A Fire of Lilies

Karimi-Hakkak, Ahmad

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CHAPTER 1

Revolutionary Posturing

Iranian Writers and the Iranian Revolution

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

This article explores the literary ground adjacent to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 in search of clues to the formation and later transformations of so simple and absolute a conception of the revolutionary process within the complex of social variables that determines the emergence and evolution of a community of literary meaning. The survey might make visible an essential function of literature as part of the system of signs that constitute a given culture. Finally – and this is my ultimate hope – the essay will address the question of why under certain social conditions attempts at fresh articulations of such oppositions in communal myths and metaphors succeed in creating new cultural artefacts, while under other conditions the system of cultural constraints prevents such re-articulations from breaking through the complexities of discourse and erecting new structures for cultural expression. By way of illustration, this article will focus on one failed attempt at myth revaluation in post-revolution Iranian society that stands as an isolated instance of a frustrated will at self-positioning.
I have argued elsewhere that the revolutionary movement of 1978–1979 in Iran was itself, in a profound sense, a work of the imagination. To those Iranian writers who had come increasingly to position themselves on the side of that eternal object of social contestation called “the people” in the battlefield where the forces of an autocratic state were perceived and portrayed as having lined up against an entire society, the phenomenon of revolution had come to mean not only a sudden radical transformation of the society on political, economic, and cultural grounds, but essentially a leap towards the utopian notion of a society at peace with itself. I will try to demonstrate here how that notion itself had derived from the perception of a series of conflicts, contradictions, and oppositions on social, political, and cultural planes reflected with enhanced poignancy in the Persian literature of the decades before the revolution. Starting with the widespread perception – formed and fostered in the aftermath, and largely as a result, of the 1953 *coup d’état* – that the monarchial state and Iranian people pursue fundamentally different visions and ideals, many Iranian poets and writers began to articulate their impression of this difference in their literary works in one form or another of opposite entities, positioning themselves with increasing self-consciousness against the state power structure.

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

One can, of course, hardly envisage a more profound, yet simple archetypal opposition than that between the demon and the angel, or a more elementary and absolute notion of revolution than a departure and an arrival. Nonetheless, it is not hard to demonstrate the ways in which the contemporary literature of Iran mediates the intellectual perception of the entire
modern process as a great historical rupture, and predicts its imminent collapse and its rather automatic replacement by an “other” entity capable of reintegrating the diverse ideals of progress, freedom, and justice, as well as the re-establishment of social links with native – and traditional – ways and values in a novel social configuration. Literary ambiguity, linguistic polysemy, and endless possibilities of semiosis as essential vehicles through which vision is expressed and communicated tend to conceal the ontological simplicity of such images as “night,” “winter,” “walls,” and “chains” – to name only a few of the images most frequently relied upon in post-World War I Persian literature – which, through semantic agreements in the intersubjective community that includes writers and their immediate readers, come to refer to aspects of the actual social condition.

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

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

*Va beh vairiz-e tanin-e hardam amin goftan-e mardom*  
*(chun seda-ye rudi az ja kandeh, andar safhe-ye mordab angah gom)*  
*morgh-e amin-guy*  
*dur migardad.*  
*Az faraz-e bam*  
*dar basit-e khetteh-ye aram mikhinad khorus az dur*
mishekafad jerm-e divar-e sahargahan,
vaz bar-e an sard-e dud-andud-e khamush
harcheh ba rang-e tajalli, rang dar paykar miafzayad.
Migorizad shab.
Sobh miayad.4

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

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

Following in the footsteps of Nima Yushij, Ahmad Shamlu relates in his famous narrative poem, “Pariya” (The Fairies, 1956), the story of a horseman journeying from Qal'eh-ye Afsaneh-ye Pir (The Castle of Old Legends) to Shahr-e Gholamha-ye Asir (The City of Captive Slaves). The quest is
thematised through the protagonist’s encounter with innocent-looking but, as it turns out, evil fairies trying to sabotage his mission, his eventual triumph over the evil creatures, and his belated arrival in the city, now freed from the clutches of the evil Amu Zanjir-baf (Uncle Chain-maker). The poem achieved immediate success not only because of its masterful use of nursery rhyme, fairytale motifs, and dramatic elements in the service of presenting a vision of the social ideal, but thematically because in it the line between the story and its moral, between fantasy and reality, is deliberately blurred to enable the poet to replace the conventional didacticism of fairytales with his own vision. In the end, for example, the dreamy world of the horseman serves to corroborate the poetic dream of an egalitarian society viewed from the vantage point where the protagonist reveals the poet’s ideal:

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

(Once on the peak,
I looked down
and saw my old dear town.
Joyful in it people sang,
tolling the bells, ding dong dang:
Everybody dance and sing,
Justice is our beloved king.
Everybody sing and dance,
we’ve defeated ignorance.
Sun, o sun, o sun so bright
cast upon us all your light.
We’ve overcome injustice
worshipped freedom, sought for bliss.
Everybody raise your cup
for people have risen up.
We’ve done the deed, gone the mile
now we’re homebound, all smile!

