world of long-established notions and fixed attributes given to animals. In its mechanisms of signification, *Kalila va Demna* contains little, if any, innovation or departures from the established code. Sa'edi's fiction, however, by its very mechanisms and processes of codification, was marking bold departures even from the fictional conventions set forth by modern Iranian writers, a code of literary communication which Sa'edi himself had helped to develop. Clearly, Sa'edi was increasingly becoming aware of the difficulties that attended his attempt to communicate through his fiction the sense of shock he was feeling when he contemplated the course of events in his homeland. It is no accident that "The Set Table …," the last episode of the trilogy, ends with the narrator insisting that he saw movements in the severed head that nobody saw, heard laughter from it that nobody else heard, and that none has ever wanted to believe his story.

Sa'edi's allegory of the Iranian revolution, conceived in a state of utter disillusionment and carried out under the worst conditions of exile,[21] provides us in the last analysis with a deep-mirror image of the writer's deteriorating ability to communicate. The specific political situation that has driven Iranian writers away from their homeland in the early years of the Iranian Revolution added a new dimension to their experience. To them, home was not only an elsewhere – even in the full sense of the alienating feeling that is embedded in that word – but also, and increasingly, a "formerly", a space-time realm with no counterpart in reality. Beset by the deepening feelings of this sense of double exile, writers may at times try to use the full power of their creative faculties to communicate their perception of how different their homeland of today is from what they remember it to have been, or from what they have envisaged it might one day be. Under such conditions, many writers often find it necessary to move beyond anything that may have given their previous creations force and efficacy. What the

exilic mentality strives to achieve in such cases is the ability to communicate something of the impression, so tormenting to the person of the exile, that the remembered homeland – and the imagined ideal of it in the future – is irretrievably lost, replaced by a place so indescribably different that only by magical powers of a free-wheeling fancy can its image be contemplated. In the case of Gholamhossein Sa'edi, as we have seen, that image was conceptualised and communicated on a plane totally beside all mimetic concerns. The tendency to universalise the fictional theme beyond the borders of time and place has its roots in the exiled writer's desire to communicate this perception. It is a tendency fraught with potentially disastrous consequences, one that may even lead – and in the case of Sa'edi it sadly did – to an abiding sense of world-weariness. It turns the fictional work into a manifestation of its writer's deep-seated sense of ennui, of the collapse of the will to live. The downward spiral, revolving around a thickening pillar of incomprehensibility, slides inevitably towards the abyss.

As we went down into the crowded metro station at la Place de la Clichy, Sa'edi turned once again to the topic that had become a familiar refrain of his Parisian musings. "I am dying, my friend," he said with little emotion in his voice, "and nobody even wants to believe it." "But you shouldn't," I responded mechanically and, I knew, clumsily. And we talked about life in exile as we travelled on the metro to the Gallieni station. Then we walked up the narrow pathways of the Père Lachaise cemetery towards his apartment. His favourite short-cut, he said. As we approached plot eighty-four where the Iranian writer Sadeq Hedayat is buried, I turned to him. "Go ahead and die, if you mean it," I said, trying to sound as callous as I could, "there's still room next to him." The memory of that remark still haunts me whenever I think of my friend, the Iranian writer Gholamhosein Sa'edi, dead of exile at the age of 49, buried close to the tomb of the Iranian writer he so admired, in Paris's Père Lachaise Cemetery.

CHAPTER 7

Poet of Desires Turned to Dust

In Memoriam Mehdi Akhavan Saless

Should we live on, we shall patch up
The garment torn from separation
Should we not, accept our apology
Many are desires turned to dust.

"He sure has a peculiar way of looking at you," I said to the friend who had taken me to meet the Iranian poet Mehdi Akhavan Saless in the summer of 1979. My friend, fellow poet Mahmud Azad Tehrani, nodded, and I tried to explain: "It was as if he were eyeing me on two levels, a constant surface look that seemed simple and trusting, and a sharp occasional glance, sceptical and testing, that penetrated at times all the way down into my soul, fixing it as if at the point of a needle." For decades he had been on my mind, one of the few poets of his generation whom I had not met as yet. His signature poem "Zemestan" (Winter) had been one of the first poems of the *She'r-e Now* (New Poetry) tradition I had read and memorised as a teenager. I still recall the chill the poem sent down my spine on my first hearing it read to me. Even now I find it an amazing instance of the power of poetry to bring readers under its spell. I gradually came to recognise the tremendous ability of Akhavan's poems to arouse strong emotions in readers as a function of the poet's mastery at investing scenes and narratives with a peculiar kind of emotional power. I now was seeing the same sort of potency in his searching glances. That look and the man behind it are no more. Mehdi Akhavan Saless died in Tehran at the age of 61 in August 1990.

Born in Mashhad in 1928, Akhavan grew up in a middle-class urban family. His father was a herbalist, a fact that accounts for numerous allusions to plants and medicinal herbs in his early poetry. Early on he selected the pen-name of "M. Omid" *(omid* means "hope" in Persian) for himself, but as he grew older and wiser with experience he began to play with the meaning of that poetic name with a dubious, gradually deepening sense of irony. Akhavan belongs to that generation of Iranian poets who followed in the footsteps of

Nima Yushij (1897–1960), the acknowledged father and founder of the New Poetry movement in lran.[1] He brought to the movement a solid background in the classical tradition, an uncanny sense of dramatic storytelling, and a facility with words that distinguishes his style from that of all the other members of his generation, one that includes such notable figures as Ahmad Shamlu, Sohrab Sepehri, and Forugh Farrokhzad. Each of these qualities had a share in turning him, at least during the decade of the 1960s, into the most sophisticated poet of the period, a kind of poets' poet who could bridge the gap between the traditionalist poets and critics concerned about the tendency in modernist Persian poetry of Iran to foreground a cultural rupture by moving too far away too rapidly from the canon of the past, as well between the modernists eager to break through the constraints imposed on individual expression by the requirements of rhyme, meter, and other formal, generic, and systemic conventions of classical Persian verse. Before discovering the principles advocated by Nima Yushij, Akhavan had published a collection of juvenilia when he was 23 years old. *Arghanun* (The Organ), published in 1951, includes over eighty ghazals and thirteen qasidas, in addition to couplets and quatrains as well as other forms of traditional verse composed after the manner – and organised on the basis – of the generic classification of the millennium-old tradition of poetry in the Persian language. The book was practically indistinguishable from the many collections of traditionalist verse of the time.

It was his move to Tehran that brought the young Akhavan into contact with the modernist movement in Iranian poetry. Having married his first cousin after the tradition of arranged cousin marriages customary at the time, he had moved in search of an occupation first to the village of Ja'farabad in Varamin, where he was hired as a teacher at a vocational school, and then to Tehran itself. In time he would become first a high-school teacher of Persian literature, and eventually, during the brief thaw in the political climate of the early 1960s, as an editor of *Farhang*, the journal of the Ministry of Education.[2] More significantly, the move to Tehran had brought the young poet into contact with the intellectual climate of the capital, where the literary war between modernists and traditionalists was still raging. Akhavan's second collection of poems, a book called *Zemestan* (Winter), first published in 1956, demonstrates the degree to which thorough absorption and thoughtful application of the principles put forward by earlier modernists as well as Nima could enhance the capacities of the Persian language to address issues of social and political import in poetry in a way that is aesthetically sound and solid and socially relevant and effective. The title poem in this

collection immediately became a model of poetic treatment of issues of social significance, an end towards which Iranian intellectuals were striving. The tragic fall of Mohammad Mosaddeq's patriotic democracy had instilled in them a chilling sense of disenchantment and disillusion. The repressive government that had succeeded the coup of 1953 had reversed the nation's drive for individual and political freedoms and created an icy chasm between the state and the intelligentsia, a breach which eventually manifested itself during the 1970s in the form of the latter's support for the Iranian Revolution of 1978–1983. In the intervening decades the social landscape appeared frigid in the extreme, and it was that frigidity as well as the resultant sense of alienation and impotence that Akhavan's poem depicted in its opening lines:

> None will answer your hello, heads are bent in collars
> none dares raise a head to respond, to meet your friendly face
> your eyes cannot see but a single step ahead
> for the path is dark and slippery
> and if you extend a hand of love to someone
> reluctantly will he move his hand out of his bosom
> for the cold is scorching in the extreme
> your breath, rising out of the warm hearth of your own chest
> turns into a dark cloud
> stands like a wall before your eyes,
> this being your own breath, what do you expect
> from the glances of near or remote friends?[3]

In its depiction of the dark and slippery path lying ahead in the noon of a bitter-cold winter's night, the poem gives expression to a condition which metaphorically recalls the situation of Iranian intellectuals facing an intolerably repressive state. The resultant inability to communicate, to extend a hand of friendship, or even to expect human warmth from others was precisely the feeling that beset the Iranian intelligentsia in the wake of the shattering of the dream of democracy that pervaded their psyche in the early 1950s. That feeling, remarkably constant throughout the poems of *Zemestan*, is communicated now through the image of a devastated grove in which the "king of all seasons, autumn"[4] reigns supreme, now through the private musings of a rebel seeker's ultimate decision to "set out on the path without an end."[5] At times it even takes the form of a statement about the vanity of all human solidarity and sociality. In comparison with Akhavan's later compositions, *Zemestan* leaves the reader at an impasse from which the poet

can envisage – and the reader can find – no release. For a moment, in the face of a devastated landscape of frustrated desire, life itself seems frozen beyond all hope.

Obviously some way had to be sought out of so debilitating an impasse if life were to continue. Akhavan's move in that direction, his ascent from Hades, was accomplished gradually and painfully. In 1959 he published *Akher-e Shahnameh* (The Ending of *The Shahnameh)*, a collection of poems that mediates between the winter of the poet's utter despair and his vision of the blossoming and growth that will have to come, albeit from within the human soul. The most famous poems of this book articulate the poet's despondent desire to believe in something. That something, however, has such a tenuous presence in the volume that it seems neither convincing to the poet nor even perceptible to the casual reader. The title poem, for instance, reveals the ambivalence that resides deep inside the poet's psyche. *The Shahnameh*, a heroic account of ancient Persian mythology and history versified by the tenth-century Persian poet Abolqasem Ferdowsi, ends in the tragic downfall of the Persian Empire before the onslaught of the Muslim Arabs. Its ending is all but hopeful. Akhavan's poem contrasts the ancient glory sung in Ferdowsi's heroic account with the degeneration and decadence that, in his view, mark the present age. The ending of the poem is typical of the ambivalent mood that the entire collection communicates:

> We
> are the conquerors of cities gone to the wind
> with a voice too feeble to rise out of our chests
> we are the reciters tales erased from memories
> no one will take our coins for a thing or a farthing
> as if they were coined by an alien ruler
> or an emir whose house has fallen.
> At times we wish to rise out of this weird sleep
> resembling the slumber of Friends of the Cave –
> we wipe our eyes and say:
> there, the wondrous golden castle of a sweet morn!
> alas, Decius is deathless
> ah, ah, sorrow and shame.[6]

The hopes and desires that accompany a momentary wakefulness preceded and followed by long periods of involuntary sleep characterise as well the mood conveyed in many poems of *Az In Avesta* (From This Avesta),

Akhavan's fourth collection (1965). Such poems as "Katibeh" (Inscription), "Qesseh-ye Shahr-e Sangestan" (The Story of a City of Stones), and "Payvandha va Bagh" (Grafts and the Garden) depict transient feelings of contentment or even joy in the midst of settings and stories beset by an abiding sense of gloom or despair. Midway during the years that lie between "The Ending of *The Shahnameh*" and "From This Avesta," however, the poet seems to have found a characteristically unique way to reconcile himself to life. Transposing his emotional energies towards a solitary vision of an ancient ideal state, a shining light on the mist-covered hill of a distant past, he begins to articulate the vision of a future at once peaceful and promising. In what must be considered his most famous and most significant piece of prose writing, the epilogue to "From This Avesta," he gives an account of his journey out of despair.

