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The Poetics of Commitment in Modern Persian:
A Case of Three Revolutionary Poets in Iran

by

Samad Josef Alavi

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Near Eastern Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

Professor Shahwali Ahmadi, Chair
Professor Muhammad Siddiq
Professor Robert Kaufman

Fall 2013

Abstract

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Modern Persian literary histories generally characterize the decades leading up to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 as a single episode of accumulating political anxieties in Persian poetics, as in other areas of cultural production. According to the dominant literary-historical narrative, calls for “committed poetry” (*she‘r-e mota‘ahhed*) grew louder over the course of the radical 1970s, crescendoed with the monarch’s ouster, and then faded shortly thereafter as the consolidation of the Islamic Republic shattered any hopes among the once-influential Iranian Left for a secular, socio-economically equitable political order. Such a narrative has proven useful for locating general trends in poetic discourses of the last five decades, but it does not account for the complex and often divergent ways in which poets and critics have reconciled their political and aesthetic commitments. This dissertation begins with the historical assumption that in Iran a question of how poetry must serve society and vice versa did in fact acquire a heightened sense of urgency sometime during the ideologically-charged years surrounding the revolution. But the dissertation departs from episodic approaches to modern Persian literature by demonstrating how the various discursive responses to the question--both in theory and in poetic practice--do not fit neatly into one concept of “political” poetry. Simply put, the term “commitment” (*ta‘ahhod*) refers to an on-going, unresolved debate in Persian poetics, not a discrete literary-historical phenomenon. Thus, even among ideologically aligned and/or self-identifying “committed” poets and critics, one encounters significant variations in the ways that each individual has understood poetics and politics to intersect.

This dissertation investigates the ways that three modern Iranian poets work through the intersection of poetry and politics in both their theoretical writings and their verse. In each of the three cases, the poets agree that poetry serves as a locus of political resistance and in this sense all three poets might fall under the general rubric of commitment that supposedly marked the period in which they wrote. However, as I demonstrate, each case study also produces a distinct poetics of commitment. In Sa‘id Soltanpur (chapter one) the dissertation locates a militant poetics, arguing that poetry can participate directly in armed liberation struggles. In M.R. Shafi‘i Kadkani (chapter two) the dissertation encounters a poetics of moral outrage, arguing that the canonical traditions of Persian classical and Islamic mystical poetry provide the discursive means through which to intervene in contemporary socio-political conditions. In Ahmad Shamlu

(chapter three) the dissertation locates a humanist poetics that treats poetry's invitation for critical reflective judgement as itself a form of resistance to repressive state and economic structures, but does not put forth any particular alternative structure in their place. Finally, the dissertation concludes by considering the the poetry and criticism of Mohammad Mokhtari (chapter four) as articulations of a post-revolutionary poetics of commitment.

Methodologically, the dissertation takes special care to distinguish between the theories as they are articulated in discursive prose and the particular way that the poems themselves respond to, expand upon, or challenge the theories' claims. For its theoretical framework, the dissertation attempts to place modern Persian poetics in dialogue with Sartre's writings on commitment, Adorno's response to Sartre, Frankfurt School aesthetics, and European and American poetries. Ultimately, the dissertation aims to demonstrate how the question of poetry's service to society historically produced fruitful and variegated debates in Persian poetics and that the question remains relevant and unresolved today.

The dissertation also includes an appendix with original, parallel translations of the Persian poems considered at length throughout the main body of the text.

To the memory of my uncle,
Mehdi Alavi Shoshtari,
1955-1980,
and the future of my children,
Mina Kate Alavi
&
Zain Ali Alavi

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Needless to say, any errors or shortcomings in this dissertation are mine alone.

Note on Transliteration and Translation

This dissertation follows the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (IJMES) schema for consonants in Persian and the *Iranian Studies* schema for vowels. While the IJMES schema maintains diacritics to avoid any ambiguities with Persian homophones, (thus z, ž, ẓ and so on) the *Iranian Studies* schema (which follows the *IJMES* system for consonants but omits diacritics) represents the vowels in a manner more easily recognizable to readers acquainted with the variant of Persian spoken widely in contemporary Iran. Any transliteration system inevitably includes certain shortcomings, but it is hoped that the system I have adapted here will combine ease of reading with orthographical precision. In the few instances where I transliterate Arabic words, I have followed the IJMES system.

For proper names and titles of works, I follow the same system but omit diacritics. In cases where writers have published in English, I use the spellings that the authors have presumably chosen for themselves. This produces the rather awkward inconsistency between, for example, Saeed Yousef and Sa'id Soltanpur. But the variation at least reflects how the former has written and published in English in addition to Persian while the latter wrote exclusively in Persian. If an anglicized version of a proper noun or word exists, I follow that spelling as well.

All translations from Persian, unless otherwise indicated, are my own. Limitations in word processing software have prevented me from including Persian script within the body of the dissertation. However, the appendix includes the Persian originals alongside my translations of the poems that I discuss at length. Translation in general and translating poetry in particular involves constant concessions between semantic and aesthetic values. I address some of my reconciliations as translator in the footnotes to the appendix and others within the body of the dissertation itself.

Introduction

We are realizing more and more that a poetic emotion lies at the origin of revolutionary thought.

-Jean Genet, "Letter to American Intellectuals"

Rise and Fall of a Discourse

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 marks the crest in a decades-long process of radicalization throughout various sectors of Iranian society. While scholars will no doubt continue to debate the significance of the competing factors and factions that eventually brought the Islamic Republic to power, it seems now, more than three decades later, self-evident that the Pahlavi monarch fled his own country at precisely that historical moment when a large enough mass of the Iranian populace expressed its absolute refusal to compromise with the equally uncompromising ruler. As with any revolution, this eruption of popular protest did not materialize without presage. Indeed, historical hindsight offers a wealth of indicators throughout the Pahlavi monarchy (1925-1979) to suggest a society moving, albeit with various turns and obstructions, towards open political revolt. And just as discontent with the Shah had developed for years before the collective demand for revolution prevailed over other voices in Iranian society, so, too, as at least two contemporary studies of modern Persian literature detail, did the voice of dissent increasingly dominate the literary sphere, until, in the 1960s and 1970s, the demand for the socio-political struggle to be enacted in literature took precedence over other literary exigencies of the day.¹ That is to say that while the literary sphere, like society itself, was neither homogenous nor unanimously in favor of revolution, by 1979, the loudest voices to be heard in literature and literary criticism were those of the champions of "committed" literature (*adabiyât-e mota'ahhed*). And for whatever else it may have signified, commitment (*ta'ahhod*) in the Iranian context at least demanded that the writer mobilize his or her society against social ills and oppressive political rule.

Of course, the call for revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, sounded as it was by various student and labor groups, guerrilla organizations and liberation armies the world over, was in no way unique to Iran. Rather, Iranian radicalism, though not necessarily the group of religious radicals that eventually triumphed in the Islamic Republic, remained in constant dialogue with revolutionary ideologies across Europe, Asia, and the Americas. In the same way, the idea of commitment in literature was not unique to Persian or Iranian literary culture. In fact the term *ta'ahhod*² seems to have entered the lexicon of Persian literary discourse as a calque on Jean Paul Sartre's *engagement*.³ But while the term itself may have originated in Europe, the idea that

¹ M. R. Ghanoonparvar, *Prophets of Doom : Literature as a Socio-Political Phenomenon in Modern Iran* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984). Kamran Talattof, *The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

² The Arabic term *iltizām* (which is also used interchangeably with *ta'ahhod* in Persian) underwent a strikingly similar development in the Arabic literary sphere. See M.M. Badawi, "Commitment in Contemporary Arabic Literature" in Issa J. Boullata, ed. *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature 1945-1980* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1980), 33-41.

³ Sirus Shamisa, *Naqd-e Adabi (Virayesh-e Dovvom)*, 2nd ed. (Tehran: Mitra, 1385/2006), 406.

literature, and especially poetry, should serve “the people” in their struggle against oppression was articulated in Iran before the publication of Sartre’s essays and developed in a manner that suggests minimal influence from Sartre’s conception of commitment.⁴ In fact, in “Qu’est-ce qu’écrire?,” the first essay in the collection *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*, Sartre immediately rejects the possibility of commitment in poetry, arguing that the poem, like painting, sculpture and music, does not transfer information and therefore cannot be committed to any particular idea or cause in the way that he describes for prose.⁵

In Iran, contrary to Sartre’s understanding, the idea that poetry must both reflect and serve society continued to gain currency among critics and poets in the decades following the appearance of Sartre’s work. Whether calling for poetry to be committed to the liberation of the masses or actually composing poems in a manner that they believed to conform to this commitment, poetry in service of the toiling masses and in defiance of the establishment was the order of the day. Indeed, by the 1970s, the proponents of armed struggle against the Shah had so thoroughly enlisted poetry into their movement that anthologies of so-called “guerrilla poetry” (*she’r-e cheriki*) found circulation throughout Iran and, at least within certain literary circles, received critical acclaim.⁶ The idea that poetry could serve as a weapon against tyranny reached its zenith with the Ten Nights poetry event, which took place at the Goethe Institute in Tehran in October of 1977.⁷ At this electrifying event, a cross-section of prominent Iranian poets and critics gathered to read what became, over the course of the ten nights, denunciatory verses against the monarchy. The legacy of commitment in poetry influenced the secular opposition to such a degree that one commentator even cited a similar poetry reading in November of the same year as the first in the series of events that eventually toppled the Shah.⁸ Whether or not these literary gatherings did in fact impact Iranian society in any meaningful way, the proponents of poetry in revolutionary service, it turns out, were the loudest voices to be heard in literary criticism at precisely the time of the revolution.

The triumph of the Islamic Revolution, however, did not bring to power the forces to which the prominent “committed” poets and critics had lent their support. Historically, the call to

⁴ The earliest Persian translation of Sartre’s *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* (though it does not include the fourth chapter, “Situation de l’écrivain en 1947”) that I have been able to locate is Abulhassan Najafi and Mostafa Rahimi’s undated edition from the late 1960s or early 1970s. In the introduction, the authors make reference to their earlier translation of a section of the book that was published in the journal *Jong-e Esfahan* in 1966: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Adabiyat Chist*, trans. Abolhassan Najafi and Mostafa Rahimi (Tehran: Ketab-e Zaman, n.d.), introduction, 36. The translators do not mention earlier published translations and I have been unable to find any other specific references to earlier translations in scholarship on Iranian literature. If Najafi and Rahimi’s translation is, in fact, the first, then a Persian translation of *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* did not appear for almost twenty years following its original publication.

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* (France: Gallimard, 1985), 17.

⁶ c.f. Safar Feda’iniya, ed. *She’r-e Jonbesh-e Novin: Enqelab-e Iran Dar She’r-e Mo’aser* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Tus, n.d.).

⁷ For a transcript of the entire proceedings of the event see Naser Mo’azzan, ed. *Dah Shab (Shab’ha-ye Sha’eran va Nevisandegan Dar Anjoman-e Farhangi-ye Iran va Alman)* (Tehran: Mo’assaseh-ye Entesharat-e Amir Kabir, 1357/1978). For a brief history of the event see Mohammad Ali Sepanlu, *Sargozasht-e Kanun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran* (Spånga, Sweden: Baran, 2002), 69-84.

⁸ Tom Ricks, “Iranian People Challenge Pahlavi Arms and American Support,” *MERIP Reports*, 68 (1978): 19.

commit one's writing, whether in Persian or in any other national literature, seemed to resonate most loudly with the various champions of Marx. And in Iran, as several contemporary historians have documented, the Iranian Left, whether Islamic or secular, pro- or anti-Soviet, did not fare well under Imam Khomeini's Islamic Republic.⁹ Unsurprisingly, then, in the wake of the Islamic Revolution and the failures of the Iranian Left, commitment in the 1980s and 1990s no longer appeared as a recurring theme in Iranian criticism or poetry, at least not with the Marxist undertones of the pre-revolutionary years. Of course, the Islamic Republic's first decade did see the rise of a state-sponsored brand of poetry praising the new political order and commemorating the Iranian people's heroic sacrifices in the so-called "War of Sacred Defense" that erupted following Iraq's invasion in 1980.¹⁰ However, with a few exceptions, this Islamic revolutionary literature has received little critical acclaim, even from critics who share the same ideological commitments.¹¹ Furthermore, after eight years of war and the transformation of the Islamic Revolution from a radical anti-establishment movement to an official state ideology, many representative figures of the "Literature of the Islamic Revolution," too, lost their revolutionary zeal in later years.¹²

As for the once-celebrated committed poets and critics from the pre-Revolution years, those who survived the upheavals and purges of the new state came to question the wisdom in their defense of poetry as a politically emancipatory endeavor. The poetry that had supposedly helped overturn the monarch in earlier years was re-scrutinized and at times dismissed as overly ideological and insufficiently literary. "Non-committed" poets of the same years, outwardly apolitical figures such as Sohrab Sepehri, were newly discovered and celebrated for their semantically ambiguous and polyvalent works.¹³ In short, commitment fell from its place as the dominant literary discourse in Iran; in contemporary Persian literary criticism, the poet's political activities and affiliations no longer served or serve as a touchstone for determining the value of his or her work.

⁹ c.f. Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Stephanie Cronin, ed. *Reformers and Revolutionaries in Modern Iran: New Perspectives on the Iranian Left* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁰ c.f. Manuchehr Akbari, *Naqd va Tahlil-e Adabiyat-e Enqelab-e Eslami: Bakhsh-e Avval, She'r, Jeld-e Avval* (Tehran: Sazman-e Madarek-e Farhangi-ye Enqelab-e Eslami, 1371/1992). ; *Naqd va Tahlil-e She'r-e "Defa'-e Moqaddas" (Jeld-e Avval)* (Tehran: Sazman-e Madarek-e Farhangi-ye Enqelab-e Eslami - Goruh-e Entesharat, 1377/1998).

¹¹ Kamran Talattof, "Postrevolutionary Persian Literature: Creativity and Resistance," *Radical History Review*, no. 105 (Fall 2009): 146.

¹² *The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian Literature*, 112. See the example of Qeysar Aminpur for one prominent poet who first supported the Islamic Revolution but later softened his ideological stance: Narguess Farzad, "Qeysar Aminpur and the Persian Poetry of Sacred Defence," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 3 (December 2007): 364-73.

¹³ Thus a typically celebratory introduction to a recent translation notes that despite "severe criticism of leftist political activists before and during the Iranian revolution," Sepehri "has gained far more relevance in current Iranian literature than some of the literature produced by his critics three decades ago," Sohrab Sepehri, *The Oasis of Now: Selected Poems by Sohrab Sepehri*, trans. Kazim Ali and Mohammad Jafar Mahallati (Rochester, NY: BOA Editions Ltd., 2013), 9.

The Dissertation

This dissertation presents case studies of three Iranian poets, Sa'ïd Soltanpur (1940-1981), Mohammad Reza Shafi'i Kadkani (b. 1939), and Ahmad Shamlu (1925-2000). Each poet, I argue, falls within a larger paradigm of commitment discourse but differs significantly from the other two in the ways that he attempts to reconcile his aesthetic with his socio-political commitments in his poetry, critical writings, and public persona. While beginning with the basic historical assumption that the question of how and to what or whom poetry commits grew especially urgent around the time of the revolution, my study departs from episodic literary histories by investigating the divergences among the poets' understandings of how such a commitment works. Furthermore, I introduce an emergent "post-commitment" (as I term it) discourse in the decades following the Iranian revolution, especially as it appears in Mohammad Mokhtari's (1942-1998) poetry and criticism. In doing so, the dissertation complicates any critical approach to commitment as a discrete episode in Persian literary history with a clearly defined start and end, suggesting instead the on-going and unresolved nature of the debates. In short, the present study treats "committed poetry" as a broad, heterogeneous literary phenomenon and commitment as a diverse and variegated theoretical approach to poetry and literature. While my study on the one hand highlights the historical prevalence at a specific period in twentieth century Iranian history of a general disposition towards poetry as a socio-politically significant endeavor, I ultimately argue that the individual poets developed significantly varied aesthetic and intellectual visions, so significant, in fact, that I identify multiple poetics within a broad framework of commitment debates. The dissertation thus contributes to studies of Iranian revolutionary literary-intellectual history while at the same time engaging with critical theoretical issues that complicate any approach to literary developments as historically homogenous, chronological, or coherent. In doing so, my case studies heed Perkins' assertion that "[w]e must perceive a past age as relatively unified if we are to write literary history; we must perceive it as highly diverse if what we write is to represent it plausibly."¹⁴

To identify and problematize the individual poetics of commitment that frame my case studies, each chapter takes a basic, two-fold approach to the poets' thought and works. First, I analyze the poets' own theoretical writings as they relate to commitment and contextualize these theories among the poets' scholarly, critical, and, to a lesser degree, popular receptions. Then I perform close readings of the poetry itself to consider how it reflects, responds to, supports, and/or challenges such theoretical articulations. By placing the poetry in dialogue with the critical writings on commitment, I at times locate points where the poems support or even conform to the theoretical demands placed upon them but, more significantly, I also demonstrate how the aesthetic works exceed their theoretical, critical, and historical frameworks. Ghanoonparvar presents an intriguing case study of the fiction writers Samad Behrangi and Sadeq Chubak to show how a general preoccupation with questions of political commitment in the 1960s and 1970s affected the critical and popular reception of both writers' works.¹⁵ Ghanoonparvar concludes that the reading public celebrated Behrangi for what it imagined to be his

¹⁴ David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 27.

¹⁵ Ghanoonparvar, *Prophets of Doom : Literature as a Socio-Political Phenomenon in Modern Iran*, 79-88.

revolutionary activities while the same public dismissed Chubak as a writer unwilling to involve himself in antiestablishment activities. This perception of the two writers' political activities, according to Ghanoonparvar, led critics to read a revolutionary content into Behrangi's stories where it in fact does not exist in any coherent manner at the same time that the critics ignored the profound sense of social commitment in Chubak's novel *Tangsir*. Similar to Ghanoonparvar's approach, my critical readings demonstrate how now, with some historical distance, the writings of Soltanpur, Shafi'i, and Shamlu complicate our understanding of what makes a "committed" poet, a designation at least at one time bestowed complementarily upon all three.

Chapter one locates Sa'id Soltanpur on the radical end of the commitment spectrum in Persian poetic discourse. Soltanpur in his role as critic and Marxist-Leninist activist, I argue, articulates and embodies a militant understanding of poetry, asserting that poetry can play a direct role in armed liberation movements. As my close readings demonstrate, Soltanpur's poems, too, at times seem to work under an assumption that poetry can participate "objectively," to use Soltanpur's term, in armed struggle. However, the poetry also complicates the militant theory by operating on the level of the personal, experiential, and therefore subjective and critically reflective. Thus the chapter presents Soltanpur's aesthetic contributions to Persian poetry as not entirely congruous with the revolutionary activities that have largely shaped his legacy in the years since his untimely death. To further contextualize Soltanpur's work, the chapter also considers the armed struggle of the 1970s and the critics who have taken that extra-literary phenomenon as the definitive framework for understanding the poetry from those years.

Chapter two presents Mohammad Reza Shafi'i Kadkani's work as occurring on the opposite end of the commitment spectrum from Soltanpur's. Critics--including Shafi'i himself--have certainly considered his poems from the 1970s as responses to socio-political events and tributes to fallen revolutionaries; however, both Shafi'i's own poetry and his extensive scholarship on Persian literature and Islamic mystical texts suggest an understanding of poetry as a vehicle for contemplative discourse, which, in the classical Persian context, means especially Islamic and Sufi thought. I refer to Shafi'i's version of commitment as a "poetics of moral outrage" to denote the way that Shafi'i's poetry expresses profound dissatisfaction with the same corrupted socio-political order that the militant poets also condemn, but that does so through a highly refined reappropriation of poetic imagery, terminology, themes, and forms from classical Persian mystical poetry. Where in chapter one I attempt to insert Soltanpur's aesthetic mastery into a legacy shaped largely by his politics, in chapter two I write Shafi'i's politics into his scholarly and aesthetic legacy by arguing that his sustained dialogue with classical Persian poetics relates to and informs his commitment to poetry as an emancipatory endeavor.

Chapter three locates human subjectivity at the center of Shamlu's poetics of commitment, which I therefore denote as "humanist." Where Soltanpur represents a militant version on one end of the commitment spectrum and Shafi'i represents a contemplative, spiritually-driven version on the other end, I argue that Shamlu falls in the middle, representing the "mainstream" approach in Persian, which corresponds most closely with commitment debates in Europe and the Americas. Not coincidentally, Shamlu also represents the most critically and popularly acclaimed of the poets studied in this dissertation, a phenomenon that the chapter also considers in light of Shamlu's writings and public persona. In his theoretical writings, I argue, Shamlu's humanist version of commitment fundamentally defines the masses as the

collective of human beings, all endowed with creative potential and all striving for a meaningful but not-yet-conceptualized form of liberation. This humanist commitment not only refers to the conviction that the human forms the center of and most powerful being in the Shamlu's universe, but also to the way that the poet understands modern poetry to commit to an ideal of unhindered individuals constructing their own destinies. In my close readings of Shamlu's poetry, however, I unravel some of the tensions that exist between the theory's humanist ideal and the fundamentally pessimistic view towards humanity that elsewhere arises from the poems.

Chapter four concludes the dissertation with a post-revolutionary version of commitment discourse that emerged after the Islamic Republic's consolidation. The chapter considers Mohammad Mokhtari's critical writings as representative of such a version and performs a close reading of one poem to suggest how the poet negotiates his Marxist-intellectual commitments in the wake of the Islamic Revolution and within the confines of the new state. Mokhtari's post-revolutionary commitment, as the terms suggests, differs from the dissertation's three main case studies in that it is informed directly by the experience of revolution. Thus Mokhtari provides a useful point on which to conclude and to reflect upon the legacies and afterlives of the commitment debates.

Finally, in order to formulate a discursive approach to poetic commitment as a universally applicable ideal, the dissertation maintains a constant dialogue with European and American theories on poetry's relation to politics and society. By engaging Persian literature and criticism with "Western" theories on commitment, however, the dissertation will perhaps raise issues of authenticity and belatedness. Too often in considering Persian literature (as with other non-Western literatures), critics have assumed that modernity occurred as a European import and therefore the trend in Iran necessarily developed as a late arrival, an imitative version of its more authentic European source. The case studies in this dissertation, contrary to such views, demonstrate how Persian/Iranian literature and criticism in the twentieth century, though of course influenced by writings in other languages as any discourse will be, developed autonomously and thus as "authentically" as any other national literature. Gregory Jusdanis has shown the limits of European literature as an absolute model and "the fallacy..in masquerading a particular ideology as universal."¹⁶ My approach to modern Persian literature as a self-contained literary system with internal (i.e. Persian) influences shaping developments at least as significantly as outside influences and models has also been informed by Michael Beard's study of Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* as a Western novel. Beard maintains that Hedayat's novel provides a case study for defining and understanding the Western novel as much as the Western novel as a theoretical model elucidates the particularities of Hedayat's work.¹⁷ In the same way, in this dissertation I offer case studies for problematizing and ultimately enriching a universalizing theory of poetic commitment, not an argument for how debates in modern Persian poetics arise from, respond to, or, as often seems the case in literary studies, fall short of imagined, impossibly authentic European or American models.

¹⁶ Idem, *Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Culture: Inventing National Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 10.

¹⁷ Michael Beard, *Hedayat's Blind Owl as a Western Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

Historical Development of the Poetics of Commitment: A Brief Socio-Political Chronology

While this dissertation does not present a chronological intellectual history, focusing instead on how the poets in consideration may have concurred or diverged in their individual conceptions of poetic commitment at varying points in their careers, it may prove useful to place the debates on committed poetry and literature within the larger historical context of twentieth century Iran. As such, before moving to the main body of the dissertation, I present here a brief chronology of socio-political events that shaped the debates with which my study engages.

The Legacy of the Constitutional Revolution

The origins of a Persian poetics of commitment in modern Iran appear, apart from European influences, with the poets of the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911). Around the turn of the twentieth century, a generation of poets began to write poems with the conviction that, since the days of serving royal patrons within the context and confines of the royal court had come to an end, it was time to write consciously for a general reading public and to incorporate this public's vernacular into verse. As Karimi-Hakkak demonstrates in his study of poetic modernity in Iran, the Constitutional poets like Ali-Akbar Dehkhoda, Iraj Mirza, Mohammad Taqi Bahar and Mirzadeh Eshqi maintained the classical forms of Persian poetry (i.e. the *ghazal*, *qasideh*, etc.) while introducing a new diction that would, they believed, more accurately reflect the contemporary spoken language.¹⁸ This break from classical poetic diction certainly set an important precedent for later generations of poets--Nima Yushij perhaps the most significant among them--to experiment with more conspicuous breaks from the rigid classical forms. Thus the formal break that lay at the heart of Nima's "New Poetry" (*Sh'er-e Now*) constituted a later stage in the same pursuit of accessibility and connection with the general reading public that the Constitutional poets had pursued several decades before. Moreover, the Constitutional Poets both argued for and enacted their socially-oriented linguistic innovations in poetry a decade before the Russian critic Georgi Plekhanov popularized the sociological analysis of poetry among Russian Marxists with *Art and Social Life*.¹⁹ Thus, any historical overview of Persian commitment debates must consider how the poets of the Constitutional Revolution complicate questions of European influence on the later generations, demonstrating that the discourse on commitment can be traced to even earlier historical developments within the sphere of Persian poetics.

The First Congress of Iranian Writers (1946) and the Soviet Presence

While the poets of the Constitutional Revolution grappled with notions of socially relevant verse on their own terms, in the 1940s the question of social and ideological commitment in literature reflected the growing Soviet influence on Iranian culture and politics.

¹⁸ Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry: Scenarios of Poetic Modernity in Iran* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995).

¹⁹ Maynard Solomon, ed. *Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary* (Sussex, England: Harvester Press, 1979), 121.

Perhaps the most notable manifestation of Iranian intellectuals' dialogue with Soviet writing and thought occurred with the First Congress of Iranian Writers (*Nokhostin Kongereh-ye Nevisandegân-e Irân*) in 1946.²⁰ The Writers' Congress (which proved to be both the first and the last) marks a high point in Soviet influence on Persian literary discourse, at a time when, not incidentally, the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party also held the most direct and open influence on Iranian politics. Tellingly held at the Iran-Soviet Cultural Society in Tehran, the Writers' Congress included a diverse range of literary figures, with older, established poets from the Constitutional period like Mohammad-Taqi Bahar and Ali-Akbar Dehkhoda debating the state of Persian literature and the relationship between politics, society and poetry with younger proponents of socialist literature like Ehsan Tabari and Fatemeh Sayyah.²¹ Thus the event's proceedings suggest something of the parameters of the burgeoning commitment debate. One encounters in the proceedings a broad range of ideas on how poetry can or should serve society--from the more conservative views of figures like Ali-Asghar Hekmat to the Marxist interpretations of Tabari, Sayyah, and novelist Bozorg Alavi.²² Among the various views articulated at the Congress, however, the unmistakable Soviet imprint pervaded nearly all the proceedings, as suggested by the writers' collective resolution to "come face to face with the masses" and to preserve "the existing literary ties between the nation of Iran and all progressive-minded democracies of the world, particularly the Soviet Union."²³ In the years following this watershed event, the pro-Soviet Tudeh party grew so extensive in its appeal to writers and intellectuals that, according to historian Ervand Abrahamian, "the list of pro-Tudeh writers" in the 1940s and early 1950s "reads like a Who's Who of modern Persian literature."²⁴

In addition to launching Soviet Marxist criticism to the forefront of literary debates, the Writers' Congress also established, once and for all, Nima Yushij's reputation as the preeminent modernist Persian poet.²⁵ Though Nima published his first poems to little acclaim in 1921 and slowly acquired supporters in the ensuing decades, it was not until 1946 that, as Karimi-Hakkak explains, Nima's "participation in the Congress raised his stature both as a poet and as mentor to a younger generation of literary intellectuals."²⁶ One young disciple, Ahmad Shamlu, published his first collection the following year (*Ahang'ha-ye Faramush Shodeh*, 1947), though the twenty-two year old Shamlu had not yet begun the formal experimentations that would eventually make him famous. Shamlu, in fact, helped popularize Nima's break from classical poetic structures to

²⁰ The proceedings of the congress were published several times in subsequent years. See, for example *Nokhostin Kongereh-ye Nevisandegân-e Iran*, (Tehran: Chapkhaneh-ye Rangin, 1326/1947).

²¹ Ali Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals in the 20th Century* (Austin: University of Texas, 1998), 71-73.

²² Bozorg Alavi, "The First Iranian Writers Congress, 1946" in Thomas M. Ricks, ed. *Critical Perspectives on Modern Persian Literature* (Washington, D.C. : Three Continents, 1984), 12.

²³ *Ibid.*, 23-24. For the original Persian, see *Nokhostin Kongereh-ye Nevisandegân-e Iran*, 303.

²⁴ *Idem*, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 281.

²⁵ "Nima Yushij: A Life" in Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak and Kamran Talattof, eds., *Essays on Nima Yushij: Animating Modernism in Persian Poetry*, Brill Studies in Middle Eastern Literatures (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), 60.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

the point that free verse became the dominant poetic form in Persian, as I discuss at length in chapter three. Perhaps more significant in terms of commitment debates, Nima's rising stature at the Congress meant further acclaim for his style of politically coded poetic language known as "social symbolism" (*sambulism-e ejtemâ'gerâ*).²⁷ I revisit the parameters and the inherent paradoxes of social symbolism at length in chapters one and three. However, it is worth noting here that social symbolism's basic premise that a poem's imagery should be read as specific socio-political referents demanding an objective, pre-determined interpretation emerged in the 1940s in reference to Nima's poetry and gained prestige with the presence and support of Marxist theorists and critics like Ehsan Tabari at the Writers' Congress.²⁸ While the period of strongest Soviet influence on Iranian politics and literary-cultural discourse effectively ended with the Coup d'État of 1953 and the crushing defeat that it delivered to the Tudeh party, social symbolism as a poetic mode only gained currency in subsequent decades, dominating debates on committed poetry until the Islamic Revolution of 1979 dramatically altered the terms of the poetics of commitment.

