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Of love and longing : a study of Ayatollah Khomeini's mystical poetry and its reception in Iran and abroad

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Ayatollah Khomeini, the Topical Poet and his Quatrains (*robâ'is*)

A considerable part of Ayatollah Khomeini's *Divân* consists of *robâ'is*: 117 of the 296 poems he composed. Ayatollah Khomeini wrote the *robâ'is* in 1984 and 1985. The immediate occasion for his first *robâ'i* was the fifth anniversary celebration of the Islamic Republic of Iran, on February 11th 1984.²¹¹ Ayatollah Khomeini wrote the poem "Our Republic" several weeks later, on March 31st 1984, together with three other *robâ'is* in which he celebrated the Islamic Republic.²¹² Within a year Ayatollah Khomeini composed another 107 *robâ'is* on various subjects. As in most of his poems, mysticism plays an important role in his *robâ'is*. Khomeini's poetry is interesting since it allows us to peak into the mind of one of the most influential political leaders of the twentieth century. Many of his *robâ'is* contain biographical elements, details on his relationship with his daughter-in-law Fâteme Tabâtabâ'i and references to the war against Iraq. What makes Ayatollah Khomeini's *robâ'is* in particular interesting, is his veneration of the controversial mystical figure of Mansur Hallâj, his references to the battle at Karbalâ and the figure of Imam Hoseyn, and his rejection of the Ka'ba in Mecca. It is the combination of these topics that make his *robâ'is* interesting since it demonstrates how Ayatollah Khomeini is able to spiritualize Shia Islam for political purposes, by linking mysticism with Shia Islam, with martyrdom and politics.

3.1 *Robâ'is* in Historical Perspective

The *robâ'i* genre is perhaps the best known Persian poetic form in the West, thanks to Edward Fitzgerald, who adapted *robâ'is* attributed to 'Omar Khayyâm (d. 1123) to English which he published in 1859. The Persian *robâ'is* consist of four hemistiches (*mesrâ's*) laid out in two couplets (*beyts*). They are short but terse poetic formulations, easily remembered and cited. Like the Japanese haiku, they often present witty statements. Usually the poet presents a thought in the first two lines. In the third line, which often has a different rhyme, the poet makes a point, and he confirms this statement in the last line and follows with a conclusion.²¹³

²¹¹ The *robâ'i* is called "Our Republic" and can be found on page 195 of Ayatollah Khomeini's *Divân*. For the sake of convenience I have numbered the *robâ'i* 195b indicating that it is the second poem on the page. This same method I use to refer to the other poems in the *Divân*.

²¹² These other *robâ'is* can be found on pp. 193b, 197a and 206a.

²¹³ A.G. Lazard, "The Rise of the New Persian Language," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. R.N. Frye, Vol. 4, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 612.

There are two variants on the *robâ'i*: the *do-beyti*, which is a two-couplet poem and which is often used in folk literature, and the *tarâna*, the musical *robâ'i*.

It is known that Persian poets often used *robâ'i*'s as an entertaining interlude during ceremonies or speeches, but in the majority of the cases, we are not informed about the setting of the *robâ'is*.²¹⁴ There are, of course, exceptions recounted, for instance, by Nezâmi 'Aruzi in his *Chahâr maqâle* (*Four Discourses*) about the position of Amir Mo'ezzi (d. 1120), the poet-laureate (*malek al-sho'arâ*) at the Saljuq court. He had fallen from the king's favor, but he composed a *robâ'i* on the occasion of observing the new moon to indicate the end of the Ramadan and he received rewards from the Sultan.²¹⁵ A poet may treat various subjects in the *robâ'i*, such as love, the praise of a patron, or philosophical or mystical thoughts. According to J.T.P. de Bruijn, it is almost certain that the *robâ'i* genre was the first poetical form in which mystics expressed their mystical ideas.²¹⁶ Numerous Persian mystical *robâ'is* have been found dating from the eleventh century, the century in which mystical poetry spread rapidly throughout the Persian-speaking world. Bâbâ Tâher (d. about 1055-1060), nicknamed 'the Naked' (*Oryân*) because he walked in as little clothing as possible, was probably the first mystical who composed *robâ'is*. Hâfez (d. 1389), whom Ayatollah Khomeini has imitated in a variety of his poems, also wrote numerous mystical *robâ'is*.

The *robâ'i* is still a very popular genre in Persian-speaking areas.²¹⁷ Poets often quote the *robâ'is* of their famous predecessors. Classical *robâ'i* writers such as Sanâ'i (d. 1131) or Hâfez (d. 1389) also inspired Ayatollah Khomeini. Like them, he composed numerous *robâ'is* on the mystical experience, and by doing so he places himself in the same tradition.

3.2 Structure of the Persian *Robâ'i*

One of the reasons why this poetic genre was and still is so popular in the Persian-speaking world might be its distinct metre, which unlike the other classical Persian poetic genres, is not based on the Arabic metric system. This suggests that this genre might predate the Islamic period in Iran.²¹⁸ Unlike other Persian poetical genres, the metre is the choice of the poet.²¹⁹

²¹⁴ J.T.P. de Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry; An Introduction to the Mystical Use of Classical Poems*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 1997, pp. 7-9.

²¹⁵ Nezâmi 'Aruzi, *Chahâr maqâle*, ed. M. Qazvini, London and Leiden, 1910, pp. 40-43.

²¹⁶ J.T.P. de Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry*, p. 13.

²¹⁷ A.G. Lazard, "The Rise of the New Persian Language," p. 612.

²¹⁸ L.P. Elwell-Sutton, "The 'Rubâ'" in Early Persian Literature," *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. R.N. Frye, Vol. 4 (The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Saljuqs), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 636.

As Jan Rypka states, the metre of a Persian poem is extremely important for a correct understanding, so the reader is faced with identifying which of the possible two metres has been used in a particular quatrain.²²⁰ Moreover the metrical rules allow one long syllable to be replaced by two short syllables, and other variations, which means that the syllable count can be quite variable. There are also two possible rhyme schemes: *aaaa* or *aaba*. Because of the brevity of this poetic genre, in many cases it is not easy or even possible to tell whether a four-line poem is a poem in itself or is part of a larger poem. Often it is the rhyme scheme that answers the question: poems with rhyming pattern *aaaa* are often *robâ'is*, while poems with rhyming scheme *aaba* can be, but are not necessarily, *robâ'is*.²²¹ Particularly in the eleventh and twelfth century the *robâ'i* was a very popular genre, especially in the East of Iran, where the New Persian language had emerged.²²² But even today, the *robâ'i* is very popular in Persian-speaking areas. Almost every poet has composed *robâ'is*.

3.3 *Robâ'is* by Ayatollah Khomeini

Ayatollah Khomeini started writing *robâ'is* only towards the end of his life in two different time spans: between March 31st and July 17th of 1984, and between January 23rd and March 22nd of 1985. Ayatollah Khomeini's *robâ'i* are interesting not only because of their biographical elements, but also because of his references to mysticism and to the war against Iraq. One can detect in them the same predilection for mysticism as in his *qasides* and *ghazals*. However, while Ayatollah Khomeini has used the *qaside* genre to display his love and devotion to his teacher Hâ'eri, presenting him as a perfect man and the Mahdi's representative who can provide a solution for the political disarray in Iran during Reza Shah's reign, in the *robâ'is* he communicates either complex mystical thoughts or biographical

²¹⁹ J.T.P. de Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry*, pp. 7-9.

²²⁰ J. Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature*, Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1968, p. 93. L. P. Elwell-Sutton speaks of two possible robai-metres: -- U U / -- U U -- U U - and -- U U / - U - U -- U U - . See L.P. Elwell-Sutton, "The "Rubā'ī" in Early Persian Literature," p. 635. and J. Rypka, *op. cit.*, p. 92. Also see C.H. de Fouchécour, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under Rubā'ī.

²²¹ L.P. Elwell-Sutton, "The "Rubā'ī" in Early Persian Literature," pp. 633-634.

²²² See J. Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature*, pp. 95-96. Especially in the Eastern parts of the region, which were far away from the "Arabized centre," the desire for a return to the Persian language was strong. Local rulers, particularly in Transoxiana, asked for praise poetry in their 'own' language. Iranians, unlike other populations under Arab rule, continued to communicate in Dari rather than Arabic. See A.G. Lazard, "The Rise of the New Persian Language," pp. 595-632.

information. As we will see, in his *robâ'is*, he synthesizes politics with Shia Islam and mysticism.

3.4 Biographical Elements: A Dialogue with Ayatollah Khomeini's Daughter-in-Law

Ayatollah Khomeini addressed at least thirteen *robâ'is* to his daughter-in-law Fâteme Tabâtabâi, the wife of his youngest son, Ahmad.²²³ It was Fâteme who encouraged Ayatollah Khomeini to resume writing poetry. In 1984, when she was still a student of philosophy and theosophy, she asked Ayatollah Khomeini to write a treatise on gnosis for her. Sometime later, Ayatollah Khomeini wrote a twelve-page paper for her, which was published shortly after Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989 under the name *Râh-e 'Eshq* ("The Road of Love").²²⁴ The treatise was the beginning of a lively discussion between Ayatollah Khomeini and his daughter-in-law on philosophical, mystical and religious matters, often in the form of *ghazals* or *robâ'is*. These poems give the reader good insights into Ayatollah Khomeini's standpoint on Islamic mysticism. Often speaking in a personal voice, he advises his daughter-in-law, as in the following quatrain:

Fâti, do you want to travel to the Beloved's quarter? Woe to me!	فاطمی تو وره به کوی دلبر هیهات!
Do you want to look at the Beloved's face? Woe to me!	نظاره گری دلبر؟ هیهات!
This is not a road you can measure:	این راه رهی نیست که پیمانی تو
Gabriel lost his wing on that road, woe to me!	جبریل در آن فکنده شهپر هیهات! ²²⁵

In this poem, Ayatollah Khomeini explains to his daughter-in-law that studying and fully understanding Islamic mysticism is not something everyone can achieve. It is a road full of hardship and exertion. The refrain of the poem, *Heyhât*, which means 'Begone!', 'Away!', 'Alas!', or 'Woe to me!', is a strong expression, pointing to the difficulties of the mystical path. It also has a personal undertone, as if Ayatollah Khomeini is reminded of his own experiences as a student of mysticism in his early years of study, when he followed private lectures at the feet of Mirzâ 'Ali Akbar Yazdi, Mirzâ Javâd Âqâ Maleki Tabrizi, Sayyed Abol-Hasan Rafi'i Qazvini and especially Mirzâ Mohammad 'Ali Shâhâbâdi).²²⁶ The mystical path, in the Sufi tradition, is marked by a series of stations (*maqâmât*). The mystic

²²³ These *robâ'is* can be found on pages 193a, 194b; 196a; 197b; 198a,1; 202b; 203b;204b; 205b; 209a; 232a; 237b and 244a.

²²⁴ R. Khomeini, *Râh-e 'eshq*, Tehran, 1989.

²²⁵ See *robâ'i Heyhât* ("Begone") in *Divân*, p. 193a.