> And when a while went by and no news arrived from anywhere, no miracle occurred, no new Coming, no new prophecy, … none to knock on the door, I rose up to help myself, to fetch some lagoon, some sacred fountainhead for the wandering, restless fish of my soul. And I did this with the aid of my own senses, intuition, intelligence, knowledge and imagination. And of course at the moment this epiphany, this prophecy is within me and for myself alone. I have, within my heart and my world, reconciled Zarathustra and Mazdak, … and already they have struck such affection and friendship for each other that you should come and see for yourself.[7]

To the poet, this imaginary reconciling of Zarathustra and Mazdak signified in the profoundest sense an attempt to bring together two seminal moments in ancient Iranian culture. Almost three millennia before Zarathustra, the legendary prophet of ancient Iran, had spread his message of the three goods: Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds. He had been – as Akhavan was to sing of him years later in the midst of the revolutionary chaos and violence presided over by the Ayatollah Khomeini – the leader who had "neither killed nor ordered anyone killed."[8] Mazdak, on the other hand, had been the archetype of the rebel prophet in ancient Iranian culture, the messenger of an egalitarian social order who had eventually been put to death by the ruling magi professing to follow in the wake of Zarathustra. Reconciling the two, then, meant in the first place uniting those ancient forces that, whatever their direction, had their origin in Iran's pre-Islamic past. On the plain of social perception, a reconciliation between these two ancient Iranian strands of thought – one mystical, the other egalitarian – was in a more common sense a combining of the will to individual salvation with an undying desire for social justice, a fusion, as Akhavan's contemporaries

saw it, of Nietzsche and Marx, both forces present in the Iran of the 1960s more than at any other time in that culture's modern history.[9]

The fountainhead that Akhavan had discovered for the restless fish of his soul was replete with social and aesthetic possibilities and perils. On the one hand his synthesis pointed to an accommodation between social forces driven by some concept of nativism as the psychic locus for a collective effort at regeneration and renewal.[10] Sharply divided between a vision of pre-Islamic Iran and an Islamic, specifically Shi'ite, Iran, these forces were nevertheless united in their resentment of and resistance to what they perceived as alien. It was true that, in its latest aspect, the intrusion of foreign elements into Iranian culture had taken the shape of an encroachment from the West. However, Westernisation was perceived as the modern version of a perennial problem that had always threatened the perceived purity of the concept of a pure Iranian culture. In ancient times the same dilemma had been articulated in terms of the two opposing concepts of Iran and *Aniran* or "non-Iran." In Akhavan's beloved *Shahnameh, Aniran* had found its concrete manifestation in two non-Iranian enemies of the country: the Turkic tribes of Central Asia to the east and the eastern Roman Empire to the west. During the Middle Ages it had taken the shape of Mongols and Tartars, whose invasions of Iran had brought the classical culture of that country to an end. Most significantly, the concept was related in the modern historical imagination to the Arab invasion of Iran. As Akhavan himself had articulated its manifestation in modern Iranian psyche, it was one that "brought its complaints about the injustices of the West, the Turks and the Arabs to the broken arm of the ancient Iranian deity Mithra."[11] On the positive side, then, Akhavan's vision of the reconciliation between Zarathustra and Mazdak meant a coalition of nativist forces against the encroachment of the West.

The social perils of the vision are equally noteworthy, if not as apparent. In the 1960s the monarchial state was developing its own version of the nativist myth of renewal and resurrection, this time to the near exclusion of Islam and its manifestations in contemporary Iranian culture. Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's steady drive towards the disenfranchisement of the clergy as a social force had already resulted in the blind and bloody rebellion of June 1963, where the army had killed thousands of supporters of the Ayatollah Khomeini. Three years later the monarch would crown himself in the style of ancient Iranian kings, bidding Cyrus the Great rest in peace, for He, the King of Kings, Centre of the Universe, Light of the Aryans, was awake. Some years thereafter the move to turn Iran's constitutional monarchy into a one-party state led by the Party of National Resurrection would get underway.

Akhavan's emphasis on the wholeness of ancient Iranian culture and the promise of such a vision for the future of the country could in theory serve the state's purpose as it tried to depict the clergy as remnants of the alien Arab influence that Iran would do well to eradicate from the social scene.

Aesthetically, the vision's possibilities and perils abide in the same qualities which have helped to shape the poet and his poetry. Releasing the poet from the constraints of pat ideologies and facile solutions, it allowed him to move his verse to a new and higher level of subtlety and sophistication. A comparison between some of Akhavan's poetic closures in his early compositions and others in later ones will best illustrate the point. Typically, Akhavan's early poems end in a final resounding statement testifying to the poet's disappointment and discontent. Whether it is the proclamation of a frigid winter of utter despair or the image of King Autumn presiding over the devastation of the poet's beloved grove, whether it is the decision at last to set out on the path without end or the poet's final word to his daughter to keep the ancestral garment of history away from the rags of the polluted ones,[12] his closures are unequivocal, unwavering, and unambiguous. Midway in "The Ending of *The Shahnameh*," however, we begin to encounter a new kind of poetic closure whose meaning and implications point in two distinct and at times opposing directions. The result is that the poem's ultimate meaning remains suspended between two equally relevant possibilities. The suspension may be the result of a wordplay, some semantic node, or two equally justifiable ways of reading a phrase, a line, or an image.

In "The Story of the City of Stone" the poet plays masterfully on the sound of words as they alter the meaning, depending on whether they are treated as word endings or as independent words, to keep the sense of his poem suspended between a positivity and a negativity. The poem's conclusion depicts the good prince of the City of Stone ritualistically addressing a cave, asking if there is any hope of salvation for him and his people. Echoing back to him, the last three syllables he has uttered make up the two words for "yes" and "no" in Persian, leaving the Prince – and the reader – hanging between two opposed oracles semantically cancelling each other out. Although this abiding quality of Akhavan's mature poetry enriches the possibilities of interpretation, it also – and often – reveals a hesitant mind behind the poem, a poet ambivalent and unwilling to communicate clearly and comprehensibly through his verse. Lastly, the vision of Zarathustra ("Zardosht" in Persian) and Mazdak reconciled – a phenomenon to which the poet, combining the latter's first syllable with the former's last, gave the name Mazdosht, calling himself a Mazdoshtist – drives Akhavan a step closer to defining poetry

in terms of prophecy. He had previously described moments of creation as moments of heightened consciousness and internal agitation. In his later years he would return once again to the notion of poetic creation as the result of *sho'ur-e nobovvat* (awareness of prophecy).[13] For the moment the vision of Zarathustra and Mazdak, two prophets of ancient Persia, gives rise to a perception that Akhavan may be turning himself into something of a prophet or a latter-day saint looking to proselytise on behalf of a new creed. The issue was unfortunately picked up and blown out of proportion by critics unhappy about Akhavan's unwillingness to submit to past solutions and advocate revolution of a socialist type. Within the atmosphere of Iranian society in the 1960s the allegation was dangerous enough to make the poet repeatedly deny and denounce alleged claims to prophecy. He did so with characteristic forbearance and forgiveness, although the implications of the debate for the evolution of his poetry and poetic vision were not always positive or constructive.

Nevertheless, the vision of a reconciled past conjured up within a contemporary poet was no easy feat. Being a true "Mazdoshti," to use Akhavan's own half-humorous coinage, meant ultimately that the poet had committed his poetic instinct to an overriding ethical system. With the possible exception of Sohrab Sepehri, Akhavan is the only contemporary Iranian poet who went beyond sheer protest to contemplate and offer a moral vision that both inspires and governs his creative impulse. At a time when the only alternative ideologies capable of mobilising the poor and powerless masses against rampant westernisation and the rapid deculturation sponsored by a powerful and increasingly authoritarian state appeared to point either in the direction of a socialist Utopia or to some sort of theocracy, Akhavan's was the contrary poetic voice summoning Iranians back to the roots of their ancient culture in order to effect a much-needed consensus for rejuvenation and renewal. He was largely seen to be pursuing an impossible dream, relying on myths whose time had long gone by rather than on the living forces present on the social stage. Even his poetry began to come under attack from critics, who accused him of being a storyteller rather than a poet in the modem sense.[14] The poet remained undaunted and may even have been strengthened in his belief, for he kept expressing his vision for the future in ever stronger terms. As he had stated through the persona of a messenger dove, "If there is a path to deliverance / It lies only through the direction out of which grows a flower, a thorn, a plant."[15]

In 1965 a charge of another kind was brought against Akhavan, one involving an illicit relationship with a married woman. By now he was

being recognised by a younger generation of literary critics, most notably Mohammad-Reza Shafi'i-Kadkani, as the major poetic voice of the decade. His books were bringing him some royalties, which made him financially secure, if not prosperous; and, more important, he had come under the protection of such influential friends and acquaintances as Parviz Natel Khanlari, Ebrahim Golestan, and Jahangir Tafazzoli. The last, once director of the National Iranian Radio and Television Organisation in the early 1960s, had hired Akhavan as a consultant and contractor for several productions. In short, the poet, now father of three children – two daughters named Laleh and Luli and a son named Tus – was closer than he had ever been to living the life of a respectable middle-class citizen. Although he protested at the accusation of an illicit sexual relationship both through legal action and, more noisily, in his writings, he seems to have taken a secret pride in it, referring to his brief imprisonment on that charge as "a consequence of my manhood."[16] At any rate, he spent the autumn of 1966 in prison. The result was another collection, *Pa'iz dar Zendan* (Autumn in Prison).

Although the collection as a whole reflects a private mood, one exception deserves to be mentioned, even dwelt upon at some length. "Khan-e Hashtom" (The Eighth Ordeal) is a long poem of gripping power and sophisticated technique in which the poet mourns the loss of a popular wrestling champion beloved both for his resistance against the state and his charitable actions on behalf of the poor and the destitute. On 6 January 1966 the news broke in Tehran that the popular wrestling champion and Olympic medalist, Gholamreza Takhti, affectionately nicknamed "Jahan-Pahlavan" (Universal Hero), was dead. The circumstances of the champion's death had been rather mysterious. His body, newspapers reported, had apparently been found in a hotel room in northern Tehran. Instantly the city was filled with the rumour that the champion had been tortured and killed by the secret police, the SAVAK. The event inspired many poetic elegies with strong political undertones. "The Eighth Ordeal," which immediately became known as Akhavan's poem on the champion's tragic demise, remains by far the most artistically conceived poem commemorating the event and a most powerful reminder of the incident.[17]

As the poem opens, we see the narrator out in the cold on a winter night. When he finally enters a teahouse by the roadside, he views a warm and loving assembly formed around an old reciter-singer of heroic tales, known in Iran as *naqqal*. Upholding the centuries-old tradition of teahouse recitations of ancient tales of bravery and heroism, the singer is on this occasion presenting the story of the death of Rostam, the central hero of ancient Iranian legends,

at the hand of his treacherous half-brother Shaghad. Gradually the teahouse attains the status of a simulacrum for Iran, and the ugly plot that brings about Rostam's demise begins to recall the circumstances of the modem champion's death. In the process the figure of Akhavan merges with that of the old reciter of the tragic tale, Takhti is seen as the mythical Rostam, and the state is identified with the treacherous half-brother who murders the legendary hero.

Technically, the poem is rich with many layers of plot and narrative. As the old teahouse reciter begins his tale, he links his performance with that of other, more ancient storytellers, particularly Azad-Sarv and Makh, whose stories form the backbone of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. He then introduces himself as MAS, a storyteller from Tus, the old name for Akhavan's birthplace, Mashhad. The name MAS, an acronym for Mehdi Akhavan Saless, combines with the mention of the reciter's birthplace to turn the reciter of the old tragic story and the modem poet into a single entity. Having achieved this identification, the poem then describes the reciter in the act of reciting the death of the ancient mythical hero in a fabulously effective way, weaving into the narrative gestures and movements of the reciter as he rejects both the East and the West, communicates his wrathful disgust, and moves his audience, utterly absorbed in his tale, to tears. At one point he likens his narrative to the cover wrapped around Takhti's coffin. However, the name of the dead (or murdered) champion is present in the text of the poem only through its highly conspicuous absence. Its place is marked by three dots in the poem's original version, and the missing name can be guessed at only because of the necessity of its rhyming with the Persian word *Tireh-Bakhti* (Darkness of Fortune). The strategy not only makes what is not in the text available to the reader, but it also parallels the absence of Takhti, who, like Rostam, is dead yet remains very much alive in the collective memory. Furthermore, the ellipsis adds a whole new dimension to the poem as an instance of artistic communication under censorship, producing a text that, while submitting to state censorship, at the same time testifies to its presence in society. As the poem draws to a close, we see the reciter, now exhausted under the weight of the tale he has had to tell, enunciate Rostam's choices as the hero breathes his last in the pit perfidiously dug in his path and implanted with poisonous swords, daggers, and arrows to ensure that he bleeds to death. He can certainly avenge himself, as he did in the original myth; he can save himself with the help of his superhuman strength and superior intelligence, but … At this point, caught in another instance of Akhavan's ambiguous poetic closures, the poem ends. It is a most fitting

conclusion for the twin purposes pursued in the poem: first, it allows the story of a seemingly immortal hero's death to be told by a reciter who knows he will return to the teahouse the next night; second, it allows the poem, designed to make the ancient story relevant to a contemporary situation without rendering it utterly hopeless, to be closed by a poet who intends to return to the subject in a second poem.