The Coup d'État (1953) and Its Repercussions

One can hardly overstate the impact, at least for certain segments of Iranian society, of the coup that ousted Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq and greatly expanded Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's power. In terms of the literary-cultural sphere, two successive prevailing sentiments--both directly related to the transformative nature of the Coup--characterized the proponents of committed poetry in the 1950s and 1960s. The poets following in Nima Yushij's footsteps in the first years after the Coup expressed a profound sense of defeat and hopelessness in their work, as epitomized by Mehdi Akhavan-Sales's much-celebrated "Winter" (*Zemestan*), which, in its original 1957 edition, included an introduction titled "Preface on the Poetry of Defeat" (*Dibacheh-i bar She'r-e Shekast*).²⁹ The inability of the Mossadeq government to withstand the CIA-backed coup, the torture and executions of Tudeh Party members carried out by the newly reinstated Pahlavi regime, and the betrayals and flight of some Tudeh leaders all surfaced as an overwhelming sense of pessimism among Leftist poets like Akhavan. In his literary history, Shafi'i Kadkani compares Akhavan's poetry with Shamlu's in the late 1950s, describing the dominant themes in both as "death...defeat and hopelessness."³⁰ Not surprising in this climate of defeat, the Tudeh party, and with it Soviet doctrine, lost much of the prestige that it held in the 1940s and early 1950s. The novelist and essayist Jalal Al-e Ahmad articulated his profound sense of disgust with the Communist and "westernized" leadership

²⁷ Mohammad Reza Shafi'i Kadkani, *Advar-e She'r-e Farsi az Mashrutiyat ta Soqut-e Saltanat* (Tehran: Sokhan, 1380/2001), 55.

²⁸ Karimi-Hakkak, "Nima Yushij: A Life" in Karimi-Hakkak and Talattof, *Essays on Nima Yushij: Animating Modernism in Persian Poetry*, 54-55.

²⁹ Mohammad Shams Langarudi, *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She'r-e Now (Jeld-e Dovvom 1332-1341)*, 4 vols., vol. 2 (Nashr-e Markaz, 1377/1998), 298.

³⁰ Shafi'i Kadkani, *Advar-e She'r-e Farsi az Mashrutiyat ta Soqut-e Saltanat*, 61.

leading up to the Coup in *On the Service and Treason of the Intellectuals*.³¹ Though he wrote the work between 1964 and 1968 and it was not published in its entirety until 1979, Al-e Ahmad's rejection of the old Left indicates a larger trend in the post-Coup period that included the widespread search among the literati for a new form of leadership and a new model of progress and commitment.³²

It is worthwhile to note that while opposition-minded poets like Akhavan and Shamlu questioned and in large part rejected the Tudeh Party wholesale, their sociological view of literature did not undergo the same intense scrutiny. To categorize post-Coup poetry as "the poetry of defeat," after all, assumes that the social conditions provide the basis for understanding the literary works. Furthermore, in response, perhaps, to the harsh censorship policies of the Pahlavi regime, poets and critics continued to promulgate the social symbolic mode, as I discuss with my reading of Shamlu's "Death of Nazli" in chapter three. Thus, while the Tudeh party fell from grace among many of its earlier supporters, the dominant conviction that poetry can and should reflect if not participate in socio-political struggles not only survived the upheavals of 1953 but in fact grew stronger as a result.

The immediate disillusionment that followed the Coup gave way in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s to a period of intense creativity towards rethinking both resistance and poetic commitment. One indication of this newfound productivity appeared in 1968 with the foundation of the Association of Iranian Writers (*Kânun-e Nevisandegân-e Irân*), which challenged censorship and advocated freedom of expression under both the Shah and the Islamic Republic.³³ In the same year, one of the association's founding members, the critic and poet Reza Baraheni, brought the new spirit of poetic resistance to a zenith of sorts with his monumental work of criticism, *Gold in the Copper*.³⁴ Baraheni's work, which I visit repeatedly throughout the dissertation, largely defined the contemporary Marxist reading of poetry in 1960s Iran. What is especially intriguing about Baraheni's work is that it neither follows an orthodox Soviet line nor accepts Western Marxists' (particularly Sartre's) reading of commitment; instead the critic attempts to articulate a model of committed Persian poetry that incorporates useful elements from other Marxist critics but ultimately remains specific to the Persian context. Baraheni, however, did not see the more radical young poets emerging around the same time as fulfilling his model's demands. In fact, as I discuss in chapter one, Baraheni vehemently rejected Sa'ïd Soltanpur's verse, dismissing the young poet as a mere sloganeer. Neither, for that matter, did

³¹ Idem, *Dar Khedmat va Khiyanat-e Rowshanfekran* (Tehran: Sherkat-e Sehami-ye Entesharat-e Khwarazmi, 1357/1978). Al-e Ahmad turned to the clergy for his model of revolutionary leadership, a position that he articulated most famously in *Occidentosis (Gharbzadegi)* (1962).

³² See Hamid Algar's introduction to Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, trans. R. Campbell (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1984), 13-19.

³³ For a history of the Association as told by one of its founders, see Sepanlu, *Sargozasht-e Kanun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran*. For an excellent chronology of the Association's entire life up until 1999, see Abbas Qezvanchahi, ed. *Seda-ye Avaz: Yadnameh-ye Mohammad Mokhtari va Mohammad Ja'far Puyandeh* (Tehran: Fasl-e Sabz, 1378[1999]), 16-100. In English, see also, Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, "Protest and Perish: A History of the Writers' Association of Iran," *Iranian Studies* 18, no. 2--4 (Spring-Autumn 1985): 189-229, which ends with the collapse of the Association in 1981.

³⁴ Reza Baraheni, *Tala Dar Mes: Dar She'r va Sha'eri* [Original 1968 Edition] (Tehran: Zaman, 1347/1968).

Baraheni see any radical potential in the Islamic-themed neo-classical poems of Mohammad Reza Shafi'i Kadkani, as I discuss in chapter two. Thus *Gold in the Copper* represents a moderate or what I call "mainstream" view of committed poetry, an argument I take up in chapter three.

Two extra-literary events in the 1960s help to illuminate the developments within poetic discourse in the same years. First, concurrent with the younger intellectuals' rejection of the Tudeh Party and Soviet Marxism and their attempts to redefine struggle and resistance in the wake of the Coup, Iran's two major underground guerrilla organizations, the Fedayan (*sâzmân-e cherik'hâ-ye fedâ'i-ye khalq-e irân*) and the Mojahedin (*mojâhedîn-e khalq-e irân*) formed sometime in the late 1960s.³⁵ Both of these self-proclaimed Marxist groups advocated armed struggle against the Shah at the same time that they rejected the Soviet line. Initially only a Feda'i sympathizer, Sa'id Soltanpur joined the organization in the late 1970s and then served as its official poet in the early days of the revolution. Furthermore, Shafi'i Kadkani and Shamlu both composed tributes and elegies for the Feda'i and Mojahedin martyrs throughout the 1970s, an indication of the guerrilla movement's profound if varying impact on all three poets studied in this dissertation.

While the guerrilla organizations represented new readings (or misreadings) of revolutionary Marxist struggle, the 1960s also saw the rising prominence of a discourse of Islamic resistance. This discourse reached a new level of visibility when massive protests erupted throughout Iran at Ayatollah Khomeini's forced exile in 1963. I discuss the significance of the event for secular-minded intellectuals like Ahmad Shamlu in my reading of his poem "Tablet" (*Lowh*) in chapter three. While Shamlu lamented what he saw as the masses' commitment to their religion and religious leaders, another group of poets incorporated Islamic terminology, images, and themes in their poetry as a newly rethought expression of political and cultural resistance, most notable among them Shafi'i Kadkani.³⁶ I consider Shafi'i's spiritually-charged version of poetic commitment at length in chapter two. However, two points are worth noting here regarding the historic context: first, the Coup's aftermath in general weighs heavily on Shafi'i's poetry, as I demonstrate with my reading of "Encounter," and, second, just as Khomeini's vision of Islamic Revolution began to gain currency in the 1960s, poets like Shafi'i began to find a space for religious discourse in their modernist poetic experimentations.

³⁵ For a brief history of the guerrilla movements, see Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 480-95. For book-length study on the Feda'i see, Peyman Vahabzadeh, *A Guerrilla Odyssey: Modernization, Secularism, Democracy, and the Fada'i Period of National Liberation in Iran, 1971-1979* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2010). On the Mojahedin specifically see, Ervand Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mojahedin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). For a general history of the Left see Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Iranian Left in Iran* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000).

³⁶ Shams Langarudi writes that the poets Ali Garmarudi, Ne'mat Mirzazadeh (M. Azarm), and Mohammad Reza Shafi'i-Kadkani were the first poets to write "poetry in the Nimaic and modernist framework with a religious (Islamic) approach," *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She'r-e Now (Jeld-e Chaharom 1349-1357)*, 4 vols., vol. 4 (Tehran: Nashr-e Markaz, 1377/1998), 80.

The Guerrilla Attack on Siyahkal (1971) and the Radical 1970s

If the 1960s marked a creative period wherein various intellectuals imagined and theorized new forms of resistance in the Coup's wake, this creative period gave way to the more radical 1970s, when "committed" poets followed and responded to the armed actions of the Leftist guerrillas. In chapter one, I provide a detailed overview of the guerrilla movements' impact on poetic debates as critics and historians have understood such an impact until now. According to sympathetic critics, after Feda'i guerrillas attacked a gendarmerie outpost in the Siyahkal region on February 8, 1971, armed struggle became the defining preoccupation for opposition minded individuals, especially among poets and other literati.³⁷ Commitment in poetry, the argument goes, largely came to mean writing poems in support of the guerrillas and in memory of their fallen heroes. In the dissertation, I complicate the notion of "guerrilla poetry" as a coherent poetic genre, demonstrating how the three poets around whom my study revolves each created a distinct poetics, even when responding to the same historical phenomenon with similar degrees of sympathy. Nonetheless, the attack on Siyahkal undoubtedly marks a turning point in the history of Iranian leftist opposition movements and as such at least partially explains the popular and critical enthusiasm for what I call "militant poetics" in the 1970s, a subject that I consider at length in chapter one.

To better contextualize the electrified atmosphere of poetic discourses in the 1970s, two additional events merit highlighting here. First, the execution of poet Khosrow Golesorkhi in February of 1974, far from silencing other Leftist poets and activists as the Pahlavi regime may have hoped, created a symbol of the committed poet as martyr and provided a rallying cry through Golesorkhi's steadfast example. Indeed, like the guerrillas who died in armed confrontations or in prison after their capture, Golesorkhi demonstrated that the ideal committed poet, too, was ready to give his life for the cause. I revisit Golesorkhi's critical writings on poetry and commitment in chapter one, comparing his militant disposition with Sa'id Soltanpur's. Rather independent of his particular writings, however, Golesorkhi's unflinching stance at his trial and his choice to face the firing squad instead of acquiescing to the courts' trumped up charges immediately inspired a wave of moving tributes from many of Iran's most prominent poets, including Ahmad Shamlu.³⁸

Three years after the Pahlavi Regime executed Golesorkhi, inadvertently giving credence to the idea that outspoken poets posed an existential threat Iran's writers found occasion to express their political dissatisfaction and revolutionary fervor publicly in the Ten Nights event of October, 1977. As I discuss in the opening section of this introduction, the event, which the Association of Iranian Writers had originally and officially planned as a cultural gathering where

³⁷ Shafi'i Kadkani represents one of the more authoritative voices of these sympathetic critics in *Advar-e She'r-e Farsi az Mashrutiyat ta Soqut-e Saltanat*, 79-81. Shams Langarudi, too, treats the guerrilla attack as the starting point for the fourth volume of his literary history, Shams Langarudi, *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She'r-e Now (Jeld-e Chaharom 1349-1357)*, 4, 2-19.

³⁸ For more on the trial and on Golesorkhi's life and work, see Abbas Samakar, *Man Yek Shureshi Hastam: Khaterat-e Zendan, Yadman-e Khosrow Golsorkhi va Karamat Daneshiyan va Goruh-e Davazdah Nafar* (Los Angeles: Sherkat-e Ketab, 1380/2001). For an example of a poetic tribute, see Shamlu's "Shekaf," in *Majmu'eh-ye Asar: Daftar-e Yekom: She'r*, ed. Niyaz Ya'qubshahi (Tehran: Zamaneh, 1378/1999), 832-3.

poets and writers would read their works, quickly became a public celebration of the writers' oppositional stance against the monarchy.³⁹ As Karimi-Hakkak details, the writers represented a wide range of ideologies, both secular and religious, but their unified stance against the Pahlavi regime reveals "the historical coalescence of ideas that made the Iranian revolution possible."⁴⁰ Of the three poets studied in this dissertation, only Soltanpur participated in the event. I discuss Soltanpur's rousing poetry reading in chapter one. However, the event marks an important turning point in any history of the Iranian revolution for it suggests a prominent role for writers in the movement that eventually toppled the Shah. Even non-literary historiographies often cite the occasion as a major milestone, as when economist Homa Katouzian argues that "[t]he campaign for freedom and human rights, still short of a general call for the overthrow of the regime, peaked during the 10 nights of poetry reading sessions."⁴¹ Of course, when the revolution actually arrived, according to Karimi Hakkak, the participants discovered that it "was not the revolution about which many of Iran's poets and writers had been dreaming."⁴² Nonetheless, the Ten Nights represents perhaps the peak of the writers' revolutionary confidence in the 1970s and the most promising expression of their conviction that poetry could participate in the social change that they pursued.

Sa'id Soltanpur's Execution (1981) and Writers' Struggles Under the Islamic Republic

No cursory chronology such as that presented in this introduction could possibly represent the multiplicity and complexity of forces that finally removed the Shah in 1979 and gave rise to the Islamic Republic under Khomeini's supreme leadership in the same year. What can be concluded with certainty, however, is that the secular-minded and especially Marxist poets and critics who at one time believed that they had participated in and shaped the revolution soon found themselves excluded from the official life of the new republic. This break between the newly formed state and the dissident writers grew much sharper with the execution of Sa'id Soltanpur on June 21, 1981. I describe some of the conditions surrounding Soltanpur's untimely death in the conclusion to chapter one.⁴³ Within the larger historical context, the Islamic Republic's willingness to eliminate the outspoken Marxist writer/activist on unsubstantiated charges dramatically altered the Iranian literary-intellectual landscape. Soltanpur's arrest and execution initiated a period of crisis for the Association of Iranian Writers, on whose executive

³⁹ For a detailed report and analysis see Sepanlu, *Sargozasht-e Kanun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran*, 69-95. A transcript of all ten evenings' proceedings has also been published, Mo'azzan, *Dah Shab (Shab'ha-ye Sha'eran va Nevisandegan Dar Anjoman-e Farhangi-ye Iran va Alman)*.

⁴⁰ Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, "Introduction: Iran's Literature 1977-1997," *Iranian Studies* 30, no. 3/4 (Summer-Autumn, 1997): 201-01.

⁴¹ Homa Katouzian, "The Iranian Revolution at 30: The Dialectic of State and Society," *Middle East Critique* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 40.

⁴² Idem, "Introduction: Iran's Literature 1977-1997," 203.

⁴³ For a firsthand account on Soltanpur's arrest and reflections on the causes and consequences of his execution, see Hamzeh Farahati, *Az an Sal'ha... Va Sal'ha-ye Digar* (Germany: Forugh, 2006), 377-79.

board the poet and playwright served.⁴⁴ The crisis in fact proved insurmountable; though it released statements sporadically in the 1990s, June of 1981 marks the end of the Association's "official life."⁴⁵ Fearing a similar fate to Soltanpur's, at least two of the poets and Association members in consideration throughout this dissertation--Saeed Yousef (chapter one) and M. Azarm (chapters two and three)--went underground in the summer of 1981 and then fled the country. Thus Soltanpur's execution not only silenced one of the most vocal and militant proponents of committed poetry, but it also severely disrupted the sense of community among the opposition writers. In chapter four, I consider the "post-commitment" discourse that arose from these ruptures, as the most radical of the surviving intellectuals went into exile and the poets and critics remaining in Iran developed an understanding of poetry and society that took into account the failures of the Left and the realities of life under the Islamic Republic.

"We Are the Writers!" (1994)

One of the more publicized indications that the disaffected writers who remained in Iran would not accept silence or abandon notions of socio-political commitments entirely appeared in 1994 in the form of a public letter signed by one hundred and thirty four poets, novelists, critics, scholars, and other published writers, many of whom had participated in the now defunct Association of Iranian Writers under the Shah and in the early years of the revolution. The letter, which came to be known as "We Are the Writers!" (*Mâ Nevisandeh'im!*) called for the (re)establishment of an Iranian writers' association and defined the signatories' "real objective" as "the removal of obstacles to freedom of thought, expression, and publication."⁴⁶ The letter remains remarkable for a number of reasons. First, although the signatories held wide-ranging ideological commitments and despite the fact that the letter explicitly disavows any "affiliation with parties, groups or factions," the letter's public nature, especially as it inspired a frenzy of hostile responses from pro-government newspapers, indicated what translator Hammed Shahidian calls "a fundamental trait of writing in Iran: the very act of writing, regardless of content, is political."⁴⁷ That is to say that the writers, precisely by challenging the state's official and de facto censorship policies with their non-partisan declaration of rights, proved that the question of how writing--including of course poetry--interacts with socio-political structures and causes had not and would not go away. Furthermore, the list of signatories represents a staggering collection of prominent cultural figures, including many who had contributed to commitment debates in years prior; to put it in perspective, the list includes nearly every writer

⁴⁴Sepanlu, *Sargozasht-e Kanun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran*, 325-41. See also Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, "Protest and Perish: A History of the Writers' Association of Iran," *Iranian Studies* 18, no. 2-4 (1985): 224-26.

⁴⁵ Sepanlu, *Sargozasht-e Kanun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran*, 341.

⁴⁶ Hammed Shahidian (tr.), "We Are the Writers! A Statement by 134 Iranian Writers," *Iranian Studies* 30, no. 3-4 (Summer/Fall 1997): 292. For the original Persian document, see Sepanlu, *Sargozasht-e Kanun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran*, 374-78.

⁴⁷ Shahidian (tr.), "We Are the Writers! A Statement by 134 Iranian Writers," 291-91.

and critic referenced in this dissertation who was still alive and residing in Iran at the time.⁴⁸ The fact that so many renowned writers endorsed the letter itself suggests how thoroughly the struggle for freedom of expression and the dissatisfaction with writers' conditions had pervaded the literary scene in the 1990s. Finally, it is particularly telling, though perhaps not surprising, that Mohammad Mokhtari served as one of the eight writers who composed the letter.⁴⁹ Mokhtari, after all, thought and wrote extensively about poets' roles in post-revolutionary societies while his poetry and criticism attempted to forge a poetics that maintained the humanist impulse of decades past while moving beyond the dogmatic, bifurcated debates, as he saw them, that had fueled the revolution.⁵⁰ I take up Mokhtari's "post-commitment" poetics and politics in chapter four. In terms of "We Are the Writers!," Mokhtari's close involvement suggests how the letter represents a public, inclusive effort to work through--as opposed to abandoning--questions of poetry and literature's socio-political commitments.

The Chain Killings (1998)

"We Are the Writers!" most likely marks a high point in post-revolutionary commitment debates, as an unprecedented number of Iranian writers collaborated to protest the political conditions that were hindering their work. Two of the signatories in particular, the aforementioned Mokhtari and Mohammad Ja'far Puyandeh, whose writings I also discuss in chapter four, continued their efforts to expand freedom of expression and to reinstate officially the Iranian Writers' Association after the letter's publication, despite numerous detentions and repeated threats from the security forces.⁵¹ Indeed, in the years surrounding "We Are the Writers!" both Mokhtari and Puyandeh published essays and translations suggesting their intellectual engagements with Marx and their political commitments to a broader, more universal understanding of human rights than what they perceived had circulated among their fellow intellectuals during the radical 1970s. Thus Mokhtari's and Puyandeh's writings offer the beginnings of a post-commitment discourse. However, the development of such a discourse was cut short in 1998. In August of that year, the writers attempting to revive the Association--including Mokhtari and Puyandeh--published a draft resolution in the journal *Adineh* that

⁴⁸ Signatories studied or referenced in this dissertation include Ahmad Shamlu, Reza Baraheni, Mohammad Mokhtari, Mohammad Ja'far Puyandeh, Simin Behbahani, Mohammad Ali Sepanlu, and Shams Langarudi (who later retracted his signature), *Sargozasht-e Kanun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran*, 377-78. In fact, the only glaring omission from the list would be Mohammad Reza Shafi'i Kadkani. However, as I discuss in chapter two, considering Shafi'i's university career and his general aversion to any sort of activity that could be construed as political, his absence from the list of signatories is hardly surprising.

⁴⁹ According to Sepanlu, the letter's seven other composers included Reza Baraheni, Mohammad Khalili, Faraj Sarkuhi, Sima Kuban, Mansur Kushan, Hushang Golshiri, and Mohammad Mohammad Ali. *Ibid.*, 373.

⁵⁰ As one telling example of his attempts to understand poetry's role in post-revolutionary societies, Mokhtari published translated biographies of the Russian/Soviet poets Marina Tsvetaeva, Anna Akhmatova, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Osip Mandelstam between 1994 and 1997. Qezvanchahi, *Seda-ye Avaz: Yadnameh-ye Mohammad Mokhtari va Mohammad Ja'far Puyandeh*, 104.

⁵¹ For a timeline of both writers' lives, see "Sal Shomar-e Zendegi-ye Mokhtari/Puyandeh," *Adineh*, no. 136 (Vizheh-ye Mokhtari/Puyandeh (Bahman 1377/February 1999): 4-5.

reaffirmed its commitment to freedom of expression and, in doing so, implied that the Association would resume its activities.⁵² In December of the same year, Mokhtari and Puyandeh, disappeared within one week of one another and were later found murdered. The Ministry of Information declared the writers victims of the so-called “chain killings” (*qatl’hâ-ye zanjireh’i*) that were carried out by “rogue elements” within the same ministry and claimed the lives of over seventy dissident intellectuals and public figures in the late 1990s.⁵³

Obviously, the question of poetry’s socio-political commitment has not been resolved in the years since their murders. However, since no critic or poet has yet engaged the question in Persian as seriously or as fruitfully as did Mokhtari or Puyandeh, I mark their untimely deaths in 1998 as an interim endpoint in this unresolved debate.

⁵² For the entire text of the resolution, as well as its historical background, see *Seda-ye Avaz: Yadnameh-ye Mohammad Mokhtari va Mohammad Ja'far Puyandeh*, 40-41.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 104.. Since no official government data has been released, the number of victims from the chain killings varies among different sources. For one fairly rigorously compiled list, see Mas'ud Noqrehkar, *Moqaddameh'i Bar Koshtar-e Degarandishan Dar Iran* (Köln, Germany: Forugh, 1392/2013), 258-64.

Chapter One: A Type of Struggle, A Type of Verse: Sa'īd Soltanpur and the Poetics of Militancy

For every aspect of writing reflects its society's politics and aesthetics; indeed the aesthetic and the political make an inseparable poetics.
- Charles Bernstein, *The Politics of Poetic Form*

Art is not a matter of pointing up alternatives but rather of resisting, solely through the artistic form, the course of the world, which continues to hold a pistol to the heads of human beings.
- Theodor Adorno, "Commitment"

I. Introduction: A Poet Takes the Stage

In October of 1977, in a climate of rapidly escalating protests against the Shah, the Iranian Writers' Association organized ten nights of poetry readings at the Goethe Institute in Tehran.¹ The Ten Nights event, as it came to be known, took an unambiguously political and oppositional hue from its inception, so much so that, according to one commentator, the event electrified its participants and built a wave of cultural support for the spreading revolution.² The writer Beh'azin (Mahmud E'temadzadeh) recounts how the event's radical charge peaked on the fifth night of readings, for on that night, a militant poet by the name of Sa'īd Soltanpur (1940-1981) read his incendiary verse to wild applause from the crowd.³ Released just months earlier, Soltanpur had spent much of the previous seven years in prison for his openly-anti-monarchy poetry and criticism, his theatrical productions steeped in social activism, his Marxist affiliations, and, eventually, his involvement with the Fedayan-e Khalq (OIPFG), the underground Marxist-Leninist organization waging armed struggle against the regime. On that fifth night, the Goethe Institute's packed courtyard verging on full-scale confrontations and the Shah's ouster just a year away, the firebrand, thirty-seven year old poet took the stage, greeted the audience as "the downtrodden in these black years, those thirsting for freedom," discussed the extreme state of censorship in Iran and then, before reading his own poetry, recited the following lines:

*dâni keh chang o 'ud cheh taqrir mikonand
penhân khworid bâdeh keh ta 'zir mikonand
nâmus-e eshq o rownaq-e oshâq mi barand
man '-e javân o sarzanesh-e pir mi konand
guyand harf-e eshq magu'id o mashnavid
moshkel hekâyatist keh taqrir mi konand*

¹ For the proceedings of the entire event, see Mo'azzan, *Dah Shab (Shab'ha-ye Sha'eran va Nevisandegan Dar Anjoman-e Farhangi-ye Iran va Alman)*.

² Karimi-Hakkak, "Protest and Perish: A History of the Writers' Association of Iran," 210. Sepanlu also asserts the overarching cultural significance of the event: Sepanlu, *Sargozasht-e Kanun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran*, 70.

³ *Ibid.*, 75-7.

Do you know what the harp and oud declare?
Drink wine in secret, for they're doling out penalties.
They plunder the honor of love and the lovers' splendor.
They inhibit the young and rebuke the old.
They say neither speak nor hear the word of love.
It's a tough tale they tell.⁴

As anyone even casually familiar with Persian literature will recognize, these opening lines belong not to any particular hero of 20th century national liberation struggles, but to Hafez, the beloved 14th century master of Persian lyric poetry.

Soltanpur's choice to begin his reading with Hafez offers an interesting point of departure for re-thinking the poet's work, for the Soltanpur who is remembered today, if he is remembered at all, tends towards Soltanpur the Marxist agitator, the militant playwright, perhaps the versifying socialist sloganeer but much less the committed artist engaging with the Persian canon or with aesthetic forms. That is to say, Soltanpur's radical politics have overshadowed his poetics. Yet, these three lines of Hafez tell a different story. We can, of course, with minimal effort read a socio-political content into Hafez's words and interpret the lines as a thinly-veiled attack on the monarchy. But to begin with Hafez also alters the terms of the politically-antagonistic readings with which Soltanpur follows. To open with Hafez demarcates the performance as something *more* than politics, more than a rally or protest. Hafez here suggests that Soltanpur's performance constitutes an aesthetic space, a space where politics do not operate independent of poetics.

In this chapter, I locate a militant version of commitment in Persian poetic discourse with Sa'ïd Soltanpur as its representative voice. Soltanpur is largely credited with founding a "guerrilla" style of poetry in the 1970s, at the same time that underground Marxist organizations waged their armed struggles against the Shah. I begin by outlining how the current scholarship frames Soltanpur's poetry and poetics in the context of this Iranian guerrilla movement. Then I turn to Soltanpur and his like-minded contemporaries' critical discursive writings to determine how combative poetics in theory situates poetry within militant liberation struggles. After articulating a theory of combative poetics, I then take up Soltanpur's poetry to demonstrate, through close readings, how the poems complicate any theory of art as militant resistance. As I argue, while Soltanpur's theoretical writings demand poems purged of the personal, the introspective, and the subjective--counterrevolutionary impositions of bourgeois society on the masses' shared literary heritage--the poems themselves challenge the idea of a purely "objective" aesthetic form by working on the level of the personal, experiential, and critically reflective. Finally, I argue that Soltanpur's poetry, in dialogue with theoretical combative poetics, presents aesthetic works as a significant but necessarily distinct arena for the struggles against dictatorship, imperialism, and despotic economic structures to take shape. The chapter ultimately aims to write the poet's literary and aesthetic achievements into his legacy, which until now has been shaped primarily by his political activities and revolutionary devotion. The lines from Hafez, then, represent not an anomaly in Soltanpur's otherwise politically committed career, but

⁴ Mo'azzan, *Dah Shab (Shab'ha-ye Sha'ëran va Nevisandegan Dar Anjoman-e Farhangi-ye Iran va Alman)*, 267.

rather one manifestation of his prolonged engagement with the Persian poetic tradition and his dialectical, as much as militant, reconciliation of poetics with his radical politics.

II. The Current Scholarship: A Siyahkal Decade in Poetry

Chronological Considerations

In his four-volume analytic history of modern Persian poetry (*she'r-e now*), Mohammad Shams-Langarudi delineates the years 1349/1971 to 1357/1979 as one distinct period in the development of a national poetics.⁵ Shams-Langarudi defines this literary-historical period, coinciding roughly with the 1970s, by a preoccupation in poetry and criticism with armed struggle and a subsequent compromising of aesthetic standards and artistic ideals. The 1349/1971 guerrilla attack outside the village of Siyahkal marks the literary period's start, as poets and critics found inspiration in the guerrillas' actions and wrote with a comparable sense of militancy. The period ends with the revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Of course, Shams-Langarudi arranges the volumes of his analytic history chronologically so that each volume covers approximately one Iranian calendar decade. But, as he explains in the introduction to volume four, we can glean a general thematic trend from each decade to cohere with the study's chronological division. Thus volume one covers the 1320s/1940s, which Shams-Langarudi sees as modern Persian poetry's formative period. Volume two presents the 1330s/1950s as the period of the poetry's blossoming. Volume three characterizes the 1340s/1960s as a period of entrenchment, though also a period showing early hints of decline. But in the fourth and (at least for Shams-Langarudi's work) final period, i.e. the 1350s/1970s, a militant poetics rose to prominence and drowned out other voices in the literary scene. According to this chronology, modern poetry suffered stagnation and debasement in the decade leading up to the revolution of 1357/1979, as writers mobilized their efforts towards radical politics and guerrilla warfare against the Shah.⁶ As such, intellectual journals ceased publishing the types of literary essays and debates that defined the two prior periods and devoted their pages instead to historical, sociological and philosophical writings or to slogans composed in verse.⁷ In short, Shams-Langarudi marks the 1350s/1970s by the domination of politics over poetics and by the currency of a militant, anti-aesthetic understanding of poetic commitment.