²²⁶ See B. Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2009, pp. 42-43.

starts with the first station, which is usually renouncement and goes along several stations, commonly seven, till he arrives at the last station, where he annihilates his ego and finds union with the Beloved. Like other poets in the Persian mystical tradition, Ayatollah Khomeini compares the mystical journey to the ascension (*me'râj*) of the Prophet Mohammad. This is supposed to have taken place one night during Mohammad's life, around the year 621. During this journey the Prophet travels, accompanied by the archangel Gabriel, through the different heavens towards the throne of God, encountering the Creator. Gabriel cannot accompany the Prophet Mohammad to the throne of God since his wings would melt, so he waits for him in the seventh heaven.²²⁷

Ayatollah Khomeini's reference to Gabriel is a favorite literary motif which mystics often use, symbolizing that angels have no access to the divine realm. Only human beings can come close to God and can even be united with the Creator. Like other mystics, Ayatollah Khomeini gives human beings a higher position in the hierarchy of being than angels. Humankind is superior to angels because the essence of the first is mixed with love, which the latter lack.²²⁸ The story of the nocturnal journey of prophet Mohammad also indicates that the Prophet stands before all human beings. He is higher than all other saints and prophets, excelling others in perfection. Prophet Mohammad's heavenly journey to meet God has become a model for mystics who aim at reaching perfection. By climbing the spiritual ladder, they hope to develop their human potential and to reach the state of perfection. Mystics call a man who has journeyed and encountered God a perfect man. This person has knowledge of both the physical and the divine world and, like the Prophet, is duty-bound to spread the divine secrets and to guide the community once he or she has returned to earth. A mystic can

²²⁷ The interpretations of the Koranic verse (17:1) on this ascension differ. Some believe this ascension was merely a spiritual ascension. Others say that it was a real ascension in the physical sense of the word. It is said that one night archangel Gabriel lifted Prophet Mohammad from his bed in Mecca and brought him to Jerusalem, Hebron and Bethlehem, sitting on the back of Burâq, a large white animal with wings. In Jerusalem, Mohammad meets all the prophets and leads them in prayer. Then Prophet Mohammad travels through the different heavens towards God. When the Prophet arrives at His throne, God advises him on how to lead the Islamic community. After that Mohammad returns to the seventh heaven where Gabriel waits for him to take him back to Mecca. On their way back they pass by Paradise and Hell and Mohammad speaks with a number of angels and Prophets. See B. Schrieke and J. Horowitz, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under *Mi'râdj*.

²²⁸ For a discussion of the position of angels see A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Layli and Majnun: Love, Madness and Mystic Longing in Nizami's Epic Romance*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003, pp. 14-16; idem, "The Erotic Spirit: Love, Man and Satan in Hâfez's Poetry," in *Hafiz and The Religion of Love in Classical Persian Poetry*, ed. L. Lewishon, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010, pp. 115-121.

only reach this state of perfection by following all the steps on the mystical road. By referring to the nocturnal journey of the Prophet and to the minor position of the archangel Gabriel, Ayatollah Khomeini places himself in the mystical tradition.

Although the metaphor of burning the wing comes from Islamic mysticism, it has a profane dimension as well, referring to the criticism a mystic such as Ayatollah Khomeini would receive. In the following lines, Ayatollah Khomeini warns Fâteme of the difficulties of the road, and says that a person must pass by all the stations on the road before attaining to the Truth, or reality.

Fâti, you and the reality of gnosis? What does this mean?

فاطمی! تو و حق معرفت یعنی چه؟

What does it mean, to discover the essence, transcending all qualities?

دریافت ذات بی صفت یعنی چه؟

Not having read the A, you cannot discover the road to Z.

ناخوانده «الف» به «یا» نخواهی رَه یافت

When you've not traveled (*soluk*) the road, what does Grace mean?

ناکرده سلوک، موهبت یعنی چه؟²²⁹

In this *robâ'i*, Ayatollah Khomeini refers to the mystical journey through the term *soluk*, which mystics use to refer to the 'methodical spiritual progress' of the mystic. Mystics also use the term to denote proper spiritual conduct. Some mystical philosophers used the term in combination with *seyr* ('visionary voyage'), saying that a mystic needs to make methodical progress to reach the stage of spiritual vision, which leads to spiritual flight.²³⁰ The mystical journey demands passing various stations such as repentance, followed by contentment, abstention, etc. The stations and their order differ considerably in the writings of various mystical masters. In one system, the first station is submission (*eslâm*), followed by "faith, virtue (*ehsân*), knowledge, independence, poverty, abasement, exaltation, variegation, and stability in variegation"²³¹ After the mystic has passed all these stages, he reaches his final goal of 'annihilation' (*fanâ*) and 'subsistence' (*baqâ*) in God. The mystic has to experience each of the mystical stages in that order and cannot leave any one of these out. The concept of divine Grace, or Bounty (*mowhebat*), in this poem, complements the effort and achievement of the disciple. Progress through the various stations is preparation for receiving God's gift.

²²⁹ See *Divân*, p. 237b.

²³⁰ See the article by L. Lewisohn, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under *Sulūk*.

²³¹ W.C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989, p. 218.

This *robâ'i* yields at least two readings. In the first reading, favoured in the translation, Ayatollah Khomeini advises Fâteme that one needs years of exertion and training to progress on the mystical path. So, not having read the first letter of the alphabet, and the other letters in subsequent order, which may symbolize the various spiritual stations on the mystical road, one cannot understand the mystical secret, which is symbolized by the final letter of the alphabet. Her questions are therefore premature. Another reading is that Ayatollah Khomeini humbly says that he is not yet in a position to answer such questions.

In the following *robâ'i* to his daughter-in-law, Ayatollah Khomeini again says that the mystic has to pass all the stations on the mystical road before he or she can attain to the divine truth:

Fâti, who studies philosophy,
Knows only the letters F, L and S of philosophy.
I hope, that by the light of God,
She'll free herself from the veil of philosophy.

فاطمی که فنون فلسفه می‌خواند
از فلسفه «فاء» و «لام» و «سین» می‌داند
اُمید من آن است که با نور خُدا
خود را از حجاب فلسفه برهاند²³²

Ayatollah Khomeini indicates in this *robâ'i* that Fâteme knows only three letters (spiritual stations), of the mystical road and those are the consonants F, L and S, of the Persian word *falsafe* (philosophy). Ayatollah Khomeini tells Fâteme that rational knowledge, such as philosophy, is a veil, reflecting a belief that only mystical experience can bring a person closer to the light of God.²³³ The word 'veil' (*hejâb*) is a recurring theme in Ayatollah Khomeini's *robâ'is*; he uses it on thirteen occasions.²³⁴ As in his panegyric to Fâteme Ma'sume, Ayatollah Khomeini uses the metaphor in his *robâ'is* to refer to things standing between the mystic and God, hindering the mystic from attaining to true oneness with God. The mystic must free himself from all 'veils' because only then can the realization of the divine truth take place. The essence of this *robâ'i* is that, according to Ayatollah Khomeini, one cannot come to divine truth from books or through rational knowledge: it is an intuitive knowledge. In the tradition of mystics, Ayatollah Khomeini believes that the rational faculty ('*aql*) cannot penetrate to the divine essence hidden in the mystic's own heart. In his *Fotuhât*, Ibn 'Arabi tells the story of a mystic and a philosopher who both travel the mystical path of

²³² See *Divân*, p. 209a.

²³³ For the mystics' aversion to philosophy, see A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975, pp. 4, 17-19.

²³⁴ Ayatollah Khomeini refers to the veil (*hejâb*) in *robâ'i* 197b; 206b; 209a; 209b; 212b; 219b; 235b; 236a; 240a; ; 247b and 248b.

divine knowledge.²³⁵ He compares their travel to the heavenly ascension (*me'râj*) of the Prophet Mohammad and explains how the philosopher cannot approach God beyond the seventh heaven because he has not released himself from his intellect. The mystic, however, is successful and is able to attain to God.²³⁶ Therefore, any form of rational knowledge must be avoided once the mystic has based himself on intuitive knowledge. Ibn 'Arabi's thought on the rational faculty is reflected in this *robâ'i* by Ayatollah Khomeini, who uses it to place himself in the mystical tradition. The *robâ'is* addressed to Fâteme show that Ayatollah Khomeini supports the mystics in their view that a person can only tread the path when he or she puts away "the scriptures of science and philosophy"²³⁷ because with philosophical knowledge a person "will not remove the thorns on the road of the traveler."²³⁸ God's essence and attributes are manifest in the heart of the mystic, and each station the mystic passes brings him closer to realize a perfect reflection of God.²³⁹ As the example of the mystic and the philosopher shows, every faculty relating to the Self, such as reason, prevents the mystic from attaining to oneness with God.

Another theme recurring in Ayatollah Khomeini's *robâ'is* is withdrawal from the world. This is an old topic in Islamic mysticism. According to the mystics, any form of worldly attachment, including the material and emotional, is an impediment to full realization of the Divine. Ayatollah Khomeini advises his daughter-in-law to remove her heart "from being friends with this person or that person" because every sense of selfness must be removed from the heart.²⁴⁰ If one does not do this, one would "smell polytheism."²⁴¹ In another *robâ'i*, he states that if a person has not renounced interest in the world, he will be "a demon on the road."²⁴² According to B. Moin, renunciation played an important role in Ayatollah Khomeini's life. Stories abound on Ayatollah Khomeini's modest and simple lifestyle, despite offers of money and gifts from his followers. Many will remember the picture of Ayatollah Khomeini sitting on a cushion under an apple tree in Neauphle-le-

²³⁵ See *Fotuhât* by Ibn 'Arabi, pp. 356-375.

²³⁶ B. Schrieke and J. Horovitz, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, under *Mi'râdj*.

²³⁷ See *Divân*, p. 205a.

²³⁸ By thorns (*khâr/khârhâ*) are meant the divine wisdom you gain from experiencing affliction. See *Divân*, p. 245b.

²³⁹ G. Böwering, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under 'Erfân (1).

²⁴⁰ See *Divân*, p. 232a.

²⁴¹ See *Divân*, p. 215b.

²⁴² See *Divân*, p. 203b.

Château in 1978, looking more like a pious mystic than a world leader.²⁴³ The way Ayatollah Khomeini, and his successor Khamenei, presented himself in public, fits in the mystical tradition of the perfect man (*ensân-e kâmel*, who has become merged with the *velâyat-e faqih*) who has destroyed all forms of egoism and material ties and focuses only on God.

Ayatollah Khomeini's *robâ'is* to Fâtème on self-abasement and intuitive knowledge show how deeply rooted Islamic mysticism was in Ayatollah Khomeini's belief system. Ayatollah Khomeini often advises his daughter-in-law not to study mysticism and philosophy, reflecting his wariness of institutionalized forms of learning. He preferred a private mode of spiritual training. It could also be that he feared the criticism of the conservative clergy. Ayatollah Khomeini was an Islamic scholar teaching *'erfân* (mysticism) for many years, believing that only intuitive knowledge could provide insight into the divine mysteries. This meant that knowledge could not be drawn from books, a symbol for discursive reasoning, but could only be achieved by experience at the hand of a spriritual teacher. In addition, the poems to his daughter-in-law on renunciation confirm the way Ayatollah Khomeini presented himself in public: as a pious and sober man who was wary of earthly matters and status, constantly fighting against the desires of his Self. When Ayatollah Khomeini adopted the position of *vali-ye faqih* (Guardian Jurist) in 1979, representing Imam Mahdi on all matters, he had reached a position in which he answered only to God, both as the leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran and on a personal level.²⁴⁴ The *robâ'is* indicate that Ayatollah Khomeini's fight against 'oppression' took place on both the communal and worldly level, and on a personal level, as a struggle against his own lower soul.