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

Although not all the literary works that attempted to subvert the power of the state conceived of that power in terms of such transcendental figures as the World-eater or the Chain-maker, the feelings generated by the presence of such figures on the social scene form a central preoccupation of this body of literature. Projected onto the populace at large, they would result in views of leafless groves ruled over by the king of all seasons, autumn (padeshah-e faslha, pa’iz), decaying corpses submerged in swampy waters, sickly flora and fauna driven out of their natural habitats, and a host of other signs of degeneration, disintegration, and dislocation. By metaphoric representation or metonymic reduction, through elegiac or satiric utterance, modern Iranian literary intellectuals continued to communicate their deep dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in their country. Occasionally, of course, literature did reflect attempts at finding alternatives to the political present. In his polemical essay Gharbzadegi (Euromania, 1962), Jalal Al-e Ahmad had advocated a return to what he had come in his later years to view as the quintessence of Iranian cultural identity. Some years later, in a bold departure from the secularised posture of a great majority of the intellectuals, he went on a ritual pilgrimage to Mecca. The account he has left of this journey, Khasi dar Miqat (Lost in the Crowd, 1964), points to renewed attention to religion as a mobilising force capable of ending the nightmare of a disintegrating society:
In the circumambulation around the house [of the Ka'ba], you go in one direction shoulder to shoulder with the others, and you go around one thing individually and collectively. That is, there's an objective and a system. You're a particle in a ray of being, going around a center. You are thus integrated, not released. More importantly, there are no encounters. You're shoulder to shoulder with the others, not face to face. You see selflessness only in the rapid movement of bodies of people, or in what you hear them saying … You can easily see what an infinity you create in that multitude from such nothingness. Like a particle of rubbish on the ocean, no, on an ocean of people, or perhaps a bit of dust in the air.7

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

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

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

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

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

The most notable outward sign of the literature conceived and produced, thematically and chronologically, around the Iranian Revolution remains – from our perspective over a decade later – its tendency to paint the scene, to gloat in the sight, to celebrate the event. Poetry, in particular, became at once perceptibly more kinetic and more buoyant. The image of a red carnation planted in the barrel of a wavering soldier’s gun, as a metaphor for the wound his bullet might plant in the body of an innocent demonstrator, appears beside the more familiar sign of red tulips signifying the reincarnation of martyrs. A chorus of sounds, from the loud screeching of gunfire to the still louder roar of people with clenched fists chanting revolutionary slogans, breaks the long lull of the poetic line. The scents of rose water and burning incense – traditionally used by women when seeing men off before or welcoming them back after hazardous undertakings – mingle with the smell of blood in the gutter. Numerous new signs and symbols are invented to capture and record the moment when one more man falls in another encounter between the army and unarmed demonstrators:
Bu-ye baradaram ra darad
in na’ash
Bu-ye bardaranam ra darad.
Az kucheha hanuz
faryad-e zakhm o khun o goluleh
bu-ye baradaranam miayad
khalq-e mobarakam
bar sarzamin-e khun
golha-ye laleh mikarad.9

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

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

Shab-e ma cheh bashokuh ast
vaqti golulehha
an ra khalkubi mikonand
va del-e ma ra
delha-ye moz.tareb-e ma ra
dar do su-ye shah
bang-e Allah-o-Akbar
beham vasl mikonad.
shab-e ma cheh bashokuh ast
vaqti keh tariki
shahr ra mottahed mikonad.10
(How glorious is our night
when bullets
tattoo it
and cries of “God is Great”
bring together
our hearts
our anxious hearts
from the two sides of the night.
How glorious is our night
when darkness
unites the town.)

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

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

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

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

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

\[ Man \]
\[ bavar nemikonam \]
\[ keh hich niru’i betvanad farda ra \]
\[ az mayehha-ye diruzin \]
\[ biafarinad. \]
I do not believe that any force
can build tomorrow
out of the stuff of yesterdays.