If Shams-Langarudi can locate a coherent period of literary history between the years 1971 and 1979, it is because his study views shifts in cultural production through an intensely sociological lens, assuming that poetic developments arise directly from social, economic, and political--that is to say, material--conditions. This materialist perspective in Shams-Langarudi's narrative by no means represents a marginal or exceptional version of Persian literary history. On the contrary, the existing scholarship tends to mark literary developments by the same set of extra-literary events. For example, Shafi'i-Kadkani's and Talattof's studies concur with Shams-

⁵ Shams Langarudi, *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She'r-e Now (Jeld-e Chaharom 1349-1357)*, 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

Langarudi's in treating the years between the attack on Siyahkal and the establishment of the Islamic Republic as a single episode of heightened radicalism in the grand historical narrative of modern Persian verse.⁸ In other words, the conventional view discerns a generally militant disposition in the poetry and criticism of the 1350s/1970s and concludes that such a disposition arose neither from immaterial textual sources nor from abstract philosophic principles but rather from the surrounding society. Therefore, modern poetry entered its fourth (for Shams-Langarudi) and most revolutionary (for most literary historians) phase precisely on the 19th of Bahman 1349/February 8, 1971 when a group of Marxist guerrillas attacked a gendarmerie outpost in the northern Iranian hamlet of Siyahkal.⁹ And the events in Siyahkal continued to resonate in the years to follow as the authoritative voices in Persian poetics demanded a revised version of commitment. The dominant poetics after Siyahkal understood commitment as direct participation in resistance movements, meaning, in a post-Siyahkal society, that poetry and the poet must promote the guerrillas' underground operations.

Formal and Thematic Considerations

While Shams-Langarudi considers Iranian guerrilla poetry's prominence as an historical phenomenon and includes in his study valuable poems and essays from the years in question to document such a phenomenon, he does not analyze the actual workings of that historically prominent poetics in detail. Instead, Shams-Langarudi includes a long passage from Saeed Yousef's book to summarize the defining features of Siyahkal poetry.¹⁰ As the title suggests, Yousef's *A Type of Criticism of a Type of Poetry: An Examination of the Poetry of the Siyahkal Period and the Poetry of Sa'id Soltanpur* synthesizes the period's disparate writings into a coherent theory of Siyahkal poetry.¹¹ Yousef formulates his theory primarily in terms of the poetry's prevailing sentiments and particular use of language. In terms of sentiment, Yousef argues that expressions of conviction and hope distinguish Siyahkal poetry from the preceding period. While the poetry of the 1960s paints a landscape shrouded in "night"--symbolizing hopelessness in a period of stifling political oppression--poetry after Siyahkal glimpses the morning light on the horizon and sings of the night's imminent defeat.¹² However, morning will not arrive without a struggle; only the sacrifices of exceptional revolutionaries bring about the dawn. Thus the poetry recreates the prisons, torture chambers and firing squads where its heroes

⁸ Shafi'i Kadkani, *Advar-e She'r-e Farsi az Mashrutiyat ta Soqut-e Saltanat*, 79-81. See also Talattof, *The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian Literature*, 88-90.

⁹ Modern Iranian historians like Ervand Abrahamian and Maziar Behrooz have detailed the events in Siyahkal at length. Currently, however, the most rigorous and thorough treatment in English appears in Vahabzadeh, *A Guerrilla Odyssey: Modernization, Secularism, Democracy, and the Fada'i Period of National Liberation in Iran, 1971-1979*, 25-30.

¹⁰ Shams Langarudi, *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She'r-e Now (Jeld-e Chaharom 1349-1357)*, 4, 15.

¹¹ Sa'id Yusof, *Now'i az Naqd Bar Now'i az She'r: Barresi-ye She'r-e Dowran-e Siyahkal va She'r-e Sa'id Soltanpur* (Saarbrücken, W. Germany: Nawid, 1987).

¹² *Ibid.*, 25.

take their final stands.¹³ Here Yousef identifies another unifying sentiment; if Siyahkal poetry expresses the conviction that only the guerrillas follow the correct path to liberation, then the proper role for the liberation-seeking poet can only be to join an underground organization and take up arms or to write a poetry that ensures those organizations' survival and eventual victory. In fulfilling the latter role, Yousef argues that Siyahkal poetry praises its heroes with a fervor resembling that of classical love poetry. The heroic figure of course has changed so that in place of the patron, the romantic beloved, or a divine figure, the poet now praises "a class, an ideal, a party or organization, or a valiant comrade," but the expression of devotion, whether for such seemingly contemporary beloveds or for familiar classical archetypes, remains one and the same.¹⁴

Besides its general revolutionary devoutness and optimism, Siyahkal poetry, in Saeed Yousef's estimation, distinguishes itself from other periods most prominently through its particular use of language. Poetry after Siyahkal acquired an "epic, harsh, and violent" lexicon.¹⁵ Poets sought clarity in their expressions of solidarity so that even as a symbolic system emerged whereby words like "sea, wave, stone, thicket, Judas-tree, poppy, red star, storm and gun" make coded reference to guerrilla operations and fallen comrades, Yousef argues that these symbols remain intentionally transparent so as not to cloud the work with ambiguity.¹⁶ However, in striving towards clarity, many of the younger, less-experienced poets produced mere slogans that fall short of the artistry inherent to true poetry. The charge of composing slogans (*sho'âr*) in place of poetry (*she'r*) reappears throughout criticism not just of Siyahkal poetry but also in the decades before and since. Perhaps the charge's very ubiquitousness allows Yousef to avoid defining the term in his characterization of the poetry here. Nonetheless, this notion of sloganeering as contrasted to true poetic composition offers keen insight into the workings of the period's dominant poetics. I will revisit the term at length in my discussion below. For Yousef's theory, however, the argument seems to go that the poetry prioritizes clarity of meaning over other aesthetic considerations, which, for unskilled poets, can compromise the literary value of the work. Since the Siyahkal poets valued their revolutionary messages over any formal mechanics of their poems, the period experienced no significant developments in musicality or poetic forms.¹⁷

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 26.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. Yousef here quotes Shafi'i Kadkani for his examples of symbolic terms but then expands upon the idea of clarity in Siyahkal poetry. For Yousef's source see Shafi'i Kadkani, *Advar-e She'r-e Farsi az Mashrutiyat ta Soqut-e Saltanat*, 81.

¹⁷ Here again Yousef quotes Shafi'i Kadkani at length. Yusof, *Now'i az Naqd Bar Now'i az She'r: Barresi-ye She'r-e Dowran-e Siyahkal va She'r-e Sa'id Soltanpur*. 25-26

Challenges to the Existing Scholarship

Yousef's study provides the most comprehensive and detailed analysis of Siyahkal poetry to date. Likewise, Shams-Langarudi's analytic history offers an invaluable resource, especially of primary documents, for reconstructing the literary-intellectual climate in the decades before the Iranian revolution. But now that these scholars have identified an insurrectionary mood among poets in the 1970s and have detailed a particular idiom through which the poets expressed that mood, one can begin to think beyond Siyahkal as *the* defining criterion for categorizing the poetry of those years. The current scholarship assumes that poems making reference to Siyahkal or other sites of militant resistance form one coherent category or even genre of poetry. Furthermore, such categorization assumes that two readily discernible historical developments carry equal weight in every poem that makes coded or explicit reference to Siyahkal: first, that the guerrilla attack catalyzed, for at least some segments of the Iranian intellectuals, the espousal of armed struggle as both theoretically feasible opposition and already occurring revolutionary praxis and, second, that this attitudinal shift extended into Persian literary discourse in such a manner that poets and critics demanded a determinate, combative poetry to mirror the political opposition's ideological militancy.¹⁸ However, I contend that the poetry itself invites a more complex and variegated reading than that which a straightforward historical narrative provides. A militant understanding of poetry's function undoubtedly appears in *some* of the poetry on, about, or around Siyahkal. But referring to armed actions, even celebrating the guerrillas' heroism, does not inherently advance a militant poetics. Therefore, a new reading of Siyahkal period poetry should work to decouple the militant view from referential gestures and historical or topical concurrences between poems, even when those poems take up the armed struggle as their muse.

Fatemeh Keshavarz identifies the limitations of episodic literary historiography in her study on modern Iranian "poetic sacred making."¹⁹ Responding directly to Talattof's *The Politics of Writing in Modern Iran*, Keshavarz points out that poetries do not fall into neat ideological categories based on their historical moment of production. So, for example, Shafi'i-Kadkani could compose poems "permeated by Islamic spiritual paradigms," a feature of post-Islamic Revolution literature according to Talattof's episodic model, that at the same time commemorated the Siyahkal uprising in the manner of poetry during leftist literary commitment's supposed height.²⁰ Thus Keshavarz proposes that literary histories recognize ideology's significance at any given historical moment but also move beyond such readings and assert "the individual way in which every work of art is rooted in the broader tradition from

¹⁸ Of course, the armed organizations like the Fedai have mythologized their actions and resulting influence on Iranian society. Still, the eruptions of demonstrations and publishing activities following the Siyahkal operation, especially after the execution of its surviving guerrillas two months later, suggest that the events did reverberate throughout the various opposition groups and lent the movement a new charge, cf. *A Guerrilla Odyssey: Modernization, Secularism, Democracy, and the Fadai Period of National Liberation in Iran, 1971-1979*, 213-4.

¹⁹ Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Recite in the Name of the Red Rose: Poetic Sacred Making in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Columbia, S.C.: The University of South Carolina Press, 2006).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

which it springs.”²¹ In other words, Keshavarz points out the limited utility of reading poetry as ideological placeholder.

Nonetheless, the methodological allure of reading poems as historical documents seems to persist. For example, Peyman Vahabzadeh, in his otherwise thoroughly researched and theoretically engaging study of the “Fadai period of national liberation” draws a rather confusing conclusion about Ahmad Shamlu’s poetry in the 1970s. Vahabzadeh, following the critics outlined above, identifies Sa’id Soltanpur as the founder of an entire “genre” of “guerrilla poetry,” which he defines as a system of “relatively fixed lexical symbolism in which...signifiers...are detached from their everyday signifieds to serve as an allegory for the conditions of life under guerrilla insurgency.”²² Having established this definition, Vahabzadeh then asserts that Shamlu “rejected guerrilla poetry himself” and yet wrote “many poems in this genre in the aftermath of Siahkal.”²³ But why would a poet, especially one as vocal and contentious about his poetics as Shamlu, write in a genre that he openly rejected? The problem here, I contend, does not arise from inconsistencies in Shamlu’s poetry but rather from the term “genre” itself. Of course Shamlu pays tribute to the armed struggle’s fallen heroes in poems throughout the 1970s, most famously in the 1973 collection *Abraham in the Fire (Ebrahim dar Átash)*. But perhaps Shamlu’s rejection of “guerrilla poetry” insists that his poems’ contexts or signifiers do not provide the most prescient criteria by which to read the works. Perhaps Shamlu himself felt that he could write about the guerrilla movement without writing a guerrilla poetry. Perhaps that he, too, celebrated violent resistance and martyrdom, that he even, in Soltanpur’s hallmark style, repeated the word “blood” twenty-two times in *Abraham in the Fire* and yet continued to deride Soltanpur and the younger poets as sloganeers all suggest that the heart of Shamlu’s poetics, at least as Shamlu would define it, does not lie in his choice of subject or even in his choice of lexicon alone.²⁴ Indeed, as I discuss in chapter four, Shamlu both in theory and practice pursued a critically reflective aesthetics contradictory to the sort of militant poetics that thrived during the Siahkal decade of poetry.

III. Theorizing a Poetics of Militancy: The Demands on Combative Art

Founding Documents: Soltanpur’s *A Type of Art, A Type of Thought*

While the poetry itself inevitably complicates whatever theoretical demands or generic categorizations are imposed upon it, a coherent theory of militant poetic commitment does seem to emerge from at least some of the critical writings of the Siahkal period. Sa’id Soltanpur, for example, advances his platform for subversive aesthetic works in his 1349/1970 essay, “A Type

²¹ Ibid., 141.

²² Vahabzadeh, *A Guerrilla Odyssey: Modernization, Secularism, Democracy, and the Fadai Period of National Liberation in Iran, 1971-1979*, 217. Vahabzadeh cites Shams Langrudi, who in turn cites Saeed Yousef on this point.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Shams Langarudi, *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She’r-e Now (Jeld-e Chaharom 1349-1357)*, 4, 15.

of Art, A Type of Thought.”²⁵ Though much of the short work treats theater specifically, Soltanpur begins with his general denunciations of contemporary artistic production in Iran and calls for a new breed of class-conscious, socially-committed aesthetic works. Interestingly, however, Soltanpur never uses the term “committed” (*mota’ahhed*) to refer to the type of art that he believes contemporary conditions demand. Rather, the essay introduces the term “combative art” (*honar-e mobârez*) to denote the art and literature that properly takes up class struggle (*mobârezeh-ye tabaqâti*).²⁶ Soltanpur’s use of the term “combative” captures especially well the poet’s idea that art must participate directly in social change. Whereas a “committed” poetry might reflect or even vaguely address social exigencies, the term “combative” implies that poetry can engage directly in struggle. Furthermore, the idea of a “combative” poetry mirrors the broader discursive shift that occurred as the attack on Siyahkal reoriented the anti-monarchical opposition towards direct armed actions. The term combative poetry, after all, contains at least three assumptions, all of which elucidate Soltanpur’s militant working of commitment theory. First, the term “combative” suggests that the desired social progress will require combat, as opposed or at least in addition to, intellectual engagement or critical reflection. Second, if the struggles that Soltanpur has in mind will be waged on the battlefield, then the combatants will require an enemy against whom to combat. So the term “combative” presumes the existence of progressive poetry’s clearly defined other. Not surprisingly, “A Type of Art, A Type of Thought,” constantly works to identify the imperialist class enemy for its presumably allied audience.²⁷ Finally, and most significantly for the present discussion, a combative poetry implies that poetry can in some significant way inflict real, material harm upon its physical enemy.

Defining Objectivity

But how does poetry participate in class struggle, much less deal physical blows against the enemy class? For Soltanpur, the answer begins with the concept of “objectivity” (*’ayniyat*). While conceding that subjectivity (*zehniyat*) has played a historic role in aesthetic works and that the artist carries a duty to maintain the “dialectical balance between objectivity and subjectivity,” Soltanpur goes on to argue that art today must prioritize the objective, which it achieves through materialist social analysis.²⁸ In Soltanpur’s rendering, the objective artist sounds more like a Soviet social scientist than an aesthician; the responsible artist discovers “the foundations of the peoples’ indignity, poverty, illness, and bondage in the existing society...through perception, analysis, and knowledge of the existing objective structures.”²⁹ In analyzing the objective structures, which Soltanpur defines as the “administrative, military, cultural, political and

²⁵ The essay never received the censor’s approval in Iran so the exact date of underground publication is difficult to verify. However, a later edition includes the date of composition as 27th of Khordad, 1349 (June 17, 1970). Sa’id Soltanpur, *Now’i Az Honar, Now’i Az Andisheh* (Rome, Italy: Entesharat-e Babak, 1357/1978), 51.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁷ *c.f. Ibid.*, 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

religious organizations,” the poet like any other artist, perceives the already-defined “basic contradiction” (*tazâd-e ašli*) in contemporary society, the “antagonism” (*tazâd*) from and towards “the forces of imperialism,” and the “inevitable conflict with the transitional feudal-bourgeois system.”³⁰

The idea that aesthetic works engage material social structures demonstrates the critic’s decidedly Marxist commitments; however, Soltanpur’s notion of objectivity has less to do with Marx’s claim that “certain periods of highest development of art stand in no direct connection with the general development of society, nor with the material basis and the skeleton structure of its organization” and more to do with Lukács rejection of Marx’s claim later in his career, as when the Hungarian critic insists in *The Historical Novel* that “...literary forms... cannot stand higher than the society which brought them forth.”³¹ Indeed, for Soltanpur as with the Soviet literary critics, art becomes objective by portraying the artist’s social-scientific data in a realistic language and form. In a polemical essay such as “A Type of Art, A Type of Thought,” realism means something like accurate portrayal of the “exploitative class” (*tabaqeh-ye estesmârgar*) and the “class enemy” (*doshman-e tabaqâti*).³² In a later interview, Soltanpur articulates a more nuanced defense of objectivity, arguing that “resistance art” (*honar-e moqâvemat*) must begin with knowledge of what exactly it is that the masses resist and the artist therefore conducts scientific, objective social research to understand the masses’ material conditions.³³ In both of Soltanpur’s discussions on objectivity, though, consciousness plays a central role. Whereas Marx, at least in the passage from *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* quoted above, sees some transcendent possibilities for the aesthetic work, Soltanpur argues that art must accord directly with the masses’ level of consciousness, which of course only the objective artist can properly perceive.

Soltanpur’s understanding of the objective as I have outlined it thus far seems to apply to the artist’s background research or to social science in general. But how does the artist translate objectivity into the aesthetic work? How does one go about writing an objective lyric poetry? For the nineteenth century Russian critic Nikolay Chernyshevsky, poetry in fact offers the most objective of all art forms, a quality which in turn endows poetry with the greatest potential for social change. By “objective,” Chernyshevsky means that the language of any poem focuses intensely on objects, that this focus brings the essential qualities of the object to the reader’s attention, and thus that poetry “provides the fullest opportunity to express a definite idea.”³⁴ But Soltanpur and his generation’s militant theorists carry Chernyshevsky’s claim further to argue

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Marx and Lukács quoted, respectively, in Solomon, *Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary*, 61, 389.

³² Soltanpur, *Now ‘i Az Honar, Now ‘i Az Andisheh*, 6.

³³ Interview with Faramarz Talebi and Behzad Eshqi in “Mosahebeh’ha [Transcripts of Two Interviews with Sa’id Soltanpur],” *Iran Open Publishing Group* http://entesharate-iran.com/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=20&Itemid=74&lang=en: 11. Downloaded October 15, 2011.

³⁴ Nikolay Chernyshevsky “The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality” in *Russian Philosophy*, eds. James M. Edie, et al. (Chicago, 1965) 25.

that poetry must ensure the transmission of that definite idea from poet to audience. Objectivity therefore comes to mean clarity of meaning.

Fellow Militants: Khosrow Golesorkhi and Mahmud Darwish on Poetic Objectivity

Another outspokenly combative poet also works through a theory of objective art in his critical writings. Khosrow Golesorkhi is perhaps best remembered for his televised 1973 show trial and subsequent execution in early 1974.³⁵ The thirty-year-old Golesorkhi took the stand and, with the regime's cameras unwittingly broadcasting his message, delivered an impassioned defense of his Marxist-Leninist commitments, arguing that he arrived at socialism through the teachings of social justice in Islam.³⁶ After his brave defense, Golesorkhi's execution only further sealed his heroic status among opponents of the regime. But apart from his by now legendary heroism, Golesorkhi left a fairly extensive body of critical writings that, in many places, articulate a militant poetics similar to Soltanpur's.³⁷ In "The Politics of Art, The Politics of Poetry," for example, Golesorkhi rejects the social symbolist poetic technique of using coded words to refer to political events. Code words, according to Golesorkhi, function as bullets shot into a dark room--if those words gain some political meaning, if they strike the poet's intended target, such a result has occurred coincidentally at best.³⁸ Golesorkhi, on the contrary, demands that a poem's words aim directly for the enemy's chest. But in demanding such semantic precision, the argument also disregards any role for subjectivity in poetry. Social symbolism, at least as Golesorkhi understands it here, allows that the audience *makes* meaning, political or otherwise, in the critical, reflective process of responding to the poem's ambiguous words. An "objective" poem, on the other hand, cannot risk misinterpretation from its audience. Just as objective social research in a Marxist-Leninist context invariably leads to the pre-determined conclusion that the masses struggle against their imperialist class enemy, so, too, does combative poetry demand a singular, politically enlightened audience response.

In a theory of combative art, then, poetry becomes a vessel with which to transmit meaning. In Golesorkhi's words, poetry functions to keep the lantern of struggle lit, an interesting metaphor since Golesorkhi then mentions the Palestinian "Feda'i" poets as exemplary resistance artists.³⁹ Though he does not mention any particular poet by name, perhaps Golesorkhi has the discursive claims of Mahmoud Darwish's 1965 "On Poetry" (*'an al-shi'r*) in mind where Darwish writes:

³⁵ For background, see Behrooz, Maziar, "Golsorki, Kosrow," in *Elr*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/golsorki>, last accessed February 11, 2012.

³⁶ Video of Golesorkhi's defense is available widely on the internet. See for example, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buTIBLGdUfo>, last accessed February 11, 2012.

³⁷ Golesorkhi's collected poetry and essays has recently been published in three volumes: Khosrow Golesorkhi, *Majmu'eh-ye Asar-e Khosrow Golesorkhi*, ed. Kaveh Gowharin (Tehran: Arvij, 1387/2008).

³⁸ *Dasti Miyān-e Deshneh va Del*, ed. Kaveh Gowharin, 3 vols., vol. 2, *Majmu'eh-ye Asar* (Tehran: Arvij, 1386[2007]), 60.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

Our poems are colorless
flavorless, voiceless
unless they carry the lantern
 from one house to another.
And if the common among us
 has not perceived their meanings
then better to let our poems winnow
and to reside in eternal silence.⁴⁰

Composed at a time when Darwish's communist activities and political militancy rivaled that of Soltanpur's or Golesorkhi's in the decade to follow, the Palestinian poet's lines imagine poetry to carry an exact message in much the same way that the Iranian guerrilla poets would later argue.⁴¹ According to such a conception, the poet works to strip away all artifice from the poem until the objective truths at its core become universally discernible.

The Sloganeering Question

Combative poetry's efforts toward clarity inevitably lead to the question of true poetry (*she'r*) versus sloganeering (*sho'âr*). Soltanpur addresses the distinction directly in "A Type of Art, A Type of Thought," conceding that the contemporary progressive artists have sometimes produced slogans. The closest that Soltanpur comes to actually defining the term sloganeering, though, occurs where he accepts that "with combative 'slogans,' there exists a shortage of artistic culture."⁴² Here, Soltanpur seems to acknowledge that aesthetic works possess some qualities independent of their socio-political content. In poetry's case, the work presumably degenerates into sloganeering when the poet disregards any non-communicative formal considerations in the interest of clarity. But, Soltanpur goes on to argue, society's current underdeveloped objective conditions require artists to produce "progressive" slogans. That is to say that the contemporary progressive poet who tends towards sloganeering does so in accordance with the masses' level of consciousness; when the conditions improve, so too will the artistic quality of the work.

As long as the conditions require slogans, though, Soltanpur appropriates the term and argues that only reactionary artists and critics attempt to discredit progressive art by labeling works that do not benefit the enemy class as slogans. For Soltanpur, progressive slogans can consist of "the deepest and most salient (*bâreztarin*) beliefs of contemporary man and the most

⁴⁰ Mahmud Darwish, *Diwan Mahmud Darwish*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Awdah, 1977), 93. Sulaiman Jubran also refers to the same poem and offers a different translation in Hala Khamis Nassar and Najat Rahman, eds., *Mahmoud Darwish, Exile's Poet: Critical Essays* (Northampton, Mass.: Olive Branch Press, 2008), 80.

⁴¹ Darwish speaks candidly on how his involvement in the Israeli Communist Party in the 1960s shaped his early view that poetry can participate in social change. Darwish later rejected his youthful romanticism and decided that, in his own words, "poetry changes nothing," Raja Shehadeh and Mahmoud Darwish, "Mahmoud Darwish [Interview]," *BOMB*, no. 81 (Fall, 2002): 56.

⁴² Soltanpur, *Now'i Az Honar; Now'i Az Andisheh*, 23.

noble ideological manifestation of a nation.”⁴³ The idea of “contemporary” carries particular importance for Soltanpur’s argument here. The class enemy has demanded art works that develop a timeless and placeless, which is to say an ahistorical, portrayal of the human being. And such a reactionary, quietist philosophy itself has propagated precisely through sloganeering in classical verse and perpetuates through the so-called “non-political” avante-garde poetry of the modern period.⁴⁴ While Soltanpur does not refer to any poets by name, his charges of counterrevolutionary sloganeering could fall equally upon classical poets who declare the human’s ultimate purpose to “drink wine and be happy” in the manner of Omar Khayyam, or to contemporary neo-Sufic poets like Sohrab Sepehri or surrealists like Yadollah Roya’i, both of whom treat poetry as intensely personal. To give just a single example, one can apply Soltanpur’s logic to a line from Sepehri’s *The Sound of Water’s Footsteps* (1964), where the poet declares, “I saw a train freighted with politics, and how emptily it went along” (*man qatâri didam keh siyâsat mi bord (va cheh khâli mi raft)*).⁴⁵ This line, according to the logic of combative poetics, does not simply paint an innocent picture with words. Rather, the line delivers a specific message about the uselessness of politics. And if politics serve no purpose, then better for the masses to forget about organizing themselves and to sit isolated, contemplating nature and the divine instead; the “slogan,” in other words, reorients the human being away from the possibility of material liberation.

But progressive slogans, Soltanpur argues, propagate a contrary understanding of the human. Progressive slogans emphasize the historical dialectic by portraying the particularities of the contemporary stage of economic development. In doing so, progressive slogans sensitize the masses to the objective conditions of class struggle. Thus, Soltanpur concludes, progressive slogans, even if they lack the aesthetic mastery of imperialist art, compel the sensitized masses to take action against their enemies and to change their conditions.⁴⁶

Complicated Slogans: Naser Purqomi’s Critical Take

Where Soltanpur seems willing to dismiss the sloganeering question as an inconvenient distraction from the more important work of making revolution, another Marxist critic works through the question more rigorously. In his 1977 essay, “Poetry, Politics and a Discourse on Committed Literature,” Naser Purqomi argues that poetry, like all literature, constitutes a political act because it assumes interaction with others at its creation.⁴⁷ But while poetry performs a political act, Purqomi maintains that a distinction between poetry and political slogans clearly exists. On the one hand, Purqomi agrees with Soltanpur that such slogans do not inherently undermine a poem. Rather, a poem can make use of slogans to enhance its musical

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 34.

⁴⁵ Sohrab Sepehri, *Hasht Ketab* (Tehran: Ketabkhaneh-ye Tahuri, 1372/1993), 279.

⁴⁶ Soltanpur, *Now ‘i Az Honar, Now ‘i Az Andisheh*, 35.

⁴⁷ Naser Purqomi, *She ‘r va Siyâsat va Sokhani Darbareh-ye Adabiyat-e Moltazem* (Tehran: Morvarid, n.d.(1977?)), 20-1.

qualities or general effectiveness.⁴⁸ But where Soltanpur dismisses categorical charges of sloganeering as reactionary tactics, Purqomi engages the issue more seriously and determines that a poem's underlying purpose contradicts that of a slogan. In Purqomi's words:

Slogans...are a type of command to perform a particular action while poetry is not a direct command. Poetry does not enclose or limit its reader. Poetry does not designate a prefabricated framework for its reader's thoughts. Rather, poetry is creative; it induces (*elqâ kardan*) its own thoughts in its readers and empowers (*yâri kardan*) the readers themselves to expand the ideas into new frontiers and in this manner it develops the ideas' territories...this objective is incompatible with sloganeering.⁴⁹

Purqomi here articulates one of the basic contradictions in Soltanpur's theory of combative poetry. The theory argues that poetry functions to liberate the masses from the economic conditions that objectify them and from the enemy that treats the human being as a static object as opposed to a "variable and changing movement of material mass in the current of history."⁵⁰ As the theory goes, since the conditions do not allow the masses to liberate themselves, poetry must resort at times to delivering objective truths to the people in the form of slogans, which will impel them to bring about change. But slogans, even to adopt a generous understanding like Soltanpur's, deny the very subjectivity of the people they purport to serve, for a slogan's truth exists independent of whatever words deliver it. A slogan, that is to say, denies any necessity for thought or experience on the part of its utterer; a slogan, to revert to a classic writers' workshop adage, "tells," when a poem fundamentally "shows."

Sloganeering and Armed Propaganda

One can read Soltanpur's call for semantic clarity as a demand for modern poetic language to show contemporary audiences their world in a manner they can understand. But in its haste for political emancipation, the theory of combative poetry at times goes further and concludes that poetry must resort to slogans that *tell* the masses to act. In doing so, the theory, much like the opposition movement after Siyahkal, takes a markedly undemocratic turn. In fact, the call for sloganeering and its inherent de-emphasis of critical reflective judgement parallels specifically Mas'ud Ahmadzadeh's platform for a "new Communist movement" pursuing armed struggle in the aftermath of Siyahkal.⁵¹ In his famous pamphlet, *Armed Struggle: Both Strategy and Tactic*, which provided "the official theory of the P[eople's] F[eda'i] G[uerrillas] in its first three years,"⁵² Ahmadzadeh argues that a small group of committed intellectuals can bypass the process of building genuine relationships with the masses and foment revolution instead by

⁴⁸ Ibid., 33-5.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁰ Soltanpur, *Now'i Az Honar, Now'i Az Andisheh*, 20.

⁵¹ Mas'ud Ahmadzadeh, *Mobarezeh-ye Mosalahaneh: Ham Estratezhi va Ham Taktik* (1356[1977]), 133.

⁵² Vahabzadeh, *A Guerrilla Odyssey: Modernization, Secularism, Democracy, and the Fada'i Period of National Liberation in Iran, 1971-1979*, 134.

carrying out symbolic attacks, or “armed propaganda” against the regime.⁵³ Just as Ahmadzadeh’s theory of armed struggle has no patience to work on the objective conditions or to wait for the masses to organize into revolutionary forces, neither does the theory of combative poetry have the patience for critical reflective judgement to produce self-aware subjects. Instead, the theory argues that sometimes poetry must shout slogans as acts of provocation.