²⁴³ B. Moin, *Khomeini, Life of the Ayatollah*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1999, pp. 182-198. See also A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, "Khomeini the Poet Mystic," and A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, "Khomeini en de Wijnschenker," in *Een Vis in een Fles Raki: Literatuur en Drank in verschillende Culturen*, eds. R. Kruk & S. Houppermans, Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers, 2005, pp. 115-130. See also B. Reinert, "Ḥumainī im Spiegel seiner Gedichte," *Islamische Grenzen und Grenzübergänge*, Monographie Volume 4, Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2007, pp. 191-293, A. Knysh, "Irfân Revisited: Khomeini and the Legacy of Islamic Mystical Philosophy," in *Middle East Journal*, 46:4, 1992, pp. 631-653 and J.G.J. ter Haar, "*Heiligheid en Politiek Gezag; Het Begrip Wilâyat in de optiek van Khumaynī*," in *Mystiek: het andere gezicht van de Islam*, eds. M. Buitelaar en J.G.J. ter Haar, Bussum: Coutinho, 1999, pp. 90-102.

²⁴⁴ A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, "Khomeini the Poet Mystic," p. 441.

3.5 Mystical Love

The concept of annihilation (*fanâ*) is central in Ayatollah Khomeini's *robâ'is*. It is mentioned in six, but present in more, as it is implied in the goal of attaining to the presence of God. Annihilation in this context means the death of the ego, a prerequisite if the mystical traveler is to be admitted to a spiritual realm.²⁴⁵ Read, for example, the following quatrain:

Sufi! Purity is required, on the road of love.

صوفی! به ره عشق صفا باید کرد

You must keep any pledge you have made.

عهدی که نموده ای وفا باید کرد

As long as your ego is there, you will not become one with your Beloved.

تا خویشتنی، به وصل جانان نرسی

On the road to the Beloved, you must annihilate your self.

خود را به ره دوست فنا باید کرد²⁴⁶

Here, Ayatollah Khomeini describes the mystical path as a road of love, a trope going back to medieval times. As early as the ninth century, early ascetics described the whole of creation as a manifestation of love and the mystical path as a road of love. In their view, love was the principle of all existence. Mystics base their love theory on several Koranic verses and Islamic traditions (*hadith*).²⁴⁷ A *hadith qodsi*, for example, states that God was a hidden treasure who wanted to be known, so he created the world and everything within it. Mystics interpret this tradition in terms of God's desire to be loved by humankind. Before creating Adam in his image, God made a bond ('*ahd*) or covenant (*mithâq*) with Adam in which the latter promised God to obey Him. Mystics base this theory on Koran 7:172, in which God asks Adam: "Am I not your Lord," to which Adam responds: "Yes, we witness that You are." Mystics interpret this as the beginning of a love relationship between God and man. Adam promises God to be loyal and to obey him as a lover obeys his Beloved. According to the mystical creation myth, humankind nevertheless committed a sin. He had no experience with love, and proved to be weak, which is why God threw him down the spiritual ladder. During life, it is the task of each person to regain his initial and pure love relation with God, by following the various steps on the mystical road. After a person has passed all these stations, his Ego will be annihilated and he will become one again with God, like a lover and his Beloved.²⁴⁸ In the *robâ'i* translated above, Ayatollah Khomeini refers to the mystical account

²⁴⁵ Ayatollah Khomeini refers to annihilation in *robâ'i* 191a; 192b; 203a; 210b; 217b and 246a.

²⁴⁶ See *Divân*, p. 203a.

²⁴⁷ See for example verse 2:31, 5:54, 33:72, 38:75, 41:37, 50:16, 51:20, 53, 75 and 95:5.

²⁴⁸ For an elaboration on this mystical creation myth see A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Layli and Majnun*, pp. 14-16.

of this covenant God, using the word *'ahd*, (translated as pledge), and by speaking of the annihilation of the Self “on the road to the Beloved.”

Mystical stories abound on the effect of love on the mystic. Some early mystics connected the term ‘love’ to the *asheqa*, a climbing plant that wraps itself so tightly around a tree that it nearly smothers the tree. Love is said to have the same effect on the lover. The mystical is willing to accept any hardship that God bestows upon him. This is because only the hearts of those who have experienced affliction, and despite this have maintained complete trust (*tavakkol*) in God, will be granted access to divine knowledge. For this reason, mystics see affliction as an indispensable station on the spiritual road.²⁴⁹ In relation to this absolute trust in God, mystics often refer to the biblical story of Joseph and his father Jacob in which the latter, despite the painful separation from his beloved son, continues to trust in God. In return for his unconditional love, God provides him with divine insights. Mystics interpret this story as evidence that only those who have faced ordeals and pass the test of complete trust in God can be freed from their Ego.²⁵⁰

The huge effect that love for God can have on the mystical lover is reflected in numerous *robâ'is* by Ayatollah Khomeini. In the tradition of mystical love poetry, Ayatollah Khomeini on several occasions depicts mystical lovers as ‘ill people’ (*bimârân*) whose only remedy is the Beloved. Read for example the following *robâ'i* with the *radif* (‘refrain rhyme’) *bimârân*:

Ah! Your face is a candle in the gathering of those who are ill.

ای روی تو شمع محفلِ بیماران!

Ah! Your memory is balsam for the hearts of those who are ill.

وی یاد تو مرهم دلِ بیماران!

O come like a physician to our death-bed.

بر بستر مرگ ما، طبیبانه بیا

The sight of you solves all difficulties, for those who are ill.

ای دید تو حلّ مشکلِ بیماران²⁵¹

In this *robâ'i* Ayatollah Khomeini, presents love as an illness, those affected by love as ill, and the Beloved as the physician. As in his other poems, Ayatollah Khomeini is rejuvenating a trope popular in Persian classical love poetry. Only the physician, who has caused the wound, can release the patient from his pain. The physician in this couplet

²⁴⁹ Y. Eshots, in *The Qur'an: an Encyclopedia*, under ‘Ishq’, ed. O. Leaman, Oxon: Routledge, 2006, pp. 310-314.

²⁵⁰ For a mystical interpretation of this story see A. Keeler, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under Joseph ii. In Qur’anic Exegesis.

²⁵¹ See *Divân*, p. 227a.

symbolizes the Beloved, God, who caused the ordeals and love-sickness and therefore is the only one who can put an end to them.²⁵² Some early mystics started presenting the end of the mystical path – the annihilation of the Ego in God’s essence – as a symbolic death. Only when the mystic, like a dead man, symbolically gives up his soul can he find union with God.²⁵³ This *robâ’i* indicates that Ayatollah Khomeini had also followed this classical poetical love tradition.

3.6 The Iran-Iraq War

Ayatollah Khomeini wrote several *robâ’is* for special occasions, especially for certain moments during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). Reading the entire corpus of *robâ’is*, including these occasional war poems, one tends to interpret the mystical poems in a different way. Terms such as annihilation, union, and love receive a different meaning in a military context. A *robâ’i* such as the following can both be interpreted as a purely mystical *robâ’i* or as a war poem, where Ayatollah Khomeini invites soldiers to offer their lives at the frontline:

Our Republic is guarding the seals of Islam	جُمهوری ما، نشانگر اسلام است
The impure thoughts of those who stir up disorder are premature.	افکار پلید فتنهجویان خام است
The people spur themselves forward on their own path.	مَلت به ره خویش جلو می تازد
In a hundred traps (<i>sad-dâm</i>) of his own making, Saddam.	صدام، به دست خویش در صد دام است ²⁵⁴

Ayatollah Khomeini composed this poem, “Our Republic,” on March 31st 1984, several weeks after the Islamic Republic of Iran celebrated its fifth anniversary. It is the first of his 117 *robâ’is*, and refers to the war between Iran and Iraq. By 1984, Iran had already lost tens of thousands of war victims. The war started on September 22nd 1980, when Iraqi troops invaded Iran and captured Arvand Rud (*Shatt al-‘Arab*), a disputed waterway on the Iran-Iraq border that had been the subject of a long dispute. But economic and strategic purposes were not the only reasons for Saddam Hussein to attack Iran. A year before the attack, the Pahlavi Shah, Mohammad Reza, had been deposed, and Ayatollah Khomeini had turned Iran into an Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Khomeini made it clear on numerous occasions that he wanted to

²⁵² A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 136.

²⁵³ The use of this symbolic love-death became extremely popular in the ninth century. Early mystics based this love-death theory on a prophetic tradition in which Mohammad had said: ‘Die before you die.’ Some took these words at face value and almost starved themselves to death. Others were more moderate and saw this mystical love-death as a merely symbolic expression. For the reference see the article by A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Layli and Majnūn*, p. 131.

²⁵⁴ See *Divân*, p. 195b.

export the Islamic Revolution to other Muslim countries and hoped to unite all Muslims worldwide in one pan-Islamic state. Moreover, Ayatollah Khomeini had made it clear that he did not approve of the secular Ba'ath government of Iraq, or of monarchies such as those of Saudi Arabia.²⁵⁵ He encouraged Muslims worldwide to overthrow their 'illegitimate' regimes. Saddam Hussein feared unrest among Iraq's majority Shiites. All these arguments led Saddam Hussein to decide to seize the Arvand Rud waterway. Most of the Persian Gulf states and Arab countries supported Iraq. Many, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, had large Shiite communities of their own and considered the Iranian Revolution a threat to their own regimes. Western powers such as the United States, France and Britain also substantially supported Iraq, by providing modern weapons. The Soviet Union and China also stood behind the Iraqi government. Iran had much less support and was boycotted by the West. The war would last for eight years, with hundreds of thousands on both sides dying on the battlefield.²⁵⁶ One of the reasons why the Iranian troops eventually regained the lost territory was their extensive use of human shields. In November 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini established a special paramilitary force known as the *Basij-e Mostaz'afin* ('Mobilization of the Oppressed'), in addition to the government's armed forces and the elite army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (*Sepâh-e Pâsdârân-e Enqelâb-e Eslâmi*). The *Basij* consisted of voluntary soldiers, many of them still young boys, who cleared minefields or launched suicide attacks. Their massive suicide attacks enabled the Iranians to achieve many victories over the Iraqis.²⁵⁷

The fact that Ayatollah Khomeini wrote his first *robâ'i* during the war with Iraq gives the poem two interpretations: mystical and profane. The third line in which Ayatollah

²⁵⁵ Concerning Ayatollah Khomeini's aversion of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq see B. Moin, *Khomeini, Life of the Ayatollah*, pp. 145-146. Concerning his rejection of monarchies such as those of Saudi Arabia I refer to his famous 1969/ 1970 lectures which were later published under the name "Islamic Governance" (*Hukumat-e Islami*), in which Ayatollah Khomeini for example says: "Islam...does not recognize monarchy and hereditary succession; they have no place in Islam." See R. Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941-1980)*, ed. H. Algar, Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981, p. 31.

²⁵⁶ For an elaboration on the conflict see the article by S.M. Gieling, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under Iraq ii. Iran-Iraq War. See also B. Moin, *Khomeini, Life of the Ayatollah*, pp. 235-269.

²⁵⁷ Many articles and books have been written on the role of martyrdom in Iranian society during the 1970s and 1980s. See for example J.D. Swenson, "Martyrdom: Mytho-Cathexis and the Mobilization of the Masses in the Iranian Revolution," in *Ethos*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1985, pp. 121-149. See also the dissertation by M.A. Nematollahi-Mahani, *Do Not Say They Are Dead: The Political Use of Mystical and Religious Concepts in the Persian Poetry of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88)*, Leiden: PhD dissertation, 2014.

