

Part Two

A Well Amid the Waste

An Introduction to the Poetry of Ahmad Shamlu

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mowzu'-e she'r-e sha'er-e diruz
Az zendegi nabud.

...

Emruz mowzu'-e she'r mowzu'-e digari-st,
emruz she'r harbeh-ye khalq ast,
Zira keh sha'eran,
khod shakheh'i ze jangal-e khalqand,
nah yasamin o sonbol-e golxaneh-ye folan.⁴

(The subject of poets of yesteryear
 was not life.

...

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

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

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

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

“I, an Iranian poet,” Shamlu has written and is fond of emphasising in his conversation, “first learned about poetry from the Spanish Lorca, the French Eluard, the German Rilke, the Russian Mayakovsky ... and the American Langston Hughes; and only later, with this education, I turned to the poets of my mother tongue to see and to know, say, the grandeur of Hafiz from a fresh perspective.”²⁵ And indeed, Shamlu’s poetry and poetic philosophy reflect an even more deeply rooted western influence than he can perhaps be conscious of. In many of his lines one can detect direct echoes of Lorca and Aragon. His images are sometimes as visual as Pound’s, sometimes as abstract as Breton’s. Like Eluard and Aragon, whom he has translated, Shamlu believes that poetry is first and foremost language, and as such nothing is more essential for the poet than to begin by trying the language on all its levels. Like Pound and Yeats, he considers the visual experience of the poet the base on which the poem is made to stand or fall. His belief in the profound will of poetry, in its deep memory and in action as the ordering principle underlying any poem links him with many of the great contemporary poets of our time such as Mayakovsky, particularly in his early poems.

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

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

Faryad bardashtam:

Shod an zamaneh keh bar masih-e maslub-e khod beh muyeh

mineshastid,

keh aknun

har zan

maryami-st,

va har maryam ra

isa'i bar salib ast,

bi taj-e khar o salib o joljota,

bi Pilat o qazian o divan-e Adalat:

Isayani hameh ham-sarnevesht,

isayani yekdast,

ba jamehha hameh yekdast,

va papushha vo papichha'i yekdast – ham bedan qarar –

va nan o shurba'i beh tasavi.

[Keh barabari miras-e geranbaha-ye tabar-e ensan ast, ari!]

Va agar taj-e khari nist

khudi hast keh bar sar nehid,

va agar salibi nist keh bar dush keshid

tofangi hast.

Asbab-e bozorgi hameh amadeh,

va har sham cheh basa keh sahm-e akher ast,

va har negah

ey basa keh negah-e yahuda'i.⁶

(I cried out,

Gone are the days of mourning some crucified Christ,
for today

every woman

is another Mary,

and every Mary

has a Jesus upon the cross,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Foru basteh bad,
ari, foru basteh bad o
foru bastehtar.
Va ba har darbازه
haft qofl-e ahanjush-e geran.⁸*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Bar zamineh-ye sorbi-ye sobh
 savar khamush istasdeh ast
 va yal-e boland-e asbash dar bad
 parishan mishavad.
 Khodaya, khodaya!
 Savaran nabayad istadeh bashand
 hangami keh
 hadeseh ekhtar mishavad.*

...

*Kenar-e parchin-e sukhteh
 dokhtar khamush istadeh ast
 va daman-e nazokash dar bad
 tokan mikhorad.*

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

(In the leaden backdrop of the dawn
 the horseman stands in silence,
 the long mane of his horse
 dishevelled by the wind.
 O Lord, O Lord!
 Horsemen are not to stand still
 when the event is brewing.

...

By the burnt hedge
 the girl stands in silence,
 her delicate skirt
 waving in the wind.
 O Lord, O Lord!
 girls are not to remain silent
 When weary and despairing,
 men grow old.)

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

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

*Mara to dars-e forumayeh budan amuzi
keh towbeh-nameh nevisam beh kam-e doshman bar,
nejat-e tan ra zanjir-e ruh-e khish konam
ze rasti beneshanam farib ra bartar,
ze sobh-e taban bartabam ay derigha ruy,
beh sham-e tireh-ye ru-dar-safar separam sar?*

...

*To rah-e rahat-e jan gir o man moqam-e masaf
to ja-ye amn o aman guir man tariq-e khatar.¹²*

(You teach me to be a coward, father?
To register repentance at my enemy's will,
to enchain my soul in order to free my body,
to seat deceit higher than truth,
to turn away from the rising dawn, Oh,
to accompany a passing night on its death journey.

...

Take your soul to safety, father, and I my body to the battlefield,
Shelter yourself in comfort, and leave me in my great danger.)

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

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

*Sefer-e yeganeh-ye forsats ra
sarasar*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Up from the Underground

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Poet of Desires Turned to Dust

In Memoriam Mehdi Akhavan Saleh

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Storyteller and His Times

Ali-Akbar Sa'idi-Sirjani of Iran

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Born on 11 December 1931 in the southeastern city of Sirjan, 'Ali-Akbar Sa'idi-Sirjani began his career in the benevolent care of two prominent figures in contemporary Iranian history: Mozaffar Baqa'i- Kermani, a controversial and maverick politician who rose to prominence in the 1950s during the years of Iran's oil nationalisation movement; and Habib Yaghmai, the influential editor of the literary monthly *Yaghma*, a journal conservative in literary taste but reformist in political terms. Although in his more recent writings he has discounted his early poetic compositions, Sirjani began his literary career as a poet in the 1950s and had five collections of verse to his name by 1966.⁵ He had also prepared a biography of poets from his hometown of Sirjan, had annotated editions of three classical texts of Persian literature and Iranian history, and had collaborated in the posthumous publication of Dehkhoda's famous encyclopaedic dictionary, the *Loghatnameh*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