A New Classicism: Combative Poetics as Anti-Formalism

In calling for greater clarity and accessibility of meaning, the theory of combative poetry comes to reject formalist practices as well. For Soltanpur and his fellow militant poets like Golesorkhi, formalist describes any poetry that prioritizes language, meter, rhyme or any other formal element over content. Golesorkhi leaves no ambiguity over the matter: “the shape and form of any artistic work at this [historical] moment are not under our consideration.”⁵⁴ Only the content of a poem, he argues, can address and fulfill art’s mission of “provocation and incitement” (*bar angikhtan va moharrek*).⁵⁵ A poet like Yadollah Roya’i therefore gets it wrong when he argues that poets must develop language for its own sake and allow a poem’s formal experimentations to carry the content wherever it will.⁵⁶ For Golesorkhi, if contemporary poetic forms evolve at all, they should only do so to serve innovations in politically radical content.⁵⁷ Soltanpur furthermore spurns formalism not only as a socially inconsequential pursuit but as a flawed and malevolent view of humanity. Formalist poetry, in Soltanpur’s rendering, perpetuates the lie that aesthetics and politics occupy separate realms, a lie that necessarily benefits the enemy class by inculcating mass alienation and defeatism. Formalism stresses the artist’s individuality and therefore subjectivity, a reactionary subterfuge which only objective art can properly contest:

Combative art and thought...decamps from formalist criteria, aestheticism and sickly subjectivism, which in modernism all form a common path to a false image of creativity. [Combative art and thought] pound their angry and revolted fists on the muzzle of administrative art and literature, which are adrift in a space polluted by tragedy and the farce of old age, death, and corruptive sexuality. And [combative art and thought] smear mud on the heavenly countenance of the art that prescribes an illogical and impossible historical nostalgia (*gozashteh gerâ’i*) under the enamel of modernism and tends toward the metaphysical with

⁵³ Ahmadzadeh, *Mobarezeh-ye Mosalahaneh: Ham Estratzezi va Ham Taktik*. A thorough analysis of the pamphlet appears in Vahabzadeh, *A Guerrilla Odyssey: Modernization, Secularism, Democracy, and the Fadaï Period of National Liberation in Iran, 1971-1979*, 138-46.

⁵⁴ “*form va she’r*” in Golesorkhi, *Dasti Miyan-e Deshneh va Del*, 2, 64.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Yadollah Roya’i, “Obur Az She’r-e Hajm,” in Shams Langarudi, *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She’r-e Now (Jeld-e Chaharom 1349-1357)*, 4, 139-49.

⁵⁷ Golesorkhi, *Dasti Miyan-e Deshneh va Del*, 2, 64-67.

contemporary-sounding explanations. [Combative art and thought does this] because all of these beautiful forms...give shape to sterile hopelessness, fatalism, and gnosis through the perspective of art and literature. In the end they show the human being as singular and alone in the endless expanse of existence.⁵⁸

In Soltanpur's poetic if polemic language, one observes the logic of combative poetics. The passage begins by equating formalism to subjectivity, for the formalist believes that every poet must develop a language particular to him/herself. But if an aesthetic work treats the human as subjective, then it cannot serve the politics of universal and hence objective liberation. So subjectivity becomes counterrevolutionary. Furthermore, if formalist art does not explicitly challenge the political order and therefore escapes state censorship, then such poetry must collude with the state. Now formalist and "administrative," by which Soltanpur means state-sponsored, art have collapsed into a single, antithetical category. One either writes poetry in service of the masses or in collusion with the bourgeois, imperialist enemy; the theory does not allow for a poetry that serves both or neither camp at once.

While combative poetics rejects modernist formalism, the theory does not dispense with questions of form per se. On the contrary, combative poetry, especially in Soltanpur's conception, demands sustained engagement with pre-existing poetic forms. In fact, by contesting formalism's call for subjective structural innovations, the theory of combative poetry implicitly validates conventional prosody as the most appropriate framework for containing poetry's dialectically contemporary meanings. The impulse to reject formal innovations as bourgeois endeavor certainly extends beyond Soltanpur or Persian articulations of combative art. For example, the American critic Jed Rasula frames the debate with the following, albeit rhetorical, question: "...given the capitalist exhortation to constant revolution in the modes of production, how revolutionary is it for artists to replicate such a structure in their media?"⁵⁹ For Soltanpur, formal revolutions likewise prove unsuitable for Iran's essentially pre-modern economy, which leads the poet to defend aesthetic conventions, asserting once again that poetry must accord with the objective conditions of the masses. Under the constraints of a quasi-feudal economy, the masses cannot be expected to make sense of high bourgeois, much less late-capitalist, modes of artistic production. In practice, this means that combative poetry achieves social relevance by presenting itself to the masses in familiar forms, by fulfilling their expectations for how a poem should look and sound.⁶⁰ At the same time, though, Soltanpur argues that the masses have not yet achieved sufficient awareness of their existing arts. So poetry should not only arrive at the masses in familiar forms, but it also works to raise consciousness of the society's rich aesthetic traditions. Only after the poetry has acquainted the people thoroughly with their traditions and conventions can it begin to depart from them.⁶¹ Whether to meet the masses' traditional

⁵⁸ Soltanpur, *Now 'i Az Honar, Now 'i Az Andisheh*, 19.

⁵⁹ Jed Rasula, *Syncopations: The Stress of Innovation in Contemporary American Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 21.

⁶⁰ Soltanpur, "Mosahebeh'ha [Transcripts of Two Interviews with Sa'id Soltanpur]," 11.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

expectations or to raise their consciousness, the politically radical theory takes a conservative, anti-avant-garde approach to form, arguing that under the current objective conditions, poetry should not chart unfamiliar aesthetic territories.

Anti-Formalism in Practice: The Critical Response

Soltanpur's poetry likewise supports the theory's demand for engagement with conventional forms. As Saeed Yousef argues, Soltanpur's first collection of poems, *The Dying Sound* (*şedâ-ye mirâ*) (1969) demonstrates the poet's experience with and relative mastery of classical forms, especially the ghazal, and his early attempts to adopt the prosodies of modernists like Nima Yushij, Forugh Farrokhzad and Ahmad Shamlu.⁶² Over the course of his next two collections, *Prison Songs* (*âvâz'hâ-ye band*) and *From the Slaughterhouse* (*az koshtârgâh*), Soltanpur's poetry actively engages the ghazal tradition, even as some of the poems depart from the ghazal's rigid rhyme and metrical structures. Indeed, five of the fourteen poems in Soltanpur's third collection, *From the Slaughterhouse* (1977/8) include "ghazal" in their titles, as in "Comrade's Ghazal" (*ghazal-e rafiq*) or "Ghazal for the Courageous" (*ghazal-e delâvaran*).⁶³ Of those five ghazals, "Ghazal of the Epoch" (*ghazal-e zamâneh*) and "Prison Ghazal" (*ghazal-e band*) actually maintain the formal features of classical ghazals, with their consistent meters and single rhyme and refrain (*radif*). Soltanpur's ghazals here respond to combative theory's call for art to embrace its aesthetic past. In other words, Soltanpur seems to compose ghazals or some echoing thereof with the belief that the masses can not yet conceive of lyric poetry in another form. Here, the theory comes into direct conflict with Shamlu's brand of modernism. Where Soltanpur argues that the ghazal can serve contemporary life, Shamlu argues, in Fatemeh Keshavarz's translation, that the form itself has grown stale and utterly irrelevant:

The ghazel [sic] is not the poetry of our time. This is my first verdict and the last...language goes forward, and expands itself, hand in hand with time. But the ghazel does not do so. In a ghazel nothing moves faster than a caravan. A car cannot enter the limited space [*mahdudah*] of a ghazel. In that realm, the latest means of transportation is a camel litter [*kajavah*].⁶⁴

⁶² Yusof, *Now'i az Naqd Bar Now'i az She'r: Barresi-ye She'r-e Dowran-e Siyahkal va She'r-e Sa'id Soltanpur*, 76-8.

⁶³ Sa'id Soltanpur, *Az Koshtargah: Bahar 51 ta Tabestan 56* (n.p.: Az Zendan Ta Tab'id [Sazman-e Cherikha-ye Fedai-ye Khalq-e Iran], n.d.).

⁶⁴ Keshavarz, *Recite in the Name of the Red Rose: Poetic Sacred Making in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 146.

Shamlu's distaste for what he considers an antiquated form helps to clarify the poet's deep animosity towards Soltanpur's verse.⁶⁵ Even if Shamlu agreed with the militant politics driving the combative poetry--as his tributes to Feda'i or Mojahedin martyrs might suggest--the very adherence to or even echoing of the outdated form invalidates the politically sympathetic poetry wholesale. Combative poetics, it would seem, imagines itself grounded in the under-developed social conditions, burdened by tradition and the historical past. Shamlu, on the contrary, imagines his poetry at the wheel of a society driving or being driven, willingly or otherwise, straight into the modern epoch's unknown.

But even a more sympathetic critic like Saeed Yousef, faults Soltanpur for his occasional over-reliance on classical poetics. For Yousef, Soltanpur's weaker poems lack a necessary organic unity (*ensejâm*) and Soltanpur's either indifference or inability to create such a sense of coherence ends up compromising the poems' entire artistic value.⁶⁶ Interestingly, Yousef compares one poem that he considers especially lacking in organic unity to Jalal al-Din Mowlana Rumi's ghazals, arguing that the lack of unity in Soltanpur's "Comrade's Ghazal" (*Ghazal-e Rafiq*), like in Rumi's ghazals, becomes so stark that one can extract a single hemistich as an independent unit of meaning.⁶⁷ However, Yousef does not consider how "Comrade's Ghazal" remains conscious of the way it appropriates the rhythms of Rumi's *Ghazaliyât-e Shams*. Though it does not look like a classical ghazal on the page, Rumi's unmistakable voice reverberates loudly in "Comrade's Ghazal" (*ghazal-e rafiq*). The poem begins:

ay sahar-e shabâneh 'am, âtash-e jâvedâneh 'am
ay gol-e sorkh-e khâneh 'am
shur-e man o sharâr-e man
zakhmeh-ye mândegâr-e man

O my nightly dawn, my eternal blaze
O red rose of my abode
my passion and my spark
my ever-lasting wound.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ In his introduction to a collection of poetry from a 1968 festival, Shamlu cites Baraheni on the difference between poetry and sloganeering. See the second and third (unnumbered) pages of Ahmad Shamlu, ed. *Khusheh: Yadnameh-ye Nokhostin Haftah-ye She'r-e Khusheh, 24-28 Shahrivar Mah 1347* (Tehran: Kavosh, 1363[1984]). Though Shamlu does not mention him by name, his exclusion from the collection--despite Soltanpur's popularity at the festival--leaves no doubt that Shamlu has Soltanpur in mind when he accuses "some younger poets" of unpoetic sloganeering. Saeed Yousef confirms this fact and describes his personal experience with Shamlu's contempt towards Soltanpur in Saeed Yousef, *Poetics and Politics, East and West: The Poetries of Ahmad Shamlu and Bertolt Brecht* (Canada: Javan Books, 2007), 151-3. Shams Langrudi also describes how Soltanpur and M. Azarm (Ne'mat Mirzazadeh) were excluded from the collection, Mohammad Shams Langarudi, *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She'r-e Now (Jeld-e Sevvom 1341-1349)*, 4 vols., vol. 3 (Tehran: Nashr-e Markaz, 1377/1998), 588.

⁶⁶ Yusof, *Now'i az Naqd Bar Now'i az She'r: Barresi-ye She'r-e Dowran-e Siyahkal va She'r-e Sa'id Soltanpur*, 67.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 122-3.

⁶⁸ Soltanpur, *Az Koshtargah: Bahar 51 ta Tabestan* 56, 20.

In echoing the classical master here, “Comrade’s Ghazal” implies that poetry serves its authentic mission by entering into and working through its existing formal traditions. Yousef, on the other hand, agrees with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who argues in his famous “organic unity” essay that form must be reinvented for each poem or else become stagnantly mechanical.⁶⁹ So what makes “Comrade’s Ghazal” inauthentic for Saeed Yousef is precisely that it exercises Mowlana’s medieval poetics--his rhythms and presumably disjointed exclamations--without progressing sufficiently towards the poet’s own distinct, contemporary voice.

Contemporary Militant Poetics: American Guerrilla Poetry in Practice

I have attempted so far to outline what a militant poetics in Soltanpur’s theoretical articulations entails. Before moving to my considerations of the poetry itself, a brief discussion about a contemporary American poetic phenomenon might further clarify my arguments. In their 2008 study on “guerrilla poetry and public space,” Boykoff and Sand identify at least four cases of “guerrilla” poets waging their struggles in the U.S. today.⁷⁰ Of course, when the American authors label certain poetic practices as “guerrilla,” their understanding of the moniker differs from Iranian critics in the years leading up to the revolution. To be clear, guerrilla poetry (*she’r-e cheriki*) for a radical Marxist Iranian critic like Safar Feda’iniya refers to a body of poems that express admiration for, solidarity with, or outright participation in the literal guerrilla struggle--meaning small armed groups committing irregular, violent attacks--against the Shah. Thus Feda’iniya (a *nom de plume/guerre* of Saeed Yousef) can logically anthologize the “poetry of the new movement,” i.e. the Feda’i-led armed struggle, by grouping poems of established figures like Shafi’i Kadkani (M. Sereshk), Ahmad Shamlu (A. Bamdad) and Esmail Khoi together with those of younger, more militant figures like Soltanpur and Golesorkhi.⁷¹ Which is to say that one can disregard momentarily the divergences among individual poetics and/or politics and appreciate how Feda’iniya has identified an Iranian “guerrilla poetry” (though the term does not appear in the collection) as a body of verses that overlap in their referential gestures towards the already existing Iranian guerrilla movement. Boykoff and Sand, on the other hand, use the term “guerrilla” figuratively to refer to a particular poetic practice or tactic; they do not suggest that any actual guerrilla movement in the traditional sense of the word exists outside of the poetic performance space. Nonetheless, the American appropriation of a term once associated with physical warfare and its requisite bloodshed does, I believe, relate to the particular understanding of poetry as direct political action that I have identified and characterized as a militant view in Persian literary discourse in general and Soltanpur’s theoretical/critical writings in particular. The American cases that I discuss below suggest that while the global interest in guerrilla-led liberation movements has waned significantly since the 1970s, the militant poetics that at one time seemed to form an inextricable branch of those armed struggles has in fact persevered

⁶⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Shakespeare's Judgement Equal to His Genius," in *Critical Theory since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 469-71.

⁷⁰ Jules Boykoff and Kaia Sand, *Landscapes of Dissent: Guerrilla Poetry and Public Space* (Long Beach, CA: Palm Press, 2008).

⁷¹ Feda'iniya, *She'r-e Jonbesh-e Novin: Enqelab-e Iran Dar She'r-e Mo'aser*.

independent of the movements' apparent shortfalls and continues to hold appeal for some poet/activists.

Boykoff and Sand define guerrilla poetry as a particular linguistic art form that propagates through unsanctioned means in order to challenge the state's dominant discourses and policies and to contest the neoliberal imposition of mass marketing on so-called "public" space.⁷² The guerrilla aspect of the poetry refers both ideologically to the poet's dissatisfaction with the capitalist state and its corporate beneficiaries and tactically to the way that the poets voice their challenges in direct violation of official laws and socially accepted norms. In terms of tactics, guerrilla poets reject large press publication, institutionally organized public readings, or state- and/or corporate-sponsored displays of poems in public spaces (the authors cite the contemporary *Poetry in Motion* projects in which poets compete to have their works posted on busses and metro trains as an example of the latter); that is, guerrilla poets reject the conventional channels for disseminating their works.⁷³ Instead, guerrilla poets visually display their poems in the "illegal" manner of graffitists or they recite their poetry in public or semi-public spaces without receiving any official permission to do so; in both cases delivering their words directly to the people. These poetic practices parallel the way that guerrilla combatants disavow any possibility for changing the material conditions through the state's existing institutions and laws (i.e. elections, schools, charitable organizations, etc.) and opt instead for violent confrontation. While presumably non-violent, American guerrilla poets likewise reject the existing institutional means through which to reach an audience and embrace instead a dissident and therefore marginalized public persona. Thus in terms of their agitational, extra-legal tactics and their generally anti-capitalist politics, Boykoff and Sand's exemplary poets resemble the same militant organizations for which Iranian guerrilla poets in the Siyahkal period voiced their support.

In theory, American guerrilla poetry pursues a type of critically reflective judgement that one would be hard-pressed to characterize as militant. In practice, however, at least some of the poetry that Boykoff and Sand discuss ends up pursuing a dogmatic understanding of poetry that upholds the most militant tenets of Soltanpur's critical writings. To rehearse the theory: American guerrilla poets argue that their poetry/activism resists the constant barrage of advertisements and the omnipresent compulsion to consume that undermine life in a late capitalist society such as our own. Poetic "actions" challenge individuals to reclaim their sense of humanity, which such conditions diminish, by exercising their ability to think freely. So guerrilla poets will lead the masses to liberation by committing agitational aesthetic acts that in turn inspire the masses to pursue further aesthetic judgements, thereby thinking beyond existing concepts and challenging the commodification of daily existence. The theory, in other words, proposes that instead of bombs, the guerrilla poets throw their verses into crowded areas and then retreat to observe as the newly-sensitized masses organize the ruling order's demise. One likes to imagine a crowd of mall shoppers interrupted by, say, a Louis Zukofsky poem thrown into their midst and said shoppers, after engaging in critical readings, deciding through spontaneous,

⁷² Boykoff and Sand, *Landscapes of Dissent: Guerrilla Poetry and Public Space*, 16.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 28-9.

collective process that labor time should not form the only criterion for determining the exchange value of commodities in their local Gap.

In practice, however, the cases of guerrilla poems that Boykoff and Sands present often lose sight of the reflective judgement that, according to the theory, will make liberation possible. One group of poet/activists in particular, operating under the name “Agit-Truth Collective,” seems to disregard the centrality of experience in aesthetic works in order to pursue a militant notion of objectivity. The Agit-Truth Collective places signs with succinct political messages like “Dick Cheney is scary” or “Where is the dead/ end of our imperialist fiasco” in public and unexpected places.⁷⁴ Even putting aside questions of whether or not such messages constitute poetry and accepting Boykoff and Sand’s contention that the project “tests the overlaps between poetic language and sloganeering,” such poetic acts contradict the Agit-Truth Collective’s theoretical commitment to “liberatory possibilities.”⁷⁵ The collective, as with other guerrilla poets in Boykoff and Sand’s study, claims to view poetry as a necessary challenge to the way that current political-economic conditions produce unthinking, unreflective subjects, but then the poems themselves, delivered in the form of politically agitational signs, invite a minimally if not entirely unreflective response.⁷⁶ Perhaps the word “truth” in the collective’s title best indicates this unreflective aspect of their approach. If the group delivers “truths” to its audience, then it delivers content that arrives already conceptualized and therefore requires no additional thought. “Truth,” in other words, suggests that the group views their own works as objective. For if it is “true” (i.e. objective, factual, etc.) that Dick Cheney is scary, then such information exists regardless of how anyone else thinks about it or feels; the content does not require a subject. Perhaps one could argue that the Agit-Truth Collective recognizes the problematic nature of claiming “objectivity” and addresses the question of subjectivity’s role in art through their works’ performance aspects, that is, in the way that their projects require self-aware individuals to contravene laws and social decorum to insert their poetry into the world. However, the word “truth” on at least some levels also suggests that the collective possesses some form of objective knowledge, an attitude bordering dangerously close to authoritarianism. That is to say that neither guerrilla poets nor actual guerrillas who believe themselves in ownership of “truth” have any use for dialogue with, much less open ended reflective experiences from, their others.

My critique of the Agit-Truth Collective’s work does not relate to the specific political position that the signs take, but rather to the fact that they take a side at all. I contend that the works would equally contradict commitments to liberation theory were they to express support of, instead of opposition to, the personalities and policies surrounding the second Bush administration. For regardless of which side one chooses to take, the practice of delivering precise socio-political messages through aesthetic works in and of itself diverges sharply from art’s more radical potential. Adorno captures brilliantly how aesthetic works differ from political messaging when he writes that “art is not a matter of drawing up alternatives but rather of

⁷⁴ Ibid., 63-6.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 62, 74.

⁷⁶ The “Poetry is Public Art” (PIPA) collective, for example, describe their site-specific poetry actions as “covert reflective commentary,” Ibid., 31.

resisting, solely through the artistic form, the course of the world, which continues to hold a pistol to the heads of human beings.”⁷⁷ Adorno here does not reject art’s emancipatory value, but he does suggest that such value derives from the way that art inspires individuals to think beyond the world’s existing concepts. And since concepts and poetry both operate in the medium of language, poetry in fact carries the most radically subversive potential of all art forms. That the world points a gun at our heads means, I would venture, that the world’s material conditions, its bases and superstructures, limit the courses of action that any individual can choose for any given situation and the possible outcomes that any given choice will produce. Or, to be more specific, a man with a gun pointed at his head has his priorities clearly defined, much as an individual living in a social order ruled by the concept of labor time has neither the need for, nor the freedom to, exercise reflective judgements before deciding how to act in a given situation. The concept determines exchange value in the latter, just as the gun prevents the man from responding to other stimuli in the former.

Now poetry, to push Adorno’s statement further, cannot change the physical world, but neither does it have to abide by the same system of concepts. And perhaps a poem most critically defies the world’s existing concepts by willfully lacking any utility. That is, a poem cannot change the world and yet insists upon its own existence anyway. Adorno seems to say that only aesthetic works can possibly or at least sanely respond to stimuli other than the gun. And in doing so, art works allow individuals to feel what it might be like to operate outside of the existing conceptual order, which then makes it possible for those individuals to carry out the later and necessarily different work of actually changing the world. The political messages that the Agit-Truth Collective displays, on the other hand, by explicitly calling for oppositional reactions to specific policies or personalities, abide by the rules and concepts of the existing order. Such messages undoubtedly serve a political function, but they do not invite the type of aesthetic experience that explodes the existing concepts. When the Agit-Truth Collective posts a sign expressing opposition to the Iraq War, they invite us to participate in a Manichaen world view of “axes of evil” and “coalitions of the willing,” a world view that requires only a vote of “no” in response to their enemy’s “yes.” The political sign as art work has drawn up an alternative to the existing policy, but it has not forged beyond the sort of bifurcated debates that inhabit the “political” realms of daily existence. And thus American guerrilla poetry in practice comes to fulfill a militant theory’s demands.

Sa‘id Soltanpur From Theory to Practice

As my tangential considerations of American guerrilla poetry have hopefully demonstrated, one can certainly articulate a subject-centered theory of emancipatory poetry, an argument versed in “theory,” as it were, and at the same time produce poems that treat their content, and hence the human audiences that will presumably receive that content, as fundamentally objective. But the reverse also holds true. I have thus far treated Soltanpur’s critical prose as source materials for the poet’s theory of combative art. However, even as

⁷⁷ Idem, “Commitment” in *Notes to Literature: Volume Two*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 80.

Soltanpur the critic goes to great lengths to insist on poetry's objectivity, on its direct participation in revolutionary battle, Soltanpur the poet responds with poems that cannot ignore the subject and thus the subjectivity at their core. For example, "Song for the Red Rose" a poem that Soltanpur reworked considerably over the course of his career, asks how the lyric voice will turn its historical particularities and radical fervor into song.⁷⁸ The poem never loses sight of its political aim towards revolution, but neither does it deny that such aim can only exist through the poem's subjective self, neatly contained in the speaker's "I":

begu cheguneh bekhwânam
keh del besuzad pâk
begu cheguneh beguyam
ze bâgh-e khun, bar khâk
begu cheguneh besuzam
cheguneh âtash-e qalbam râ
be yâd-e ânhamêh khunsho 'leh-ye khiyâbâni
be yâd-e inhamêh gol'hâ-ye sorkh-e zendâni
*be châr jâneb-e in dasht-e khun bar afruzam?*⁷⁹

Tell me
how shall I sing for the heart
to burn pure?
Tell me
how shall I speak of the garden
of blood
upon the earth?
Tell me, how shall I burn
how shall I ignite
my heart's fire
in memory of all those streetward blood-flames
in memory of all these red roses enchained
throughout this plateau of blood?

If Soltanpur's militant poetics demand that poetry must bypass thought and deliver objective realities to the masses directly, then a poem like "Song for the Red Roses," even in its rhetorical claims, turns the theory around and asks how the objective realities will take an aesthetic form in the poem. Though my English translation ends on the word blood, Soltanpur's poem, it should be noted, ends on the act of igniting (*bar afruzam*) which, pursuant to the rules of Persian grammar,

⁷⁸ "Sorud, Bara-ye Gol'ha-ye Sorkh." For variations, compare Sa'id Soltanpur, *Avazha-ye Band* (n.p. : Da'ereh-ye Entesharat-e Sazman-e Daneshjuyan-e Irani Dar Amrika (Publishing Group of the Iranian Students Organization in America), 1354/1976), 40-43. and *Dah Shab (Shab'ha-ye Sha'eran va Nevisandegan Dar Anjoman-e Farhangi-ye Iran va Alman)*, 276-80.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 280.

means that the poem ends on the first-person conjugational ending of the verb. In other words, the only “content” that the final letter of the poem communicates in Persian would have to be translated into English as “I.” Indeed, Soltanpur’s lyric voice hears the combative theory’s insistence on objective, material liberation theory and responds with a final seal of the personal on his aesthetic work.

IV. Hovering Above the Meeting: The Poetry of Sa’id Soltanpur

If the theory of militant poetry calls for objectivity, perhaps Soltanpur’s poetry itself best enacts the limitations inherent to the theory. For while the poems frequently proclaim their political commitments in a voice far too explicit for many contemporary critical tastes, the same poems also demonstrate Soltanpur’s aesthetic commitments and rigorous engagement with poetic traditions. This latter aspect--the poems’ moments of high formal poetic caliber--support an argument that Soltanpur, with his lifelong dedication to poetry and theater, must have sensed at least implicitly: in creating aesthetic works, the artist must at some point consider the work’s formal demands. But precisely in thinking about form, the artist cannot simultaneously “express” an objective political content, for the very objectivity of that content always arrives through an artistic and therefore not-scientifically-objective form. Soltanpur’s poetry offers a particularly rich source for thinking through this conundrum in militant poetics because Soltanpur embodies at least two figures at once. Soltanpur the theoretician, activist, party poet, political prisoner, and eventual Feda’i martyr on the one hand embodies the militantly committed writer/intellectual that he seems to imagine in *A Type of Art, A Type of Thought*. On the other hand, Soltanpur the poet, at least at his finer moments, demonstrates why poetry by its very existence cannot possibly fulfill the combative theory’s demands. In this section, I turn to Soltanpur’s poetry to investigate what happens when a talented and experienced poet sets out to compose militant verse. The poems, I argue, show where the poetics of militancy falls short. And the poetic theory falls short precisely because political militancy itself falls short of the liberation that it claims to pursue. The political theory begins with the demand for the masses to liberate themselves but ends with the resignation that an armed vanguard can do the work of liberation on the masses’ behalf. And the poetry likewise somewhere latently--at least with a skilled poet like Soltanpur--acknowledges that poetry works through experience. But the poetic theory tries to bypass the defining, experiential quality of poetry and arrive straight at the universality that an objective truth might achieve. So if Soltanpur’s poetry can invoke aesthetic, i.e. critically reflective, experience or judgement, as I argue that it can, then the poems counteract militancy’s claim and suggest that subjectivity plays a fundamental role in any poetry or art.

Prison Lyric (*Ghazal-e Band*)

“Prison Lyric” (*ghazal-e band*) provides a useful point of departure for placing Soltanpur’s poetry in dialogue with militant theory.⁸⁰ When read purely for its semantic content, the poem certainly invites labels of “political” and “combative.” That is, we can read the poem

⁸⁰ *Az Koshtargah: Bahar 51 ta Tabestan* 56, 9-11. See Appendix, 141, for my translation of the poem in full.

on its referential level as what Barbara Harlow calls “resistance literature,” meaning that the poem takes a “critically active role in the liberation movement.”⁸¹ Accordingly, we would take the poem’s discursive posturing as paramount. The poem opens with a prisoner expressing solidarity with his cellmates and comrades:

*tâ keh dar band yeki bandam hast
bâ tow ay sukhteh payvandam hast*

Until one joint of mine remains in prison
O burnt one, my bond remains with you

Then, over the course of the next eleven distichs, the poem re-expresses the speaker’s steadfastness under torture, refusal to divulge his organization’s secrets, and absolute commitment to maintain the struggle whether in captivity or outside the prison’s walls. However, even as the poem makes explicit its commitment to political struggle, so too does it operate under a system of formal, which is to say aesthetic and therefore apolitical, rules. Beginning with the title, the poem presents itself as a ghazal. I have translated the word as “lyric,” to show in English how the poem immediately acquires an aesthetic label. Even if it also contains political content, the poem simultaneously enters dialogue with a form that has served for a millennium as the “vehicle *par excellence* of the Persian lyric,” a form that perhaps at times has expressed objective social realities--as militant poetics demands--but that has unquestionably served as the prominent vehicle for romantic, spiritual and mystical themes as well.⁸² Indeed, regardless of how one appraises the poem, its self-identification not as treatise nor slogan nor tract but rather as lyric demands that we consider the musical performance--an act of questionable political utility--at its core. And the poem makes good on its titular claim by maintaining a consistent rhyme and refrain and adhering to a familiar meter,⁸³ in other words, by conforming to the classical ghazal’s formal requirements. “Prison Lyric” therefore abides by a rule system that, even if it does not contradict the poem’s politics, cannot serve any particular ideology directly. Perhaps one could argue that a meter associated with poems of battle--the *Shahnameh*’s *motaqâreb*, for example--could carry an agitational effect in a “political” poem but “Prison Lyric” does not make use of such an easily-associable form. Instead, by nature of composing a ghazal, Soltanpur opens a space for ambiguity in the poem’s purpose.

But if “Prison Lyric’s” structure creates a sense of purposive ambiguity, the poem’s diction creates even more ambiguity around its combative content. Even the title, “*ghazal-e band*” does not signify “Prison Ghazal” alone. Rather, the word *band* can mean, to select only a few of the more relevant translations from Steingass’ Persian-English dictionary, “bondage,

⁸¹ Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 39.

⁸² Heshmat Moayyad, “Lyric Poetry,” in *Persian Literature*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, *Columbia Lectures on Iranian Studies* (New York: The Persian Heritage Foundation, 1988), 121.

⁸³ The rhyme and refrain read: *dar bandam hast, payvandam hast, sowgandam hast....* The meter is *fâ’elâton fe’elâton maf’ul*, i.e. *ramal-e mosaddas-e mahzûf*, used frequently in *masnavis*. Finn Thiesen, *A Manual of Classical Persian Prosody* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1982), 128.

chains, shackles, fetters, manacles, knot, joint, belt, girdle.” Soltanpur could have chosen a more precise word like *zendân* or *habs* for the title to refer exclusively to prison. But the poem resists monovalence and brings multiple meanings of *band* into play simultaneously. I have chosen words like “joint” and “bond” in translation to capture some of the word’s associative resonance.