Khomeini speaks of people who “spur themselves forward on their own path” can be seen as a reference to the mystic who must continue his spiritual journey. The line can also be read as a summon to the soldier to give up his life at the frontline. The fourth line can also be interpreted in both a mystical and a profane sense. When Ayatollah Khomeini speaks of Saddam Hussein “in a hundred traps of his own making,” he may refer to the soul that is captured in the human body, which mystics describe as a ‘trap’ (*dâm*) from which they wish to free their soul. However, the couplet can also be interpreted in a profane sense, referring to the numerous Iranian soldiers who accepted martyrdom to lead Saddam Hussein and his troops into their traps.

In the following *robâ’i*, Ayatollah Khomeini’s message oscillates between the actual war context, in which soldiers should march forward and offer their lives, and lovers attaining to union with the Beloved in a symbolic mystical journey:

All the travelers are on the road: arise!	بر خیز که رهروان براهند همه
All are forever underway to their destination.	پیوسته بسوی جا یگانهند همه
Where there’s no thought of anything, except the Beloved,	آنجا که بجز دوست ز کس یادی نیست
All whose hearts are frozen have blackened faces.	افسرده دلان، روی سیاهند همه. ²⁵⁸

If one reads the *robâ’i* in a mystical sense, the poet urges the mystic to continue his journey, since all the other travelers are going to their final destination. The *robâ’i* reminds the reader of ‘Attâr’s *The Conference of the Birds*. In this story, birds assemble to find their king Simorgh. They choose a hoopoe as their guide during the journey to Mount Qâf, the residence of Simorgh at the end of the world. During the journey, many birds are unable to continue on, and every time the hoopoe tries to convince them to travel on because the destination is near and the journey is worthwhile. When the birds arrive at Mount Qâf, they call Simorgh but cannot find him and realize that they are the *Si-morgh* (‘thirty birds’): the Self of all thirty birds are all part of the Beloved and the only way to achieve this realization is to go on a journey.²⁵⁹ In the second and third line of Ayatollah Khomeini’s poem, the poet encourages travelers to continue on, because those who are travelling have fixed their thoughts on the Beloved. It is this meditation on the thought of the Beloved that keeps them going. In the final line, the poet introduces an antithetical element: those who cannot love have frozen hearts, and therefore ‘blackened faces,’ meaning they are wrongdoers.

²⁵⁸ See *Divân*, p. 239b.

²⁵⁹ For the whole story see Farid ud-Din ‘Attâr, *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. D. Davis and A. Darbandi, London: Penquin, 1984.

If one reads the *robâ'i* from a profane perspective in its war context, it is as if the poet is addressing the soldiers, encouraging them to arise and attain their goal like those who preceded them “underway to their destination.” The lines are reminiscent of the way Ayatollah Khomeini, in his speeches of the 1980s, encouraged young Iranians to go to the front and offer their lives to ensure Iranian victory. In these speeches, Ayatollah Khomeini often depicted soldiers as mystical lovers who would receive rewards beyond compare. Not only would the government financially support their family, but many great awards awaited them in the afterlife. In numerous prophetic traditions, mention has been made of the ‘presents’ that the *shahid* (‘martyr’) will receive once he has died ‘in the path of Islam.’²⁶⁰ First of all, the martyr will not experience the ‘pains of the grave’ (an approximate equivalent of purgatory). All his blameworthy acts will be erased, so he will have immediate access to Paradise. Moreover he will be allowed to choose another seventy persons to whom access to Paradise will be granted, and 72 promised paradisiacal virgins (*huris*) await him and will be made his wives.²⁶¹ One can imagine how attractive these rewards must have been for many disadvantaged people who had no chance of a bright future. Hundreds of thousands of people responded to Ayatollah Khomeini’s calls for volunteers for martyrdom. Like the mystic, the *basij* soldier was prepared to surrender his soul (or his life, *jân*, the Persian word having both meanings). He was no longer afraid of death because, according to the Koran, martyrs are alive.²⁶²

During the war, the Iranian media constantly praised Iranian voluntary soldiers for their heroic deeds. Also, school children were overloaded with information on the rewards awaiting martyrs.²⁶³ In one of his statements, Ayatollah Khomeini spoke of a soldier of this kind as “a perfect example of devotion, sacrifice, sincerity, and love for God and Islam.”²⁶⁴ In his speeches, Ayatollah Khomeini often coined mystical phrases relating to the ‘school of love’, known in Persian as *maktab-e ‘eshq* or *madrased-e ‘eshq*, which is a metaphor for the spiritual training of the mystic, where he purifies and disciplines his soul for the sake of the

²⁶⁰ E. Kohlberg, in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under *Shahīd*.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

²⁶² See Koranic verse 3:169-170.

²⁶³ Iranian school books of the 1980s played a big role in transmitting the political and social ideas of the Islamic Republic of Iran. See G. Mehran, “Socialization of Schoolchildren in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” in *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 22, part I, 1989, pp. 35-50.

²⁶⁴ R. Khomeini, *Pithy Aphorisms: Wise Sayings and Counsels*, ed. M. Limba, Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imām Khomeinī’s Works (International Affairs Department), 2006, p. 140.

Beloved, i.e. God. Suffering and martyrdom forms an important part of this training.²⁶⁵ The topic of the mystical love death has been a popular theme in Persian poetry since the time of Rudâki (d. 941). Mystics have adopted this theme from the Banu ‘Adhra tribe who, in the first Islamic century, used it in their love stories and regarded it as the greatest virtue.²⁶⁶ They often compared it to the death of a martyr in a holy war. Mystics in their turn adopted this idea to represent the mystic’s rejection of the world and his selflessness: he is prepared to give up everything including his life for the Beloved, without expecting any reward. In mystical love poetry, this death may either be caused by love itself (*koshte-ye ‘eshq*) or by the Beloved (*koshte-ye ma‘shuq*). Ayatollah Khomeini in his public speeches often referred to this mystical love death, saying that the soldiers, like those mystics, were aiming at being united with their Beloved: the soldiers by sacrificing their lives, the mystics by achieving the annihilation of their souls. Among the best known of these sayings is, “The *Basij* is the school of love and the classroom of unknown martyrs”²⁶⁷ Many Iranian war poets adopted this motif, presenting the Beloved as God, as Imam Hoseyn, or as Ayatollah Khomeini himself. They often interpreted union with the Beloved as giving one’s life for the object of love. Those who attained union were soldiers who were killed and were consequently considered martyrs.

There are other phrases by Ayatollah Khomeini from the 1980s that confirm that the *robâ’is* just quoted have a military reading, in addition to their mystical reading. In the following statement, Ayatollah Khomeini addresses a group of soldiers: “O dear *Pâsdarân* [‘revolutionary guards’] and O soldiers of Islam! Wherever you are, guard yourselves well so that by overcoming your ego you attain victory over all evil.”²⁶⁸

In both these *robâ’is* and in this public statement, Ayatollah Khomeini emphasizes that a person must discipline his soul, whether he is a mystic or a soldier. The first must annihilate his soul for the Beloved symbolically, while the second should do it literally by giving up his life. Therefore it seems very likely that, in both *robâ’is*, Ayatollah Khomeini is

²⁶⁵ See M.A. Nematollahi Mahani, *Do Not Say They Are Dead*, pp. 64-73, 203-238; A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, “Martyrdom as Piety: Mysticism and National Identity in Iran-Iraq War Poetry,” in *Der Islam*, Vol. 31, 2011, pp. 250-254.

²⁶⁶ See R. Jacobi, “‘Udhra: Love and Death in the Umayyad Period,” in *Martyrdom in Literature: Visions of Death and Meaningful Suffering in Europe and the Middle East from Antiquity to Modernity*, ed. F. Pannewick, Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2004, pp. 137–148.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 140. For Ayatollah Khomeini’s use of mystical ideas in a military context see also A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, “Martelaren: van Mystieke Weg tot Oorlogspad,” in *Mededelingen*, deel 72, No. 4, Amsterdam: KNAW Press.

²⁶⁸ R. Khomeini, *Pithy Aphorisms*, p. 141.

summoning Iranian soldiers to follow their predecessors and attain martyrdom on the battlefield for the sake of love. Realizing that Ayatollah Khomeini often compared the road of the soldier to that of the mystical lover in his public statements sheds a whole new light on poems such as the following, which at first glance seems to be purely mystical:

As long as He's your friend, you'll know no loss.	تا دوست بود تو را گزندی نبود
As long as He is, no quandary about quality and quantity.	تا اوست غبار چون و چندی نبود
Leave everything that is, choose Him.	بگزار هر آنچه هست و اورا بگزین
There's no better counsel than these two words.	نیکوتر از این دو حرف پندی نبود ²⁶⁹

In this poem Ayatollah Khomeini reminds the reader that God is always with you because God is everywhere. Even if you have no possessions or family, as long as you trust in God, he will be at your side. If one interprets the poem in a mystical sense, the poet urges the mystic to withdraw from all worldly connections and to follow the mystical path, because the annihilation of the self in His essence is the best thing that a mystic can achieve. If one reads this *robâ'i* in a military context, the poet urges the soldier to turn his back on everything, or rather, to follow the path of martyrdom. Just as a mystic wants his Ego to symbolically die in God's essence, the soldier should give up his actual life for the sake of God, the nation, and the Shiite faith, the 'true' Islam. Ayatollah Khomeini presents martyrdom as the end of a long road, as the ultimate goal, and as the most wonderful thing one can achieve. In one of the publications from an institute propagating Ayatollah Khomeini's ideology, M.J. Noruzi states: "Under the shelter of the revivalist doctrine of Islam, death and killing that was always regarded as painful became a blissful ending and martyrdom came to be regarded as a great victory."²⁷⁰ Not only was this thought spread by war poets of the 1980s. This is also confirmed in school books of this period in which the martyr is constantly praised for his heroic deeds and for his aid to the Republic of Iran and the well-being of Iranian society.²⁷¹ This propagation of martyrdom can also be noticed in some of Ayatollah Khomeini's *robâ'is*. Although Ayatollah Khomeini did not publish his poems, which are reflections of his private line of thoughts, during his life and thus did not use them for propaganda purposes, they do

²⁶⁹ See *Divân*, p. 213b.

²⁷⁰ M.J. Noruzi, "Role of Islam in the Occurrence and Victory of the Iranian Revolution," in *Imām Khomeini and The Islamic Revolution; A Collection of Articles*, ed. J.R. Khan, Tehran: International Affairs Department, The Institution for Compilation and Publication of Imām Khomeini's Works, 2008, p. 10.

²⁷¹ See G. Mehran, "Socialization of Schoolchildren in the Islamic Republic of Iran," in *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 22, part I, 1989, pp. 38-39.

resemble the way he compared the ‘selfless’ martyr deaths of Iranian war soldiers to the love-deaths of mystical lovers in his public life. By presenting death in this way, Ayatollah Khomeini gave meaning to death and turned something so sad and awful into an ultimate token of love. Although the mystical notion of dying for love has been a popular theme in Persian mystical poetry and in Islamic mysticism since the ninth century, it seems that Ayatollah Khomeini has employed the concept militarily, to mobilize thousands of people to go to the front. In response to his love-calls, thousands of men, often still children, volunteered to clear minefields to make a path for the Iranian soldiers. Others would throw themselves before the enemy to distract them and to make Iranian victories possible. The following *robâ’i* is another example of the use of concepts from mystical love poetry to mobilize people for war:

Oh Sheikh, come, and act for my sake as the guide.
 Grant me release, and enchain me in madness.
 The Friend cannot be found through knowledge and reason.
 Make ignorance an assistance on this road.