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

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

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

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

This partial reappropriation of the nationalist discourse of the early Iranian modernisers of a century ago by the contemporary literary intellectuals was not without its consequences. That the reactions of ShamLU, Khoʿi, and Vaqedi to a historical event that had failed to conform to their notion of where a revolution ought to lead drives them towards a formulation of an Iranian cultural identity reminiscent of that posited by such men as Mirza
Aqa Khan Kermani further drives a wedge between their idealised notion of Iranian culture and the reality that binds their actual lives. On the one hand, what seems to motivate their creative impulse is a deep desire to salvage the idea of revolution from the actuality they perceive as abhorrent. On the other, however, they seem painfully wary of slipping into the state-sponsored nationalist cant of the 1970s glorifying ancient Iranian culture.

The fundamental incongruity of the situation in which the secular intelligentsia found itself at this juncture is articulated in several significant literary works as an inexplicable gap between the initial causes of the revolution and its subsequent course. Hushang Golshiri’s “Fathnameh-ye Moghan” (The Magi’s Victory Chronicle), perhaps the most artistically conceived short story written in the decade following the revolution, best typifies the thematisation of that gap. It follows the fortunes of a group of characters in a provincial town from the noontime joy of popular revolt against the monarchy to the midnight of forced submission to the savagery of the Islamic revolutionists. As the story opens, the people have already broken windowpanes in cinemas and banks in protest against what such institutions represent. One observes, “When we shattered movie house windows we did not think that it was the movies we were breaking down. We were attacking the banality they symbolized as well as the perpetrators of that banality.”

What remains to be destroyed of the system of which films and banks have thus been established as outward signs is the imposing statue of the horseman at the Shah square. Obviously mindful of the actual fact that, besides these, taverns too were targets of attacks by the religious faction in the revolutionary coalition, Golshiri introduces a tavern owner called Barat as his protagonist and the man who finally enlists the townsfolk to help pull down the shah's statue. A cultivated, honest, and popular man who loves poetry and loathes hypocrisy, Barat possesses an innate capacity for leadership. He has been a civil servant who, having lost his job because of his leftist views, turned to selling books. It is only after his bookstore was raided and closed down by the shah’s dreaded secret police, the SAVAK, that he opens a tavern, hoping his new profession will shield him from harassment by state security agents.

After a detailed description of how Barat, basking in the rays of a midwinter sun, succeeds in dislodging the statue from its pedestal and throwing the horseman and his horse to the cement surface of the square, the story turns, in a well-structured sequence of poignant dialogues, to typical scenes of drinking bouts in Barat’s humble tavern, where conversation revolves around the course and objectives of the revolution. The story's main body deals with Barat’s worsening situation as the Islamicisation following
the revolution begins, and the authorities of the new state turn against him because of his unholy occupation. Eventually Barat is arrested and flogged in public because he continues to sell spirits in defiance of the ban on alcohol consumption. His cache of wines and spirits is discovered and given to a local bulldozer driver for destruction. The driver buries the precious find in an open field, word goes from mouth to mouth, and at night the townspeople head for the site. There they partake in the sacred ritual of unearthing these symbolic remains of their worldly culture and, their bodies bruised, they begin to nourish themselves with this forbidden liquid of joy, this ab-e hayat (water of life) so dearly celebrated in Persian literature and lore, even though it has been proscribed by religious dogma as “um al-khaba’es” (the mother of all evil). For a brief moment, in the dim light of a lantern or a candle, the assembly becomes an image of the “native” Iranian culture reminiscent of so many life-and-death struggles through the ages. Soon, however, the Revolutionary Guards, clad in the Arabian keffiyeh and akal and guided by the flickering light and a human voice singing a sad, sinuous song, arrive on the scene. They surround the drinkers, violators of a most severe religious proscription. The commanding officer issues the inevitable verdict, “They ought to be flogged, every one of them! Start!”

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

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

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

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

In a short story entitled “Dar Saracheh-ye Dabbaghan” (In the Skinner’s Homestead, 1981), which had been conceived as an episode in a larger work, Gholamhossein Sa’edi allegorises his perception of the Iranian Revolution in terms at once more abstract and more complex than those set forth by Shamlu and Golshiri. The narrative, which depicts the passage of an Egyptian embassy on its way to the Tartar court through a green valley resembling “an
emerald bowl” vaguely located between those two geographical points, will be fully analysed in a later chapter in this book.