One especially intriguing point of ambiguity occurs in what is perhaps the poem’s most combative and posturing distich. Here, the speaker announces his participation in armed struggle through a thinly-veiled code:

*panjeh gar ruyadam az sangar-e eshq
gol-e nâranj-e tashâkandam hast*

Should I sprout this fist from love’s stone fortress
I will clutch a flame-hued pomegranate within

For initiates to combative poetry, *nâranj* (sour orange) immediately points towards *nâranjak* (hand grenade), a word that requires only one additional letter to become explicit. Thus the poet very nearly writes a prized weapon of guerrilla warfare into the verse. If we add the missing letter and read a hand grenade into Soltanpur’s words, then the line’s content translates to something like, “if I extend my fist from this prison where I find myself due to my love for my comrades and cause, then it will only be to throw a hand grenade at the enemy.” However, the line does not directly utter such a militant claim. In fact, that the poet only *very nearly* writes a grenade into the lines without actually doing so points towards poetry’s unique function. Fortunately for the translator, the common etymology of *nâranj* and *nâranjak* in Persian approximates that of *pomegranate* and *grenade* in English, so that the defiant fist can grasp a botanical item in either language. But the poem enacts its unique function by showing how the cognitive step from *nâranj* to *nâranjak* or from pomegranate to grenadine to grenade, even if a small step, requires some subjective judgement, for just as the poem allows us to perceive a relationship between the words and in doing so to transform the natural image into a weapon, so too does it leave us free to read an actual flower or fruit into the hand. If the political code functions properly, then perhaps we will *feel* as though the grenade’s presence forms an objective reality, but the poem also insists that no literal grenade lies within. To arrive at the feeling of objectivity, we have exercised our capacity for thought. In allowing such an exercise to take place, though, the poem has wagered its political content with signs that point in multiple directions instead of directly at one pre-determined thought.

“Prison Lyric,” then, shows how even a politically combative poem, if the poet has engaged poetic language and tradition, inhabits realms outside the politics or praxis that the poem professes. “Prison Lyric,” in terms of form, diction, and imagery, meets the requirements of a traditional ghazal. And as the poem self-identifies as a ghazal, then it participates in an aesthetic tradition and carries all of the form’s historical weight along with it. So when “Prison Lyric takes up the lover/beloved dichotomy, it expresses at least some awareness of how the same dichotomy reappears and shapes centuries of Persian verse. The poem’s lover and beloved certainly embody the politically committed prisoner and his comrade, since the poem verbalizes such, but the same figures also become every poetic lover and beloved precisely because they

exist in ghazal form. The poem's flowers likewise stand in for contemporary militant activists or wounds from torture or modern weaponry, but the same flowers also plant the poem in a shared plot with, say, Hafez, who, for whatever other reason he may have composed ghazals, likely did not do so in abetment of underground armed struggle. Soltanpur's flowers might express a political stance, but the way that the poet plays with florid and seasonal imagery and associations in a line like

*dar zemestânam agar khun-e bahâr
bâ che gol'hâ ke dar âvandam hast*

I may be in winter but with such flowers
spring's blood courses through my veins.

makes it impossible to disassociate the poem entirely from similar play in Hafez's poetry, for example when Hafez writes:

*bahâr o gol tarab angiz gasht o towbeh shekan
beh shâdi-ye rokh-e gol bikh-e gham ze del bar kan*

Spring and the rose aroused joy and left vows of abstention foresworn.
You, too, uproot sorrow from your heart with rosy-cheeked elation.⁸⁴

"Prison Lyric," in its adherence to classical tropes and forms, remains conscious of its shared poetic heritage. And the poem's self-awareness likewise invites contemplation from its audience. For if the poem's signifiers point simultaneously towards contemporary politics and classical literature, then the course that any individual reader follows necessarily remains undetermined. Where the theory of militant poetry calls for a single, pre-determined reading, the militant poem itself shows how it constructs its own truths through highly subjective language. "Prison Lyric" does not negate its own politics, but it does suggest that any significant liberation process will involve the type of reflective judgement that an aesthetic work invites, the type of subjectivity that perhaps the objective social conditions have denied.

In Pahlavi Prison (*Dar Band-e Pahlavi*)

If "Prison Lyric" complicates its politics primarily through the way it forges links to the classical poetic tradition, then one might assume that a more loosely-structured poem like "In Pahlavi Prison" (*Dar Band-e Pahlavi*) will arrive directly at its combative contemporary message without the same complications.⁸⁵ "In Pahlavi Prison" appears in the same collection as "Prison Lyric" (*From the Slaughter House, 1357/1978*) and expresses a similar attitude of prison

⁸⁴ Shams al-Din Mohammad Hafez, *Divan-e Hafez-e Shirazi*, ed. Khalil Khatib Rahbar (Tehran: Entesharat-e Safa Alishah, 1387/2008), 388.

⁸⁵ Soltanpur, *Az Koshtargah: Bahar 51 ta Tabestan 56*, 41-46. See Appendix, page 145, for my translation in full.

resistance as encountered in that ghazal. But unlike the rigidly structured “Prison Lyric,” “In Pahlavi Prison” allows lines of varying length and returns only intermittently to its rhyme and refrain. As such, we might logically expect the poem to express its ideological content more explicitly, unhindered by the sorts of ambiguities and complexities that arise from “Prison Lyric’s” generic demands. In close reading, however, even a seemingly more combative poem like “In Pahlavi Prison” illustrates how Soltanpur’s poetry continues to maintain a vibrant dialogue between its ideological and therefore universal elements on one side and its aesthetic, thus personal and experiential, elements on the other, even when the poems depart from allusive classical forms and imagery.

Of course, “In Pahlavi Prison’s” particularities of time and place do seem, at least on one level, to respond to a model of combative art. The poem locates itself in a prison cell alongside a soon-to-be-executed opponent of the Pahlavi regime. From the opening lines, “In Pahlavi Prison” declares and then reasserts that the regime’s policies of terror and repression will never break the resolve of its dissidents. We first encounter the unnamed protagonist suffering torture’s physical wounds but steadfast in his resistance:

*dar band-e pahlavi
oftâdeh mard-e khasteh o khun âlud
âtash damideh az kaf-e pâyash
ârâm mi tarâvad dar barg’hâ-ye zakhm
chun qetreh’hâ-ye âtash
khun az jedâr-e tafteh-ye rag’hâyash
shallâq’hâ-ye sim
ru-ye madâr-e khun
besiyâr gashteh ast o nagashteh ast
ru-ye madâr-e digar, râyash*

In Pahlavi prison
a man has fallen fatigued and bloodied
fire set alight from the soles of his feet
blood from his veins’ blazing walls
like fire drops
flows calmly in the leaves of the wound
the wire lashes
having traveled circuits of his blood
have not travelled
another circuit, his resolve

On the surface, these opening lines, like the rest of the poem that follows, all seem to manifest a militant poetic perspective, demonstrating how poetry under conditions of intense political struggle mobilizes its resources to join its comrades in struggle. According to such a reading, the poem’s geographic specificity serves primarily to emphasize its participation in a real, contemporary, on-going conflict. As with the undetermined Persian title of “Prison

Lyric” (*Ghazal-e Band*), the “prison” of “In Pahlavi Prison” (*Dar Band-e Pahlavi*) might also be translated as “In Pahlavi Bondage,” which could in turn invite an allegorical reading, in other words, a reading in which we decide that “bondage” refers to a general sense of restriction under which everyone subject to the Pahlavi monarchy suffers. But the militant voice in the poem responds to any threats of ambiguity with the names of actual Pahlavi prisons, as if to insist on its own veracity, relevance, and combativeness:

*va shab, shab-e mahib, shab-e khunkhwâr
jallâdvâr; bâl-e ghâzab basteh bâ kamar
âranj basteh bâ gereh âsetin-e khun
khun jâ-ye cheshm rikhteh dar cheshmikhâneh 'hâ
dar qal'eh-ye evin
dar qal'eh-ye heşâr
dar naqab-e khowfnâk-e qezel qal'eh
dar qal'eh-ye komiteh-ye koshtârgâh
kham gashteh ru-ye hofre-ye târik
bâ dast o bâl-e khunin dar kâr ast*

and night, bloodthirsty, monstrous night
like a hangman, furious arms at the ready
elbows exposed from rolled up, blood-stained sleeves
eyeless sockets filled with blood
in the fortress of Evin
in the fortress of Hesar
in the dreaded buried halls of Qezel Qal'eh
in the fortress of the Committee's slaughterhouse
hunches over the darkened pit
at work with his bloody arms.

The naming of specific prisons here demands that we not lose ourselves in the poem's metaphors, that we always keep in mind that the forces and suffering that the poem resists are real.⁸⁶ By designating its specific sites of resistance, the poem cautions against over-aestheticizing its struggles and insists that we read the lines not simply as artistic play in the name of some ahistorical conception of the human experience but rather as discrete acts of aggression against a defined political body, i.e. the Pahlavi monarchy, in its current juncture in the dialectic of history.

To push this reading of “In Pahlavi Prison” as combative poetry even further, we can read the poem's historic and geographical particularities as part of a larger effort towards creating an objective art form in accordance with Soltanpur's theoretical framework in “A Type of Thought,

⁸⁶ Evin, Hesar, Qezel Qal'eh and Committee all refer to well known and feared prisons used especially for political dissidents under the Pahlavi regime. Committee (*komiteh*), a term that “became synonymous with prison brutality,” is short for *komiteh-ye moshtarak-e žedd-e kharâbkâri* (The Joint Committee Against Subversion), Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions : Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran*, 105.

A Type of Art.” If we understand objective to describe conclusions based on quantifiable, empirical observation as opposed to conclusions based on the infinitely variable results of individual contemplation, then the poem’s descriptive presentation creates an immediate feeling of objectivity. The lyric voice of “In Pahlavi Prison” does not acknowledge its own origin in an individual, as usually suggested by the use of the first person “I.” Instead, the poem describes the scene in its protagonist’s prison cell with a removed, third person voice that reads at times like stage directions for a theatrical script. This style of theatrical poetic language may reflect Soltanpur’s experiences as an actor and playwright, but the language also gives the sense that the scene “exists” regardless of how the lyric voice chooses to represent it. In other words, the impersonal style of the poetic language sounds as though it reports the empirical reality of prison (at least for political prisoners) as opposed to interpreting or rendering those conditions through a personal subject. This implied effort towards objectivity justifies the bloodied lexicon and imagery that subsequently appear throughout the poem. “In Pahlavi Prison” repeats the word “blood,” either alone or in adjectival or compound constructions, seventeen times, a trademark of Soltanpur’s diction that led some mocking critics to dub him “Dracula” in the 1970s.⁸⁷ But if some critics find the prevalence of blood in the poem distasteful, the theory of combative art would respond that poetry must represent the material conditions and the conditions for political prisoners are indeed awash with blood. So “In Pahlavi Prison” serves the larger struggle by sensitizing its audiences to the objective conditions behind the prison walls.

While the poem’s lyric voice/narrator creates an air of objectivity, however, the same narrator also takes special care to neither objectify nor mythologize its protagonist. Of course the protagonist, who is referred to only as “the man,” does endure extreme suffering and still chooses to die rather than to surrender to his captors. The poem takes us into the man’s thoughts and his imagined final words to his mother before facing his own execution at sunrise:

*ârâm a...y mâdaram, âram
 begozâr tâ sepideh barâyad
 begozâr bâ sepideh bebandand
 posht-e marâ beh tir
 begozâr tâ barâyad “âdash”
 begozâr tâ setâreh-ye shelik
 divâneh ’vâr begozarad az kakhshân-e khun*

Calmly, mother, calm
 allow the morning light to rise
 allow them to bind at first light
 my aspirations to the stake
 allow the call of “fire” to rise
 allow the star of the discharge
 to pass madly through this galaxy of blood

⁸⁷ Yusof, *Now’i az Naqd Bar Now’i az She’r: Barresi-ye She’r-e Dowran-e Siyahkal va She’r-e Sa’id Soltanpur*, 109.

While the poem here depicts the man as brave and resolute, it does not go so far as to ascribe superhuman qualities to him. In fact, the very use of “man” to denote the protagonist reflects Soltanpur’s deliberate, ideological choice to avoid terms with mythical or religious connotations, as in “hero” (*ghahremân*) in the case of the former or “martyr” (*shahid*) in the latter.⁸⁸ In fact, Soltanpur’s carefully selected “man” even appears in poems with stronger epic undertones, poems like “Winter Squall” (*Esfand Bâd*), as a means of marking the basic humanity and commonness of the individuals who choose to combat the regime.⁸⁹ Soltanpur’s humanizing portrayal of fallen comrades becomes a defining feature of his particular brand of committed poetry and contrasts significantly with the way that Shamlu mythologizes his heroes in a poem like “Abraham in the Fire,” which I discuss in chapter four. In a poem like “In Pahlavi Prison,” objectivity means that the poet conveys his protagonist’s heroic resistance but also his suffering, both the physical suffering of torture and incarceration and also the psychological anguish that the man experiences in separation from his family and with the knowledge that they too suffer from his absence. The poem once again enters the man’s thoughts:

*dar khâneh'am, cheh dur
 az shisheh'hâ-ye panjereh mahtâb-e nimshab
 afshândeherd-e sukhteh-ye anduh
 ânjà dar ashk o dud neshasteh'ast mādaram
 ânjà gereftēh zânu-ye gham dar baghal, pedar
 bâ zhâleh'hâ-ye rikhteh, bâ guneh'hâ-ye khis
 khwâbideh ru-ye mashq-e shabâneh, barâdaram
 bar sineh-ye "saḥar"
 âshofteh'vâr rikhteh gisu-ye hamsaram
 âmikhteh tarâneh-ye lâlâ'i
 bâ geryeh'hâ-ye u
 mādaram resideh tâ saḥar-e e'dâm
 bi ekhtiyâr mi shekanad hây hây-e u
 ammâ pedar hanuz
 tâbideh ru-ye zânu-ye anduh
 az geryeh'hâ-ye khoftēh gerânbâr ast*

at home far away
 midnight moonbeams through window panes
 scattering grief's ashen dust
 there my mother sits in smoke and tears
 there my father clutching sorrow's knees
 with dew drops spilled, with dripping cheeks

⁸⁸ This point about Soltanpur intentionally humanizing his poetic protagonists with the word “man” (*mard*) was explained to me by Saeed Yousef (Saeed Ghahremani) in conversation on December 16, 2011.

⁸⁹ Soltanpur, *Avazha-ye Band*, 48-9. See Appendix, page 143, for my translation of the poem in full.

my brother asleep on his nightly assignments
my wife's disheveled ringlets spill
on Dawn's chest
lullaby mingled
with her bouts of weeping
mother until the dawn of execution
involuntarily breaks her sobs
but father still
curled on sorrow's knees
weighted by the sleeping cries.

The humanizing aspect of these lines could provide a useful counterpoint to a general characterization of the Iranian Left that has gained currency in recent years. The characterization, as articulated by a number of Iranian intellectuals, accuses the various Iranian Marxist organizations, be they the pro-Soviet Tudeh or Soltanpur's anti-Soviet Feda'i, of propagating hagiographic self-histories and rendering martyrs out of anyone who happened to die while also professing sympathy for the organizations' causes.⁹⁰ While such a characterization undoubtedly contains some truth to it, "In Pahlavi Prison," I would argue, complicates any monolithic narrative of the Iranian Left. While the poem's "objective" lyric voice esteems steadfastness over compromise, while it celebrates self-annihilation as heroic sacrifice for an ideological position, it does not lose sight of the real human suffering that each act of heroism necessarily entails. If we are to read Soltanpur's poetry as one representative voice from within the Iranian Left, a reading that Soltanpur's involvement with the OIPFG certainly supports, then it is especially important to note how the poetry, even on a discursive level, not only refuses to deify its protagonists but also reflects seriously upon the human consequences of its combative disposition.

But of course "In Pahlavi Prison" does not constitute a treatise on guerrilla activism, Leftist or otherwise, and any thorough reading of the poem requires consideration beyond the lines' rhetorical or communicative content. Even as the poem moves away from the ghazal's formal constraints, so too does it maintain palpable echoes of the classical tradition that plant the language firmly in the domain of the lyrical. For example, the poem maintains one rhyme and refrain throughout in the manner of a classical ghazal or qasideh, which creates a sense of pacing and sonic coherence. To capture this lyrical coherence in English, all of the following lines would have to rhyme in English: "he stays restless like a flame...stays awake...here, what countless springs have burned...weighted by the sleeping cries...this is blood and will remain... at work with his bloody arms." Unlike a classical lyric, "In Pahlavi Prison" breaks from its rhyme and refrain and ends on the dissonant but semantically loaded "prison window" (*panjareh-ye band*). Referring to another poem in *From the Slaughterhouse*, Saeed Yousef explains that Soltanpur did not think that two discordant words or subject matters

⁹⁰ See, for example, the entries for "Khosrow Ruzbeh" or "Samad Behrangi" in Abbas Milani, *Eminent Persians: The Men and Women Who Made Modern Iran, 1941-1979*, 2 vols. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 277, 838.

(*maṭlab*) should share a rhyme.⁹¹ So the word “prison” (*band*) on which the poem ends should logically disrupt any comfortable sense of musicality because the poem does not serve to make a comfortable experience of prison. This final sonic break marks the poem’s turn away from classical poetics and towards the modern. Yousef relates such a break to a quote from the widely-acknowledged “father” of modern Persian poetry (*she’r-e now*), Nima Yushij, where Nima argues that “sometimes not having a rhyme is itself exactly the same as rhyme.”⁹² In the case of “In Pahlavi Prison,” the lack of rhyme in “prison” pulls the poem towards Nima and his successors’ conception of a “new” poetry for the modern historical epoch. And yet the preceding rhymes and refrains pull the poem back in the opposite direction, toward the types of formal complications that we encountered in “Prison Lyric.” The rhymes and refrains, after all, neither express a particular tenet of revolutionary theory nor resist a particular despotic structure. But they do affect the poem by grounding it once again in a literary tradition. The lyrical elements serve the poem as an aesthetic form and in doing so they problematize any claim that poetry and politics can become one and the same. And as these formal elements distinguish “In Pahlavi Prison” from discursive theoretical prose, I would label this particular poem a “quasi-ghazal.” The “quasi-” in such a label expresses how Soltanpur can only arrive at the ruptures and dissonances of “In Pahlavi Prison” after extensive experience with the classical form, experience demonstrated both through his ghazals proper and through the echoes reverberating in the current poem’s points of rhythmic symmetry.

“In Pahlavi Prison’s” quasi-ghazal form raises certain difficulties for the reader. On the one hand, the inconsistent rhymes create a sense of unpredictability along with the pacing. Unlike the entirely regular and thus predictable rhythm of “Prison Lyric,” the quasi-lyric does not allow us to be lulled by its musicality. On the other hand, the lyrical quality of “In Pahlavi Prison’s” language does not allow the same clarity of meaning that we encounter in a later poem like “Communist Victor” (“*Jahân-e Komunist*”) that I discuss below. By lyrical language I mean that, beyond rhyme and meter, “In Pahlavi Prison” does not conform to the rules of modern Persian syntax. For example, in the opening stanza, Soltanpur writes, “*ârâm mi tarâvad dar barg’hâ-ye zakhm/ chun qeṭreh’hâ-ye âdash/ khun az jedâr-e tafteh-ye rag’hâyash.*” To “translate” these lines into standard, communicative prose, they should read, “*khun az jedâr-e tafteh-ye rag’hâyash chun qeṭreh’hâ-ye âdash dar barg’hâ -ye zakhm ârâm mi tarâvad.* Or, to render the syntactical peculiarity into English, instead of writing, “blood flows calmly from his veins blazing walls into the leaves of the wound like fire drops,” Soltanpur writes something like “flows calmly in the leaves of the wound from his veins’ blazing walls, like fire drops, blood.” This deviation from standard syntax suggests that the poem works towards something other than direct communication of meaning and as a result creates certain difficulties for the reader. The reader here must unpack the lines, must think about how the language performs a function distinct from unmarked communicative prose. The poem’s difficulties, in other words, demand a certain type of reflection on the part of its recipient. Walter Benjamin identifies a profound role

⁹¹ Yusof, *Now’i az Naqd Bar Now’i az She’r: Barresi-ye She’r-e Dowran-e Siyahkal va She’r-e Sa’id Soltanpur*, 118. Yousef refers to the poem “Ghazal-e Delavaran” (Ghazal of the Courageous) but the point applies equally well to “In Pahlavi Prison.”

⁹² *Ibid.*, 117.

for difficulty in lyrical poetry when he opens his famous essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” with the following sentence: “Baudelaire envisaged readers to whom the reading of lyric poetry would present difficulties.”⁹³ Benjamin argues that subjective experience in general has become increasingly difficult with the rise of capitalism because commodification and conceptualization have limited the opportunities for individuals to exercise critical judgements. Baudelaire’s genius was to compose a lyric poetry that expresses the difficulty of experiencing lyric poetry under such conditions and, in doing so, opens possibilities for working through those difficulties and arriving at aesthetic experience. To make sense of “In Pahlavi Prison’s” particular difficulties, we can riff on Benjamin and conclude that Soltanpur envisaged an audience for whom the experience of prison would present difficulties. The poem’s graphic representation of torture-inflicted wounds and mental anguish might offer a window into the difficult reality of incarceration. But from another direction, the poetic challenges that arise from inhabiting a quasi-ghazal space--its unsettled musicality and fragmented syntax--require effort on the part of the reader before accessing any combative ideological content. That effort, when applied to the reading of a poem, translates to reflective judgement, a process that gives rise to the feeling of experience. “In Pahlavi Prison’s” difficulties finally open the possibility for a feeling of the prison experience about which it sings.

Communist Victor (*Jahân-e Komunist*)

Soltanpur’s artistic and political career entered a new phase following the Shah’s fall. As Saeed Yousef explains, Soltanpur had composed poems in praise of the OIPFG throughout the 1970s and gradually increased his involvement with the organization as the revolution gained momentum.⁹⁴ But when the OIPFG split in 1980, Soltanpur enlisted as official propagandist for the Minority faction; in Yousef’s words, Soltanpur no longer walked the tightrope between poetry and sloganeering--he had now become a professional sloganeer.⁹⁵ Soltanpur’s poetry likewise reflects his evolving organizational commitments; while earlier poems like “Prison Lyric” and “In Pahlavi Prison” work through the experiences of an independent poet with revolutionary inclinations, the later poems often ignore the personal and address only the needs of the revolutionary organization that they serve. Yousef dismisses much of these final poems as hastily composed slogans for specific political events, arguing that Soltanpur himself would not take such poems seriously.⁹⁶ However, even in his final phase of professional militancy, Soltanpur the self-appointed sloganeer produced some poems that address emotions and experiences outside of the guerrilla organization’s day-to-day demands. Soltanpur’s last known poem, “*Jahân-e Komunist*” (which I translate as “Communist Victor” for reasons that I will explain below), marks in many ways the culmination of the poet’s career and the final

⁹³ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books 1969), 155.

⁹⁴ Yusof, *Now‘i az Naqd Bar Now‘i az She‘r: Barresi-ye She‘r-e Dowran-e Siyahkal va She‘r-e Sa‘id Soltanpur*, 155.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 155-6.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

intersection of his aesthetic and political commitments.⁹⁷ Yousef describes the work as a masterful “documentary poem” (*she‘r-e mostanad*) on account of the way that it captures both the objective events of Bahman 17, 1359/ February 6, 1981--the day the OIPFG Minority held its first meeting after the organizational split--and also “those feelings of fervor, anxiety, anger, stress, and excitement” that a participant would experience at such events.⁹⁸ As a historical document, the poem records how agents of the newly formed Islamic Republic stormed the meeting, assaulted its participants, and arrested one of their leaders, Jahangir Qal‘eh Miyandowab, who turned up dead sometime thereafter in the state morgue. The poem opens with a clear, disturbing image of the murdered leader:

goluleh‘i dar dahân
goluleh‘i dar cheshm

A bullet in the mouth
a bullet in the eye.

Soltanpur’s earlier calls for objectivity in some sense come to full fruition in the documentary quality of these opening lines. The poem begins with an empirical observation of Qal‘eh Miyandowab’s body in its final state, an image verified by photos of the corpse that have circulated on the internet in more recent years.⁹⁹ The poem then proceeds to document the actions, slogans, and sentiments that shaped the meeting and the subject’s last day alive, in a much simpler, more straight-forward language than that encountered in Soltanpur’s earlier poems. In other words, one aspect of the poem works to document the “facts” or the objective realities from that momentous day. At the same time, to describe “Communist Victor” as a documentary *poem* rightly acknowledges that a poetic aspect functions distinctly from other forms of documentation or documentary work.

To begin with the title, Soltanpur’s *Jahân-e Komunist* not only acts as historical documentation and combative ideological posturing, the seemingly straightforward words also open a possibility for reflective experience. The word *komunist* leaves little doubt as to the poem’s ideological allegiances. But to capture the title’s undetermined qualities in English, the word *jahân* requires at least three distinct translations. On one level, “Jahân-e Komunist” mourns the individual death of Jahangir Qal‘eh Miyandowab, shortened to “Jahan,” as one of Communism’s fallen heroes. Accordingly, the title should translate as “Jahan the Communist.” But *jahân* in Persian is not only a fairly common man’s name; the word *jahân* also means “world” so that the same title must translate as “Communist World.” In this sense, the poem not only mourns Jahan’s death, it also resists his murderers’ policies by creating, in an aesthetic space, the world that the fallen hero wished to bring into existence, i.e., a Communist world. And on yet a third level, which Soltanpur brings to the surface later in the poem, *jahân* forms one of

⁹⁷ Soltanpur, Sa‘id, “Jahan-e Komunist” in *Ibid.*, 156-66. See Appendix, page 150, for my full translation.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁹⁹ At the time of writing, I have been unable to locate any of these photos.

the present participles (the other being *jahandeh*) of the verb *jahidan*, meaning "to spring, bound, leap, etc," so that the title also means "Communist Springing." These three meanings do not contradict one another, but if the words *Jahân-e Komunist* invite multiple understandings, which is to say that if the words leave one free to exercise judgements before arriving at their meaning, then the title does not and cannot function as slogan, or at least it does not function as slogan alone. Slogans, after all, should transfer objective, meaning not-open-to-interpretation, content while *Jahân-e Komunist* immediately invokes interpretation. I have renamed Soltanpur's hero in my English translation and retitled the poem "Communist Victor" with a similarly open-ended reading in mind. Perhaps my English will not open as many poetic possibilities as Soltanpur's *jahân* but the sound experience of "Communist Victor" at least suggests how the poem simultaneously inhabits both the personal and the political, the historically particular and the ideologically universal.

Just as the title anticipates an aesthetic experience, "Communist Victor's" form also suggests the particular way that any poetry interacts with history and ideology, even poetry that aims to document objective events. Between "Prison Lyric" and "In Pahlavi Prison," I have observed a process through which Soltanpur goes from writing traditional ghazals with rigid rhyme and meter to more loosely-arranged quasi-ghazals with occasional rhyme and lines of varying length. The process reaches its logical end in "Communist Victor." Despite its unrhymed, un-metered language, the poem retains such a strong imprint of Soltanpur's earlier formal exercises that it warrants a new categorical label of "post-ghazal." While abandoning the classical ghazal's recurring rhymes, "Communist Victor" performs variations on its opening lines with a series of images that drive the poem forward and create a sense of coherence and organic unity, replacing "A bullet in the mouth/ a bullet in the eye" with "A firelight in the mouth/ a firelight in the eye" and then "A sunburst in the mouth/ a sunburst in the eye" and later "A lightning bolt in the mouth/ a lightning bolt in the eye" and so on (*sho 'leh' i dar dahân/ sho 'leh' i dar chashm...khworshidi dar dahân/ khworshidi dar chashm...âzarakhshi dar dahân/ âzarakhsi dar chashm...*). This refrain replaces classical poetry's aural rhyme with a semantic one and in doing so retains a ghazal's sense of pacing and mounting inevitability each time that it returns to its mono-rhyme and refrain. Soltanpur has dropped the formal elements and kept that feeling--he has de-aestheticized the ghazal without disposing of the tradition entirely. Saeed Yousef explains the motivations behind this de-aestheticizing process. According to Yousef, intellectuals like Soltanpur adopted a more populist revolutionary platform after the Shah's fall.¹⁰⁰ In Soltanpur's case specifically, the poet consciously dropped the obscure or archaic vocabulary that he used at times in *From the Slaughter House* in order to make his poems accessible for wider audiences.¹⁰¹ "Communist Victor" undoubtedly reflects this populist drive, as the language approximates contemporary, communicative Persian prose. To this point I would add, though, that "Communist Victor" can only use such simple language to achieve its controlled sense of pacing and its echoes of classical form because the poet has worked through the tradition. In other words, the post-ghazal label that I affix to the poem implies that the poet mastered the classical form and internalized what for him constituted the tradition's essential qualities before then popularizing

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 154-5.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 155.

his diction. Yousef raises a similar point at the end of his book when he reminds younger poets that Soltanpur studied poetry seriously and that his acrobatic exercises on the tightrope between poetry and sloganeering required hard work and extensive experience.¹⁰²

“Communist Victor” does at places treat language primarily as a vehicle for promoting the guerrilla organization’s official history; in doing so, the poem loses its delicate balance on the tightrope that Yousef identifies and falls conclusively into the realm of unpoetic sloganeering. In these places, the poem seems to respond to the least reflective aspects of the theory of combative art. For example, the following lines voice the OIPFG’s historical narrative, contesting the Islamist’s claim that Marxists played no role in overthrowing the Shah, but they do not invoke an experience of reflection or mourning:

gol'hâ-ye chehel o noh
gol'hâ-ye tâ emruz
gol'hâ-ye hamisheh
golhâ-ye jangal o
gol'hâ-ye shahd
gol'hâ-ye fedâ'i
kharman, kharman
az siyâhkal
tâ qiyâm
kharman, kharman
az qiyâm
tâ emruz.

flowers of '71
flowers from then until now
eternal flowers
jungle flowers
and ambrosial flowers
Feda'i flowers
harvested heaps
from Siyahkal
to the uprising
harvested heaps
from the uprising
until today.