A year later Akhavan wrote a sequel to "The Eighth Ordeal" and gave it the title "Adamak," which means "The Little Man" but also connotes a robot or a wicked person and is a diminutive designation for "man" in general. The poem tells of another visit to the same teahouse "the next year, or I know not which year from which century."[18] This time, however, the warmth of the teahouse atmosphere has turned into the chill that sweeps over the narrator when he sees the old reciter, displaced and dejected, squatting in a corner. At centre stage a television set is broadcasting mind-altering propaganda designed to eradicate the past from the collective memory of the audience and to replace it with an aggrandisement of the present state of affairs. When the TV speaker introduces himself, his image closely resembles that of the late Shah, a frequent feature of programmes on state-owned television in those years. At this point the old reciter, custodian of collective memory and a reminder of old glories, rises to leave "this ancient teahouse." When he recognises the narrator, he draws the sketch of a little man on the steam-covered windowpane with his trembling fingertips. The poem ends in another ambiguity as the narrator tries to decipher the meaning of the message thus conveyed to him by the old reciter. Did the latter mean the ephemeral image on the windowpane, already beginning to disappear as small streams of condensed moisture flow down the glass, to recall the image of the man on the television screen? Or is it supposed to remind the narrator of the people who have been totally absorbed into the discourse of power proclaimed by the television, itself an unwelcome sign of an alien intrusion into the fabric of a wholesome society? As the poem ends, the narrator is still pondering that question.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s Akhavan published two other poetry collections, *Zendegi Miguyad …* (Life Says …) and *Duzakh Amma Sard* (Hell, Yet Cold). Neither had the impact of such early works as "The Winter" and "The Ending of *The Shahnameh*." Much of the poet's time in these years was given over to a series of radio and television programmes designed to acquaint new audiences with the poetic heritage enshrined in the Persian language. His television programmes, both in Abadan and in Tehran, went a long way towards bringing poetry to new classes of Iranians who

would otherwise have had no inclination for such pursuits. Furthermore, they redefined contemporary views of the literary past, propagated by a more or less rigid academic criticism. Such phenomena as the so-called Indian style of Persian poetry and the rise of modernity in the poetry of Iran were redefined partly as a result of Akhavan's exploration of them in characteristically insightful, if somewhat erratic and impressionistic, observations. Here, and in his writings of this period, Akhavan began to develop a systemic view of classical Persian poetry, whereby the gradual sophistication of the encoding system of poetry is seen as the main reason for the sterility of Persian verse in the post-classical culture of Iran. That view provides a fundamental cornerstone for a redefinition of the rise of modernity in Persian poetry. Finally, a byproduct of Akhavan's experiments with radio and television as means of propagating literary views is worth noting. *Mard-e Jen-zadeh* (The Man Who Was Possessed), a collection of four stories for children initially broadcast on radio, and *Derakht-e Pir va Jangal* (The Old Tree and the Forest), the tale of a sacred tree and the secret of its longevity (published in 1977), reflect the poet's concern with teaching the art of storytelling to younger audiences.

After the Iranian Revolution of 1978–1983 Akhavan devoted most of his time to scholarship on Persian poetry rather than to creative work. He had already published in 1978 a brilliant if somewhat inchoate study of the language of Nima Yushij's poetry entitled *Bed'atha va Badaye-'e Nima Yushij* (Nima Yushij's Inventions and Innovations). In the new atmosphere of reaction against many manifestations of modern literature he organised his second volume on the subject, eventually publishing it in 1983 as *'Ata va Laqa-ye Nima Yushij* (Nima Yushij's Contribution and Countenance). He asked me to read the manuscript, and I did, bringing it back to him with the complaint that this book too, like its predecessor, was digressive and wordy. He took his pen in my presence and added a concluding paragraph that ends in the lines by an anonymous poet which I have selected as the epigraph to this article.

As for poetry, Akhavan did write at least one memorable poem in the decade he lived after the revolution of 1979. "To Ra Ay Kohan Bum o Bar Dust Daram" (I Love You, Ancient Homland) is a qasida in the grand Khorasani style, a work wherein the poet takes his readers on an imaginary journey around ancient and modern Iran, roaming up and down its history and territory, noting all that he loves, adores, or otherwise finds worthy of celebrating. The poem, first published in 1982, became an immediate favourite with the newly emerging communities of Iranians abroad, composed of

various social groups and individuals of diverse ideological and political persuasions who had fled the country around the time of the revolution or in its aftermath. The result was a temporary ban on his works by the Islamic Republic. Fearing for his life, Akhavan agreed to an interview with a state-owned newspaper in which he attempted to dispel suspicions of disloyalty to the Islamic state and to appease the militant Muslims eager to settle scores with the remnants of the intellectual opposition to the new political system. The picture of the poet seated under a large portrait of the Ayatollah Khomeini testifies far more to the dangers of intellectual life under despotic regimes than to the understandable frailties of an aging man. When the ban was finally lifted in the late 1980s, Akhavan combined his most recent poems with a selection of his earlier unpublished compositions in what was to be his final book, published in 1990 and bearing the name of his famous qasida, "I Love You, Ancient Homeland."[19]

It was during this period of his life that I came to know Akhavan personally. He had never travelled abroad, and I had spent much of the previous decade in the United States. When I first met him, he knew me as a friend of Ahmad Shamlu, the poet whom critics had often portrayed as Akhavan's most formidable rival in claiming the mantle of Nima Yushij. He was naturally suspicious of me at first, which accounted for his searching and testing glances when our talk turned from personal pleasantries to literary topics. He still seemed haunted by the tragic loss of his daughter Laleh, who had drowned in the artificial lake behind Karaj Dam near Tehran some years before. His other daughter, Luli, was now married, and his son Tus, now married and a father in his own right, had not become quite the literary figure his father expected him to be. His younger sons, named significantly Zardosht and Mazdak, had yet to come of age. His wife of over thirty years, always a benign presence, would quickly retire into the background, leaving the aging poet and his inquisitive guest to their preoccupations. Many were the days and nights we spent in his humble house or in my apartment, discussing poetry, politics, and people. On such matters he had definite and precise opinions, which he often wrapped in characteristically witty and at times delicious ambiguities. In the few years that I knew him I learned as much from him as I have ever learned from any one person. He seemed genuinely surprised and saddened when he learned that I too had decided to leave the country. We promised to correspond but rarely did.

Early this year, Akhavan was invited by the Berlin-based Haus der Kulturen der Welt (House of World Cultures) to participate in an international gathering in celebration of the literature enshrined in the Persian language.

Besides him, the gathering brought together such other notable Iranian writers as Bozorg Alavi, Hushang Golshiri, and Mahmud Dowlatabadi, as well as the most notable Tajik woman poet, Golrokhsar Safieva. When he called me from Germany in April, it was I who suggested that he come to the United States for a brief poetry-reading tour. He was reluctant at first, pleading his deteriorating health. He had grown smaller even in size, he said. He agreed anyway, however, asking me to send my invitation to England, where he would be staying with his longtime friend, Iranian writer Ebrahim Golestan. I did so, little knowing that an American consular officer in London would reject his application for a temporary visa to the United States. Disheartened one last time, Akhavan told me in our last telephone conversation that he would apply again the next year to come to the United States. "Should we live on, of course," he added after a pause, quoting from his favourite folk poem. Then his voice dropped suddenly, as if into the ocean that separated us. Barely two months after his return to Tehran, Mehdi Akhavan Saless died of massive heart failure on Sunday evening, 26 August 1990.

CHAPTER 8

A Storyteller and His Times

Ali-Akbar Saʿidi-Sirjani of Iran

On 14 March 1994 two agents from the Anti-Vice Division of Iran's Revolutionary Prosecutor's Office arrested Ali-Akbar Saʿidi-Sirjani, writer and outspoken critic of the Iranian government. Forty days later, an official of the Ministry of Information announced the government's charges against Sirjani: trafficking in narcotics, sodomy, contact with expatriate counterrevolutionary elements. Under the penal code instituted by the Islamic Republic of Iran, each of these charges is punishable by execution.

Sirjani's arrest has already turned into a rallying point for expatriate Iranian intellectuals, academics, and media.[1] Letters of protest have been dispatched to various political and professional organisations in Europe and the United States. Organisations such as Amnesty International, the American PEN, Human Rights Watch, and the Middle East Studies Association, as well as many European associations of writers, have in tum directed letters of inquiry and/or protest to different Iranian authorities. A Committee to Defend Saʿidi-Sirjani has been formed to coordinate the effort on behalf of the imprisoned Iranian writer and to ensure him access to legal counsel and possibly a public trial. Perhaps most significantly, over one hundred Iranian writers living in Iran have put their signatures to a petition addressed to Iran's minister of justice, asking that the circumstances surrounding the arrest and incarceration be clarified. Sirjani's arrest, in short, has brought together the disparate factions of the Iranian exile community as never before and has created the scaffolding of a bridge between expatriate Iranians and the intellectual community in Iran over issues of freedom of expression.

Beyond the obvious necessity of defending an imprisoned writer, Sirjani's fate provides an occasion for revisiting the issue of writing under severe sociopolitical constraints. Totalitarian state structures habitually resort to violence in order to silence writers whose works they perceive as undermining their legitimacy or criticising their policies. The more relevant the authorities judge an oppositional stance put forward through writing, the likelier they are to suppress the works or to silence their author. Clearly the concept of

relevance, of a text or a type of writing's not only being about or related to a performance or a state of affairs but, more specifically, of the text's containing a critique (not to be confused with criticism) of it, merits discussion as an aspect of literary-theoretical thinking.

When we say that a text is about an aspect of a community's social life, it is generally assumed that the text in question can be interpreted as containing an opinion about events external to it. As readers begin to detect implied meanings in texts and draw inferences from them, they supply connections that direct textual meanings towards immediately present social conditions. When the state power structure finds such meanings disparaging of the concepts that inspire it, or detrimental to its survival, or offensive to the individuals or institutions that sustain it, it attempts to sever the link between the text and the hearts and minds which it thinks may be affected by the ideas and opinions perceived as present in it.

Such is the relevance accrued to Sirjani's writings over the past fifteen years or so. Having felt the sting of Sirjani's pen throughout its presence on the Iranian political scene, the Islamic Republic – or at least certain constituent elements of it – has finally decided to break the connection by eliminating the author if possible, by other means if necessary. A survey of Sirjani's writings, particularly those which have proven most offensive to Iranian authorities, in relation to the interpretive climate of present-day Iranian society may go beyond all personal desires to see the author released unharmed. It may actually illustrate the nature of relevance and its relation to discursive and interpretive practices in societies in which the expression of ideas through literature is controlled by highly ideological states.

In a fictionalised episode written ten years ago, Sirjani had predicted the fate that had come to visit him. Written in 1984 and published in 1988 in a book entitled *Ay Kutah Astinan* (You of Shortened Sleeves), "Khodam Kardam Keh …" (My Own Damnable Doing) contains the narrative of a case of mistaken identity which causes the writer-narrator eventually to decide to go to a government office to seek resolution of a situation that threatens to stigmatise him as an antirevolutionary. The office, however, is located inside the infamous Evin Prison. Understandably, the mere mention of the prison's name evokes great consternation in the family. However, Sirjani tries to deflate the tension through a bittersweet mixture of plain fact and jesting. He is going there, he reminds his wife and children, not as a prisoner but as a citizen anxious to clear his name. At the same time, he alludes to the recently televised confessions of the leaders of the Tudeh Party of Iran, in which venerable aged party leaders had been seen to recant long-held

beliefs, confess to having been spies all their lives, and concur in the state prosecutor's opinion of them as traitors and criminals who deserve to be executed. He warns his wife and children to be prepared for any outcome ensuing from the visit to Evin:

> If for any reason – God forbid – tomorrow evening you decide to tum on this abandoned TV set of ours, and happen, in place of such extremely edifying shows as pious preachments and illuminating lamentations, to see my image on your screen, sitting erect upon a stool, in the presence of the grand mufti and reporters domestic and foreign, engaged in the act of what our zealous youth have termed "revealing secrets" of my own treacheries and crimes, recounting all the lies I have been delivering to the God-fearing flock of Muslims, confessing to the secret contacts I have had with the First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy, or the American Attaché and detailing all the monies I have received in return for my spying; … you must promise me here and now that you will not tum against me, saying such things as: you hypocrite hack! you were receiving all these pounds and dollars, and still made us live life in such abject misery.[2]

In this fictional account the visit itself proceeds without any unwelcome incident. However, as fate would have it, Mr. Sirjani the protagonist suffers a heart attack on his way back home and is hospitalised for four days without being able to inform his family of his whereabouts. So, by the time he returns home, his wife and children know nothing about the reason for his absence. Having assumed the worst, they have tried to contact the writer's friends. Alas, fear has overtaken friends and relatives alike, and many trusted associates have stayed away, shrinking from mentioning the disappeared man's name. Some of those to whom the family has appealed pretend not to know them at all; others avoid them like the plague. More daring well-wishers counsel various precautionary measures through comically coded messages. Eventually, when Mrs. Sirjani confesses to her husband that, out of caution, she has thought it best to bum some of his writings, the writer suffers a stroke and has to be hospitalised again.