ای پیر! بیا به حق من پیری کن
 حالم ده و دیوانه‌ی زنجیری کن
 از دانش و عقل، یار را نتوان یافت
 از جهل، در این راه مددگیری کن²⁷²

At first sight the *robâ’i* seems to be a purely mystical poem in which madness, or the turning off of reason, representing the world of the heart, is praised over reason and rational knowledge. As was noted earlier in this chapter, Ayatollah Khomeini constantly tried to make these thoughts clear to his daughter-in-law. The mystic often surrenders his rational faculty, symbolised by ‘head’ to eliminate his ego to the point where one can no longer speak of the mystic as a separate person, for he or she has attained to oneness with God through a symbolic death. Although Ayatollah Khomeini in this poem does not directly refer to death or the bestowing of the head, two words in these couplets are conspicuous: ‘release’ (*hâl*) and ‘ignorance’ (*jahl*). The first term *hâl* literally means ‘condition’ ‘ecstasy’, ‘mystical state’ and here it refers to the wish of the mystic to have his soul released from captivation in ‘otherness’, to be one with the Beloved. In other words, the persona poetica asks for his soul to be annihilated in God. With the second term ‘ignorance’ the poetic persona asks for his reason to be turned off.

In addition to a mystical reading, the poems on ‘turning off reason’, may also deserve a profane reading. If one places these *robâ’is* alongside the numerous poems composed during the war which compare the mystic’s symbolic bestowing of the head and the soldier’s

²⁷² See *Divân*, p. 233b.

martyrdom, one tends to place the *robâ'i* in a military context, as the 'bidding farewell' is a reference to being killed at the frontline. Think for example of poets such as Qeysâr Aminpur (1957-2007) who referred to beheading as the most rewarding thing a soldier can achieve, as in the following example:

It is a spectacle watching the Beloved's body and dwelling from your eyes	از چشم تو دیدنی است بوم و بر یار
Tell about the summit, what is at the end of the road	ز آن اوج بگو که چیست در آخر کار
A saintly smile at the moment of bidding farewell	لبخند سلام واره درگاهِ وداع
O friend! Tell! What did you see on the gallows? ²⁷³	ای یار مگو چه دیده ای بر سر دار

In this poem, Aminpur compares the martyrdom of an Iranian soldier to that of Mansur Hallâj, the famous mystic who was executed in 922 by the Abbasids for claiming he had reached spiritual perfection and thus had symbolically been annihilated in God. Such comparisons were very popular in Persian war poetry of the 1980s. In some of the *ghazals* Ayatollah Khomeini composed during the war, he also connects the 'symbolic bestowing of the head' to the frontline and the soldier. For example, in his *ghazal* "The Secret of the Soul" Ayatollah Khomeini says: "Give your head on the road of the Beloved, take your life in your hand like a soldier. Whoever does not cast his head in the alley of the Beloved, is no soldier."²⁷⁴ In this *ghazal*, Ayatollah Khomeini compares the life of the mystic to that of the soldier, using a Persian word for soldier which has the connotation of one who gambles with his life. Just as a mystic symbolically cuts off his head, by going beyond reason and through detachment from the Ego, the martyr-soldier literally gambles his life or has his head cut off at the front. Keeping these war poems and Ayatollah Khomeini's *ghazals* in mind, one also tends to interpret Ayatollah Khomeini's *robâ'is* with topics such as 'detachment' and 'madness', which he wrote during the war, as a means to popularize the martyr-death of the soldier who literally gives up head and soul to defend his country.

Ayatollah Khomeini's use of mystical concepts such as the mystical love-death and the need for self-annihilation, in his speeches and statements to the Iranian nation, appeared to be effective ways to mobilize numerous Iranians to go to the front or to martyr themselves.²⁷⁵

²⁷³ From M. Akbari, *Naqd va tahlil-e adabiyât-e enqelâb-e eslâmi*, part I, Poetry, vol. I, (Tehran: Sâzmân-e Madârek-e Farhangi-ye Enqelâb-e Eslami, 1371/1992), p. 196. Read more on Aminpur's poetry in N. Farzad, "Qeysar Aminpur and the Persian Poetry of Sacred Defence," in the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2007, 34:3, pp. 351-374. See also M.A. Nematollahi Mahani, *Do Not Say They Are Dead*, pp. 70-73.

²⁷⁴ See *ghazal* "The Secret of the Soul" in *Divân*, p. 65.

²⁷⁵ See A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, "Martyrdom as Piety..." pp. 248-273; See also A. Knysh, "Irfan Revisited..." pp.

Soon numerous soldiers and poets adopted his mystical phrases and these motifs. Many war poets composed lines in which mystical concepts such as “turning off reason” on the mystical road were equated to the actual sacrificing of the head of the Iranian soldier.²⁷⁶ Some of the *robâ’is* Ayatollah Khomeini composed during the war indicate that he was engaged with the same line of thought in private, as these poems are self-documentation. However, the ingenious connection Ayatollah Khomeini made between the symbolic love-death and actual death was not the only means by which Ayatollah Khomeini stimulated people to go to war.

3.7 Martyrdom and Shiism In order to further contextualize the messages in Ayatollah Khomeini’s *robâ’is*, we must first sketch a historical picture of the political situation at the time Ayatollah Khomeini wrote these poems. When Iran had regained all its territory from the Iraqis in September 1982, Saddam Hussein asked for a cease-fire. Ayatollah Khomeini rejected Saddam’s reconciliation gesture. Although Ayatollah Khomeini had achieved what he wanted, which was to recapture Iranian territories, he decided to take the war to the next level. Instead of accepting Saddam’s proposal, Ayatollah Khomeini continued the war on Iraqi territory.²⁷⁷ For Ayatollah Khomeini, the war was more than a defensive battle. As early as the 1960s, Ayatollah Khomeini adopted terms in his speeches and works that indicate that he divided the world into two camps: that of the oppressed (*mazlum*) and the oppressor (*zâlem*). Another pair that appeared frequently in his speeches is the weak (*mostaz’afin*) who are oppressed by the strong (*mostakberin*). Although Ayatollah Khomeini had used these terms before, it was not until the 1970s and particularly during the war in the 1980s that he used them on a regular basis in his speeches, and infrequently in his poetry.²⁷⁸

Traces of this ‘war against oppression’ also appear in Ayatollah Khomeini’s *robâ’is*. In the following example he uses the terms *setamkeshân* (‘victims of injustice’, translated here as ‘the oppressed’) and *setamgar* (‘inflictor of injustice’, ‘oppressor’):

631-653.

²⁷⁶ One can think of the poems by P. Beygi Habibâbâdî in *Gozide-ye ash’âr: she’r-e jang va defâ’-e moqaddas*, ed. H. Hoseyni, Tehran: Sura, 1381/2002.

²⁷⁷ See S.M. Gieling, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under Iraq ii. Iran-Iraq War. See also B. Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2009, pp. 235-269.

²⁷⁸ For an extensive discussion of Ayatollah Khomeini’s division of the world into an oppressive and oppressed camp see E. Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 1993, pp. 26-32 and pp. 47-50.

Our Islamic Republic is eternal.
The enemy despair of their own lives.
The day when the world is empty of oppressors.
Will be a festival for us, and all the oppressed.

جمهوری اسلامی ما جاوید است
دشمن ز حیات خویشتن نومید است
آن روز که عالم ز ستمگر خالی است
ما را و همه ستمکشان را عید است²⁷⁹

Ayatollah Khomeini recited this poem in public at a celebration of the fifth anniversary of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1984. In the poem, he presents the war as a battle between the oppressed and the oppressors. By using the paradigm of ‘us and them,’ Ayatollah Khomeini implies that there is a division between the Shiites and the Sunnites and all those countries supporting them, such as the West, although he does not say this explicitly. It seems that Ayatollah Khomeini wanted the Iran-Iraq war to be a continuation of the battle on the day of *Âshura*, the tenth of the month Moharram, 680 AD, in which the supporters of Hoseyn ibn ‘Ali, the grandson of Prophet Mohammad, were defeated by the army of the Ummayyad caliph. The battle was the result of a dispute that occurred after the Prophet Mohammad died in 642, as to who should succeed him as the next Islamic ruler. Some believed that the best Muslim should be leader. Others believed that only his sons could do this. The differences of opinion between the two groups, who later became known as the Sunnites and Shiites, led to bitter disputes that have continued into modern times. Imam Hoseyn, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, did not recognize the Ummayyad caliph and rebelled against him. In 680 the armies met near Karbalâ, where Imam Hoseyn was killed by Shemr Ibn Dhil-Jawshan. Shiites consider Imam Hoseyn a martyr.²⁸⁰ In his speeches of the late 1960s, Ayatollah Khomeini referred to *Âshura* and the month of Moharram, when Shiites around the world mourn the death of Imam Hoseyn:

The month of Muharram is the month of epic action, the month in which blood triumphed over the sword; the month in which the power of Truth forever condemned falsehood and stamped the faces of tyrants and wicked government with the brand of vanity and falsehood; the month that teaches all generations throughout history, the way to victory over bayonet points; the month that registered the defeat of the arrogant powers vis-a-vis the Word of Truth; the month in which the Imam of the Muslims taught us how to fight history's tyrants; the month in which the clenched fists of the

²⁷⁹ See *Divân*, p. 193b; Ayatollah Khomeini composed the poem on March 31st 1984, the fifth anniversary of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

²⁸⁰ For the importance of this event to our topic, see B. Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah*, pp. 249-252.

rightful, the seekers of freedom and independence must overcome the tanks, the machine-guns and the forces of the devil and the Word of Truth expurgate falsehood.²⁸¹

For Ayatollah Khomeini, it was the duty of the Shiites to rebel against any form of oppression and falsehood by any means. In these sentences, Ayatollah Khomeini reminds his followers of their joint responsibility and connects martyrdom to Shia Islam. He suggests that all Shiites, just like Imam Hoseyn, should be prepared to give up everything, including life, to fight for the truth. In his lectures on the Ashura uprising, Ayatollah Khomeini believes that dying as a martyr is the highest proof of love for the Shiite faith, just as mystics consider the symbolic annihilation of the soul in God's essence to be a supreme gesture of love.²⁸²

Ayatollah Khomeini's emphasis on the struggle against any form of oppression, shown in the 1969 speech quoted above, was translated in the institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran some ten years later. One example is the *Basij-e Mostaz'afin* ('Mobilization of the Oppressed'), the special armed forces that Ayatollah Khomeini established, whose mission is to revive 'true' Islam. The *basij* soldier was to defeat the oppressor and free the Shiites who had been oppressed since the death of Imam Hoseyn in 680. The Iranian soldiers wanted to fight, like Hoseyn who fought Yazid till death. Ayatollah Khomeini presented the paradigm of Moharram, presenting Saddam Hussein and the Sunnite government of Iraq as the 'oppressors'. In such a war context, the fact that a large population of Iraq was Shiite was simply ignored. As B. Moin had also said, Ayatollah Khomeini used the war as a means to export his Islamic Revolution to other countries, such as Iraq, which had Shiite majorities.²⁸³ Various statements by Ayatollah Khomeini support this view such as: "The war, while it was unpleasant and has devastated our towns, had the blessing of introducing Islam to the world" or "We have exported our Revolution to the world during the war."²⁸⁴

²⁸¹ Ayatollah Khomeini delivered this speech on October 22nd 1969 during a meeting of clergy from Western Tehran. See R. Khomeini, *The Ashura Uprising in the Words & Messages of Imam Khomeini*, Tehran: Institute for Compilation and Publication of the Works of Imam Khomeini, International Affairs Department, 1995, p. 26.