While the lines might serve to rally the already-sympathetic Feda'i partisans and guerrillas, they do not, for me, offer access to the feelings of either revolutionary fervor or personal mourning that the poem elsewhere masterfully achieves. These lines, in voicing the organization’s narrative directly, give up on the vivid images and novel metaphors that make the emotions running

¹⁰² Ibid., 166.

already subjective level of experience. Of course, “Communist Victor” does not proffer any unified poetic or political theory--that work is left for critical and discursive prose. But the poem does create a dialectical balance between its metaphors and its politics. The poem begins with the objective events of the February 6th meeting, then lifts off into metaphor as the emotions of fervor and mourning grow too powerful to express through empirical description. And the poet exhibits remarkable control of this dialectic on the poem’s final word, which presents neither a concrete image nor an extended metaphor, but rather seals the poem with “history,” an ideologically resonant term:

dar miyân-e pelâkârd'hâ
“enqelâb”
bâ pishâni-ye shekasteh o khunchekân
mi khwânad
bâ şedâ-ye derakhshân-e “jahân” o
rudkhâneh'hâ
va rafiqân-e “jahân”
“jahân-e komunist râ
mi sorâyand o
mi sorâyand
bâ dasteh gol'hâ'i az khun
bar farâz-e miting-e târikh.

Among the banners
the Revolution
with its forehead split and bleeding
calls
with Victor’s shining voice
and rivers
and Victor’s comrades
sing
“Communist Victor”
and they sing
with bouquets of blood
at the head
of the meeting
of history.

In its final lines, “Communist Victor” enacts a point that gets lost in the theory of combative poetics. “Communist Victor” can respond to, enter dialogue with, or interpret ideology, but the poem can never perform the same work as either ideology or political activism precisely because it works through experience. The poem works toward the *feeling* of ideological conviction, gives a sense of what it feels like to occupy its hero’s particular time and place, but without actually demanding any specific emotion or action in response. In other words, the

poetic language suggests what it might feel like to chant slogans with conviction, but it does not assume that we have already arrived at the same concepts.

V. Conclusion: Problems in Biography

In this chapter, I have intentionally kept biographical considerations of Saeed Soltanpur to a minimum. Soltanpur's literary-intellectual output, I contend, warrants serious consideration on its own terms, without collapsing the poet's complex, dialectical aesthetics and the events of his life into interchangeable points on a single timeline of Iranian revolutionary history. But if I have managed to remove Soltanpur's poetics from a strictly biographical framework, then I have resisted what seems to be a common impulse in contemporary intellectual discourse, for Soltanpur's ideological commitments and extra-literary political activities have largely defined the poet's legacy in the decades since the Iranian Revolution.¹⁰³ Any cursory internet search will reveal that the Soltanpur who has endured in collective memory is the Soltanpur who devoted his personal and, eventually, his professional life to radical activism. Attention to such activities, while unquestionably significant, tends to understate Soltanpur's aesthetic contributions to modern Persian poetics. Thus, a typical on-line biographical entry first describes Soltanpur as a "Communist and revolutionary poet and playwright" who suffered "medieval torture" and then, when it does turn to his artistic endeavors, describes his poetry as a "weapon" and his readings (*shab'hâ-ye she'r*) as "centers of rebellion and movement" (*markaz-e shuresh va harekat*).¹⁰⁴ This representation not only prioritizes the poet's life events over his published words, but it follows the theory of combative art's basic assumption that political and aesthetic activities can constitute one and the same. Accordingly, the connection between, say, Soltanpur's prison poems and his actual prison experiences will seem inherent and absolute. However, as I hope this chapter's close readings have demonstrated, Soltanpur's poetry consciously challenges any attempt to define his own or any other aesthetic work as purely objective. The poetry, in other words, opens a space for considering Soltanpur as poet *and* member of Communist organization without assuming that the former can always serve the latter in direct, quantifiable terms. Nonetheless, if Soltanpur's politics have overshadowed his aesthetic legacy, then the circumstances surrounding his death have supported a similarly-partial collective remembrance, for the poet upheld his own model of artist as warrior to the end.

Having considered Soltanpur's engagement with complex aesthetic debates, his proficiency in the classical canon, and his reworking of the ghazal tradition to accommodate his contemporary poetics, I will conclude at the point where most discussions of Soltanpur begin. Sa'id Soltanpur, poet and playwright, was arrested at his own wedding ceremony by the security

¹⁰³ Although the trend seems to be changing. A recent biographical dictionary of Persian writers includes an entry for Soltanpur and describes his contributions to modern Iranian drama and poetry, Mohammad Reza Ja'fari, *Farhang-e Adabiyat-e Farsi* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Mo'in, 1387[2008]), 85. Such an entry would have been unthinkable during the 1980s, when the Islamic Republic enforced an unofficial but total ban on so much as mentioning Soltanpur's name in public forums. Saeed Yousef describes how the poet Simin Behbahani first defied this ban and dedicated a poem to Soltanpur at a reading: Sa'id Yusof, "Gami Doshvar Beh Su-ye Sadegi," *Iran Nameh* 23, no. 1-2 (Spring-Summer 1385/2006).

¹⁰⁴ "Biografi-ye Kutah: Sa'id Soltanpur," <http://www.iwsn.org/aashr/1/asn/pur/0.pdf>, accessed March 6, 2012

forces of the Islamic Republic on April 16, 1981.¹⁰⁵ The official charges included “having a criminal record, smuggling money, [and] being a member of the [OIPFG],” though the government denied access to an attorney and has yet to provide any evidence that the defendant received a fair, open trial.¹⁰⁶ Soltanpur was executed by firing squad in Evin Prison two months after his arrest, on June 21, 1981, at the age of forty-one.

¹⁰⁵ For a detailed description of the day of the arrest, see Sarvar Ali Mohammadi, "Revayati Digar Az Dastgiri-ye Sha'er-e Mobarez," *Arash*, no. 84. (Arash, 84), <http://www.arashmag.com/content/view/305/50/>, accessed March 7, 2012.

¹⁰⁶ The most rigorous reconstruction of the circumstances surrounding Soltanpur's arrest and execution are available on line at <http://www.iranrights.org/english/memorial-case-35843.php>, last accessed March 7, 2012.

Chapter Two: Living in Lyric: Shafi‘i Kadkani’s Poetics of Moral Outrage

...those who use...empty and vain slogans...are destitute of any imagination of or feeling of what such greed, racism or imperialism is like. The poet’s role is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it.

- Robert Duncan in a letter to Denise Levertov

Refrain is one of the most valuable of all form methods. Refrain is return to the known before one flies again upwards.

- John Steinbeck

I. Introduction: Poems in Prison or Prison Poems?

Among the many compelling details that he relates in his firsthand account of arrest, torture, imprisonment and eventual trial before the infamous Death Commissions of 1988, former political prisoner Mehdi Aslani at one point notes that he had considered titling his book “Thorn Bush” (*gavan*) after a poem by Mohammad Reza Shafi‘i Kadkani.¹ The story behind this potential title serves as an allegory of resilience under extreme physical and mental duress, though with perhaps a surprising turn. Aslani’s incarceration began in 1984 in the dreaded Komiteh Detention Center, a vestige of the Pahlavi monarchy that the security forces of the Islamic Republic had commandeered after the revolution.² From the time that plainclothes agents blindfolded him in the unmarked car that carted him off to Komiteh until his assignment to a solitary cell one month later, Aslani experienced a state of near constant sightlessness, for the prisoner was required to wear his blindfold at all times, whether during his interrogations and processing, his transfer between various points in the building, or in the long stretches of silence on the floor of the prison corridor. Only after arriving at his cell could Aslani finally remove his blindfold and view his surroundings freely. There, among the many poems and slogans etched on the walls of the tiny cell, Aslani’s eyes landed first upon Shafi‘i Kadkani’s famous poem. At this point in the memoir, Aslani assumes that his readers will know which poem he means when he reports that he encountered Shafi‘i Kadkani’s “Thorn Bush;” the author apparently feels no need to provide either the poem’s formal title or any of its lines.³ But considering that Shafi‘i’s words seem to have resonated so profoundly with the author’s prison experience, the poem warrants a full citation and further consideration here.

“Thorn Bush” of course refers to “Safe Travels” (*Safar Beh Kheyr*), the second poem in Shafi‘i Kadkani’s popular 1971 collection *On The Garden Pathways of Nishapur* (*Dar*

¹ Mehdi Aslani, *Kalagh va Gol-e Sorkh* (Cologne, Germany: Arash Books and Magazine, 2009), 118-22.

² “Komiteh” is short for *komiteh-ye moshtarak-e zedd-e kharâbkâri* (The Joint Committee Against Subversion). See Chapter 2, f.n. 86 for more on Komiteh Prison in Sa‘id Soltanpur’s poetry. Surprisingly little scholarship exists on the facility, considering its central role in both the monarchy’s and the Islamic Republic’s efforts to eliminate their opponents with brute force. However, Jafar Yaghoobi’s recent memoir presents English readers with brief historical background and unprecedented, firsthand descriptions of the prison’s interior. See Jafar Yaghoobi, *Let Us Water the Flowers: The Memoir of a Political Prisoner in Iran* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2011), e.g. 382, f.n. 5.

³ Aslani, *Kalagh va Gol-e Sorkh*, 120.

Kuchehbâgh'hâ-ye Neshâbur).⁴ Pari Azarm Motamedi translates the title as “A Good Journey I Wish You.”⁵ Here is Motamedi’s translation of the poem in its entirety, as Aslani presumably found it etched into the wall of his cell:

‘To where, with such haste?’
the thorn-bush demanded of the wind.
‘My heart is afflicted by this place,
do you not have a yearning to travel
away from the dust of this desert?’

My whole being yearns, but
what can I do with my feet tied...’

‘To where, with such haste?’

‘I’m heading for anywhere except this place.’

‘A good journey I wish you, but for the love of God,
when you’ve safely escaped from this brackish
wasteland,
give my greetings,
to the blossoms, and the rain.’⁶

On one hand, Shafi‘i’s wind and thorn-bush in this short poem may invite a symbolic reading, the former standing in for revolutionary activists who risk their comfort and lives in pursuit of a better world and the latter for passive or otherwise inactive but sympathetic bystanders who confine themselves to the familiar and known. Following this logic, Aslani may have seen the thorn bush as an apt symbol for his own sense of shame and sorrow, years later, at having survived the mass executions of 1988 that killed thousands of his prison mates and comrades.⁷ On the other hand, it immediately strikes the reader, especially after contextualizing the poem’s appearance within a political prison memoir, that Shafi‘i’s words remain devoid of any overt references to prison or ideological struggle. While one may choose to interpret the images in any number of ways, the poem at its surface presents only a natural setting, with flora and meteorological elements forming the central figures. Indeed, in terms of referential content alone, one can hardly label Shafi‘i’s work a “prison poem” in the vein of poems like Sa‘id Soltanpur’s “Prison Lyric” or “In Pahlavi Prison,” which I discuss in chapter one. Furthermore,

⁴ Mohammad Reza Shafi‘i Kadkani, *A'ineh-i Bara-ye Seda-ha* (Tehran: Sokhan, 1376/1997), 242-3.

⁵ *In the Mirror of the Stream*, ed. Alan Williams, trans. Pari Azarm Motamedi, Contemporary Persian Poetry, 5 (Tehran: Sokhan, 2008), 135.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 135-7.

⁷ Aslani estimates at least 3,700 prisoners executed in the summer of 1988, Aslani, *Kalagh va Gol-e Sorkh*, 331.

Shafi'i's dialogic format here does not invoke the same singular and authoritative celebration of personal resistance that one encounters in Soltanpur's or his militant peers' more combative verse. The appearance of this particular poetic dialogue, then, in its highly politicized space, raises interesting questions about poetry's role in political struggle. What significance do Shafi'i's ambiguous words carry in a setting where one reasonably expects to encounter a protest poem or slogan? Why, in other words, during a heightened wave of attacks against secular leftist organizations such as Aslani's Organization of Iranian People's Fadaiyan (16th of Azar/December 7th faction), in a prison cell reserved for recently tortured bodies, does the ideologically committed prisoner find meaning and solace in Shafi'i's decidedly nonpartisan if emblematic words?⁸

I began the last chapter with the seeming paradox of Sa'id Soltanpur opening a politically charged poetry reading with a passage from Hafez. In that case, the Marxist activist poet turned not to any contemporary voice of revolutionary commitment--a Darwish or Neruda, for example--to imbue his performance with ideologically contestatory meaning; rather the militant poet turned to the classical Persian canon. I begin this chapter with another paradox of sorts. Here, the notably non-activist scholar and poet Shafi'i Kadkani undergoes a rewriting process whereby his words reemerge as a form of direct action, if for no other reason than because the act of inscribing words on the cell wall defies the prison authorities' attempts to subjugate the detainee. At the time that he published the poem in 1971, Shafi'i had just begun his career as professor of Persian literature at Tehran University. And by the time that Aslani encountered his "thorn bush" in Komiteh Prison thirteen years later, Shafi'i had established his international reputation as an authority on Persian literature and Islamic mystical texts.⁹ Though his *On The Garden Pathways of Nishapur* had received popular acclaim as a work of Siyahkal poetry in the 1970s (as I discuss below), Shafi'i the scholar, not unlike the natural images of the wind and thorn bush, avoided direct affiliation with any political organization or cause. It would seem, then, that either the prisoners in Komiteh read an intentionally coded message into Shafi'i's words that somehow provided a directive on how to act in their predicament or, more likely, that the prisoners understood Shafi'i's poetry and therefore poetry in general as a unique form of cultural expression that, while intrinsically relevant to the prison experience or to other manifestations of social struggle, necessarily remains distinct from either direct discursive formulations of political resistance or platforms for any particular revolutionary program. That is to say that the poem, the poet, and the poem's reappearance in the prison text all suggest a more contemplative understanding of poetry's social commitment than that of militant theorists like Soltanpur, an understanding that allows for poetry's aesthetic and historical particularities to shape the way that any given poem responds to contemporary social exigencies.

⁸ The particular theoretical and/or practical disputes among the various Marxist factions hold little relevance for the present discussion. For more on the numerous splits within the Organization of Iranian People's Fadai Guerrillas, see Vahabzadeh, *A Guerrilla Odyssey: Modernization, Secularism, Democracy, and the Fadai Period of National Liberation in Iran, 1971-1979*, 69-77. Vahabzadeh briefly recounts the formation of the December 7th faction, which Aslani joined, *Ibid.*, 74.

⁹ For more on Shafi'i's academic career, see Kamyar Abedi, *Dar Rowshani-ye Baran: Tahlil va Barresi-ye She'r-ha-ye Mohammad Reza Shafi'i-Kadkani (M. Sereshk)* (Tehran: Ketab-e Nader, 1381/2003), 28-36.

In this chapter, I argue that Shafi'i's notion of socially-engaged poetry cannot be separated from the poetry's aesthetic and contemplative work, which centers especially around the poet's sustained dialogue with classical Persian and Islamic mystical texts. Shafi'i's incorporation of Sufi terminology, concepts, and forms (in the sense that he incorporates entire lines from classical poetry) not only reflects the poet's experiences as a scholar, but also shapes his distinct poetics. This poetics warrants the "neoclassical" label to the degree that elements of the classical canon resurface in the poems as commentary on contemporary events. More importantly, Shafi'i's understanding of poetry ultimately treats the social content of poems as a natural and necessary extension from poetry's primary role as a vehicle for contemplative discourse, which in the Persian context means especially Islamic and Sufi thought. Thus while Shafi'i's poetry often expresses a moral outrage towards the same corrupted socio-political order and celebrates the same opposition figures that one encounters in Soltanpur's poetry, Shafi'i's poetics must ultimately be understood within a context of spiritual discursive writings in Persian and Arabic that imagine themselves as instances of a Truth beyond the human or the material.

II. The Current Scholarship: Neoclassical Poetics as Radical, Reflective and Reactionary

Three Critical Views

Mohammad Reza Shafi'i Kadkani's poetry has received increasingly celebratory acclaim in recent years, with some critics even suggesting that the poet deserves a seat in the hallowed pantheon of post-Nima Yushij modernists, a place typically if arguably afforded only to the quadrumvirate of Ahmad Shamlu, Forugh Farrokhzad, Mehdi Akhavan Sales and Sohrab Sepehri.¹⁰ But while Shafi'i's overwhelming success as a literary scholar stretches at least as far back as his graduate student days at Tehran University in the 1960s, his poetry has not always enjoyed such unanimous critical approval.¹¹ In fact, even in limiting the discussion to Shafi'i's so-called "Siyahkal" poetry, or poems referring to the armed struggle that erupted in Iran's Siyahkal region in 1971, critics have disagreed, at times sharply, on the artistic and societal value of the works. In this section, I identify three critical positions on the tension between, and reconciliation of, aesthetic and socio-political commitments in Shafi'i's poetry from precisely the period when Shafi'i most actively engages the commitment question. As I detail below, literary historians like Shams Langarudi and Shafi'i himself tend to read Shafi'i's poems from the 1970s in terms of their referential gestures and therefore classify them as Siyahkal poetry, generically concurrent with militant poems from the same years. Critics like Mojtaba Bashardust and Kamyar Abedi, on the other hand, seek to demonstrate the universality of Shafi'i's poetry; as such their critical view minimizes the significance of specific historical references and emphasizes the ways that the poems speak to a timeless and placeless human experience. Reza

¹⁰ Baqer Mo'in, "Shafi'i Kadkani, Seda-ye Zamaneh," *Jadid Online* November 19, 2012.

¹¹ As Kamyar Abedi reports, upon completing his monumental dissertation, *Sovar-e Khiyal dar She'r-e Farsi* [Imagery in Persian Poetry] in 1969, Shafi'i's advisors Foruzanfar and Natel Khanlari (perhaps the two most luminous figures in Persian literary studies at the time), invited the thirty year old Shafi'i to join the faculty at Tehran University, Abedi, *Dar Rowshani-ye Baran: Tahlil va Barresi-ye She'r-ha-ye Mohammad Reza Shafi'i-Kadkani (M. Sereshk)*, 29.

Baraheni's polemical critiques typify the third critical view; according to Baraheni and like-minded detractors of Shafi'i's poetry, the works negate any possibility for contemporary relevance as they remain hopelessly lost in the classical and the academic.¹² While all three views provide useful insights for thinking about Shafi'i's poetics of commitment, as I finally argue, none of these views sufficiently considers the ways that Shafi'i's sustained dialogue with classical Persian and Islamic mystical texts profoundly informs his writing of poetry as socio-political critique and socio-political critique as poetry.

The Siyahkal Paradigm

As I discuss at length in chapter two, critics like Shams Langarudi, Saeed Yousef, and Shafi'i Kadkani himself have identified the years 1349/1971 to 1357/1979 as the "Siyahkal decade" in modern Persian poetry. To rehearse the argument once more: the attack by Marxist guerrillas against a gendarmerie outpost in the jungle hamlet of Siyahkal on February 8, 1971, inspired a new wave of poetry that made coded reference to those and subsequent armed actions as a form of cultural-intellectual support for the militants combatting the monarchy. So, for example, a poem like Shafi'i's "Threnode" (*Suk Nâmeḥ*) typifies the new movement when it opens with the line "Wave by wave the Caspian in mourning wears black," for here the initiated reader immediately recognizes the natural elements as referents for the heroic deaths of the guerrillas in Siyahkal (near the Caspian sea), marking an occasion for the deepest and most sincere mourning.¹³ This poetry of armed struggle, the aforementioned critics report, dominated the Iranian literary scene throughout the decade, just as militant liberation theories dominated the various opposition movements that eventually coalesced and culminated with the monarch's ouster in 1979. What can be added to this brief summary is that the same critics treat Shafi'i's *On The Garden Pathways of Nishapur* (1971) as one of the foundational works of what they variably call "Siyahkal," "guerrilla," or "jungle" poetry and *On Living and Lyric* (*Az Budan va Sorudan*) (1977) as a summation of Shafi'i's mastery over that poetic mode.¹⁴

Shafi'i's poetry becomes written into the Siyahkal paradigm in a number of critical texts. Shams Langarudi considers *On The Garden Pathways of Nishapur* one of the finest representatives of "jungle poetry" (*she'r-e jangal*) as well as one of the best collections of the decade in general.¹⁵ Likewise, Shams Langarudi considers *On Living and Lyric* one of the few examples of "guerrilla poetry" (*she'r-e cheriki*) in which the poet also demonstrates mastery of

¹² Baraheni's critiques appear in his revised edition of *Tala dar Mes*, published in 1992. The 1968 edition makes no reference to Shafi'i's work.

¹³ Shafi'i Kadkani, *A'ineh-i Bara-ye Seda-ha*, 301-02. Originally published in *Dar Kucheh Bagh'ha-ye Nishapur* (1971). See Appendix, page 172, for my translation of the poem in full.

¹⁴ For more on the latter collection, see Shams Langarudi, *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She'r-e Now (Jeld-e Chaharom 1349-1357)*, 4, 459-60. Shafi'i's *Az Budan va Sorudan* translates more literally as "On Being and Composing Poetry." I have translated the title as *On Living and Lyric* to maintain some of the sonic affinity in the Persian.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 185.

classical literary modes and poetic language.¹⁶ The critic believes that Shafi'i's poems in the Siyahkal period gained widespread popularity, especially among "political intellectuals," on account of their "clearly revolutionary content, Nimaic structures [i.e. lines of varying lengths], neoclassical (*nowqodamâ'i*) aesthetics...and rapid, fluid rhythms."¹⁷ Furthermore, Shams Langarudi argues that the collections also gained popularity because they were written by Shafi'i Kadkani, meaning by a prominent professor of Persian literature.¹⁸ In other words, the critic implies that the collections possessed some form of cultural authority that endeared the poems to their public, regardless of, or at least separate from, the public's approval or rejection of guerrilla warfare as a viable means of liberation. Thus Shams Langarudi places the poems within a Siyahkal paradigm because of their references to historical events, but he views their popular success through other aesthetic and extra literary features. Interestingly, Shams Langarudi also mentions that Shafi'i, along with only two of his contemporaries, the poets Ne'mat Mirzazadeh and Ali Musavi Garmarudi, contributed "the first noteworthy religious poems in modernist modes" to the Persian literary scene, but he does not elaborate on how religious imagery or themes might alter the terms of a Siyahkal genre of poetry.¹⁹

Shafi'i, too, groups his poetry with other representatives of the Siyahkal period, describing the poets of this school as "either participants in the armed struggle or those who praise it."²⁰ Like Shams Langarudi, Shafi'i sees the point of commonality among the various poets as their use of natural elements to represent events and heroes from the guerrilla movements.²¹ And though he does not include himself when he lists the prominent poets from the period--a list that includes Sa'id Soltanpur, Ahmad Shamlu, Khosrow Golesorkhi and Saeed Yousef--Shafi'i includes in his list "[other] young poets whose works we see in the collection *Poetry of the New Movement*."²² In fact, Shafi'i's poetry, including "Threnody," figures prominently in *Poetry of the New Movement*, an anthology edited by Saeed Yousef under the pseudonym Feda'iniya.²³ One can infer, then, that Shafi'i concurs with the classification of his poems under the rubric of the "New Movement," as the editor refers to the armed struggle in the collection's title. Considering how the act of anthologizing "rewrites" an author, to use Lefevere's term, it is interesting to note how Shafi'i's poetry appears in Yousef/Feda'iniya's anthology.²⁴ For example, "Threnody" appears as the first poem in chapter three, which includes

¹⁶ Ibid., 459-60.

¹⁷ Ibid., 186.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 76.

²⁰ Shafi'i Kadkani, *Advar-e She'r-e Farsi az Mashrutiyat ta Soqut-e Saltanat*, 79.

²¹ Ibid., 81.

²² Ibid., 79.

²³ Feda'iniya, *She'r-e Jonbesh-e Novin: Enqelab-e Iran Dar She'r-e Mo'aser*.

²⁴ André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, Translation Studies (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

the subheading “poems mourning the Fada’i martyrs.”²⁵ Thus “Threnody’s” defining feature becomes its political subtext, even though the poem never specifies the people or organizations that its “scattered flowers,” “black-robed,” and so on purportedly symbolize. This point becomes more significant when we compare “Threnody” to the poem that immediately follows it in the collection; F. Pashaki’s “Red Field” (*Mazra’-e Sorkh*) includes the heading “for those executed in Esfand ‘50 [February/March, 1971].”²⁶ This poem, unlike Shafi’i’s, actually names its heroes, as in a line like “...martyrs such as Katira’i, Targol, Taherzadeh, Karimi, Madani” (line 11).²⁷ Apart from the contrasting degrees of explicitness between the two poems, one also notes their stark contrast in form: Pashaki’s “Red Fields” lacks any semblance of meter or rhyme while Shafi’i’s adheres to the formal requirements of a classical ghazal, meaning that the poem maintains a coherent meter and a single rhyme throughout. When Shams Langarudi refers to Shafi’i’s “neoclassical” aesthetics, he undoubtedly has features such as this poem’s appropriation of classical forms in mind. However, neither Feda’iniya’s anthology, by placing “Threnody” alongside a work of free verse, nor Shams Langarudi’s literary history, by using terms like “guerrilla poetry,” questions the category that it establishes. Rather, the definition of “Siyahkal poetry” in all these cases remains straightforward and uncomplicated: the poems refer to specific events related to Siyahkal so they constitute Siyahkal poetry. According to the Siyahkal paradigm, then, Shafi’i’s incorporation of classical language, imagery, or forms does not problematize the category in any significant way.

Baraheni addresses and ultimately rejects the categorizing of poems as “Siyahkal” or “guerrilla” but not on account of their formal features. Rather, Baraheni dismisses Shafi’i’s characterization in *Periods of Persian Poetry*²⁸ as a superficial attempt to write Persian poetry into the prevailing theoretical preoccupations of the day, which for the 1970s meant primarily the role of guerrilla warfare in Iranian society.²⁹ In other words, Baraheni essentially charges Shafi’i with critical trendiness. While this critique helpfully cautions against submitting poetry too broadly to any one particular theoretical trend, Baraheni does not offer an alternative way of looking at the poetry from the Siyahkal period. If the guerrilla framework proves problematic, then Baraheni, at least in his critique of *Periods of Persian Poetry*, never offers an alternative framework that can address the referential affinities in the poems from the Siyahkal period while also providing a way to think beyond those references. That is to say that Baraheni’s critique does not offer a way to re-read the poems beyond their socio-political content.

The Canonical View

²⁵ Feda’iniya, *She’r-e Jonbesh-e Novin: Enqelab-e Iran Dar She’r-e Mo’aser*, 80.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁷ The names refer to members of an underground cell calling itself People’s Ideal Group (*Goruh-e Arman-e Khalq*), all of whom were executed in 1971. Vahabzadeh, *A Guerrilla Odyssey: Modernization, Secularism, Democracy, and the Fada’i Period of National Liberation in Iran, 1971-1979*, 32-3.

²⁸ Shafi’i Kadkani, *Advar-e She’r-e Farsi az Mashrutiyat ta Soqut-e Saltanat*.

²⁹ Reza Baraheni, *Tala Dar Mes: Dar She’r va Sha’eri* 3 vols., [Revised 1992 Edition] (Tehran: Nevisandeh, 1371[1992]), 1881-2.

The critics who celebrate Shafi'i's poetry agree with Baraheni that the poems about Siyahkal mark an outmoded trend but they treat this social orientation as a logical early stage in the evolution of a first-rate poet. Bashardust's study, for example, focuses on Shafi'i's intellectual development in his roles as an academic and a poet, neither of which requires a well-defined ideological commitment, much less membership in a political organization.³⁰ Bashardust concludes that Shafi'i never wrote "art for art's sake" (i.e. a purely "uncommitted" poetry), but in his earlier collections like *In the Language of Leaves (Az Zabân-e Barg)* (1968) and *On The Garden Pathways of Nishapur* he wrote "poems for society's sake."³¹ Only in his later poetry, Bashardust continues, does Shafi'i transcend the slogan-prone idea of art for society and start composing "art for humanity."³² Underneath this argument, of course, lies the assumption that an authentic or first-rate poetry cannot limit itself to associations with a particular time or place. Bashardust does, in fact, argue that a socially oriented poem like "Threnody" possesses some artistic value, but, just as in Hafez's poetry, the value derives exactly from the fact that the poem treats essential, "contradictory themes" (*omur-e motanâqez*) like "reality and truth, present and future, body and soul, love and mysticism, life and death, sorrow and joy, the world and the hereafter."³³ Bashardust ultimately seems to locate the defining feature of a poem like "Threnody," then, not in the socio-political context of its composition but rather in its ambiguity, which allows the poem to acquire new meanings after the "dust of forgetfulness has settled" on the socio-historical context.³⁴ Indeed, Bashardust implies that Shafi'i's poems become worth reading precisely because they do *not* fit within a Siyahkal paradigm.

Kamyar Abedi likewise attempts to write Shafi'i's poetry outside of any socio-political context by arguing for its universality. Abedi does acknowledge that the struggle against the monarchy plays a central role in a collection like *On the Garden Paths of Nishapur* and he even equates the "literary value" of the poems with that of contemporaneous, combative poets like Said Soltanpur and Khosrow Golesorkhi.³⁵ However, Abedi's overarching thesis states that Shafi'i has always been more of a romantic rather than a political poet and that in the decades after the revolution, his poetry *improved* by treating larger cultural concerns, which he defines as the question of how to recover and re-appropriate the authentic Iranian past.³⁶ Abedi's assessment therefore implies that the "political" poetry necessarily remains inferior to the "cultural" poetry on account of its content. Like Bashardust, Abedi here seems to assume that he

³⁰ Mojtaba Bashardust, *Dar Jostojuy-e Nayshabur: Zendegi va She'r-e Mohammad Reza Shafi'i Kadkani (M. Sereshk)*, Chehreh'ha-ye She'r-e Mo'aser-e Iran (Tehran: Nashr-e Sales, Nashr-e Yushij, 1379/2000).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 202.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁵ Abedi, *Dar Rowshani-ye Baran: Tahlil va Barresi-ye She'r-ha-ye Mohammad Reza Shafi'i-Kadkani (M. Sereshk)*, 59.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 130-41.

must deemphasize the historical particularities of Shafi‘i’s early poetry in order to write the poet into the modern canon; according to this logic, the “Siyahkal” moniker precludes the possibility of a truly canonical verse.