"My Own Damnable Doing" typifies the kind of writing that has proved most offensive to Iranian authorities. Like most of Sirjani's stories, it is an episode contained in an essay rather than presented as a short story. It situates the author in the text, giving him a subject position. Beyond these formal features, it is fairly easy to see the textual strategies used here. Through incorporating elements and structures external to the fictitious event it

narrates, the episode thematises some of the most basic social conditions that allow any totalitarian power structure to perpetuate itself. The text tells us, for example, that by projecting an aura of its own invincibility and total control over the lives of the people, the Islamic Republic has been able to reduce Iranian citizens to fearful individuals concerned only with their own survival and safety. In other words, the state has instigated such fear in the minds of Iranians as to disrupt normal human relations, turning each person into a caricature of the caring and connected creature all human beings would like to perceive themselves as being. Furthermore, through the linkages the text highlights (the location of a government office inside a dreaded prison, the televised self-incriminations, the comically coded messages, etc) as well as those between the text and the social context beyond it ("pious preachments" to "God-fearing Muslims" in contrast to trumped-up charges and forced confessions, for example), it works towards a coherence which turns the text away from being read as the account of an accidental mishap and towards a reading that makes it a condensed image of life in Iran in the early 1980s.

In some of his vignettes and fictionalised sketches Sirjani stays at the level of current events, depicting situations where futile efforts inspired by revolutionary zeal for purity prove pitiably comical to everyone except those who believe the power of the state to be unbounded. In others he delves into the depths of Iranian history or probes the bottom layers of the culture to fetch the pearl of a single relevant episode about the trappings of power or mechanisms for exercising it. In all such writings the butt of the joke seems to be the pious pretension of purity by a few power-hungry and hypocritical politicians who have mastered the art of dissimulation.

I will cite only two more examples from "You of Shortened Sleeves," the book in which the above episode appears. The first is a hilariously funny narrative contained in the book's introduction and centres on a childhood memory of the author's.[3] The account tells the story of a conspiracy between a provincial landowner and a local mullah. As it turns out, there has been an overproduction of watermelons, and the two co-conspirators must find a way to sell the produce fast. Soon the news of a dream by the mullah spreads all over the nearby city: he has dreamed that the Imam Reza, the eighth Imam of the Shi'is, has selected the village shrine for his summer residence. The faithful flock to the shrine, enabling the landowner to sell his watermelons at twice the price he would normally charge without having to incur the cost of transporting them to the city. The story has numerous parallels in Iranian history and has become part of the popular belief about the machinations Iranian clergymen are capable of staging. At the same time, it is logically

coherent in that it provides a material basis for the conspiracy of exploitation devised by the two most visible power structures in Iran, namely feudal landowners and clergymen. The exploitation appears all the more unseemly because it aims at the foundation of people's faith rather than at their labour. That the episode comes to us as a childhood memory rather than a fictional account makes the critique it contains far more effective.

My second example relates to the book's title. The phrase "Ay Kutah Astinan" is part of a ghazal by the medieval Persian lyricist Hafez and is addressed to the Islamic clergy.[4] In the poem Hafez admonishes the religious authorities of his day to refrain from meddling in the private lives and personal affairs of the Muslims. In the poem's phraseology, the clerical custom of shortening sleeves as a show of pious poverty contrasts with the idea of transgression expressed in Persian as *deraz-dasti* (having long hands [or arms]). Clearly, as the title of a book published in Iran in the 1980s, the address conjures up a new coherence which foregrounds every one of the book's eight essays as somehow related to the theocratic state ruling over the society. It thus enlists every essay, every story in the volume, even every statement in each story, into an overall system of coherence that releases its ultimate meaning in terms implied by that address. At the same time, the appropriation of Hafez's phrase goes beyond the aesthetic appeal contained in it to transfer the truth value, insight, and legitimacy of the greatest of Persian lyricists to the ideas communicated through the book.

Born on 11 December 1931 in the southeastern city of Sirjan, 'Ali-Akbar Sa'idi-Sirjani began his career in the benevolent care of two prominent figures in contemporary Iranian history: Mozaffar Baqa'i- Kermani, a controversial and maverick politician who rose to prominence in the 1950s during the years of Iran's oil nationalisation movement; and Habib Yaghmai, the influential editor of the literary monthly *Yaghma*, a journal conservative in literary taste but reformist in political terms. Although in his more recent writings he has discounted his early poetic compositions, Sirjani began his literary career as a poet in the 1950s and had five collections of verse to his name by 1966.[5] He had also prepared a biography of poets from his hometown of Sirjan, had annotated editions of three classical texts of Persian literature and Iranian history, and had collaborated m the posthumous publication of Dehkhoda's famous encyclopaedic dictionary, the *Loghatnameh*.

It was in the pages of *Yaghma* that Sirjani first rose to prominence as an essayist, primarily on cultural affairs. His essays, published irregularly through much of the 1970s, were subsequently collected and issued in 1977 in a book entitled *Ashub-e Yadha* (A Motley of Memories).[6] These essays,

mostly chronicling the author's travels to diverse academic and scholarly gatherings in Europe and India, reflect little more than an educated Iranian's anxiety over the government's cultural policies, particularly in relation to the former Persian-speaking world of the Indian subcontinent. Even though they reveal Sirjani's proclivity for anecdote, they often lack the biting sarcasm which characterises his more recent writings. Reading them in the light of his more recent essays, one is left with the distinct feeling that life under the social conditions created by the Islamic Republic must have led the author to discover new coping mechanisms.

Sirjani's potential as a writer who can hide his intellectual angst under a shrewdly conceived grin came to the fore after the Iranian Revolution that toppled the monarchy and brought about the Islamic Republic. In a series of anecdotal essays, often framed as remembrances of childhood or youth and presented in a satiric mode, he began to offer specific interpretations of the sweeping currents of political and cultural tides stemming from the revolution. As the clerical establishment, eager to consolidate its power, began to resort to extralegal means in order to eliminate its enemies, Sirjani reminded his readers of popular stories surrounding the behaviour of a mythical creature in Iranian folklore called the *duwalpa*, meaning "belt-legged." One of the creature's stratagems for survival provided a particularly apt analogy for the gradual appropriation of the revolution by the Shi'i clerics. Tradition has it that the *duwalpa*, turning itself into the likeness of a feeble old man or woman, appears on the path of unsuspecting travellers late at night. Squatting, as if unable to walk, it begs for a ride home on the back of the traveller. Once mounted, the creature begins to transform its long, flimsy legs into a tightening belt around the traveller's waist. It then demands to be taken to one destination after another until the traveller collapses from exhaustion. As Sirjani tells the story, the gap between the legitimate grievances that co-opted Iranians of all walks of life into the revolutionary process and the undue hardships by which Iranians were burdened in its wake begin to become visible, making the popular, perennial myth an expression of a very particular social situation.

"Shaykh San'an," an unfinished allegory published in the journal *Negin* in 1980, became the most successful story of this kind. It was also exceptional in that it was serialised not as an essay but as a story in its own right. Nevertheless, like so many of Sirjani's writings, it was framed as the author's remembrance of a narrative recited from the pulpit by a provincial preacher. Taking its name from a well-known mystical parable,[7] it chronicles the events following the rescue of a beautiful Muslim woman from the clutches of

an infidel overlord. The rescue mission is spearheaded, with the purest of intentions, by Shaykh San'an, an exemplary Sufi guide and chief *pir* (elder) of a Khaneqah, a Sufi monastery. The shaykh's avowed plan, announced to the townsfolk to enlist their support, specifies that the lady will be returned to the care of her rightful guardians, her kinsmen. The shaykh's followers, however, have their own ideas about what constitutes proper care for the lady. They argue that her relatives have proven unworthy of keeping guard over her in the past, and that therefore she ought to be kept in the Khaneqah under their constant supervision. For a while, a compromise solution sees the lady placed under the care of a merchant known for his honesty and piety. However, the shaykh's associates sabotage this arrangement, as it does not advance their designs. To complicate matters, the great shaykh himself falls desperately in love with the woman upon first setting eyes on her. At the suggestion of his associates, he agrees, after some initial misgivings over his immaculate reputation, to marry her and to keep her in the Khaneqah. Lady Qodrat, however, is as fickle as she is captivating, and the shaykh catches her time and again flirting unabashedly with all his associates.

As the fellows of the Khaneqah sink deeper and deeper into petty rivalries over the twin blessings of closeness to the leader and gaining the lady's favour, news of the scandalous events at the Khaneqah begins to spread, causing immense anxiety among the townsfolk. In order to divert attention from the scandal, his associates advise the shaykh to stage the takeover of a half-crumbled bathhouse rumoured to be haunted by genies. The narrative stops abruptly at the point where Shaykh San'an's associates are making speeches in which the genies are blamed for the mysterious disease which they say has suddenly seized the Khaneqah's great leader.

No literate Iranian would fail to see in the parable an account of events in the Iranian Revolution, from the ouster of Shah Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi in February 1979 to the seizure of the American Embassy in November. The parallels are too obvious to list, and a variety of signs provide unmistakable connections. The central clue is the name Sirjani gives to the object of disputation: Qodrat, the name of the woman first rescued then lusted after, means "power" in Persian. But that is not all. The word *bazargan* (merchant) is clearly designed to recall the surname of the prime minister in the Provisional Revolutionary Government, first appointed by the Ayatollah Khomeini in February 1979, then forced to resign eight months later following the embassy takeover. Other names of places and persons, character traits, or descriptions of events and records of conversations, though less obvious, do nevertheless help the reader follow in the narrative a specific articulation of the events

outside it, viewed from a particular ideological stance. Clearly, Sirjani is debunking the idea of the revolution as selfless service to an ideal and is communicating instead the notion of it as a means of attaining to power.

Sirjani's masterful delineation of the space between appearance and reality, between proclamations and action, between dialogue and soliloquy, gives the narrative of "Shaykh San'an" a particularly rich texture. Through a number of dichotomies the shaykh's initial purity of intention is contrasted with his subsequent hypocritical show of piety. The strategy allows the reader to follow the process through which "love of power," a common human trait, comes to "corrupt" even the sincerest and loftiest of human intentions. As Shaykh San'an finds himself disturbed over the thought of deviating from the path of righteousness, he is made to recount his past piety in a midnight verse dialogue with Satan. Here are four lines from Satan's response: "Desire for power led you astray, o Shaykh / and the demon of lust threw you in the pit. / Now bid farewell to your pious peace of mind / And forget the stories of your former obedience."[8] In the rapidly changing environment of Iran's literary milieu in the early 1980s, Sirjani had obviously found a means of making old stories meaningful in a specifically new way, and the artful manner in which he was doing this was not lost on the authorities. In envisaging this modem version of a classical tale of power and piety and placing it in the mouth of a humble provincial preacher who relates the tale in a mix of verse and prose, he had dipped into a source of relevance untapped by the modernist literary intellectuals.

In 1984 Sirjani published *Dar Astin-e Moraqqa*' (In the Tattered Sleeve), another collection of essays, most of them written before the revolution. In his introduction, the only post-revolution piece in the book, Sirjani mocks the work of cultural reorientation initiated by the Islamic state. The most poignant illustration of this is contained in his critique of Sadeq Khalkhali's account of the career of Cyrus the Great, the founder of the ancient Persian Empire. In a book entitled *Kurosh-e Dorughin va Jenayat-Kar* (Cyrus, the Impostor, the Criminal) Khalkhali, an Islamic ideologue, postulated that the pre-Islamic Iranian monarch had been a passive homosexual. Unfortunately, this historical discovery was the result of the Islamic scholar's misreading of a Persian phrase: the author, now a high-ranking state official, had confused the word *rah-zani* (highway banditry) with the phrase *rah-e zani* (the path of femininity) and had interpreted the latter as referring to a man's inclination to submit to sodomy.

In a gripping paragraph Sirjani apologises for his own ignorance of this significant historical fact and thanks the Muslim scholar for having

enlightened him. Assuming the posture of a not-so-bright pupil, he cites the source of his own mistake (in fact, Khalkhali's misreading) and adduces the correct reading as his own misreading. In the process, he goes on to expose two other mistakes by Khalkhali in reading a single sentence written in fairly simple Persian prose. Thus the substance of his writing enables him to move far beyond an exposition of Khalkhali's deficiency, not only in scholarship but in the simple act of reading a text. He further instantiates, in a very concrete manner, alleged historical misreadings and/or falsifications by Islamic historians and scholars of all ages. At the same time, his satirical tone allows him to poke fun at the famed clerical preoccupation with sexual matters.[9]

It was clear by the mid-1980s that the Iranian government's patience with Sirjani's peculiar angle of assault was beginning to wear thin. The first visible signs of a crackdown came in 1989 within the cultural climate created in the wake of the Iran-Iraq war. By then Sirjani's writings had become so popular as to be sought after by top Iranian publishers and issued in runs of 50,000 copies, over ten times that of standard book printings. In a calculated move, the Ministry of Islamic Guidance refused to issue the permits necessary for the release of seventeen volumes of Sirjani's works from three publishers' warehouses.[10] The move was designed to inflict severe punitive wounds on indiscreet publishers as well as on non-conformist writers like Sirjani. In addition to whatever consequences it might herald for the author, it would deliver another blow to what had remained of independent publishing as an enterprise in Iran.