²⁸² A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, pp. 135-136.

²⁸³ B. Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah*, p. 236.

²⁸⁴ For these statements see R. Khomeini, *Pithy Aphorisms: Wise Sayings and Counsels*, ed. M. Limba, Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imām Khomeinī's Works (International Affairs Department), 2006, p. 138.

The focus Ayatollah Khomeini placed on the active rather than passive role that Shiites should play in relation to injustice, had a huge effect on the attitude of the Iranians vis-à-vis the rest of the world. He was not the sole author of this active interpretation of the events at Karbalâ: Najafâbâdi's 1968 "The Immortal Martyr" (*Shahid-e Jâvid*) is one predecessor. The concept was extensively used by Ayatollah Khomeini in his military mobilization campaign.²⁸⁵ By presenting Karbalâ as a battle for justice, rather than the martyrdom of the innocent, and the war as a continuation of that battle, Ayatollah Khomeini hoped to pull as many Shiite Muslims as possible into his camp. And this often worked, as hundreds of thousands of soldiers were prepared to follow Hoseyn's example, by offering their lives during the war.²⁸⁶ With statements such as "All days are Âshura and all lands are Karbalâ,"²⁸⁷ Ayatollah Khomeini reminded the Shiites of their duty to fight oppression, just as Imam Hoseyn had done, even if their "power or force be inadequate."²⁸⁸ Ayatollah Khomeini had partly adopted this slogan from Ali Shari'ati, who in turn had been inspired by the famous nineteenth-century saying: "Every place should be turned into Karbalâ, every month into Moharram, and every day into Âshura."²⁸⁹ Ayatollah Khomeini made extensive use of this slogan and popularized it. Many war soldiers recited it and Persian war poets even incorporated it in their war poems.²⁹⁰ War poets such as Sayyed Hasan Hoseyni (1956-2004) composed numerous poems in which Imam Hoseyn served as a role model for active revolt against injustice and illegitimate rulership.²⁹¹ By referring to the event at Karbalâ, Ayatollah Khomeini reminded the Iranian people that they had not defended Imam Hoseyn in 680, but they now had the chance to make up for the past.

The events of Karbalâ were also emphasized more in every-day life. The passion-play (*ta'ziye*) during the month of Moharram, in which actors depict the martyrdom of Imam Hoseyn, experienced a strong revival after the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The

²⁸⁵ For an extensive study of the battle at Karbalâ and the re-examination of this event in the 1960s and 1970s, see chapter 5.10 in this study; see also the book by H. Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 1982, pp. 183-194.

²⁸⁶ B. Moin, *Khomeini, Life of the Ayatollah*, pp. 249-252.

²⁸⁷ R. Khomeini, *The Ashura Uprising*, p. 49.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²⁸⁹ See E. Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1993, p. 29.

²⁹⁰ For the use of the slogan in Persian war poetry see S.H. Hoseini, *Ham-sedâ bâ halq-e Esmâ'il*, Tehran: Surih-ye Mihr, 4th edition, 1387/2008, p. 40.

²⁹¹ On Imam Hoseyn as a role model in Persian war poetry see A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, "Martyrdom as Piety..." pp. 262-267.

Iranian government erected many theater-like-buildings, known as *hoseyniye* or *takye*, to commemorate the event of Karbalâ. They were accessible not just in the month of Moharram but throughout the year.²⁹² The Iranian government reminded Iranians of the fate of the Shiites daily in other ways. With this reinforcement, Ayatollah Khomeini was able to find tens of thousand of recruits who were willing to defend and spread the Shiite cause at any cost.

3.8 The Mystic Mansur Hallâj

In addition to the events at Karbalâ and the figure of Imam Hoseyn, the image of the medieval mystical Mansur Hallâj was instrumental in mobilizing people to defend the country. Ayatollah Khomeini mentions this mystical figure no less than seven times in his *robâ'i*s. The following *robâ'i* is an example:²⁹³

As we can't be obedient, we fall into sin.
 We turn from the madrase to a Sufi convent.
 The cry of "Ana l-haqq" was the way of Mansur.
 Oh Lord help us, so we may think of our way!

طاعت نتوان کرد و گناهی بکنیم
 از مدرسه، رو به خانقاهی بکنیم
 فریاد آنالْحَق، ره منصور بود
 یا رب مددی که فکر راهی بکنیم.²⁹⁴

In poems such as these, certain aspects of Mansur Hallâj's life and mysticism are emphasized while other elements are downgraded or entirely ignored. Mansur Hallâj was born around 858 in the town of Tur, in southern Iran. At a young age, Hallâj left Iran and moved to Iraq where his father worked in various places as a cotton-carder. From an early age, Hallâj was interested in Islamic mysticism. In Basra, famous mystics such as Amr Makki (d. 910) and Ibn Juneyd (d. 910) taught him the principles of Islamic mysticism. During his numerous travels abroad, Hallâj began spreading his mystical messages. He was expelled from the Sufi brotherhood he had followed, and subsequently wandered around the Middle East.²⁹⁵ Hallâj became both famous and notorious for his statement: "*Ana al-Haqq*" ('I am the Truth'), by which he implied that he had reached spiritual perfection. On saying this, Hallâj was sentenced to death by the court in Baghdad, accusing him of implying to be God himself. On

²⁹² P. Chelkowski, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under Ta'zia.

²⁹³ See *Divân*, pp. 217b, 226b, 231b, 232b, 246a, 246b and 248b.

²⁹⁴ See *Divân*, p. 226b.

²⁹⁵ L. Massignon, *La Passion de Hoseyn Ibn Mansûr Hallâj; part I: La Vie de Hallâj*, Paris: Gallimard, 1975, pp. 61-76;

the way to his execution, Hallâj is said to have “danced in fetters” so happy was he to soon be reunited with God.²⁹⁶

Many mystics condemned Hallâj for openly claiming to have arrived at the station of union because it was not appropriate for a mystic to reveal the divine truth. On the one hand, Ayatollah Khomeini places himself in line with these mystics that condemn him for his claim. But as the previous *robâ'i* demonstrates, Ayatollah Khomeini also partly identifies with him. Like Hallâj, the poetic persona in Ayatollah Khomeini's poem has distanced himself from orthodox institutes: he places the word *madrâse* or college in contrast to *khâneqâh* or Sufi convent, emphasizing the difference between reason and love. While in the *madrâse* people engage in philosophical discussions, in the Sufi convent, mystics abandon reason and try to perceive the reality of the Beloved through love. In line 3, he proposes following Hallâj's way, which is suggested to be a way of avoiding the dilemma of choosing a college or a convent. What is interesting in such allusions to Hallâj is that Ayatollah Khomeini shows in a personal document that he is wary of the school (*madrâse*), a term which in its broader sense would include the theological seminary, where *'erfân* and philosophy were generally avoided. The dilemma the poet presents is given another dimension when we consider that Ayatollah Khomeini had problems in the seminary because of his interest in these two fields. Although the poetic persona in this *robâ'i* partly identifies himself in the third line with Hallâj's antinomian mysticism, in the same line the poet criticizes Hallâj for openly revealing the secret by shouting 'I am the Truth.' In line 4, the poetic persona wonders which direction he himself should choose, once he has attained to the annihilation of self, and he asks for God's assistance.

The problem Ayatollah Khomeini sees with Hallâj's open claims of spiritual perfection also appears in another *robâ'i* that Ayatollah Khomeini wrote on this mystic. The *robâ'i* is called *khod-bin*, 'self-admirer' or 'arrogance':

When there is no you, you will not sound the drum
of "Ana al-Haqq."
Do not get tied up by your own nonsensical claims.
As long as you are seeing yourself, you are no more
than a polytheist.
Be without self, then you will not boast of the absolute.

گر نیست شوی کوس "انا الحق" نرنی
با دعوی پوچ خود معلق نرنی
تا خود بینی تو مشرکی بیش نه ای
بی خود بشوی که لاف مطلق نرنی²⁹⁷

²⁹⁶ A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 136.

²⁹⁷ See *Divân*, p. 246a.

Here, Ayatollah Khomeini condemns Hallâj for his famous statement, because had the mystic attained self annihilation he would not have claimed to be anything, let alone the Truth. The poet interprets Hallâj's reason for uttering such a statement as self-admiration or even arrogance. In the second line, the word *mo'allaq* translated as 'tied up' may refer to the gibbet upon which Hallâj was hanged while repeating "I am the Truth."²⁹⁸

It is interesting to see that Ayatollah Khomeini places Hallâj in the category of organized Sufis whom he condemned for their hypocrisy. In the entire *Divân*, Ayatollah Khomeini is not positive about these mystics, depicting them as hypocrites. Also in the following poem, he includes Hallâj among them:

Among the Sufis I have never seen purity.	از صوفیها، صفا ندیدم هرگز
Among these people I have never seen faithfulness.	زین طایفه من وفا ندیدم هرگز
Among these pretenders, who openly say "Ana l-Haqq,"	زین مُدعیان که فاش «أنا الحق» گویند
While seeing themselves, I have never seen annihilation.	با خودبینی، فنا ندیدم هرگز. ²⁹⁹

As in his *ghazals*, Ayatollah Khomeini speaks of mystic pretenders who brag about themselves like Hallâj. Hâfez too, in his poems, regularly spoke of Hallâj, as in the following line:³⁰⁰

He said, "That comrade because of whom the gallows became exalted, His crime was this, that he was divulging the mysteries." ³⁰¹	گفت آن یار کزو گشت سر دار بلند جرمش این بود که اسرار هویدا می کرد
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Hâfez, like Ayatollah Khomeini, blames Hallâj for "divulging the mysteries." According to Mehdi Hâ'eri (d. 1999), Ayatollah Khomeini's former student and son of Ayatollah Khomeini's former teacher, Ayatollah Khomeini believed he had reached the same spiritual state as Hallâj. But he argues that Ayatollah Khomeini, unlike Hallâj, did not make the mistake of openly revealing this. Mehdi Hâ'eri also considered Ayatollah Khomeini to have reached this state of perfection.³⁰² Ayatollah Khomeini's son Ahmad Ayatollah

²⁹⁸ Farid al-Din 'Attâr, *Tadhkerat al-owliyâ*, ed. H. Khalili, Tehran: Manuchehri, 1370/1991.

²⁹⁹ See *Divân*, p. 217b.

³⁰⁰ See the article by J.T.P. de Bruijn, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under Hafez iii. Hafez 's Poetic Art.

³⁰¹ Translation by P. Avery, *The Collected Lyrics of Hafiz of Shiraz*, Cambridge: Archetype, 2007, p. 185, verse 6. *Divân*, p. 288, ghazal 136, l.6.

³⁰² B. Moin, *Khomeini, Life of the Ayatollah*, p. 51.