The Anti-Classical Critique

Baraheni agrees with Abedi on the inferiority of the poems that concern themselves with Siyahkal, but he does not reject the “political” verses on account of their attempts to intervene in social movements. Rather, he dismisses Shafi‘i’s entire body of work as fundamentally flawed in its poetics.³⁷ For Baraheni, Shafi‘i’s engagement with classical forms and themes negates any possibility for contemporary relevance in the poetry. As Baraheni sees it, Shafi‘i writes poems that at first glance appear innovative since they cascade down the page in imitation of the modernist forms pioneered by Nima Yushij (1896-1960) but, upon closer inspection, adhere so rigidly to the classical ghazal tradition that they contribute nothing to modern Persian poetics. According to Baraheni, “the poems that Shafi‘i believes to be Nimaic are not Nimaic; they are ghazals that have been written to look like staircases (*pelekâni*) and that have had the rhymes from some of their hemistichs removed.”³⁸ Thus labeling the poems “ghazals” for Baraheni constitutes a denunciation in and of itself; where critics with a view towards the canon see “political” as an inherently negative label, Baraheni treats “classical” as synonymous with “outmoded” and therefore irrelevant.

To unpack the aesthetic assumptions in his critique, Baraheni, at least in the passage from *Gold in the Copper (Tala dar Mes)* cited above, positions himself as a Nimaic critic, arguing that Shafi‘i’s poetic structures do not accord with Nima’s modern and modernist innovations. In this sense, Baraheni formulates a critique grounded in the essential link between form and content. Baraheni does not argue that a poet must break entirely from preexisting aesthetic traditions or reinvent forms anew, but he does argue that an “authentic” poet like Nima engages and transforms his or her traditions from within and, in doing so, creates new poetic forms that maintain a dialectical continuity with the past while at the same time accommodating the visions and perspectives of contemporary life.³⁹ Here, Baraheni resorts to an organic metaphor, arguing that poetry should become a living organism, genetically linked to its predecessors but adapted to its present environment.⁴⁰ So when Baraheni denounces Shafi‘i’s poetry as “ghazals,” he implies that since the poems’ forms have not evolved in any meaningful way for nearly a millennium, then they cannot properly express contemporary content, political or otherwise. It may be interesting to note here that Baraheni later rejects the Nimaic label in an essay titled “Why I Am

³⁷ Baraheni, *Tala Dar Mes: Dar She‘r va Sha‘eri* 1875-83.

³⁸ Ibid., 1882. Bashardust, Shams Langarudi, and Abedi all cite Baraheni’s argument. As far as I know, however, my discussion here is the first to put these various critics in dialogue in English. See Bashardust, *Dar Jostaju-ye Nayshabur: Zendegi va She‘r-e Mohammad Reza Shafi‘i Kadkani (M. Sereshk)*, 202. Shams Langarudi, *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She‘r-e Now (Jeld-e Chaharom 1349-1357)*, 4, 194. Abedi, *Dar Rowshani-ye Baran: Tahlil va Barresi-ye She‘r-ha-ye Mohammad Reza Shafi‘i-Kadkani (M. Sereshk)*, 182-3.

³⁹ Baraheni, *Tala Dar Mes: Dar She‘r va Sha‘eri* 367.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

No Longer A Nimaic Poet.”⁴¹ However, in that essay Baraheni does not change his argument about the dialectic between form and content; instead, he reassesses Nima’s poetics to argue that the modernist pioneer, at least in his theoretical writings, applied a Cartesian worldview in treating form as entirely distinct from content.⁴² Baraheni therefore concludes that he should not be bound to any one poet’s theory and should not be considered a follower of Nima or any other poet. Regardless of labels, though, the relevance for the present discussion of Baraheni’s various engagements with modernist poetics returns to the idea that Baraheni demands forms that “deviate from the patterns, criteria, and norms of the language of both the past and the present,” not for the sake of change itself, but as an organic component of changing human experiences.⁴³

But what begins as Baraheni’s aesthetic critique of Shafi’i’s work extends into a personal attack against the poet himself. Baraheni concludes that since Shafi’i’s poetry has not risked departure from classical forms, then the “...poetry is conservative and reeks of the poetry of the ‘literati’ (*adib*) poets rather than imaginative, visionary, and authentic poets. When we have taken no risks in our lives, in our environments, in the end we will also remain conservative in our poetry, prose, politics, research, and thought. And Shafi’i must endeavor to position himself beside a true modernity.”⁴⁴ Here, Baraheni implies that one’s personal, political and professional endeavors define the nature of his or her poetic output. One can only speculate on what he has in mind when he accuses Shafi’i of having taken no risks in his life. Perhaps he alludes to the fact that he himself spent time in prison under both the monarchy and the Islamic Republic for his writings while Shafi’i’s academic career continued, for the most part, uninterrupted.⁴⁵ Regardless of what he has in mind, however, Baraheni’s charge, since he never qualifies the accusation, undermines his more interesting arguments on form and provides an opening for Bashardust’s retort. Bashardust counters the personal attack as overly political, arguing that Baraheni believes that poets must serve as politicians, a role that may have served the Constitutional poets in the early twentieth century but does not remain relevant today.⁴⁶ But Bashardust’s dismissal does not address a larger shortcoming in Baraheni’s critique, namely, that Baraheni resorts to a vague personal attack instead of elaborating on how and why he believes that Shafi’i’s incorporation of classical modes *inherently* negates the possibility of writing an effective, contemporary, socially engaged poetry. One must refer to Baraheni’s writings elsewhere, as I discuss them above, to make sense of the critic’s distaste for what he sees as stagnant and ossified poetic modes.

Shafi’i’s writings, both his poetry and his scholarly-critical output, offer a counterargument to Baraheni’s formalist, anti-classical critiques and the unqualified personal attack beneath them. For Shafi’i, it would seem, one can utilize the ghazal framework creatively

⁴¹ *Khetab beh Parvaneh-ha va Chera Man Digar Sha'er-e Nima'i Nistam* (Tehran: Markaz, 1374[1995]), 123-97.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 128-29.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴⁴ *Tala Dar Mes: Dar She'r va Sha'eri* 1882-3.

⁴⁵ For Baraheni’s prison experiences under the monarchy, see *The Crowned Cannibals: Writings on Repression in Iran* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 131-208. Or *God's Shadow: Prison Poems* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1976), 11-26.

⁴⁶ Bashardust, *Dar Jostojuy-e Nayshabur: Zendegi va She'r-e Mohammad Reza Shafi'i Kadkani (M. Sereshk)*, 202.

to articulate a modern world view. In other words, a poet can use the ghazal form consciously and reflect upon the form's continued significance in modern society. One point where Shafi'i implicitly defends such a position occurs in his writing on the Urdu/Persian poet Mohammad Iqbal Lahuri (1877-1938). Shafi'i argues that Iqbal successfully "gives shape to the human experience of our own epoch" through his appropriation of the classical form, not by rejecting it: Iqbal's poem "Birth of Man" (*milâd-e âdam*), in Shafi'i's estimation, articulates the impressions of a man who

has read and absorbed Marx and Engels alongside Mowlavi [Rumi] and Shaykh Shabestari and Hegel and Nietzsche and Hafez and who has in any regard developed an independent worldview. We might not accept this worldview today but we cannot say that Iqbal does not possess an independent worldview or consider him a mere imitator (*moqalled*) of classical Persian poets."⁴⁷

Shafi'i's selection of Iqbal as his model thinker here is anything but random. As Iqbal represents, in Annemarie Schimmel's estimation, the "spiritual father of Pakistan," one is hard-pressed to separate the poet's engagements with Islamic and European poetics and philosophies from his profound influence on the development of a modern state.⁴⁸ Shafi'i does not go so far as to argue that Iqbal's poetry should be deemed modernist. However, in drawing our attention to the way that Iqbal develops an "independent" worldview within the structural confines of classical forms, Shafi'i complicates any claims that a poet cannot simultaneously inhabit "classical" and "modern" poetic spheres or that doing so necessarily negates the poet's socio-political relevance.

Rethinking Neoclassicism

None of the above characterizations of Shafi'i's poetry investigates how the poet's mastery of classical Islamic and especially Sufi idiom arises from and informs his poetics, which in turn shapes his understanding of socially engaged verse.⁴⁹ In fact, Shafi'i's historically and theoretically complex engagement with the Persian canon makes it minimally useful to think of his references to Siyahkal as totally congruous with combative poetics. In other words, the fact that Shafi'i's poems refer to or even praise the actions of armed militants does not mean that the poems necessarily articulate the militant poetics that I observed in the previous chapter. At the same time, however, Shafi'i's poetics does address both the possibility of and the need for contemporary socio-political commentary, meaning that the poems consciously respond to the question of how poetry will commit to social change. Underneath Shafi'i's appropriation of classical Islamic modes in his Siyahkal poems lies an assumption that the tradition--i.e. the

⁴⁷ Mohammad Reza Shafi'i Kadkani, *Ba Cheragh va Ayeneh: Dar Jostojuy-e Risheh'ha-ye Tahavvol-e She'r-e Mo'aser-e Iran* (Tehran: Sokhan, 1390/2011), 674.

⁴⁸ "Iqbal, Mohammad." *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Accessed March 26, 2013.

⁴⁹ Shams Langarudi does at one point mention that Shafi'i published one of the first collections of "New Poetry" with religious themes but he does not elaborate on how the poems' religious orientation reflects or shapes the way the poetry works, *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She'r-e Now (Jeld-e Chaharom 1349-1357)*, 4, 76.

already-existing literary canon--provides all the necessary material with which to voice contemporary resistance. So while Baraheni correctly identifies the profoundly classical idiom of Shafi'i's verse, he falls short of asking how Shafi'i engages classical poetics specifically to resolve intellectual inquiries related to contemporary material conditions.

In the following section, I consider how Shafi'i's scholarly-theoretical writings on the poetic image suggest how a theory of commitment in his poetry might begin to work. Shafi'i's analysis of the image as poetry's constitutive element, I argue, directly informs the spiritual-mystical undertones and neoclassical forms and diction that permeate his own poetry. Ultimately, as his vast body of scholarship suggests, Shafi'i treats poetry as an object of study and a vehicle for contemplative thought. As such, poetry serves as a locus for imagining various realities, a mission that not only allows for poetry to simultaneously voice ideological stances on contemporary issues, regenerate the classical poetic canon, and reformulate mystical discourses, but indeed a mission in which these various elements naturally and necessarily coexist.

III. Imagined Realities: Shafi'i's Poetics in Theory

In comparison with Soltanpur, it is more difficult to locate a coherent response in Shafi'i's criticism to the question of how poetry will commit to society. To begin with, Soltanpur did not leave behind an extensive body of critical writings and the one book that he did leave behind--*A Type of Art, A Type of Thought*--as I have shown in the previous chapter, focuses primarily on the requirements of "combative" art. Shafi'i, in contrast, has published over a dozen authoritative studies of poetry since his monumental *Sovar-e Khiyal dar She'r-e Farsi (The Image in Persian Poetry)* first appeared in 1971.⁵⁰ In addition to the sheer quantity of his scholarly output, the fact that Shafi'i concentrates largely--though by no means exclusively--on classical Persian and Arabic poetics further suggests that one will not encounter a coherent and easily-summarized theory to explain how contemporary political struggles inform modern poetics. Since Shafi'i's critical writings do not take ideology or revolution as poetry's primary substance, then his theory of commitment, to the extent that such a theory exists, remains necessarily nebulous. Nonetheless, Shafi'i's scholarship in general and his work on the poetic image in particular do open possibilities for a socially relevant and engaged--if not a fully "committed"--art. In this section, I argue that Shafi'i's studies of the poetic image provide useful insights into the ways that social commentary and neo-classical poetics interact in Shafi'i's theoretical approach to poetry.

The Poetic Image As Constitutive Element

As the title suggests, the poetic image forms the keystone for analyzing poetic works in Shafi'i's seminal 1971 study, *Imagery in Persian Poetry*, whose lasting influence is reflected in

⁵⁰ For a complete bibliography of Shafi'i's work, see Bashardust, *Dar Jostojuy-e Nayshabur: Zendegi va She'r-e Mohammad Reza Shafi'i Kadkani (M. Sereshk)*, 543-54.

the book's multiple editions and re-printings in the decades since its initial publication.⁵¹ Drawing equally from 20th century English New Criticism, classical Islamic rhetoric, and what he sees as the common roots of both in Aristotelian poetics, Shafi'i traces the evolution of the poetic image (*sovar-e khiyâl*) in Persian poetry's first five centuries following the rise of Islam.⁵² Citing Aristotle and his descendants in both European and Islamic critical traditions, Shafi'i argues that poetry's defining feature occurs precisely in its use of imagery and imaginative language, not in its secondary mechanical elements like rhyme and meter.⁵³ In other words, an unmetred, unrhymed text with no consideration towards line breaks can still fulfill the requirements of poetry if the language works through poetic imagery; conversely, a rhymed and metered text does not become true poetry unless the author employs imaginative language.⁵⁴ But what exactly constitutes the poetic image, imaginative language, or imagery? Shafi'i defines the poetic image as a "subjective intervention" (*tašarrof-e zehn*) through which the poet shows "material and spiritual realities."⁵⁵ By subjective intervention, Shafi'i means that language becomes poetic when it departs from the straightforward and empirically-verifiable claims that one requires in logical discourse and instead presents relationships between humans, nature, and objects that originate in the author's imagination (hence the "subjective" quality of the intervention) and that express a feeling of truth. Shafi'i translates the English poet and critic C. Day Lewis's definition to clarify how the poetic image can include any number of devices or uses of figurative language.⁵⁶ In Day Lewis's own words, the poetic image fundamentally operates on the level of metaphor:

In its simplest terms, [the poetic image] is a picture made out of words. An epithet, a metaphor, a simile may create an image; or an image may be presented to us in a phrase or passage on the face of it purely descriptive, but conveying to our imagination something more than the accurate reflection of an external reality. Every poetic image, therefore, is to some degree metaphorical. It looks out from a mirror in which life perceives not so much its face as some truth about its face.⁵⁷

While much of Shafi'i's study then goes on to describe and catalogue various categories of poetic images, especially as identified by classical Islamic rhetoricians, C. Day Lewis's

⁵¹ The book had undergone fourteen editions as of 2010. Mohammad Reza Shafi'i Kadkani, *Sovar-e Khiyâl Dar She'r-e Farsi: Tahqiq-e Enteqadi Dar Tatavvor-e Imazh'ha-ye She'r-e Parsi va Sayr-e Nazariyeh-ye Balaghat Dar Eslam va Iran*, 14 ed. (Tehran: Agah, 1389/2010).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 7-9.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁵⁴ Shafi'i demonstrates these possibilities of poetry in prose and non-poetic verse with examples from Attar's *Tazkereh al-Awliya* and a Hafez ghazal stripped of its metaphors and figurative language. *Ibid.*, 4-6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁵⁷ C. Day Lewis, *The Poetic Image*, The Clark Lectures Given at Cambridge in 1946 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1947), 18.

definition captures the essence of Shafi‘i’s understanding of poetry as mimesis, meaning that poetic language “reflects” external, objective realities to the extent that the poet derives his/her substance from lived experiences, but that such a reflection also takes shape through the poet’s unique imagination and therefore presents an unreplicable picture of reality. From this basic definition of poetry as a subjective representation of life, one can begin to formulate a role for socio-political critique in the poetic text.

The Poetic Image in Political Dimensions

It perhaps bears repeating that *Imagery in Persian Poetry* never explicitly addresses the commitment question, even though the book appeared in the same years when Shafi‘i’s poetry voiced strong protest against the policies of the Iranian monarchy and the corruption that it perceived in various layers of the society at large. But if the academic study, in terms of its scientific language, systematic approach and the temporal expanse of its topic, seems removed from the more contentious debates on social struggle and liberation to which his poetry alludes, Shafi‘i’s theorization of the poetic image nonetheless accounts for the ways that poetry’s foundation in experience carries the potential for engagement with such debates, a potential realized in the moral outrage that emerges from his poetry. In *Imagery in Persian Poetry*, Shafi‘i defines poetry as a form of experience (*tajrobeh*), arguing that while human emotions are universal and as such can be described objectively, the poet represents and arrives at those emotions through original poetic images; poetic experience thus means something like the process of arriving at universal emotions through the poet’s particular (i.e. subjective) imagination.⁵⁸ Shafi‘i identifies the poet’s creative representation and discovery of realities as “primary experience” and the audience’s discovery or awakening to the same emotions and realities through the poem as “secondary experience.”⁵⁹ Thus far, nothing in Shafi‘i’s conception precludes the possibility of experiencing a poet’s emotional responses to politically relevant actualities, say, for example, his or her sense of spiritual disquietude about modern society’s vast mechanization or feelings of both sorrow and reverence towards an activist who willingly dies for a cause. Indeed, applying Shafi‘i’s theory to his own poetry, a passage like “The clean clear crystal of words has grown so opaque/ that the divine mission of the rose/ has opened a way/ to thornbushes, bugloss” constitutes poetry precisely because, on the one hand, we can sense that the lines warn us of a social order that has been disrupted and corrupted by unnatural human processes but, on the other hand, we arrive at such a conclusion through the way that the poet imagines language as a crystal that must be polished to allow light to shine through it or society

⁵⁸ Shafi‘i certainly does not consider the idea his own. He cites “the Islamic literary critic” Ibn al-Athir (1163-1269 CE) as the first to think of poetry as experience and includes references to several Western writers who pursue similar lines of thinking. Shafi‘i Kadkani, *Sovar-e Khiyal Dar She‘r-e Farsi: Tahqiq-e Enteqadi Dar Tatavvor-e Imazh‘ha-ye She‘r-e Parsi va Sayr-e Nazariyeh-ye Balaghat Dar Eslam va Iran*, 20.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

as a rose garden that has been overtaken by undesirable plants.⁶⁰ Likewise, to describe the fallen heroes of Siyahkal as “trampled flowers, scattered in the wind, /senseless off the wine of martyrdom” certainly implies that the guerrillas fought on the righteous side of a political struggle, but it does so through the poet’s imagining of the guerrillas as flowers, historical change as a wind blowing through a natural landscape and heroic death as an intoxicant that induces a temporary state of inebriation.⁶¹ In both cases, the socio-political referents do not make the emotional experience any less “poetic,” but the poet’s subjective imposition of imaginary relationships (we know, of course, that language is not a crystal, that death is not wine, and so on), and not his political commentary or his adherence to particular formal structures, provide the basis for aesthetic assessment.

Of course, Shafi‘i does place certain limits upon the emotional experiences that authentic poetry can pursue. *Imagery in Persian Poetry* explicitly defines two types of sentiments (*‘avâtef*) that do not befit good poetry:

Human sentiments cannot be quantified. They cannot even be classified in a precise manner because they are numerous and complicated. However, two groups of sentiments can be mentioned: the first are the sort of personal sentiments that compel us to act in our self interests, as in escaping from the battlefield, or [seeking] revenge, or expressing praise for the sake of material compensation and under the influence of personal incentives and desires. These types of sentiments are not emotional reactions (*enfe‘âlât*) that can provide a genuine impetus for art. The second category consists of distressful (*ranjâmiz*) sentiments that incite the audience’s suffering, such as jealousy, rancor, hopelessness and so on. Literature’s duty is not to incite those sentiments and one must not confuse depicting them, which is an artistic endeavor, with inciting them.⁶²

In the first category, Shafi‘i seems to have classical Persian and Arabic poetry with their long tradition of court panegyric in mind when he excludes desires for material gain from the range of poetry’s legitimate emotional experiences. But the problem with financial motivations, to push the argument further, only manifests in poetry when it produces uncritical and therefore unimaginative praise. Thus, writing about the modern period, when court-patronized poets have more or less disappeared from the literary landscape, Shafi‘i concludes that he has “never seen a pure party poem or a pure religious poem that also possessed artistic value.”⁶³ The question of “party poetry” certainly holds the most relevance for the current discussion but Shafi‘i’s categorical rejection of “pure” praise poems, regardless of the object of praise or the specific

⁶⁰ Shafi‘i Kadkani, “Prayer of Sudden Dread,” trans. Ahmad Karimi Hakkak and Dick Davis in Nahid Mozaffari and Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, eds., *Strange Times, My Dear: The Pen Anthology of Contemporary Iranian Literature* (New York: Arcade, 2005), 403. For the original poem see “*Namaz-e Khawf*” in Shafi‘i Kadkani, *A‘ineh-i Bara-ye Seda-ha*, 201.

⁶¹ Shafi‘i Kadkani, “*Suknameh*” (Threnode), see Appendix, page 172 for my translation of the poem in full.

⁶² *Sovar-e Khiyal Dar She‘r-e Farsi: Tahqiq-e Enteqadi Dar Tatavvor-e Imazh‘ha-ye She‘r-e Parsi va Sayr-e Nazariyeh-ye Balaghat Dar Eslam va Iran*, 25.

⁶³ *Zamineh-ye Ejtema‘i-ye She‘r-e Farsi* (Tehran: Akhtaran, 1386/2007), 398.

reward, if any, that the poet has in mind, suggests that the desire to uncritically elevate an individual, organization, or ideology will compromise the poem's imaginative quality. Saeed Yousef thinks further through the problem of uncritical poetry in an "interview with himself" when, considering the notion of "party art" (*honar-e hezbi*), he argues that an artist's work must always involve iconoclasm (*qâleb shekani*) in various forms and therefore cannot commit to consistently serving the interests of a political party.⁶⁴ Yousef, himself a onetime Marxist activist and political prisoner, adds an interesting layer of understanding to Shafi'i's critique of praise poetry, for both critics ultimately conclude that poetry must begin with the imaginative and thus necessarily subjective act, while uniform praise for a party, patron, or ideology limits the poet's emotional range. In other words, the emotional response that a poem incites cannot be determined before one experiences the poem itself while the types of financial or organizational commitments that Shafi'i and Yousef identify impose a predetermined emotional response upon the work.

In terms of poetry's emotional experience, when Shafi'i states that a poem should not evoke distressful sentiments like rancor, he adds an interesting point to the ubiquitous debate on poetry (*she'r*) versus sloganeering (*sho'âr*), though he does not use the latter term in *Imagery in Persian Poetry*.⁶⁵ True poetry, Shafi'i implies, cannot use images solely to experience feelings of enmity. Rather than a question of form or imaginative language, then, poetry differs from sloganeering in terms of the higher or more contemplative emotions that the former pursues. By this logic, a poem can degenerate into sloganeering by excessively denouncing a perceived enemy, whether an individual or a larger entity like a nation. This emphasis on denunciation and enmity as unpoetic emotional responses recalls the poem "Statue of Liberty" (*Mojasameh-ye Âzâdi*) by Shafi'i's contemporary, Ne'mat Mirzazadeh (M. Azarm).⁶⁶ Mirzazadeh (b. 1939) is often associated with Shafi'i, not only because of their poems' similarly anti-monarchical stances during the 1960s and 1970s, but also because they both composed "modernist poems using religious themes" and incorporated the linguistic particularities of their native Khorasan region.⁶⁷ However, "Statue of Liberty," in lines like the following, illustrates how a poet's efforts to invoke hostility towards an enemy, regardless of his mastery over forms or imaginative language, might contradict or undermine the types of "genuine" emotional responses that Shafi'i has in mind in *Imagery in Persian Poetry*:

She stands on a mound of dollars,
her blazing torch in hand,
a coarse colossus--in a saintly countenance--

⁶⁴ Sa'id Yusof, "Mofaveze Ba Khwish: Dar Havali-ye Eltezam-e Honari," *Cheshm Andaz* no. 4 (Bahar 1367/Spring 1988): 102.

⁶⁵ For more on the debates among Persian critics regarding poetry versus sloganeering, see my discussion in chapter two.

⁶⁶ Ne'mat Mirzazadeh (M. Azarm), *Sohuri: Daftari az She'r'ha-ye M. Azarm 1344-1348* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Raz, 1349/1970), 94-97.

⁶⁷ Shams Langarudi, *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She'r-e Now (Jeld-e Chaharom 1349-1357)*, 4, 76. Shams Langarudi also includes the same poem in his discussion of Mirzazadeh's *Sohuri*, *Ibid*, 77-79.

with a mighty torch
 with which to light
 the depths of the Bolivian thickets
 and there,
 with her other hand,
 to fell Che Guevara
 with a dagger through the heart
 and in the covert jungles of Congo
 to set fire to Lumumba's soul.

*bar talli az dolâr setâdeh ast
 dar dast mash'ali'ash foruzân
 ghuli khashen--beh chehreh-ye qeddisi--
 bâ mash'ali azim keh bâ ân
 a'mâq-e bisheh-ye bulivi râ
 rowshan konad
 vângâh
 bâ dast-e digarash "che gevârâ" râ
 khanjar beh qalb forud âvarad
 vandar nahân jangal-e congo
 âtash damad beh jân-e lumumbâ⁶⁸*

Mirzazadeh's lines here certainly do not lack in poetic imagery, as the poet imagines the lifeless statue committing the sorts of crimes that he believes it to represent. In terms of specific devices, the lines include personification (*tashkhiṣ*), which Shafī'ī defines as the poet's "subjective intervention on [inanimate] objects...whereby [the poet's] imaginative forces grant the object motion and mobility" and allow us to see the object as "animated and full of life" and which he considers "one of the most beautiful types of poetic image."⁶⁹ Likewise, the lines perform a type of what Shafī'ī categorizes as "metonymic acts" (*kenâyeḥ*) by imagining the atrocities of the whole nation or government through the part of its representative statue.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Mirzazadeh's rhymes and rhythmic structures mark the language as distinctly poetic, suggesting that the words perform a function apart from straightforward transfer of meaning. Yet the poem, I would venture, rings hollow and outmoded in comparison with Shafī'ī's more symbolic poems from the same period. Despite its creative imagery, Mirzazadeh's poem seems to pursue a provocation of anger towards the US which, regardless of such a sentiment's political validity, does not work as a poetic experience. In other words, applying Shafī'ī's framework, the poem's

⁶⁸ Mirzazadeh (M. Azarm), *Sohuri: Daftari az She'r'ha-ye M. Azarm 1344-1348*, 95-96.

⁶⁹ Shafī'ī Kadkani, *Sovar-e Khiyal Dar She'r-e Farsi: Tahqiq-e Enteqadi Dar Tatavvor-e Imazh'ha-ye She'r-e Parsi va Sayr-e Nazariyeh-ye Balaghat Dar Eslam va Iran*, 149.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

effort towards inciting anger undermines poetry's higher potential for actually experiencing and reflecting upon anger or any other emotion through the imaginative act.

But if Shafi'i's theory does not call for poetry to incite political anger or proclaim the poet's ideological stance directly, then how does the poetic image relate to the work of politics? In fact, Shafi'i's conception of the poetic image allows for a more subtle but no less radical political reading. The poet, after all, does not merely comment upon life; rather, by imagining relationships between humans and their material and spiritual worlds, s/he reframes our realities and redefines the concepts that govern them. Thus, Shafi'i sees poetry as intervening exactly in the sphere of what French philosopher Jacques Rancière deems the political. Rancière defines politics as

a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear; which allows or does not allow some specific subjects to designate them and speak about them. It is a specific intertwining of ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking.⁷¹

Rancière's definition of politics suggests why it is more radical to imagine in poetry than it is to express an already conceptualized political stance, for it is through poetry's imaginative act that one begins to think beyond the limits and structures of the existing world. Rancière's definition also explains why, in *Imagery in Persian Poetry*, Shafi'i argues that a poet's images improve, which is to say that they produce more profound emotional responses, as they draw more unexpected and less explicit relationships between humans and their worlds.⁷² Shafi'i contends, albeit implicitly, that the imaginative aspect of poetic relationships requires the exercising of critical judgement on the part of both the poet who creates such relationships and the audience who makes sense of them.

Because the act of imagining carries such direct political implications, Shafi'i, in another essay, rejects any poetry that uses images arbitrarily. In "Crossword Poetry" (*She'r-e Jadvali*), Shafi'i argues that the Iranian avant-garde poet Hushang Irani (1925-1973) incorrectly believes that poetic innovation means simply combining whatever images come to mind at random and allowing others to decide what kind of meanings emerge from the arrangements.⁷³ Shafi'i dismisses such writing as "crossword poetry," comparing the arbitrary meanings that emerge to the way that, when completing the horizontal words in a crossword puzzle, one can also complete many of the vertical words without giving their clues or meanings the least bit of thought.⁷⁴ On the contrary to Irani's use of imagery, Shafi'i thinks that the poet plays an active role in constructing meanings through purposeful arrangements of images. And here Shafi'i

⁷¹ Jacques Rancière, "The Politics of Literature," *SubStance* 33, no. 1 (2004): 10.

⁷² Shafi'i Kadkani, *Sovar-e Khiyal Dar She'r-e Farsi: Tahqiq-e Enteqadi Dar Tatavvor-e Imazh'ha-ye She'r-e Parsi va Sayr-e Nazariyeh-ye Balaghat Dar Eslam va Iran*, 70.

⁷³ *Zamineh-ye Ejtema'i-ye She'r-e Farsi*, 410.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 403-4.

comes up against Sartre's early delineation of his commitment theory. Shafi'i might agree to some extent with Sartre when the French philosopher argues that poets, unlike prose writers, use words as "images" rather than "signs," but Shafi'i's theory does not allow that using words as images automatically exempts the poet from political commitments.⁷⁵ Rather, the poet's conscious manipulation of imagery for Shafi'i means that a poem becomes a locus for imagining truth and, in doing so, initiates the kind of critical judgement that any political intervention requires.

The Poetic Image in Mystical Dimensions

If the poetic image in Shafi'i's conception carries political implications, the act of poetic imagining also extends into the realm of mysticism. On its most basic level, the image originates in the poet's imagination and therefore concerns aspects of reality and experience that cannot be verified or refuted with empirical evidence. Of course in Shafi'i's case, the very fact that he incorporates terminology and entire lines of poetry from classical poets like Rumi and Hafez into his own verse makes his exploration into Islamic mystical themes inevitable, for Persian poetry's historical development from at least as early as the eleventh century CE intertwines with that of Sufism.⁷⁶ In other words, Shafi'i's engagement with the Persian canon requires his engagement with Sufi images, concepts and themes. However, the poetic image in twentieth century English criticism also seems to challenge the limits of scientific discourse and elicit contemplation of non-rational aspects of existence. Thus, when C. Day Lewis explains the image's metaphysical significance, the one-time Communist Party member sounds less like a dialectical materialist and more like a pantheist concerned with the interconnectedness of being:⁷⁷

In my opinion, ...every image recreates not merely an object but an object in the context of an experience, and thus an object as part of a relationship. Relationship being in the very nature of metaphor, if we believe that the universe is a body wherein all men and all things are 'members one of another', we must allow metaphor to give a 'partial intuition of the whole world'. Every poetic image, I would affirm, by clearly revealing a tiny portion of this body, suggests its infinite extension.⁷⁸

Day Lewis makes no mention of Persian poetry but his "members of one another" rings loudly of the oft-quoted lines from Sa'di, "The sons of Adam are limbs of one another..." (*bani âdam a 'zâ-*

⁷⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *"What Is Literature?" And Other Essays*, trans. Steven Ungar (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 30.