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

In all such instances of literary communication, Iranian writers had come to find their discourse conditioned and constrained by structures epistemologically dependent on the oppositional categories of a simple discourse of antagonism. Beyond the portrayal of those antagonistic relations – conceived in one or another variety of the we/they, Iranian/non-Iranian, progressive/reactionary formulas – lay the spectre of indeterminate structures connoting the perceived incomprehensibility of the social situation in which they found themselves. Either through the artful creation of supernatural
figures or through diverse metonymic, metaphorical, or allegorical devices, they had reduced complex patterns of social interaction to familiar patterns of dichotomous opposition. When those patterns lost their relevance because of the introduction of the more complex variables, more complicated patterns of cultural contestation aggressively advanced by an unlikely contender – i.e., the traditional religious leaders – the symbolic order began to appear as an impediment to the act of literary communication. The crisis brought with it a vague realisation that the mechanisms that bind artistic expression to a particular version of the symbolic grasp of reality, conceived and conducted within one social environment, may not operate in the same way in another. Thus, the number of literary works caught up in the dualities and dichotomies of the social structure before the Iranian Revolution is exceeded only by attempts to break through those dichotomous categories.

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

Popular revolt against tyrannical rule, restitution of legitimacy, and progress towards social justice, all elements present in the myth, had been thematised in the hands of a generation of Iranian reformers, modernisers, and revolutionaries in such a way as to serve the ideals of liberal democracy, individual freedom, and social justice. The myth’s narrative structure is deceptively straightforward: the throne of Iran was once occupied by an
alien tyrant named Zahhak, who had grown two voracious serpents on his shoulders as the visible signs of the evil in his heart. He had to kill the youth of the land and feed their brains to the hungry serpents. Eventually, an ironsmith named Kaveh, having lost seventeen sons to the tyrant's affliction, revolted against the usurper, led an army of the people to his palace, and chained the tyrant up. Still followed by the people, he then proceeded to reinstate Feraydun, the rightful possessor of divine glory, as king. The latter ruled the country with the utmost justice and liberality for the rest of his long life.

The text containing the attempt at redefining this myth appeared, interestingly, in the form of an editorial footnote to an article about the new elementary school textbooks published by the Islamic state. Almost a year after the revolution in the twentieth issue of Ketab-e Jom’eh, by far the most influential cultural weekly of the period, a writer of children’s fiction had written a scathing criticism of the new textbooks, stressing at one point that “in the fifth grade Persian reader the story of Kaveh the ironsmith, this symbol of work and suffering, which is one of the most epical and patriotic verse stories of Ferdowsi, has also been omitted.”

The editor of the journal, the poet Ahmad Shamlu, had added a footnote to this observation, which occupies two pages of the journal. Here the poet, whose influence on the evolution of poetry in contemporary Iran has been unique, openly expresses his dislike for Ferdowsi, the medieval canoniser of the ancient myth, whom he accuses of singlehandedly and intentionally distorting the historical truth of Ajidahak’s revolutionary movement against the Iranian monarchy and the Zoroastrian priesthood and in favour of a classless society. The monstrous face that Ferdowsi has given to Zahhak is, in Shamlu’s view, a result of the poet’s displeasure with a revolutionary leader who had disrupted ancient Iranian society’s structure of social classes by overthrowing the king. Such radical changes, Shamlu observes, “run counter to the convictions of the poet of Tus [Ferdowsi] who has concealed his hatred of classless society underneath the ugly aspect he gives to the founder of that society.”

Equating such ancient terms as dehqan (landed aristocracy) with the modern concept of “feudal lords,” sepahi (the soldiery) with “the army” of the ruling aristocracy, and the magi (Zoroastrian priests) with “the clergy,” Shamlu observes that in an “unholy alliance” these forces of reaction eventually banded together and defeated the revolutionary movement of the emphatically “Iranian” Zahhak, and returned the monarchy and the class system to society. He then cites as evidence some lines from Feraydun’s proclamation on the occasion of his reinstatement as king, in which the necessity of “order” in society is expounded.
Sepahi nabayad keh ba pishehvar
beh yek ruy juyand hardo honar
yeki karvarz o degar gorzdar
sezavar-e hardo padid ast kar
cho in kar-e an juyad an kar-e in
por ashub gardad sarasar zamin.

In the Warner translation, the proclamation runs thus:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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