The ban was as encompassing as any the Islamic Republic had ever issued in its ten years of rule. At its centre was a new edition of the author's latest collection of essays, "You of Shortened Sleeves," the book containing the essay in which Sirjani imagines his own appearance on the state-run television network. The book had been sold out on its appearance a year earlier, and was in great popular demand. But the ban also included new editions of Sirjani's previously published works such as "In The Tattered Sleeve," published three years before, and even some of his less political yet no less relevant works like *Sima-ye Do Zan* (Profiles of Two Women)[11] and *Zahhak-e Mar-dush* (Zahhak the Serpent-Shouldered).[12] The latter two books in effect constitute interpretations of three important personages from classical Persian literature, one from the *Shahnameh* by Ferdowsi (935–1010) and two from the *Khamseh* by Nezami (1141–1209). The ban further extended to earlier editions of classical texts prepared by the author, including a commentary on the Qur'an.[13] Clearly, it was aimed at the author rather than at any single work of his.

It is true, on the other hand, that even Sirjani's literary interpretations are not altogether devoid of topical significance. In his writings on the classics of Persian literature he generally follows a twofold purpose. First, he sets out to make classical texts understandable to the younger generation of Iranians. Second, and more significantly, he strives to establish the relevance of those works to the conditions he perceives as governing contemporary Iranian society. For example, in "Zahhak the Serpent-Shouldered" the fate of the tyrant of ancient Iran is held up as an instance of the inevitable end of all tyranny. The allusion to liberators like Kaveh and Faridun contained in the book's dedication "to oppression-fighting children of Iran, the Faranaks, the Fariduns, and the Kavehs" sums up Sirjani's ultimate purpose in retelling the story, as does the exhortation which closes the book:

> Now that the glory of Faridun, together with the resistance of Faranak, the efforts of Kaveh and the uprising of the people, has left the demagogic alien ruler hanging forever from nails of eternal damnation deep in the cavern of history, having left an edifying story about the domination of the government of ignorance and insanity upon the face of the earth, let us wish, in gratitude for the downfall of Zahhak, that the nightmarish oppression of no Zahhak shall ever burden our sacred homeland henceforth.[14]

In protesting against the ban, Sirjani launched a letterwriting campaign with a series of open letters addressed to various Iranian authorities, including spiritual leader Ayatollah ʿAli Khameneh'i, President Rafsanjani, and Mr. Larijani, Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance. When these proved ineffective, he issued an open appeal to expatriate Iranians, asking them to help him pay back the publishers who had invested their capital in the publication of his works. He offered as a token of his gratitude a new book of his, another work of literary interpretation entitled *Bichareh Esfandiar* (Poor Esfandiar), published in Washington, D.C.[15] The letter, written in 1992 and distributed widely among Iranians abroad, further infuriated the Iranian authorities, as it coincided with the inauguration of a campaign on the part of the latter to bring expatriate Iranians, particularly technocrats and entrepreneurs, back to their homeland.

The 1993 awarding of a Hammett-Hellman Prize to Sirjani (jointly with Shahmush Parsipur, a woman writer also suppressed by the Islamic Republic) further distinguished the author as a literary voice to be reckoned with. Even though he was separate from the din of intellectual opposition to the Islamic

Republic, he had nevertheless attracted the attention of the world beyond the borders of Iran. Sensing that situation, and wary that the government might use the granting of a literary award by an American organisation as a pretext for further harassing him, Sirjani refused to accept the prize. Three years earlier, Iran's spiritual leader, the Ayatollah Khameneh'i, found Sirjani's case important enough to send him a personal message. The text of that message has not been made public, but we can speculate from Sirjani's response to it that, although it may have contained vague promises, it was primarily designed to frighten him into silence. One way or another, the tug of war between a solitary, though immensely popular author and a powerful government deeply despised by the country's educated elite had to be ended.

Sirjani's response to Khameneh'i's message shows how determined a man can be in trying to preserve his principles. He opens with an expression of regret over his misgivings about the nature of the Islamic government. He says he feels disappointed when "contemplating the fate that the Iranian nation is bound to have under your leadership." He rejects the accusation that his writings contain attacks on Islam and draws a distinction between belief in Islam and an uncritical acceptance of the dictates of a political power structure that presents itself by that name:

> As for my banned books, I really fail to see where in them there is an assault on Islam, or on the basis for an Islamic government. I am by nature averse to hypocrisy, falsehood, discrimination, and injustice, and this aversion shows through my writing. If, God forbid, such vices have penetrated into the organs of the government, they could be remedied when they get an airing. The main problem is that in the present government, criticism of any office-holder is viewed as "questioning the regime" and undermining the foundation of Islam. This then becomes a pretext for suppression, strangulation, and the outcome that we are all witnessing. I deeply believe in all that I have put in my books, now banned, and the paper turned to pulp. And I would be willing to answer for them in any court of law. If my writings are against Islam or a truly Islamic government, why do the authorities behave in such an unethical manner in my case? Doesn't the country have laws and courts?[16]

The letter sealed the author's fate in a way that no previous writing of his – be it an anecdotal essay, a political allegory, or an open appeal – had done. It went far beyond a plea of not guilty by an individual author and questioned

the legitimacy of the state and the authority of its spiritual leader. The only response of which the Islamic Republic could be thought capable was the one given: the use of state violence in the form of Sirjani's arrest and incarceration. Three months after that arrest, the Islamic Republic of Iran has just begun to produce a series of statements, allegedly in Sirjani's handwriting, in which the Iranian writer admits to a number of unspecified crimes, recants his past positions, and asks for leniency. Sirjani's prediction of his own fate has indeed come true.

There is a parable in the opening pages of "In the Tattered Sleeve" which tells of a man dispossessed of his wealth and belongings by a powerful local dignitary, once again in the author's hometown of Sirjan.[17] The destitute man appears at the local bazaar every day to recount the injustices he has been made to suffer. Thanks to the influence of his oppressor, he is soon arrested and publicly flogged for falsely discrediting a local luminary. Gholam-ʿAli, determined to tell the story of the injustice done to him at the marketplace, next incorporates his story in a song-and-dance performance much like those of village madmen. When the police attempt to silence him again, local shopkeepers and peddlers intercede, stating that the man may be insane and that, after all, he is only performing a comical act.

The powerful target of Gholam-ʿAli's camouflaged criticism, now seeing himself as the butt of the jokes which make people laugh, next obtains an edict from the local mullah outlawing song- and dance performances. Getting wind of the edict, the dispossessed plaintiff changes his strategy of communication once more, this time directing his words to Yazid and Shemr, archetypes of villainy in the Shiʿi consciousness. The context has been established, however, and no one fails to infer who are the real recipient of the insults. The powerful adversary then obtains another edict, one which everyone fears may finally succeed in silencing Gholam-ʿAli. This edict stipulates that the likening through allusion of a believer to an unbeliever is tantamount to sacrilege. The next day Gholam-ʿAli appears at the head of the bazaar with his pet cat on his shoulder and begins to tell, in the most explicit terms yet, the story of all the atrocities his cat has committed against him. "Thus," Sirjani concludes from his own exemplum, "emerges the language of epochs of oppression under governments of club-wielders." He describes the challenge of literary communication within society in terms of voices or images transmitted through constantly changing environments of communication. "Readers," he says, are "sensitive antennae which distinguish and separate the original voice through wave upon wave of static."[18]

What Sirjani communicates is immediately relevant to his readers because it is already present to them. In their movement from the diffuse, polyvalent space of the culture to the dynamics of a definable interpretive ambience, his narratives become most specifically political, meaningful, and relevant, for the power vested in them comes directly from the culture.

Notes

Prologue

1 The chapters of this book previously appeared in the following sources: "Revolutionary Posturing: Iranian Writers and the Iranian Revolution." *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)*. Volume 23, No. 4 (November 1991): 507–531; "Protest and Perish: A History of the Writers Association of Iran." *Iranian Studies*, Volume XVIII, Nos. 1–4 (1985): 189–229; "Of Hail and Hounds: The Image of the Iranian Revolution in Recent Persian Literature." *State, Culture and Society*, Volume I, No. 3 (Spring 1985): 148–180; "A Well amid the Waste: An Introduction to the Poetry of Ahmad Shamlu." *World Literature Today*, Volume 51, No. 2, (Spring 1977): 201–206; "Poet of Desires Turned to Dust: In Memoriam, Mehdi Akhavan-Saless." *World Literature Today*, Volume 66, No. 1 (Winter 1991): 18–25; "A Story-Teller and His Times: Sa'idi-Sirjani of Iran." *World Literature Today*, Volume 69, No. 3 (Summer 1994): 516–522; "Authors and Authorities: Censorship and Literary Communication in Post-Revolution Iran." *Persian Studies in North America: Essays in Honor of Professor M.A. Jazayery*, ed. Mehdi Marashi, Iranbooks; Bethesda, MD, 303–330; "Up from the Underground: The Meaning of Exile in Gholamhossayn Sa'edi's Last Short Stories." *Iranian Refugees and Exiles since Khomeini*, ed. Asghar Fathi, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 257–279.

Introduction – The Bleeding Pen

1 Also see his other contributions such as "Some Common Characteristics of Persian Poetry and Art," in *Studia Islamica*, No. 16 (1962), pp. 61–71, where he, for instance, states, "Poetry is the most significant artistic achievement …," p. 61.

2 G. Lazard, "The Rise of the New Persian Language," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. IV. *The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Saljuqs*, ed. R.N. Frye, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, Chapter 19, pp. 595–632. There are several stories about the birth of Persian poetry and who first composed a Persian poem. The chronicle *Tārikh-e Sistān* has it that the first Persian poem was composed at the local court of the Saffarids (861–1003). A poet recited a panegyric in Arabic. as was customary. praising the ruler, but the Persian ruler Ya'qub Layth questioned why he should be praised in a language that he could not understand: *chizi ke man andar nayābam cherā bāyad goft* or "things that I do not understand, why should they be said." His secretary Mohammad ibn Wasif translated the poem into Persian. While this story is usually told to refer to the rise of Persian literature, there were of course several other crucial events during the ninth and the tenth centuries showing the essential role of poetry in the revivification of Persian culture. See *Tārikh-e sistān*, p. 209. The variant of the name is also Moḥammad b. Wāṣef but in Bahār's critical text edition it is Wasif. Also see S.M. Stern, "Ya'qub the Coppersmith and Persian National Sentiment" in *Iran and Islam, in Memory of the Late V. Minorsky*, ed. C.E. Bosworth, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1971, pp. 535–555; C. Edmund Bosworth in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, s.v. Saffarids; J.S. Meisami, *Persian Historiography to the End of the Twelfth Century*, Edinburgh, 1999, pp. 47–140; also see Ahmad Ashraf in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, s.v. Iranian Identity, iii. Medieval Islamic Period.

3 See the analysis by A. Karimi-Hakkak of the topical literature between 1977 and 1979, which gives excellent leads for the political use of art and literature. See "Introduction: Iran's Literature 1977–1997," in *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3/4, (1997), pp. 193–213.

4 An excellent study, although not explicitly on the role of poetry, is Kathryn Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs: Cultural Landscape of Early Modern Iran*, London/Cambridge: Harvard Middle Eastern Monographs xxxv, 2002; other studies are Stephen G. Haw, "The Persian Language in Yuan-Dynasty China: A Reappraisal," in *East Asian History*, No. 39, 2014, pp. 5–32; D.O. Morgan, "Persian as a *Lingua Franca* in the Mongol Empire," in *Literacy in the Persianate World: Writing and the Social Order*, ed. B. Spooner and W.L. Hanaway, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, pp. 160–170; Bert G. Fragner, *Die 'Persophonie': Regionalität, Identität und Sprachkontakt in der Geschichte Asiens*, Berlin: Halle an der Saale, 1999. On the use of poetry by Sufis see Dick Davis, "Sufism and Poetry: a Marriage of Convenience?" in *Edebiyât*, Vol. 10, 1999, pp. 279–292.

5 Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 85.

6 Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, p. 86.

7 See Seyed-Gohrab, "Poetry as Awakening: Singing Modernity," in *Literature of the Early Twentieth Century: From the Constitutional Period to Reza Shah*, ed. A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, Vol. XI, London / New York: I.B. Tauris, pp. 30–132.

8 Houra Yavari, in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, s.v. Fiction ii (b). The Novel.

9 Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, p. 88.