Khomeini (d. 1995) confirms that his father believed he had “a special relationship with God, with whom he was at one.”³⁰³

Although numerous people, including mystics, condemned Hallâj for his open claims of perfection, over the centuries Hallâj had also become an embodiment of unconditional love for God. In Persian classical poetry and particularly in contemporary poetry, he has been presented as the martyr of love *par excellence*.³⁰⁴ To quote A. Schimmel, he became for many people “the model for every loving soul who will gladly suffer and die for the sake of his love.”³⁰⁵ While Ayatollah Khomeini generally disapproved of Hallâj for presumption, or for revealing the divine secrets, in the following *robâ’i*, which is named *Sâye* (“Shade”), Ayatollah Khomeini speaks positively of Hallâj:

O glory of Homâ,³⁰⁶ throw your shade over me.

Assist me and throw my existence from its feet.

I desire a rope thrown around my neck.

Oh Friend, throw it on the neck of this humble one.

ای فرّ هُما! بر سر من سایه فکن

فریادرس و وجودم از پایه فکن

طوقی که به گردنم فکندهست هوس

یارا! تو به گردن فرومایه فکن³⁰⁷

In the poem, the poetic persona identifies with Hallâj by referring to the rope (*tawq*) by which he was hung. Like Hallâj, he wishes for the end of his existence, that is, for self-annihilation. In this poem, Ayatollah Khomeini praises Hallâj for his willingness to be executed for the love of God, and wishes to attain the same state of spiritual perfection.

Although there are only two places in Ayatollah Khomeini’s *Divân* where he praises Hallâj for his extraordinary devotional love and his willingness to die for God,³⁰⁸ Iran-Iraq

³⁰³ Ibid., p. 52. See also A. Khomeini, in *Sargodhashtha-ye vizhe az zendegi-ye hazrat-e Emam Khomeini be Ravâyat-e jam’i az fozalâ*, ed. R. Sha’rbafe, Tehran, Vol. I, 1364/1985, pp. 1-4.

³⁰⁴ See also J.T.P. de Bruijn, “De politieke betekenis van Perzische poëzie,” in *De pen en het zwaard: literatuur en politiek in het Midden-Oosten*, eds. G.J van Gelder & E. de Moor, Muiderberg: Coutinho, 1988, p. 89.

³⁰⁵ A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 75.

³⁰⁶ Homâ is a legendary bird from Iranian mythology and mystical stories. It flies constantly above the earth without ever landing. Homa is called the bird of fortune. Whomever it throws its shade upon will be fortunate. In classical stories it also meant kingship for the person which was touched by its shadow. See A. Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jallâloddin Rumi*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993, p. 123.

³⁰⁷ See *Divân*, p. 232b.

³⁰⁸ The *robâ’i* ‘Sâye’ on page 232b. translated above, and the *ghazal* “Cheshm-e bimâr” on page 142 of Ayatollah Khomeini’s *Divân*. See also the comment on Hallâj as a role model in Persian war poetry by A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, “Martyrdom as Piety...,” pp. 254-262.

war poems by Iranian poets abound with such references.³⁰⁹ One of several poems by the famous Iranian poet Qeysâr Aminpur (d. 2007) that refer to Hallâj reads:

The alphabet of hurt flows from my lips	الفبای درد از لبم می تراود
Not dew drops; it is blood that flows from my nights	نه شبنم، که خون از شبم می تراود
Three letters sum up the thirty chapters of the heart	سه حرف است مضمون سی پاره دل
Alef, lâm, mim, is the chant that flows from my lips	الف. لام. میم. از لبم می تراود
So caught up in the swelter of love's delirium	چنان گرم هذیان عشقم که آتش
It is fire and not sweat that flows from my fever	به جای عرق از تبم می تراود
In the time it takes for prayer to soar from heart to my lip	ز دل بر لبم تا دعایی آید
It is acceptance that flows from my every call to God	اجابت ز هر یاریم می تراود
I have no need of the religion of hypocrisy	ز دین ریا بی نیازم، بنازم
I am proud of blasphemy that flows from my faith.	به کفری که از مذهبم می تراود ³¹⁰ .

In this poem, Aminpur makes a comparison between Hallâj and the Iranian soldier. Although Aminpur does not mention Hallâj by name in this poem, the first line speaks of the drops of blood that flow from the soldier's mouth, as it flowed from Hallâj's body before he was executed, and in which he is said to have performed his ritual ablutions.³¹¹ In the last line, Aminpur states a preference for blasphemy over religious hypocrisy, again referring to Hallâj, who was a blasphemous person in the eyes of many, but is nevertheless praised for his ultimate act of sacrifice. Aminpur contrasts the soldier's upright sincerity to the enemy's hypocrisy, as Hallâj's love mysticism is often placed in contrast to the hypocritical orthodox Sunnite rulers of Baghdad, who executed him.³¹² This poem is a good example of the way Iranian war poets use Hallâj as the martyr of love to represent the war soldier, prepared to die

³⁰⁹ One can think of Sayyed Hasan Hoseyni. For his work see S.H. Hoseini, *Ham-sedâ bâ halq-e Esmâ'il*, Tehran: Surih-ye Mihr, 4th edition, 1387/2008.

³¹⁰ Translation by N. Farzad, "Qeysar Aminpur and the Persian Poetry of Sacred Defence; Iranian Intellectuals from 1997-2007," in the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 2007, p. 359. For the original Persian poem see Q. Aminpur, "Golhâ hame Aftâbgardânand" ('All Flowers are Sunflowers'), in *Majmu'e-ye kâmel-e ash'âr*, Tehran: Golshan, 9th ed., 1391/2012, p. 104.

³¹¹ See A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, "Martyrdom as Piety..." p. 257.

³¹² For an extensive discussion of Aminpur's poetical works see N. Farzad, "Qeysar Aminpur and the Persian Poetry of Sacred Defence; Iranian Intellectuals from 1997-2007," in the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 2007, pp. 351-374.

for the sake of love without expecting a reward. Hallâj serves as a role model for the soldier, showing how one can ascend to the higher stages of sincerity and purity by fighting all forms of injustice, to the point of self-annihilation. The example of Hallâj teaches him not to fear death, and it ennobles death for those who lost fathers, husbands and sons at the front. But while Hallâj's road promoted peace and non-violence, the road of the Iranian soldier was one of blood and destruction. The Islamic Republic of Iran thus used the mystical lover Hallâj to amplify the division between the oppressed and the oppressor, all with the purpose of mobilizing people for the war.

Iranian war poets have made much of the fact that Hallâj was born in Tur, in the south of Iran, although he moved to Vasis, in Iraq, at a young age. They have presented him as a Persian mystic who preferred to be executed rather than to conform to the orthodox Sunnite rulers in Baghdad. This nationalistic stance should colour our reading of the references to the rope in Ayatollah Khomeini's *robâ'i* 'shade,' translated above, especially as he refers to the bird Homa, a famous character from Persian mythology, in the first line of the poem. By mentioning this mythological Iranian bird alongside an indirect reference to Hallâj, Ayatollah Khomeini links them, indicating that both have a Persian origin. This *robâ'i* indicates that Ayatollah Khomeini at times used the figure of Hallâj positively as an embodiment of Persian mysticism, adopting the anti-Arab stance that was purposely created in Iran to mobilize people for the Iranian cause.³¹³

In conclusion, one can say that certain aspects of Hallâj's character were neglected during the war, such as his revealing of the divine secrets, while other aspects were overemphasized. Depending on the situation, either Arabs or the Sunni orthodoxy are presented as his enemies, to create an imagined 'other' for Shiite Iranians. In some cases this meant the 'oppressor' was defined as non-Persian, including the Arab countries and all the Western countries that were seen as an anti-Iranian or anti-revolutionary coalition. In other instances, the 'oppressor' was non-Shiite, placing the Shiites living in Arabic or other foreign countries in Iran's camp. Ayatollah Khomeini's *robâ'is*, which are self-documents, indicate that he followed this trend to some extent. In many of his poems on Hallâj, he condemns the mystic for revealing secrets. However, in two of them he also identifies with Hallâj,

³¹³ For an extensive discussion of Hallâj as a role model in Persian war poetry see A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, "Martyrdom as Piety..." pp. 254-262. See also the article by A. Schimmel, "Das Hallaj-Motiv in der Moderne Islamitische Literatur," in *Die Welt des Islams*, New Series, 23/24, Leiden: Brill, pp. 165-181; and M.A. Nematollahi Mahani, *Do Not Say They Are Dead*, pp. 134-154.

presenting him as a Persian mystic whom he praises highly for his unconditional and sacrificing love.

3.9 The Ka‘ba, the Holy House of God Despised

Ayatollah Khomeini’s identification with opposition to Arabs and to orthodox Sunnism shows in another way in his *robâ’is*. Like many war poets Ayatollah Khomeini subordinates Mecca to Karbalâ. In his *ghazals*, and also in two *robâ’is*, he refers to the Ka‘ba, the holy building in the city of Mecca, pretending he prefers the ‘Ka‘ba of the Heart.’³¹⁴ How should unorthodox poems like these be interpreted? Should they not be taken at face value, as antinomian poems requiring a mystical reading? Or could it be that Ayatollah Khomeini used the antithesis between the Ka‘ba of the Heart (*Ka‘be-ye del*) and the Ka‘ba of Clay in Mecca (*Ka‘be-ye gel*) for political purposes? The question arises because the Iranian Islamic government, and Ayatollah Khomeini in particular did not have a friendly relationship with the Saudi Arabian government, and Ayatollah Khomeini wrote these *ghazals* in the eighties, when the tensions between the two countries were at their height. In this poem, Ayatollah Khomeini is probably making a political point when he asks to be banished “from the Ka‘ba and from the kingdom of Hejâz”? Although there have always been disagreements regarding religious doctrines and rituals between the Sunnite Saudi government and Shiite Iran, the two countries had a rather good, mutual bond after they established diplomatic ties in 1929. Relations began to deteriorate when an Iranian pilgrim was executed by the Saudi government in 1943 because, in the eyes of the Saudi government, he had shown disrespect to the holy shrine. The execution had far-reaching consequences, and for several years the Iranian government forbade Iranians to go on pilgrimage to Mecca. A few decades later, the ties between both countries declined again after Iran turned into an Islamic country in 1979.

Many countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia, were afraid that the Islamic revolution would be adopted by their own Shiite minorities, and undermine the stability of the region. As Ekhtiari Amiri points out in his article on Saudi-Iranian relations, the Iranian government believed it to be its right to defend “the rights of all Muslims of the world”³¹⁵ The constitution of the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran stated that Iran wished to form an “Islamic world order,” uniting all Muslims worldwide under Iranian command. The Iranian

³¹⁴ The *robâ’is* in which Khomein refers to the Ka‘ba can be found on page 195a and 212b of his *Divân*.

³¹⁵ R. Ekhtiari Amiri, K. Hasnita Binti Ku Samsu and H. Gholipour Fereidouni, “The Hajj and Iran's Foreign Policy towards Saudi Arabia,” in the *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 6, London: Sage Publications, 2011, pp. 679.

government rejected all non-Islamic forms of government. Concerning the pilgrimage to Mecca, the constitution furthermore stated that it was the duty of the Iranians to hold “political demonstrations...[in order to claim]...liberation from/disavowal of infidels during the Hajj.”³¹⁶ It is not surprising that the rulers of the countries surrounding Iran, which are home to large numbers of Shiites, at first feared Iran’s new foreign political program. Saudi Arabia in particular, which hosted large numbers of Iranian pilgrims each year, was wary. Once the Islamic Republic of Iran was established, Iranians considered the pilgrimage to Mecca not only as a religious duty but also, as Ekhtiari states, as “an occasion for an ‘Islamic uprising,’ or to expose the ‘misdeeds’ of the pro-American Saudi regime.”³¹⁷ Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iranian pilgrims have initiated large-scale demonstrations in Mecca, asking for ‘liberation from infidels,’ by which they mean Israel and America and all countries that support Saudi Arabia. Ayatollah Khomeini had even declared the pilgrimage of a pilgrim would be unacceptable (to God) if he or she did not join the demonstrations for liberation from the infidels.

