A Fire of Lilies

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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. 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 turn 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 turn 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 burn 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. 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. 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. 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). 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, 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'ān, 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’ān’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 sodomize.

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

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

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

The letter sealed the author’s fate in a way that no previous writing of his – be it an anecdotal essay, a political allegory, or an open appeal – had done. It went far beyond a plea of not guilty by an individual author and questioned
the legitimacy of the state and the authority of its spiritual leader. The only response of which the Islamic Republic could be thought capable was the one given: the use of state violence in the form of Sirjani’s arrest and incarceration. Three months after that arrest, the Islamic Republic of Iran has just begun to produce a series of statements, allegedly in Sirjani’s handwriting, in which the Iranian writer admits to a number of unspecified crimes, recants his past positions, and asks for leniency. Sirjani’s prediction of his own fate has indeed come true.

There is a parable in the opening pages of “In the Tattered Sleeve” which tells of a man dispossessed of his wealth and belongings by a powerful local dignitary, once again in the author’s hometown of Sirjan. 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.”

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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.