10 J.T.P. de Bruijn defines *sokhan* in his discussion of Nezāmi's *Makhzan al-asrār*. Elsewhere I have summarised the gist of this definition as follows: "it alludes to the metaphysical logos, the as yet undivided principle of creation, which is closely related to universal reason. *Sukhan* also refers to God's creative command, as mentioned in the Quran (19:35), or in general terms to God's Word as a command to ethical action, contained in the Quran and elaborated in Islamic law. *Sukhan* also alludes to the rational capacity of individuals, enabling them to understand the intellectual reality behind the deceptive appearance of sensually perceptible realities. Moreover, *sukhan* refers to language; an ennobled literary version of language which is worthy to express the eternal truth, the treasures or secrets of both worlds." See J.T.P. de Bruijn, "De dichter over het woord. Beschouwingen over de rede, de taal en de dichtkunst in de Perzische poëzie" in *De Vorsten van het woord: Teksten over dichterschap en poëzie uit Oosterse tradities*, ed. W.L. Idema, Amsterdam, 1983, pp. 36–37, and Seyed-Gohrab, *Courtly Riddles: Enigmatic Embellishments in Early Persian Poetry*, Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2010, p. 156; also see K. Talattof, "Nizāmi Ganjavi, the Wordsmith: the Concept of *sakhun* in Classical Persian Poetry," in *A Key to the Treasure of the Hakim: Artistic and Humanistic Aspects of Nizami Ganjavi's Khamsa*, ed. J.C. Bürgel and Ch. van Ruymbeke, Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2011, pp. 211–244.

11 Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, p. 93.

12 For an evaluation of Karimi-Hakkak's scholarly *oeuvre* see K. Talattof, "Introduction" in *Persian Language, Literature and Culture: New Leaves, Fresh Looks*, ed. K. Talattof, London/New York: Routledge, 2015, pp. 1–20.

13 H. Mir'ābedini, *Encyclopædia Iranica*, s.v. Behazin.

14 See chapter two of this book "Protest and Perish: A History of the Writers Association of Iran"; on Persian prison narratives see Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami, *Literary Subterfuge and Contemporary Persian Fiction: Who Writers Iran?*, London: Routledge, 2015 especially chapter one, and pp. 85–87.

15 See chapter two "Protest and Perish," p. 66.
16 See chapter two "Protest and Perish," p. 53.
17 See chapter seven "Poet of Desires Turned to Dust: In Memoriam Mehdi Akhavan Saless," p. 175.
18 On Nimā see *Essays on Nima Yushij: Animating Modernism in Persian Poetry*, ed. by A. Karimi-Hakkak and K. Talattof, Leiden: Brill, 2004.
19 See chapter seven "Poet of Desires Turned to Dust," p. 177.
20 Mehdi Akhavan Saless, Zemestan, Terhan: Morvaraid Publications, 1956, p. 105.
21 See chapter seven "Poet of Desires Turned to Dust," p. 177.
22 Interview with *Le Monde*, 6 May, 1978.
23 For more examples see Houra Yavari, in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, s.v. Fiction. ii(f). by Persians in non-Persian languages.
24 Also compare Azar Nafisi who indicates in her introduction to the English translation of Ferdowsi's *Shahnama* that "Persians basically did not have a home, except in their literature, especially in their poetry." See Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnama: The Persian Book of Kings*, translated by Dick Davis, Penguin Classics, 2007, with a foreword by Azar Nafisi, p. ix.
25 See chapter six "Up from the Underground," p. 152 of this book.
26 For a most recent treatment of this theme see A. Karimi-Hakkak, "Continuity and Creativity: Models of Change in Persian Poetry, Classical and Modern," in *The Layered Heart: Essays on Persian Poetry*, ed. A.A. Seyed-Ghorab, Washington DC: Mage Publishers, 2019, pp. 25–54.
27 See chapter one "Revolutionary Posturing," p. 29.
28 K. Talattof, "Introduction" in *Persian Language, Literature and Culture*, p. 10.
29 See chapter four "Of Hail and Hounds," p. 111.
30 See chapter two "Protest and Perish," p. 83.

Chapter 1 – Revolutionary Posturing

1 Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak. "Of Hail and Hounds: The Image of the Iranian Revolution in Recent Persian Literature," *State, Culture and Society*, I, 3 (Spring 1985), 148–180, pp. 148–180.
2 For a survey of this tendency in one particularly illustrative instance see Sorour S. Soroudi, "The Iranian Heritage in the Eyes of the Contemporary Poet Mehdi Akhavan Salis (M. Omid)," in Ellie Kedouri and Sylvia Haim, eds., *Towards a Modern Iran: Studies in Thought, Politics and Society* (London: Frank Cass, 1988), pp. 132–154.

3 For a representative sample of this poetry see Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, *An Anthology of Modern Persian Poetry* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1978).

4 Nima Yushij, "Morgh-e Amin" (The Amen Bird), *Majmu'eh-ye Asar-e Nima Yushij* (The Collected Works of Nima Yushij), vol. I (Tehran: Nashr-e Nasher, 1985), pp. 172–182.

5 Ahmad Shamlu, "Pariya" (The Fairies), *Hava-ye Tazeh* (Fresh Air) (Tehran: NIL Publishers, 1976), p. 89. For a more detailed analysis of "The Fairies," see my article "A Well Amid the Waste: An Introduction to the Poetry of Ahmad Shamlu," *World Literature Today* 51, 2 (Fall 1976), 201–206.

6 Karimi-Hakkak, *Anthology*, p. 89.

7 Jalal Al-e Ahmad, "First Day in Mecca," tr. John Green and Ahmad Alizadeh, in *Iranian Society: An Anthology of Writings by Jalal Al-e Ahmad*, comp. and ed. Michael C. Hillmann (Lexington, KY.: Mazda Publishers, 1982), pp. 122–133.

8 Karimi-Hakkak, *Anthology*, pp. 153–159.

9 Mirza Aqa Asgari, "Tashyi'-e Jenazeh-ye Shahid" (A Martyr's Funeral Procession), in *Nameh-ye Kanun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran* (Journal of the Writers' Association of Iran), I (Spring 1979), 199.

10 Siyavosh Kasra'i, "Az Ghorub ta Khorus-khan" (From the Dusk to the Cockcrow), in ibid., p. 139.

11 Mahmud Azad, "Farazha-i az sh'e r-e Boland-e 'Iman Hamisheh Razi-st'" (Fragments from the Long Poem "Faith Is Always a Mystery"), ibid., p. 141.

12 Esma'il Kho'i, "Mardom Hamareh Haq Darand" (The People Are Forever Right), in *Andisheh-ye Azad*, I (February 19, 1980), pp. 11–15.

13 Ibid., p. 15.

14 Ahmad Shamlu, "Sobh" (Morning), in *Taranehha-ye Kuchek-e Ghorbat* (Little Homesick Songs) (Tehran: Mazyar Publishers, 1980), p. 27.

15 On the attitude of Iranian intellectuals towards the language of the clerics in contemporary Iran see my essay entitled "Language Reform Movement and Its Language: The Case of Persian" in Bjorn H. Jernudd and Michael J. Shapiro, eds., *The Politics of Language Purism* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1989), pp. 81–104.

16 Esma'il Kho'i, "Amizegan-e Tokhmeh-ye Changiz o Dudman-e Abujahl" (Crossbreeds of the Seed of Gengiz and the House of Abu-Jahl), in *Andisheh-ye Azad*, p. 33.

17 On the nationalistic views of this pioneering Iranian thinker see Mangol Bayat-Philipp, "Mirza Aqa Khan Kirmani: A Nineteenth Century Persian Nationalist," in *Toward a Modern Iran*, op. cit. [cited in note 2], pp. 64–95.

18 Hushang Golshiri, "Fathnameh-ye Moghan" (The Magi's Victory-Chronicle), in *Kargah-e Qesseh* I (n.d.), 1–6. The story itself is dated November-December 1980.
19 Ibid., p. 6.
20 Qodsi Qazinur, "Ketabha-ye Darsi-ye Jadid" (New School Textbooks), *Ketab-e Jomc e h*, 20 (27 December 1979), 31–41.
21 Ahmad Shamlu in ibid., 39–41.
22 Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *The Shahnameh of Firdausi*, tr. Arthur George Warner and Edmond Warner, vol. I (London, 1905), p. 168.
23 Shamlu's footnote to Qazinur's essay (cited in n. 25), p. 40.
24 M.A. Sepanlu, "Ferdowsi va Dastan-e Kaveh-ye Ahangar" (Ferdowsi and the story of Kaveh the Ironsmith), *Ketab-e Jom'eh,* 31 (7 April I 980), 157–160. Also, Feraydun Jonaydi, "Aqa-ye Shamlu, Tora ba Nabard-e Deliran Chekar?" (Mr. Shamlu, What Have You to Do with the Battle of the Brave?), *Borj*, I (November-December 1980), 96–139.
25 Ahmad Shamlu (cited in 26), p. 39.

Chapter 2 – Protest and Perish

1 The account of these two attempts was related to me by playwright and novelist Gholamhosein Sa'edi in Paris in the winter of 1984.
2 A copy of this statement was published by Baqer Parham as part of a series of articles on the relationship between the Writers' Association of Iran and the Tudeh Party. Cf. *Ketab-e Jom'eh*, No. 27 (21 February 1980): 16.
3 According to Michael Hillmann, "Nader Naderpur recalls that most of the writers boycotted the event." In 1971, the Pahlavi government published a volume titled *Sokhanraniha-ye Nakhostin Kongreh-ye She'r dar Iran* (Speeches of the First Congress of Poetry in Iran), Tehran: Ministry of Arts and Culture, 1971.
4 The Writers' Association of Iran, "Report of the Executive Board to the General Assembly" dated 14 March 1969, quoted in ibid., p. 22.
5 Ibid., p. 24.
6 The various views on Al-e Ahmad's death are described by Michael Hillmann in "Cultural Dilemmas of an Iranian Intellectual," Lost in the Crowd by Jalal Al-e Ahmad (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1985).
7 Quoted in M.E. Beh'azin, *Mehman-e In Aqayan* [Guest of These Gentlemen] (Tehran: Nil, 1970), p. 5.

8 Ibid., p. 152.
9 Ibid., p. 155.
10 Bahram Bayza'i, "Dar Mowqe'iyat-e Te'atr va Sinema" [On the Situation of Theatre and Film-Making] *Dah Shab* [The Ten Nights], compiled by Naser Mo'azzen (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1978), pp. 120–125.
11 Shams Al-e Ahmad, ibid., pp. 117–119.
12 Baqer Mo'meni, "Sansur va 'Avarez-e Nashi az An" [Censorship and Its Implications], ibid., pp. 253–265.
13 "Mosahebeh-ye Sa'edi dar New York" [Sa'edi's Interview in New York], dated 15 June 1978, mimeographed.
14 Bahram Bayza'i, Ten Nights, p. 122.
15 On this point see my essay entitled "Adabiyat va Degardisiha-ye Tarikh" [Literature and History's Transformations], *Andisheh-ye Azad*, No. 5 (April 1980): 5.
16 [Historical Transformations] Andisheh-ye Haj-Seyed-Javadi's letters were disseminated through xerox copies in various forms. In my personal collection of this xeroxed literature of the years from 1973 to 1979 I have a total of 16 letters written by him.
17 Gbolamhosayn Sa'edi, "Shebh-e Honarmand" [Pseudoartist], *Ten Nights*, pp. 201–205.
18 Nameh'i az "(A Letter by) 'Ali Aaghar Haj Sayyed Javadi," dated 19 November 1977.
19 Jamshid Amuzegar, "Cable to the American PEN Society," dated 19 December 1977, translated into Persian and disseminated by the Committee for Artistic and Intellectual Freedom in Iran.
20 The Writers' Association of Iran, "Nameh-ye Sargoshadeh beh Aqa-ye Amuzegar" (Open Letter to Prime Minister Jamshid Amuzegar), dated 7 January 1978.
21 Rubollah Khomeini, "Statement Addressed to University Students," 1977 (no date). Cf. also Homa Nateq, "Sa'id Soltanpur dar Jonbesh-e Daneshju'i" (Sa'id Soltanpur in the Student Movement), *Sosializm ya Engelab*, No. 2 (December 1982): 28–36.
22 The Organisation of Students Affiliated with the Ehya Confederation News and Reports. No. 22 (April 1978), quoted in ibid., p. 31.
23 "Mowza'e Kanun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran" [the Position of the Writers Association of Iran], ratified by the General Assembly on 21 April 1979.
24 "Darbareh-ye Shabha-ye She'r va Ta'liq-e Goruh-e Panj Nafari" [Statement of the Writers Association of Iran concerning the Poetry-Reading Nights

and the Suspension of the Group of Five], dated 14 November 1979, printed in Ketab-e Jom'eh. No. 16 (22 November 1979:) 163–167.

25 "Nameh-ye Sargoshadeh beh Aqa-ye Abolhassan Banisadr" [An Open Letter by the Writers Association of Iran Addressed to Mr. Abolhassan Banisadr], dated 5 February 1980, Andisheh-ye Azad. No. 1, p. 1.