As Ekhtiari *et al.* indicate, Ayatollah Khomeini on numerous occasions verbally attacked the Saudi government.³¹⁸ Ayatollah Khomeini had problems with Saudi Arabia’s support for Iraq during the war, and disapproved of the fact that Saudi Arabia had a monarchy rather than an Islamic republic. He also believed that the country was too much dominated by America and Israel. Furthermore, Ayatollah Khomeini opposed Saudi Arabia’s possession of the holy shrines in Mecca and Medina, which in the eyes of Ayatollah Khomeini belonged to all Muslims. On July 31st of 1987, tensions between the two countries came to a peak when fighting broke out between Iranian pilgrims and Saudi governmental forces, ending in the death of 275 Iranian pilgrims. The Saudi king responded by putting a ban on Iranian visas to Saudi Arabia. Ayatollah Khomeini, on his turn, responded by putting a ban on the pilgrimage to Mecca.³¹⁹ For the next three years, all bonds between the two countries were broken.³²⁰ According to Ismael and Ismael, after this event Ayatollah Khomeini’s hatred for

³¹⁶ Ibid., p. 679.

³¹⁷ Ibid., p. 680.

³¹⁸ Ibid., p. 680, 681.

³¹⁹ See M. Kramer “Khomeini’s Messengers in Mecca,” in *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival*, New Brunswick: Transaction, 1996, pp. 161-87.

³²⁰ Ibid., pp. 678-690.

Saudi Arabia exceeded even his dislike of Saddam Hussein.³²¹ Rafsanjani has said, of Iran's relation with Saudi Arabia, that: "the Saudi rulers have chosen an evil path, and we will send them to hell."³²² According to him, Ayatollah Khomeini had "dictated that Fahd (the Saudi King) would not remain alive."³²³

In the following *robâ'i* by Ayatollah Khomeini, one can read how the poetic persona prefers 'the place of sin' to the Ka'ba in Mecca, which Muslims are obliged to visit once in their lives if they are able to do so:

Oh Sheikh, I long for the monastery.	ای پیر! هوای خانقاهم هوس است
The rituals of worship bring me no profit, my sin is desire.	طاعت نکند سود، گناهم هوس است
The friends have all set out for the Ka'ba.	یاران همه سوی کعبه کردند رحیل
My cry is still, "my bawdyhouse is desire."	فریاد ز من، گناهگاهم هوس است. ³²⁴

Ayatollah Khomeini's unorthodox poems on the Ka'ba fit into the context of mystical poetry by Persian poets such as Nezâmi 'Aruzi (d. 1209), Ahmad Ghazâli, 'Attâr (d. ca. 1221), Rumi (d. 1273) and 'Omar Khayyâm (d. 1131), who used the rejection of this holy Islamic building as a metaphor to stress the priority of spiritual sincerity over outward duties.³²⁵ In a quatrain attributed to 'Omar Khayyâm, for example, we read:

Young wooer, charm all hearts with lover's art,	در راه نیاز هر دلی را دریاب
Glad winner, lead thy paragon apart!	در کوی حضور مقبلی را دریاب
A hundred Ka'bas equal not one heart,	صد کعبه آب و گل بیکدل نرسد
Seek not the Ka'ba, rather seek a heart! ³²⁶	کعبه چه روی برو دلی را دریاب

Both Khayyâm's and Ayatollah Khomeini's poems indicate that the pilgrimage to Mecca will not be accepted, no matter how often you go, if you are not pure of heart.³²⁷ Many

³²¹ J.S. and T.Y. Ismael, *The Gulf War and the New World Order*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994, p. 306.

³²² M. Mohaddessin, *Islamic Fundamentalism*, New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 2003, pp. 94-95.

³²³ M. Brecher and J. Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, p. 657.

³²⁴ See *Divân*, p. 195a.

³²⁵ See the discussions on the Ka'ba in Mecca by A.A. Seyed-Gohrab's, in "Martyrdom as Piety...", pp. 267-269 and in *Layli and Majnun*, pp. 228-234.

³²⁶ Translation of *robâ'i* 18 by E.H. Whinfield, in *The Quatrains of Omar Khayyâm*, London: Trübner & Co, 1883, p. 14; For the Persian lines see *ibid*, p. 15.

³²⁷ See also A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, "Rumi en de School van de Liefde: Antinomistische Motieven in Rumi's Werk," in *Tree voor tree naar Gods troon*, Leiden: Uitgeverij Quist, 2010, pp. 63-81.

mystical poems and works have been written in which antinomian mystics (*qalandars*) purposely trespass Islamic laws by setting fire to the Ka'ba in Mecca or by disgracing this holy institution in other ways, as a way of saying that religion has to do only with purity of heart. It could be that Ayatollah Khomeini, who has written many antinomian poems, wrote his *robâ'i* in this tradition. However, if one places the previous *robâ'i* by Ayatollah Khomeini in the historical and political context in which it was composed (between 1984 and 1985) one can come to a completely different interpretation. From the early 1970s, Iranian pilgrims had been demonstrating in Mecca against Israel, the United States, and all their supporters. In the 1980s, the slogans that Iranian pilgrims shouted became more political. Slogans such as: "Allah is great, Khomeini is our Leader," were not at all appreciated by the Saudi government. The war with Iraq did not improve relations between Iran and the Arab countries, who massively supported Saddam Hussein. On July 31st 1987, several years after Ayatollah Khomeini wrote this *robâ'i*, the demonstrations in Mecca ended in a bloodbath, with almost four hundred people dead on both sides (Iranian and Saudi). Ayatollah Khomeini strongly condemned the Saudis for the killings, and for three years there was a ban on Iranian pilgrims going to Mecca.³²⁸ Thus, when Ayatollah Khomeini wrote these *robâ'is*, there was a lot of tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The fact that the poetic persona in these *robâ'is* on the Ka'ba, like Ayatollah Khomeini a few years later in real life, rejects this most holy shrine may be no coincidence. *Robâ'is* like these could be purely mystical poems but, given the historical and political context in which they were written, it is very likely that Ayatollah Khomeini purposely used this mystical metaphor to amplify the antithesis between the oppressor and the oppressed, 'us' and 'them,' to pull more people into his camp. As in his *robâ'is* on Imam Hoseyn and the mystic Hallâj, his poems indicate that Ayatollah Khomeini used ingenious methods to recruit supporters. By projecting metaphors from classical mystical poetry onto contemporary situations, Khomeini created oppositional groups in the service of his Islamic ideological agenda.

Conclusion

The *robâ'is* that Khomeini composed in 1984 and 1985 demonstrate that in Ayatollah Khomeini's life, everything revolved around love for God and a spiritual approach to religion. Ayatollah Khomeini's *robâ'is* are imbued with mystical ideas. At the same time, Ayatollah Khomeini wrote the *robâ'is* in the midst of the Iran-Iraq war. Traces of the political situation

³²⁸ R. Wright, *In the Name of God; The Khomeini Decade*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989, p. 126.

often appear in these poems. Ayatollah Khomeini's *robâ'is*, like some of his speeches, apply the mystical concept of love to the life of the Iranian soldier. Ayatollah Khomeini composed several *robâ'is* in which he compares the road of the mystic to the road of the soldier, both seeking union with God. The first aims to do this in a symbolic way, the latter literally gives up his life to be united with God. The comparison between the lover and the war soldier also appears frequently in Ayatollah Khomeini's public statements and in war poems by other Iranian poets. By presenting the martyr's death as an ultimate token of love, the Iranian government mobilized thousands of people to go to war. Ayatollah Khomeini was not the first to interpret this mystical death in a literal way but it is at least certain that never before had this literal interpretation of the mystical death received such a large-scale response with thousands of soldiers, often teen-agers, volunteering to die as a martyr. By presenting death as the end of the spiritual road of the soul and union with the Beloved, Ayatollah Khomeini gave purpose to the war and to the hundreds of thousands of victims who fell. In his *robâ'is*, as in his public speeches and lectures, Ayatollah Khomeini refers to the oppressed condition of the Shiites since 680, when Imam Hoseyn was killed. By changing the image of the battle at Karbalâ from a passive event, where Hoseyn and his troops accepted defeat in a spirit of self-abnegation, into an active if unsuccessful revolt against the illegitimate Sunnite enemy, Ayatollah Khomeini was able to effect drastic changes in the passive stance of the Shiite community. By presenting the war as a continuation of this struggle between truth and falsehood and between the Shiite and Sunnite faith, that every Shiite is expected to fight, Ayatollah Khomeini presents the war not only as a territorial war but also as a spiritual battle. Ayatollah Khomeini appealed to Shiite feelings of historical guilt for not defending Imam Hoseyn in 680 to effectively mobilize people to fight against oppression. Ayatollah Khomeini presented the Shiites and Iranians as the 'oppressed' (*mazlum*) who have a duty to fight the 'oppressors,' the Sunnites. By presenting the figure of Imam Hoseyn as the embodiment of ultimate love and sacrifice, thousands of soldiers were motivated to join the 'war of love.' Ayatollah Khomeini succeeded in extending the story of Karbalâ into the modern era.

Ayatollah Khomeini's references to the antinomian figure of Mansur Hallâj, who was executed for the love of God, proved to be another effective way to promote martyrdom and anti-Arabism. The antithesis between the holy shrine in Mecca and the Ka'ba of the heart, which he used in both his *robâ'is* and in lyrical poetry, was an ingenious way to amplify the dichotomy between the 'oppressed' Shiites and the oppressors, in this case the Sunnite Saudis. The fact that, in 1987, Iranian pilgrims massively responded to Ayatollah Khomeini's manifesto in which he urged Shiite pilgrims in Mecca to curse the Saudi kings, proves that

Ayatollah Khomeini's 'mystical' messages led to a political response. By prioritizing the Ka'ba of the heart over the actual Ka'ba in Mecca, Ayatollah Khomeini 'spiritualized' orthodox Islam during a time of war for political purposes.

The fact that soldiers at the front very commonly wrote and recited mystical poems in which they presented themselves as lovers and mystics who were prepared for annihilation in their Beloved, indicates that Ayatollah Khomeini's mystical messages, that were based on a century old antinomian poetic tradition, had a broad resonance. Thus, Ayatollah Khomeini used mystical concepts both to mobilize people for war, and to export his ideas on the revolution and to plea for the unity of all Muslims worldwide under one banner. Knysh already argued, in a 1999 study, that Ayatollah Khomeini "tried to employ his extensive knowledge of *'erfân* for propaganda purposes."³²⁹ He suggests that Ayatollah Khomeini may have seen himself as the perfect man of his time who believed it was his task to guide the Islamic community and to protect it against any form of injustice. The *robâ'is* that Ayatollah Khomeini wrote support this view, and demonstrate that he applied mystical concepts to everyday events. His *robâ'is* illustrate that he used mystical messages of love, which are usually peaceful and non-violent, for the opposite purpose, to persuade Iranians to offer their lives to defend Iran and Islam.

³²⁹ A. Knysh, "Irfan Revisited...", p. 652.