26 "Bayaniyeh-ye Kanun … darbareh-ye Daneshgah-ha" [Statement of the Writers Association of Iran Concerning the Universities], dated 21 April 1980, printed in Andisheh-ye Azad. No. 5, p. 1.

27 "Nameh-ye Sargoshadeh-ye Kanun … beh Aqa-ye Doktor Abdolhassan Banisadr …" (Open Letter by the Writers Association of Iran Addressed to Dr. Abolhassan Banisadr, the President of Iran, concerning Censorship and Strangulation), dated 10 May 1980, printed in *Ketab-e Jom'eh*. No. 36, pp. 114–116.

28 "Sarkub, Estebdad, Khafegan …" (Repression, Despotism, Strangulation – A Statement by the Writers' Association of Iran), *Bustan*, No. 1, p. 96.

29 "Bayaniyeh-ye Kanun … darbareh-ye Daneshgah-ha" [Statement of the Writers' Association of Iran Concerning the Universities], dated 21 April 1980, printed in Andisheh-ve Azad, No. 5, p. 1.

30 "Nameh-ye Sargoshadeh-ye Kanun … beh Aqa-ye Doktor Abdolhasan Bani-Sadr …" [Open Letter by the Writers' Association of Iran Addressed to Dr. Abolhasan Bani-Sadr, the President of Iran concerning Censorship and Strangulation], dated 10 May 1980, printed in *Ketab-e Jom'eh*, No. 36, pp. 114–116.

31 "Sarkub, Estebdad, Khafeqan …" [Repression, Despotism, Strangulation – A Statement by the Writers Association of Iran], *Bustan*, No. 1, p. 96.

Chapter 3 – Authors and Authorities

1 I would like to thank Professor Afsaneh Najmabadi, who read an earlier draft of this essay and made a number of very perceptive suggestions.

2 Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, "Censorship in Persia" in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, vol. 5, fasc. 2, pp. 135–142, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers.

3 Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, tr. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 254.

4 *Adineh* was first published in newspaper form for 10 issues. Beginning with number 11, which bears the date April 1987, it evolved into a varia journal

published monthly. *Donya-ye Sokhan* began publication as a biweekly magazine in February 1986, but was interrupted after six issues. When it resumed publication after nine months, it attempted repeatedly to dispel the thought that the journal's disappearance might have been related to government suppression. Cf. *Donya-ye Sokhan*, no. 7 (January 1987), p. 3; no. 8 (February 1987), pp. 2, and passim. *Gardun* appeared as a biweekly journal in December 1990, and is being published more or less regularly at present. In August 1991, the publication of a front cover and an essay depicting the problem of Iranian expatriates in its 15th issue caused a violent reaction among the Islamic fundamentalists who attacked the journal's office, manhandled its staff, and caused extensive damage to its archives. The episode was chronicled in the subsequent issues of the journal. Cf. *Gardun*, nos. 17–18 (August 1991), pp. 2, 8, 9, 10, and passim.

5 Khomeini's speeches, for example, are regularly published in fresh editions wherein new selections are made, certain references are deleted, and various other adjustments are introduced depending on the state's current preoccupations. Cf. *Dar Jostoju-ye Rah az Kalam-e Imam (Seeking the Path through the Imam's Words)*, vols. 1–19, 1982–1984. This book, like other works of this nature in the Islamic Republic, does not follow a coherent or consistent editorial policy.

6 Ruhollah Khomeini, *Payamha va Sokhanraniha-ye Imam Khomeini [dar sheshmaheh-ye avval-e 1359]* (Speeches and Messages of Imam Khomeini [March to August 1980) (Tehran: Nur Research and Publishing Institute, 1980), p. 238. This is the first of a multi-volume series of books, each of which contains edited excerpts from the Ayatollah Khomeini's speeches and other writings or pronouncements. Once again, there is no explanation of the editorial policies or the criteria for inclusion and exclusion of certain speeches or passages therein.

7 The ghazals of the Ayatollah Khomeini were published posthumously in various journals and cultural organs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, always accompanied by commentaries which relate their content to religious or mystical beliefs.

8 "Chahar Nameh Piramun-e she'r va Honar-e Emruz-e Iran" (Four Letters on Iran's Art and Poetry Today), *Nameh-ye Showra-ye Nevisandegan va Honarmandan-e Iran* (Journal of the Iranian Council of Writers and Artists) 6 (Spring 1982): 10–22.

9 Ibid., p. 23.

10 Ibid., p. 15. For an analysis of the poetic discourse developed on the basis of

such dichotomies see Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, "Revolutionary Posturing: Iranian Writers and the Iranian Revolution of 1979," *The International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23 (Autumn 1991): 507–531.

11 Ibid., p. 16.

12 Ibid., p. 22.

13 Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, "Protest and Perish: A History of the Writers Association of Iran," *Iranian Studies* 18 (1985): 189–229.

14 Lev Loseff, On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature, tr. Jane Babkol (Munich: O. Sagner, 1984).

15 For a more comprehensive analysis of this play see Kaveh Safa, "Othello in the Islamic Republic," *Emergences 2* (Spring 1990): 131–163.

16 For an analysis of Sa'edi's literary output in his years of exile see Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, "Up from the Underground: The Meaning of Exile in Sa'edi's Last Short Stories," in *Iranian Refugees and Exiles since Khomeini*, ed. Asghar Fathi (Costa Mesa, CA, Mazda Publishers, 1992), pp. 257–279.

17 Gholamhosein Sa'edi, *Pardeh-daran-e A'ineh-Afruz va Otello dar Sarzamin-e Ajayeb: Do Nemayeshnameh* (Mirror-Holding Chamberlains and Othello in Wonderland: Two Plays) (n.p., n.d.), p. 85. This volume was part of Sa'edi's writings published posthumously, presumably in Paris. Khomeini's use of medical analogies can be found in many of his speeches and pronouncements, particularly in reference to Israel and his own opposition forces.

18 Amirhossein Arianpur, "Baztab-e Enqelab-i Eslami-ye Iran dar Honarha" (The Retlection of the Islamic Revolution of Iran in the Arts), *Nameh-ye Showra-ye Nevisandegan va Honarmandan-e Iran* (Journal of the Iranian Council of Writers and Artists) 6 (Spring 1982): 24–46.

19 An analogous situation occurred even before the Iranian Revolution had succeeded. When the Ayatollah Khomeini made a statement in Paris to the effect that the revolution will "cut off the hands of those who had plundered Iran's wealth," the world was thrown into confusion over whether the statement is to be interpreted literally or metaphorically.

20 Sa'edi, *Othello in Wonderland*, p. 85.

21 Manuchehr Irani, *King of the Benighted*, tr. Abbas Milani (Washington, D.C., Mage Publishers, 1990). Manuchehr Irani is a pseudonym shared by several contemporary Iranian writers. The book is authored by Hushang Golshiri, one of Iran's best contemporary fiction writers.

Chapter 4 – Of Hail and Hounds

1 In October 1977, the Writers Association of Iran, which for a decade had been fighting unsuccessfully for greater intellectual and artistic freedoms, conducted a series of nightly lectures and poetry readings in which a growing number of young audiences from all over the country participated and many leading writers and poets came into direct contact with their audiences. The event was viewed as an early sign of the crack in the repressive system of secret police surveillance, and constitutes a decisive turning point in the history of intellectual contributions to the Iranian revolution.

2 Because newspapers and periodicals were paralysed by massive strikes, these works were photocopied on xerox machines and distributed among the people demonstrating in the streets.

3 Cf. Mehdi Akhavan-Saless's "My Grove" in *An Anthology of Modern Persian Poetry*, (Westview Press; Boulder, CO, 1978), p. 89.

4 Mahmud Azad, "Fragments from the long poem 'Faith Is Always a Mystery,'" ibid., p. 141.

5 M.A. Sepanlu, "Tomorrow, to Iran," in / *Take the Pulse of My Country*, Tehran: Zaman Publications, 1978, p. 78.

6 A particularly illustrative example of this tendency occurs in Tahereh Saffarzadeh's long poem entitled "Salman's Journey" in her fifth collection of poetry, The Fifth Journey, Tehran: Ravaq Publications, 1978.

7 Ahmad Shamlu, "The End of the Game," Little Homesick Songs, Tehran: Mazyar Publications, 1980. The poem is dated 16 January 1979.

8 Esma'il Kho'i, "People are Forever Right," Andishe-ye Azad [Free Thought], No. 4 (15 April 1980): p. 33.

9 Ahmad Shamlu, "Morning," *Little Homesick Songs*, op. cit.

10 Ahmad Shamlu, "In this Blind Alley," *Taranehha-ye Kuchek-e Ghorbat*, op. cit. pp. 30–32.

11 The play was first published in *Ketab-e Jom'eh* (Friday Journal), No. 15 (15 November 1979), and later in book form. My views are based on the earlier version and I am not aware of any changes in that.

12 The Writers' Association of Iran, "Report of the Executive Board to the General Assembly," dated 14 March 1969, quoted in ibid., p. 22.

13 Asghar Vaghedi, "Elegy for Poetry and the Fatherland," *Andishe- ye Azad*, No. 2 (5 March 1980): 20.

14 Hushang Golshiri, "Fathnameh-ye Moghan" [The Magi's Victory- Chronicle], *Kargah-e Ghesseh* [Fiction Workshop], No. 1 (undated), pp. 1–6. Only one issue published. The story is dated November- December 1980.

15 Javad Mojabi, "Giahist Kamelan Ma'muli" (It's a Perfectly Common Plant), *Cheragh*, No. 1 (Autumn 1981), pp. 53–69. The story is dated March-April 1981.
16 Mohammad Mokhtari, "October Nights," *The Journal of the Writers Association of Iran*, No. 4 (Special issue on the war, Autumn 1979).
17 Earlier versions of this article were presented as lectures in the spring of 1984 at Princeton University, The University of California at Los Angeles and the University of Pennsylvania.

Chapter 5 – A Well amid the Waste

1 *Kayhan-e Sal* (Annual Kayhan), vol. 8 (1969), p. 156. All prose and poetry translations in this essay are mine.
2 Quoted in *Kahyân*, 10 January 1973, p. 8.
3 Jalal Ale-Ahmad, *Moshkel-e Nima Yushij* (The Problem of Nima Yushij), Tehran, Mash'al va Danesh, p. 21.
4 These are the opening lines of "She'ri Ke Zendegi-st" (Poetry that is Life). The poem was first published in 1957 in *Hava-ye Tazzeh* (Fresh Air). It has since been anthologised extensively.
5 From the poet's introduction to *Ham chun Kucheh-i Bi-Entaha* (Like an Endless Alley), an anthology of modern non-Persian poetry, Ahmad Shamlu, ed. Tehran, 1973, p. 6.
6 "Lowh" (Tablet) was written, according to Shamlu, in 1962. It was published in 1965 in *Aida, Derakht, Khanjar va Khatereh* (Aida, Tree, Dagger and Memory). My version of the poem comes from *Ârash*, vol. 2, no. 3 (October 1965), pp. 25–31.
7 These are the opening lines of the title poem in *Aida dar Ayineh* (Aida in the Mirror) Tehran, NIL, 1965. My version of it, however, comes from *Az Hava va Ayeneha* (From the Air and the Mirrors), an anthology of Shamlu's love poems, Tehran, Ashrafi, 1967, p. 215. Aida is Shamlu's wife and, in many of his poems, the source of inspiration in the poet's search for beauty.
8 This is the second and final stanza of a short poem entitled "May my Prison have no enclosure …," published in *Shekoftan dar Meh* (Blossoming in the Fog), Tehran, Ketab-e Zaman, 1970, p. 14.
9 "Pariya" (The Fairies) was first published in *Havaye Tazeh* (Fresh Air) in 1957. Since then it has been anthologised in numerous places. My version comes from an underground anthology entitled *Majmu'eyi Az Ash'ar-e*

Moteraqi-ye Iran (A Collection of Progressive Poetry of Iran), printed in New York, pp. 15–17.

10 *Andisheh va Honar* (Thought and Art), vol. 5, no. 2, p. 146.

11 "Taraneh-ye Tarik" (The Dark Song) appears in Shamlu's latest volume of poetry, *Ebrahim dar Atash* (Abraham in the Fire), Tehran, Ketab-e Zaman, 1973, pp. 36–37.

12 This poem, "Nameh" (Letter), is dated 1944. However, it is published in one of Shamlu's latest collections, *Shekoftan dar Meh* (Blossoming in the Fog), pp. 7–12.

13 "Shekaf" (The Gap) was one of Shamlu's most recent poems, as yet unpublished at this writing. It was published in 1977. See *Doshneh dar Dis* (Dagger in a Plate), Terhan: Morvarid Publications, 1977, pp. 48–50.

Chapter 6 – Up from the Underground

1 Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Harvard University Press, Boston, 1983, pp. 5–9 and 17–30.

2 The expression of this feeling is an ever-present feature of Sufi lamentations in medieval Persian poetry. The most illustrative example occurs at the opening of Rumi's *Spiritual Couplets* where the reed's song in depicted as its lament for being separated from the reedbed from which it has been cut off.

3 Of these stories, only one, "The Black Wagon," has been translated into English under the title of "The Black Boxcar." See *Iranian Studies* Vol. XVII, nos. 2–3 (Spring-Summer 1984): 257–277.

4 For a general survey of this kind of separation form the homeland see Michael Beard and Hasan Javadi, "Iranian Writers Abroad: Survey and Elegy," *World Literature Today*, Volume 60, No. 2 (spring 1986), 257–262.

5 Ahmad Shamlu, unquestionably a leading Iranian modernist poet, travelled to the United States in 1976 at the invitation of the American PEN club to participate in the PEN-Princeton Conference on Near Eastern Literatures. He stayed for two months before going back to Iran. Then in February 1977 he returned to the U.S. and lived near Princeton in N.J. until the summer of 1978 when he moved to London to assume the editorship of *Iranshahr*. He returned to Iran a few days after the February 1979 insurgency which toppled the Iranian monarchy and has lived there through the turmoil of the last decade.

6 In the text of the story, there are several instances where the Iranian writer has erroneously remembered or recorded the names of people and places. The most obvious, of course, is A.J. (instead of J.A. for J. Alfred) Prufrock. Names of English places, written in the Latin alphabet within the Persian text, also contain errors and inconsistencies, although we cannot determine whether these originate with the writer or with press people.

7 Sa'edi's playful presentation of this catalogue cannot be fully described here. Besides such contrasts as that between food and books and death and wedding, etc., there are linguistic plays as well, like the latent one between "Holly Rose" and *The Holy Book*. Such plays on foreign words were a constant feature of Sa'edi's conversation as well [cf. my memorial essay in Persian, "Sugyad-e Marg-e Sa'edi" (The Sad Remembrance of Sa'edi's Death), PAR Monthly Journal, Vol. I, no. 1 (January–February 1986): 16–17.]. What such games signify is, of course, open to speculation. I think they are somehow related to Sa'edi's simultaneous fascination with foreign languages and his inability to master any.

8 The most illustrative instances of such uses, I think, are those related to the character of the American sergeant in "Dandil" (Dandil) and the description of blood-givings in "Ashghalduni" (The Rubble Heap) (Cf. Sa'edi: 1981). See *Dandil* (four stories), Tehran, 1966; tr. Hasan Javadi et al. as *Dandil: Stories from Iranian Life*, New York, 1981.

9 "Dar Aghaz-e Safar" was published in the first issue of Arash, fifth series, a literary and cultural journal published under the supervision of Simin Daneshvar and Gholamhosein Sa'edi. The journal ceased publication a few months after the latter went into exile.

10 "Dar Saracheh-ye Dabbaghan" was first published in Tehran in the summer of 1981 in *Bustan*, a journal that lasted only a single issue. It was reprinted in the second issue of *Alefba*, the journal which Sa'edi had resumed in Paris, in spring 1983.

11 In the interview, Sa'edi uses the French / English word allegories / allegory as well as its more traditional Persian equivalent "tamsil." Gholamhosein Sa'edi, "Dar Saracheh-ye Dabbaghan", *Bustan*, 2nd Series, no. 1 (June-July 1981): 54.

12 Ibid, p. 54.

13 Ibid, pp. 56–57.

14 For an analysis of this story in the context of Iranian writers' attitudes towards the Iranian revolution see Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, "Poetry against Piety: The Literary Response to the Iranian Revolution", *World Literature Today*, Volume 60, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 251–256.

15 The trilogy, published in the first issue of *Alefba*, contains two new episodes and the reprint of a third already published in Tehran in 1981.

16 Gholamhosein Sa'edi, "Seh-ganeh" (The Trilogy), [1. "Talkhabeh" (The Bittern)], *Alefba*, New Series, no. 1 (winter 1983): 132.

17 It is noteworthy in this regard that in ordering the stories into a trilogy, Sa'edi has discarded the chronological order in which they had been written to return to them the chronological order of the three religions treated in the trilogy. As a result, in the Parisian trilogy the order of the stories conforms to the order of the historical appearance of the religion criticised.

18 Gholamhossein Sa'edi, "Seh-gaeh", op. cit., 2. "Jarukesh …", *Alefba*, New Series, no. 1 (winter 1983): 133–134.

19 Significantly, Sa'edi seems to have preoccupied himself in his remaining years primarily with non-fictional writings. Cf. "Farhangkoshi va Honar-zoda'i dar Jomhuri'ye Eslami" (The Murdering of Culture and Eradication of the Arts in the Islamic republic), Sa'edi: *Alefba*, New Series, no. 1 Winter, 1983: 1–8.

20 "The BBC Radio Interview with Dr. Gholamhossein Sa'edi," *Alefba*, 7 (autumn 1986): 6–11.

21 For an analysis of this story in the context of Iranian writers' attitudes towards the Iranian revolution see my essay "Poetry against Piety: The Literary Response to the Iranian Revolution", World Literature Today, Volume 60, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 251–256.

Chapter 7 – Poet of Desires Turned to Dust

1 For a general introduction to modern Persian poetry see *An Anthology of Modem Persian Poetry*, Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, ed. & tr., Boulder, Co., Westview, 1978.

2 For the details of the poet's biography, especially in the early part of his life, I have relied on private communication from Ebrahim Mokalla, Akhavan's longtime friend and associate. I would like to thank Mr. Mokalla for the patience and care with which he has made this information available to me. Naturally, I remain responsible for the accuracy of the details of Akhavan's life as they appear in this essay.

3 The poem bears the date of Dey (December 1955-January 1956). My version comes from a selection of the poet's early poetry and prose published under the title *Behtarin Omid* (The Best Hope), Tehran, Agah, 1969, pp. 166–167.

My translations here and elsewhere in this essay are deliberately literal, designed to be an instrument for a discussion of the poem's words and images.

4 This is the closing line of a poem entitled "Bagh-e Man" (My Grove). For an English translation of the poem see *An Anthology of Modem Persian Poetry*, p. 89.

5 This is the closing line of a poem entitled "Chavushi" (Caravan Song), dated April 1956.

6 Akhavan, *Behtarin Omid*, pp. 221–222.

7 Mehdi Akhavan Saless, *Az In Avesta* (From This Avesta), Tehran, Morvarid, 1965, pp. 154–155.

8 Mehdi Akhavan Saless, *To Ra Ay Kohan Bum o Bar Dust Daram* (I Love You, O My Ancient Habitat), Tehran, Morvarid, 1990, p. 225.

9 It is worth mentioning that Marxism, having been introduced to Iran earlier in the form of Soviet Stalinism, was being increasingly subjected to re-examination in the aftermath of the 1953 coup, an event in which the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party was widely perceived as having turned its back on the national desire for freedom and justice. At the same time, two young Iranian intellectuals, the philosopher Dariush Ashuri and the poet Esma'il Kho'i, were translating Nietzsche's *Thus Spake 'Zarathustra* into Persian.

10 For a discussion of this point see Sorour S. Soroudi, "The Iranian Heritage in the Eyes of the Contemporary Poet Mihdi Akhavan Salis (M. Omid)," in *Toward a Modem Iran: Studies in Thought, Politics and Society*, Ellie Kedourie and Sylvia G. Haim, eds., London, Frank Cass, 1980, pp. 132–154.

11 The statement occurs towards the end of "The Story of the City of Stone" and is spoken by the prince-hero of that poem. See *Behtarin Omid*, p. 263.

12 The allusion occurs at the end of a famous early poem entitled "Miras" (Inheritance). See *Behtarin Omid*, p. 205.

13 Akhavan's latest statement on the creative process occurs in an interview with a literary magazine two years before his death: "Bara-ye Cheh Minevisid?" (Why Do You Write?), *Donya-ye Sokhan*, 17 (March-April 1988), pp. 6–16. Akhavan's statement occurs on page 7.

14 See, for instance, Reza Baraheni, *Tala dar Mes* (Gold in Copper), Tehran, Zaman, 1968, pp. 413–448.

15 Akhavan, "The Story of the City of Stone," p. 256.

16 Mehdi Akhavan Saless, *Dar Hayat-e Kuchek-e Pa'iz dar Zendan …* (In the Small Yard of the Autumn in Prison …), Tehran, Bozorgmehr, 1989, p. 20. This is a reissue of three of the poet's books in one volume. It includes, in

addition to *Pa'iz dar Z£ndan* (Autumn in Prison), *Z£ndegi Miguyad …* (Life Says …) and *Duzakh Amma Sard* (Hell Yet Cold).

17 For the text of the poem see *Dar Hayat-e Kuchek-e Pa'iz dar Z£ndan,* pp. 71–83.

18 For the text of the poem see *Dar Hayat-e Kuchek-e Pa'iz dar Z£ndan,* pp. 84–88.

19 Mehdi Akhavan Saless, *To Ra Ay Kohan Bum o Bar Dust Daram*. I owe the information on this book to Majid Roshangar, founder of Morvarid Publishing House and a longtime friend of Akhavan.

Chapter 8 – A Storyteller and His Times

1 Almost all Persian-language newspapers published in the US have given extensive coverage to the unfolding event. However, *Khavaran*, a weekly newspaper published in San Francisco, has been exemplary in its precise and comprehensive treatment. In this essay all reports of events ensuing from Sirjani's arrest come from *Khavaran* unless otherwise indicated.

2 ʿAli-Akbar Saʿidi-Sirjani, *Ay Kutah Astinan*, Costa Mesa, CA / Bethesda, MD, Mazda / Iranbooks, 1991, p. 204.

3 Ibid., pp. 8–27.

4 See *Divan-e Hafez*, Parviz Natel-Khanlari, ed., 2nd ed., Tehran, Kharazmi, 1983, p. 868.

5 These are *Suz o Saz* [Burning and Bearing], 1951; *Akherin Shararehha* [The Last Sparks], 1953; *Afsanehha, Dastan-e Manzum* [Fables: A Verse Story], 1963; *Khakestar* [The Ashes], 1964; and *Zir-e Khakestar* [Under the Ashes], 1965.

6 ʿAli-Akbar Saʿidi-Sirjani, *Ashub-e Yadha; Yaddashtha-ye Safar* [A Motley of Memories: Notes on Travels], Tehran, Ziba, 1977.

7 The best-known version of the story has come to us in ʾAttar's celebrated *Manteq al-Tayr*. See Farid al-Din ʾAttar, *The Conference of the Birds*, Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis, trs., Penguin, 1984, pp. 57–108.

8 ʿAli-Akbar Saʿidi-Sirjani, "Shaykh Sanʿan," reprint of a series of episodes originally published in 1980 in *Negin*, Sazman-e Farhangi-ye Sharq, comp., n.p., n.d., p. 10.

9 ʿAli-Akbar Saʿidi-Sirjani, *Dar Astin-e Moraqqa'*, Tehran, Novin, 1984, pp. 15–16.

10 On the details, scope, and effects of the ban see *Guardians of Thought: Limits*

on Freedom of Expression in Iran, New York, Human Rights Watch, August 1993, pp. 78–80.

11 ʿAli-Akbar Saʿidi-Sirjani, ed. & comm., *Sima-ye Do Zan: Shirin va Layli dar Khmaseh-ye Nezami*, Tehran, Nashr-e Now, 1989. This was the last edition of the book before the ban took effect.

12 ʿAli-Akbar Saʿidi-Sirjani, ed. & comm., *Zahhak-e Mar-Dush*, 3d ed., Los Angeles, n.p., 1990. This is a pirated edition published in the United States. In Iran, the book went through two printings within three months (January-March 1989) before the ban took effect later that year.

13 I have not seen this work, but Sirjani refers to it in his letter to Khameneh'i.

14 ʿAli-Akbar Saʿidi-Sirjani, *Zahhak-e Mar-Dush*, p. 146. It would be illuminating to contrast this reading of the myth with that proposed by the poet Ahmad Shamlu. Such a comparison would shed important light on the strategies of resistance to the Islamic Republic devised by the two main factions of Iranian elites, the modernist and the traditionalist intellectuals. For an analysis of the latter see Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, "Political Posturing: Iranian Writers and the Iranian Revolution," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 23:4 (November 1991), pp. 507–531.

15 ʿAli-Akbar Saʿidi-Sirjani, ed. & comm., *Bichareh Esfandiar*, Bethesda, MD., Iranbooks, 1992. The book, a retelling of an episode from the *Shahnameh*, was offered as a gift to those who would contribute at least fifty dollars to a fund to pay back the publishers in Iran affected by the ban on Sirjani's works.

16 ʿAli-Akbar Saʿidi-Sirjani, letter to "Your Excellency Mr. Khameneh'i," undated xerox copy. In all likelihood, the letter was written late in 1990.

17 ʿAli-Akbar Saʿidi-Sirjani, *Dar Astin-e Moraqqa'*, pp. 5–10.

18 Ibid., p. 10.

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