⁷⁶ For a very brief history of Islamic mysticism in Persian poetry, see J. T. P. de Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry: An Introduction to the Mystical Use of Classical Persian Poems* (Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon, 1997), 1-5.

⁷⁷ For more on Day Lewis's political activities, see Peter Stanford, *C Day-Lewis: A Life* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 140-51.

⁷⁸ Day Lewis, *The Poetic Image*, 29.

ye yek digarand).⁷⁹ But whether or not the English critic knows that he has implicated his theory with medieval Persian and Islamic poetic endeavors, when Shafi‘i’s poetry develops images with mystical undertones, the Persian poet and critic undoubtedly knows that he not only draws from his own language’s tradition, but that he also demonstrates a universal principle by which all poetic images work. For example, when Shafi‘i’s “On Living and Lyric” calls its audience to “let the dawn rain/ gathered on the acacia/ mirror the Divine (*bârân-e şobhdam râ / bar shâkkeh-ye aqâqi/ â’ineh-ye khodâ kon*),⁸⁰ the poem’s mirror repeats “a common metaphor for the pure heart” in Islamic mystical discourse.⁸¹ Thus the poem reenacts the way that the image of the mirror in Sufi poetry teaches that a rightly guided believer should strive to purify the carnal self in order to reflect the attributes of the Divine. However, by using metaphors to conjure mystical concepts, in other words, by imagining relationships between rain, mirrors, and the Divine where we cannot say that such a relationship “objectively” exists, Shafi‘i also confirms Day Lewis’s general claim that poetry demonstrates “unverifiable truths.”⁸² When Shafi‘i theorizes the poetic image, then, he bridges the logical if latent affinities between Day Lewis’s spiritually inflected hypotheses and more fully developed Islamic mystical motifs like Ibn Arabi’s (1165-1240 CE) seminal concept of the “unity of existence.”⁸³

Day Lewis seems to identify a general affinity between poetry’s imaginative aspect and the way that gnostic traditions, regardless of denomination, pursue a type of extrasensory and therefore contemplative experience. Shafi‘i, however, relates the poetic image specifically to the Islamic traditions with which he is intensely familiar. When Shafi‘i argues in his scholarship or demonstrates through his poetry that the imagination manifests truths that the rational intellect cannot--the truth, for example, that “pure is He who causes all things to manifest and He is the essence of all things”⁸⁴--he implicates poetry’s work directly with Islamic mystical thought. And Shafi‘i does not simply allude to Sufi themes in a generalized or arbitrary manner; rather, he engages consciously with specific thinkers and concepts. Just as he calls for purposeful arrangements of poetic images as opposed to the free associations of “crossword poetry,” so too does Shafi‘i’s poetic engagement with Sufi discourse take determined intellectual stances. Fayzi demonstrates how Shafi‘i draws specifically from what he deems a Khorasani Sufi tradition that originated in the Islamic East, shaped such major mystical poets and figures as Bayazid Bestami (9th century CE), Farid al-Din Attar (12th-13th century CE) and Jalal al-Din Mowlana Rumi

⁷⁹ I have found no evidence that Day Lewis held any interest in the Persian language or its poetry, but it seems reasonable that he would have encountered Sa‘di’s lines at some point during his undergraduate studies in classics at Oxford: Stanford, *C Day-Lewis: A Life*, 45-61.

⁸⁰ Shafi‘i Kadkani, *A’ineh-i Bara-ye Seda-ha*, 252. See Appendix, page 165, for my translation of the poem in full.

⁸¹ Keshavarz, *Recite in the Name of the Red Rose: Poetic Sacred Making in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 82.

⁸² Day Lewis, *The Poetic Image*, 35.

⁸³ For more on Ibn Arabi’s thought, see Shafi‘i’s notes in Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *Tasavvof-e Islami va Rabeteh-ye Ensan va Khoda*, trans. Mohammad Reza Shafi‘i Kadkani (Tehran: Entesharat-e Sokhan, 1374/1995), 138-41. See also *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1994), 149-61.

⁸⁴ My translation of Ibn Arabi’s *fasubhâna man azhara al-ashyâ’ wa huwa ‘aynuhâ*. Shafi‘i considers this aphorism emblematic of Ibn Arabi’s entire concept of the unity of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), Karim Fayzi, *Shafi‘i-Kadkani va Hezaran Sal-e Ensan* (Tehran: Etela‘at, 1388/2009), 910-11.

(13th century CE), and upheld the value of human subjectivity while struggling against all forms of suffering.⁸⁵ Shafi'i contrasts this Khorasani Sufi tradition with the Arab-Andalusian Sufism that arose from Ibn Arabi's writings in the Islamic West, developed into an esoteric philosophical school with subsequent generations of Ibn Arabi's disciples, and placed little value in individual humans or their pain or hardships.⁸⁶ As an intellectual practice, Shafi'i argues, Arab-Andalusian Sufism suffers from an overly abstract language that ultimately treats contemplative discourse as nothing more than "playing with words" (*bâzi bâ alfâz*).⁸⁷ This critique implies that language does not or at least should not produce casual meanings; thus mystical writing, whether poetry or prose, must work purposefully, in other words, must commit, to the truths that it seeks to articulate. Therefore, if imaginative language turns the mind away from the type of rational thinking that requires empirical data, then, for Shafi'i, such non-rational thinking has been developed extensively in the Islamic mystical traditions and, in its positive forms, has provided the same avenues for emancipatory thought that befits a contemporary poetry and society.

Mysticism in Political Dimensions

The fact that the poetic image in Shafi'i's conception possesses both political and mystical aspects does not mean that the two aspects occur independent of one another. On the contrary, the particular way that the poetic image as a literary phenomenon and Sufism as a devotional practice both turn the subject away from sensory data and inward towards contemplative reflection directly informs the politics that emerge from Shafi'i's poetics, especially during the so-call Siyahkal period. That is to say that detaching oneself from the material world constitutes exactly the foundation for proper individual actions and social reform; the political becomes subsumed in the mystical. Nowhere does Shafi'i write political action into Sufi practice quite as explicitly as in his poems celebrating mystics from Islamic history, as in the poem "Hallaj" (1971), which refigures the 9th century gnostic, executed for his seemingly blasphemous proclamation of "I am the Truth," as a socio-political dissident.⁸⁸ Fatemeh Keshavarz has noted how Shafi'i's poem voices a "social commentary on the oppressive regime" that is also "imbued with vibrant spiritual pathos."⁸⁹ However, what can be added to Keshavarz's observation is that the poem's spiritual pathos provides the appropriate means through which to voice social commentary, not a casual byproduct. In the poem, one cannot reasonably disassociate the fact that Hallaj sings his "red songs" (hardly a neutral choice of color, particularly in 1968, the year that the poet includes as the date of composition) from that fact that he also recites a "prayer of love." Through prayer (and the Persian *namâz* leaves no question over the prayer's Islamic specificity), Hallaj performs an act of self purification that makes it

⁸⁵ *Sad'ha Sal-e Tanha'i: Dar Bab-e Ara-ye Shafi'i Kadkani* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Etela'at, 1388/2009), 438-9.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 438-39.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 439-40.

⁸⁸ "Hallaj" in Shafi'i Kadkani, *A'ineh-i Bara-ye Seda-ha*, 275-77. Originally published in *Dar Kuchehbagh'ha-ye Neshapur* (1971). See Appendix page 163 for my translation of the poem in full.

⁸⁹ Keshavarz, *Recite in the Name of the Red Rose: Poetic Sacred Making in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 82.

possible to remain steadfast through torture and execution, even as the “spectating crowd of vultures” does nothing to protest the hero’s unjust suffering. Thus Hallaj’s self purification also combats the societal corruption that allows such a barbaric scene to unfold. And Hallaj’s struggle against corruption reemerges generations later in the “chest-rent waywards of Nishapur” (*rendân-e sineh châk-e neshâbur*) who, in an act bearing no less Islamic mystical resonance, celebrate their drunkenness in public. Shafi‘i here draws both the term “waywards” (*rendân*) and the characterization of such figures directly from Hafez’s 14th century poetry, where the wayward represent those individuals who defy the hypocrisy endemic to their outwardly religious society, especially in the institutionalized Sufism that dominates public life, by taking their drunkenness and debauchery to the streets while more “pious” authority figures only practice such acts in private.⁹⁰ Thus the wayward, in their rebellious lack of outward piety, continue Hallaj’s struggle against social corruption by cleansing themselves of hypocrisy and deceit. While Keshavarz’s study focuses on common forms of “sacred making” in modern Persian poetry, then, I identify a qualitative difference between the way that Shamlu employs Biblical referents to put forth a universalized and fundamentally secularized conception of human liberation (as I discuss in chapter four) and the way that Shafi‘i treats mysticism as an “authentic” version of Islam that forms a discourse of resistance against corruption in various forms, if not a totalizing emancipatory ideology.

The idea that Islamic mysticism offers an effective means for socio-political reform requires some historical contextualization. *Imagery in Persian Poetry* and *In the Garden Pathways of Nishapur* both appeared around the outset of the armed struggle against the Shah, when the particularities of various opposition movements could be overlooked in favor of each group’s shared dissatisfaction with the monarchy. After the Islamic Republic’s triumph in 1979, and especially after thousands of Marxists of various stripes suffered imprisonment and execution in the decade to follow, an Islamic mystical poetry celebrating secular if not atheist martyrs may strike one as incongruous or distasteful at best. And Shafi‘i’s appropriations of Islamic themes have certainly changed in tone in more recent decades, as I address in this chapter’s conclusion. But his pre-revolutionary poetics of commitment nonetheless suggests the appeal of a theory that, lacking the historical precedence of a modern Islamic state with a supreme jurisconsult and mystical poet at its head,⁹¹ treats the poetic image, Islamic mysticism, and political action as concentric spheres working towards the same end. In this regard, Shafi‘i’s hints of gnosticism as political action reach their logical ends in Ayatollah Khomeini’s vision of religion and governance. In Shafi‘i’s pre-revolutionary writing, poetry purposefully engages with Islamic mystical discourse and mysticism and poetry both work towards an inward turn whereby the subject abandons concern with the material world in favor of purifying the self. In Khomeini’s writing, abandoning the material world constitutes the most important struggle for a

⁹⁰ For more on the *rend* as archetypal anti-corruption figures in Hafez’s poetry, see Lewis, Franklin. “Hafez viii. Hafez and Rendi,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hafez-vii-viii>, accessed July 22, 2012.

⁹¹ For a collection of Khomeini’s mystical poems, see Ruhollah Khomeini, *Badeh-ye Eshq: Ash‘ar-e Arefaneh-ye Hezrat-e Emam Khomeini* (Tehran: Mo’asseseh-ye Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Emam Khomeini, 1993). In English, see Ruhollah (trans. William Hanaway) Khomeini, "Five Mystical *Ghazals* by the Ayatollah Khomeini " *Iranian Studies* 30, no. 3-4 (Summer/Fall 1997): 273-76.

just social order that any individual can undertake, meaning that such an abandonment constitutes an inherently political act. In Khomeini's words:

Those who would dissuade people from engaging in supplicatory prayer and *dhikr* [inducing or maintaining a state of awareness of God, especially by means of the vocal or silent recitation of His Supreme Name] on the pretext of involving them more fully in the world do not understand how matters lie. They do not know that it is precisely prayer and the like that make man become a true human being so that he may conduct himself toward the world as he ought...Prayer and *dhikr* are the beginning of all things, for if man practices them correctly, they cause him to turn to the origin of his being in the unseen and to strengthen his attachment to it. Not only does this not deter him from activity, it even produces in him the best of activity, for he comes to understand that his activity should not be for his own sake but for the sake of God's bondsmen, and that his activity should be service to God.⁹²

Indeed, a poem like "Hallaj" anticipates Khomeini's view, for the poetic hero's political action originates precisely in his spiritual purity, not despite or alongside it. Hamid Algar further develops gnosticism's inherently political function in an essay dedicated to Khomeini. Algar views the "interconnectedness of the Gnostic and sapiential with the political and confrontational" as a fundamental and consistent component of Khomeini's thought, from his early theosophic writings like *The Uncovering of Secrets (Kashf al-Asrar)* (1945) through his final decade as the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic.⁹³ Algar traces the foundations of Khomeini's spiritual-political vision in his interpretation of Quran 34:46 ("Say: I enjoin upon you one thing only -- that you rise up for God, in pairs and singly, and then reflect."), concluding that "'Rising up for God' thus becomes both an act of personal redemption and a commitment to change and reform Muslim society, an insurrection equally against spiritual lassitude and neglect in oneself and against corruption, irreligion and tyranny in the world."⁹⁴ Shafi'i's treatment of mysticism as political, it seems, concurs with Khomeini's vision of political action originating in personal acts of worship.

Liberation in Return

That is not to say that Shafi'i's poetry voices support for the Islamic Republic, tacit or otherwise. But untangling the notion of socio-political commitment in Shafi'i's poetics does reveal basic affinities between his own theory and other revolutionary movements that see emancipatory potential in some form of return to a pure and authentic version of Islam. In this

⁹² Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), 399-400.

⁹³ Hamid Algar, "The Fusion of the Gnostic and the Political in the Personality and Life of Imam Khomeini (R.A.)," *al-Tawhid* Special Issue dedicated to Imam Khomeini (ra)(June 2003).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

sense, Shafi'i's reconciliation of poetic and political commitments differs significantly from that of his Marxist contemporaries like Soltanpur or secular humanists like Shamlu, even if their poetries all voice dissatisfaction with the same political regime. Indeed, Shafi'i's pre-revolutionary poetics, unlike the aforementioned poets, ascribes a central role to the very concept of return--return to an authentic Iranian identity as articulated in the classical poetic tradition, to an originary Islamic practice as perpetuated by mystics, and to a purified self as achieved through contemplative reflection. Neo-classicism, then, means not simply a re-appropriation of classical poetic forms or themes, but a vision of contemporary socio-political struggle that locates all the necessary concepts for social progress in the canon of pre-modern texts. As Algar recounts, Khomeini certainly upheld such a vision throughout his career, as when, in his role as Supreme Leader, he suggested "as a contribution to remedying the [crisis of Soviet breakup]... that Gorbachev dispatch Soviet scholars to Qum to study inter alia the works of Farabi, Ibn Sina, Suhrawardi, Mulla Sadra, and Ibn 'Arabi."⁹⁵ Shafi'i, in his role as literary scholar and poet, has not typically dispensed advice to world leaders; nonetheless, one observes the fact that his pre-revolutionary writings engage with the same classical Islamic thinkers to express a distinctly political dissatisfaction. In Shafi'i's neo-classical conception, poetry and politics remains in constant dialogue with their own history, drawing substance from precisely those preexisting texts. In the next section, I present close readings of the poetry in order to further analyze Shafi'i's dialogue with and return to this aesthetic and ideological past.

IV. Radical Returns: Reading *On The Garden Pathways of Nishapur*

On The Garden Pathways of Nishapur (Dar Kucheh Bâgh'hâ-ye Neshâbur)

As I have suggested throughout this chapter, Shafi'i's 1971 collection *On the Garden Pathways of Nishapur* marks a milestone in modern Persian poetics and in the debates surrounding committed literature in the pre-revolutionary years. The collection burst onto the poetic scene with an overriding spirit of social engagement and revolutionary fervor, an optimism that overturned the previous decade's looming sense of defeat and ushered in a new period of hope, idealism, and militancy in Persian verse. As a whole, *On the Garden Pathways of Nishapur* heralds the demise of a spiritually bankrupt, superficially "modern" socio-political order and pays tribute to the harbingers of its downfall, the guerrillas and activists who catalyze an imminent dawn.⁹⁶ But the poems do not only voice support for contemporary armed struggles. Rather, the collection appropriates and reworks a vast tradition of classical Persian and Islamic poetic and mystical texts, from its opening injunction to "Recite!" to its constant incorporation of terminology, rhythms, themes, and even entire verses from canonical figures like Hafez and Rumi. In this section, I demonstrate how Shafi'i's poetry responds to his theoretical articulations about neo-classicism, socio-political renewal, and the interaction between the poetic image and social critique.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Shams Langarudi, *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She'r-e Now (Jeld-e Chaharom 1349-1357)*, 4, 185-87.

The Opening (*Dibâcheh*)

The first poem of *On the Garden Pathways of Nishapur* opens the collection with a strong Qur'anic thrust. "The Opening" (*Dibacheh*) begins "Recite, In the name of...", an injunction that immediately invites any audience even slightly familiar with the Qur'an to recall the first verse of Surah al-'Alaq, "Recite, in the name of your Lord who created" (96:1), which according to tradition marks the first words revealed to the Prophet Mohammad.⁹⁷ Shafi'i adds a mystical dimension to his opening line, calling on his audience to "Recite in the name of the rose."⁹⁸ With the turn from "your Lord" to "the rose" the poem at once maintains its sense of sanctity by beginning with the scriptural injunction but also shifts to a mystical disposition by pointing to natural elements as manifestations of the same truths that the sacred text reveals. Fatemeh Keshavarz writes extensively and convincingly on the "Qur'anic rhythm" guiding Shafi'i's poem and argues that the poem "establishes close rhythmic, thematic, as well as temporal affinity with its scriptural model," i.e. the Qur'an.⁹⁹ In fact, Keshavarz sees Shafi'i's poem as so emblematic of "poetic sacred making" in modern Persian poetry that she uses the opening line as the title of her book. To Keshavarz's analysis of the poem's Qur'anic resonance I add only one point on translation, namely, that the title itself invites added Qur'anic undertones in English. While *dibâcheh* means generally "introduction" or "opening chapter" (as Keshavarz translates it), translating the word simply as "The Opening" gives the poem the same title in most English versions as the first chapter of the Qur'an (*al-Fātiḥa*). Although Persian translations usually refer to the chapter with the Arabic *al-Fātiḥa* or *al-Ḥamd*, considering how prominently the scripture occurs in Shafi'i's poem, "The Opening" seems a justified overdetermining of the Persian title.¹⁰⁰ From there, I depart from Keshavarz's analysis to argue a distinct but by no means contradictory understanding of the poem. Where Keshavarz sees the "borders between faith, poetry, and activism...blurred," I argue that the poem makes a pronounced, politically charged call for a return to an idealized past, a call that begins with the poem's return to the originary sacred words that institute the entire Islamic tradition but that permeates the poem, as I demonstrate below, at various levels of both sound and sense.¹⁰¹ Neo-classicism in "The Opening" thus becomes a coherent call for an Islamic cultural revival, a revisiting of past poetic, social, and ideological structures as a means for remedying the various layers of corruption endemic to the present state.

⁹⁷ *iqra' bismi rabbika alladhī khalaqa* (Qur'an 96:1) Most English versions translate the first word as "Read!" However, Sahih International more accurately captures the oral/aural component in the Arabic word with "Recite!" which also serves as a better translation for Shafi'i's *bekhwân* in the poem. For comparisons of English Qur'an translations, see www.quran.com, last accessed May 18, 2013.

⁹⁸ Shafi'i Kadkani, *A'ineh-i Bara-ye Seda-ha*, 239. See Appendix page 161 for my translation of the poem in full.

⁹⁹ Keshavarz, *Recite in the Name of the Red Rose: Poetic Sacred Making in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 72.

¹⁰⁰ For Persian Qur'an translations, see <http://www.parsquran.com/>, last accessed May 18, 2013, which includes versions by Fuladvand, Makarem Shirazi, and Khorramshahi. The translations read: *bekhwân beh nâm-e parvardegârat keh âfarid* (Fuladvand); *bekhwân beh nâm-e parvardegârat keh jahân râ âfarid* (Makarem Shirazi); *bekhwân beh nâm-e parvardegârat keh âfaridah ast* (Khorramshahi)

¹⁰¹ Keshavarz, *Recite in the Name of the Red Rose*, 72.

*ke 'âsheqâneh'tarin naghmeh râ dowbâreh bekhwâni.
bekhwân beh nâm-e gol-e sorkh o 'asheqâneh bekhwân:
"hadis-e 'eshq bayân kon bedân zabân ke tow dâni."*

Of course, most editions place this final line in quotes and include a footnote explaining that the words come from Hafez.¹⁰⁴ But even without the editorial intervention, I would venture that an educated Persian audience would recognize the message and rhythm, if not the exact words, from Hafez's beloved ghazals. Either way, the now explicit intertextuality grants the poem a heightened sense of purposiveness. For one, it becomes clear why the poet has adhered to a single meter--the poem has appropriated the same prosodic structure as the Hafez ghazal with which it closes. Furthermore, the poem weaves its final rhyme between the operative word in Shafi'i's injunction and the last word in Hafez's ghazal, so that *bekhwâni* ("for you to recite" or "to recite" in my translation) shares an intrinsic affinity with Hafez's *tow dâni* (you know). In other words, while the word *bekhwân* (recite!) at the poem's start creates a directive towards its audience and grants the poem a Qur'anic authority; the fact that *bekhwân* will later become *bekhwâni* which will then rhyme with Hafez's *tow dâni* also reveals how the poet's exacting word choice has been shaped as much by his dialogue with the classical master as by his political and confessional commitments. Pushing this logic even further, while the *bekhwân* at the start of the poem has a clear Quranic connotation, meaning "recite!" Shafi'i shifts the same word's connotations in the final stanza by modifying it with the adverb "amorously" (*'âsheqâneh*) and affixing the direct object "melodies" (*naghmeh'hâ*). Thus the line between reciting a line of holy scripture and singing a romantic musical composition, both of which can be denoted with the Persian verb *khwândan*, becomes appropriately blurred, just as classical Persian prosody treats musical performance as an intrinsic component of poetics. In moving fluidly between both senses of the verb, then, Shafi'i has strengthened his poem's ties to the Hafezian poetic system.

Keshavarz addresses the fact that Shafi'i closes his poem with a quote from Hafez, arguing that the brilliance of Shafi'i's quotation lies in the way that it on the one hand opens the poem to multiple readings and on the other affiliates itself with the Persian poet best known for his expertise on the Qur'an.¹⁰⁵ I would argue, however, that Hafez's presence in Shafi'i's poem does not so much "warn us not to remain limited to the subject matter of his poem" as it does shift the subject matter to an idealized version of its social and aesthetic past.¹⁰⁶ Certainly poetic ambiguity would constitute one aspect of that past, in the sense that Hafez's poetry lends itself to multiple interpretations. So if Shafi'i's poem puts forth a claim that the preexisting poetic tradition provides the framework for contemporary social critique, then it logically follows that the poem will imitate that aspect of Hafez's poetry that makes it, according to translator Dick

¹⁰⁴ e.g. Shafi'i Kadkani, *A'ineh-i Bara-ye Seda-ha*, 241. ; *Dar Kucheh Bagh-ha-ye Neshabur*, 7th ed. (Tehran: Tus, 1357/1978), 12. Neither edition, however, cites the specific poem. For the Hafez poem in full, see Ghazal 476 in Hafez, *Divan-e Hafez-e Shirazi*, 649-50.

¹⁰⁵ Keshavarz, *Recite in the Name of the Red Rose: Poetic Sacred Making in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 74.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Davis, “profoundly, and deliberately, ambiguous.”¹⁰⁷ Ambiguity, in other words, becomes one more way that Shafi‘i’s poem turns consciously towards its tradition in response to the ills it perceives in the present day.

If the meter, rhyme, and interweaving of Hafez’s line all idealize the poem’s imagined past, then such an idealization becomes even more explicit where the final stanza revives one of Hafez’s archetypal figures, lamenting the fact that “the earth is emptied of the wayward” (*zamin tohist ze rendân*). I have described the appearance and significance of the “wayward” (*rendân*) in the poem “Hallaj” in the section above. However, since the term appears frequently throughout *On the Garden Pathways of Nishapur* and since the *rend* (plural, *rendân*) in many ways embody Shafi‘i’s conception of an idealized past, then both the Persian term and my translation warrant further consideration here. In Hafez’s poetry, as Frank Lewis explains, the “*rend* is a composite of the Perfect Man of gnostic Sufism, the impoverished beggar in the road, the libertine, and the political rebel who refuses to bow the knee to hypocrisy and values imposed by force.”¹⁰⁸ Thus when Shafi‘i’s poem declares that the *rend* no longer exist today, it essentially claims that contemporary society lacks truly righteous figures. And, once again, by then turning to the audience and imploring “you...to recite again the most amorous melodious refrain,” the poem has suggested that its audience look to the past, specifically to a 14th century social archetype, for a revolutionary model.

Since the *rend* carry such ideological weight in Shafi‘i’s poetry, I have attempted to find an appropriately resonant approximation in English translation. According to the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, *rend* has been translated as “rake, ruffian, pious rogue, brigand, libertine, lout, debauchee;” however, none of those terms captures the moral complexity of the character.¹⁰⁹ Even Persian dictionaries require a good deal of explanation to make sense of the term, as when the *Sokhan* dictionary defines the *rend* as follows: “in gnostic literature, a pure-hearted, virtuous, free-thinking, truth-seeking individual unconcerned with external realities/appearances.”¹¹⁰ I have not found a single English word to evoke all of these associations. However, as a starting point, I have translated *rendân* as “the waywards.” To describe someone as “wayward,” suggests their unpredictable and unruly character, which may capture something of the ruffian nature of the *rendân*. At the same time, my translation also has “way” built into it, a fact that corresponds nicely with Hafez’s varying conviction that only the wayward *rendân* possess the type of authentic morality that leads one to the Divine. Finally, “way” in English might suggest the Sufi concept of *ṭariqat* meaning a religious order but deriving from the Arabic *ṭariqa*, meaning path or way. That is all to say that Shafi‘i’s invoking of the *rendân* suggests the need for return not only to classical poetry but to the conditions from which such poetry arose and that the term

¹⁰⁷ Shams al-Din Mohammad Hafez, Jahan Malek Khatun, and Obayd Zakani, *Faces of Love: Hafez and the Poets of Shiraz*, trans. Dick Davis (Mage, 2012), xxix.

¹⁰⁸ “Hafez viii. Hafez and Rendi,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hafez-vii-viii>, accessed July 22, 2012.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Hassan Anvari, *Farhang-e Feshordeh-ye Sokhan*, 2 vols. (Tehran: Sokhan, 1382/2003), 1149.

Encounter (*Didar*)

While “The Opening” looks towards a natural, aestheticized, and idealized past to counter the disharmonious state of the present, “Encounter” (*Didâr*) directs a more acute sense of anger towards those contemporary forces and individuals who have caused the disharmony.¹¹⁴ Thus, where the natural imagery in “The Opening” culminates with a Hafez line celebrating love’s multitudinous manifestations, implying at least some forward-looking optimism that the natural order will be restored through an as-yet-not-fully-determined course of actions, “Encounter’s” palpable outrage develops a more detailed and therefore damning critique of recent history and the current conditions that require overturning. In fact, applying a social-symbolist reading, “Encounter” becomes a direct attack on the Shah, the post-1953 society that tolerates his rule, and the Western imperialist powers that exert their dominance from behind the scenes. Of course, Shafi’i, as in most of his poems, relies upon a symbolic language that transcends the confines of time and space, making it impossible to attach the referents definitively to any one historical context. Thus, for example, in a 1973 review, the critic Mostafa Rahimi mentions in passing that the poem refers to contemporary events in Latin America, a point that he never qualifies, perhaps because the references seem so obvious or, more likely, because the Iranian censorship apparatus would not tolerate an overt critique of internal politics, neither in a poetry collection, nor a critical reading of that collection.¹¹⁵ Regardless of the critic’s motivations, however, Rahimi’s idea remains irretrievable today, for one is at a loss to locate Latin American history in the poem. On the other hand, as I will demonstrate below, “Encounter’s” unmistakable outrage readily lends itself to a reading of the poem as a symbolic denunciation of the Pahlavi regime, even now that historical distance has obscured at least some of the references.

Despite the strong sense of moral indignation that runs throughout the poem, the way that “Encounter” seems to take place in a vaguely defined landscape from historical memory where biblical false-prophets arise from Mongol onslaughts permits one to read the poem in reference to any number of socio-political contexts. In other words, the poem’s central condemnation of a falsely revolutionary messiah-like figure who deceives the masses with empty promises of salvation could apply to any number of leaders, historical or contemporary, Iranian or otherwise. This vague sense of time and place, no doubt, allows Rahimi to associate the poem with Latin American history without causing the casual reader much pause. However, upon close reading, Shafi’i’s masterful appropriations of Hafezian poetics, Christian imagery, and Islamic philosophical terminology and concepts all converge logically in a critique if not outright condemnation of the Iranian monarchy and the internal and external forces that serve as its buttress. Indeed, at the heart of the poem lies its call to “scour” (*zodâ’idan*) the landscape, a verb

¹¹⁴ Shafi’i Kadkani, *A’ineh-i Bara-ye Seda-ha*, 286-9. See Appendix, page 169, for my translation of the poem in full.

¹¹⁵ Shams Langarudi includes a slightly abridged version of the review in Idem, *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She’r-e Now (Jeld-e Chaharom 1349-1357)*, 4, 196-7. For the full article see, Mustafa Rahimi, “Shokuh-e Shekoftan,” *Alefba* 2, no. 2 (Azar 1352 (Nov./Dec. 1973)): 198-203. However, Rahimi does not expand upon his reading of the poem as a reference to Latin American events any more than in the one sentence that is also included in Shams Langarudi’s study.

that perfectly encapsulates the way that Shafi'i "anticipates, and cherishes, the arrival of an Islamic revolution" within the confines of his particular brand of natural imagery.¹¹⁶

To begin with the temporal, "Encounter's" second stanza establishes a sense of chronology, implying that a series of events at a specific if undated point in the past have brought about the conditions in which the speaker later locates himself:

Since those days and years
when the Tatar hordes
sealed the gate with fire and blood,
the year of burning books
with "death to fire!"
and "long live the wind!"
(from whichever side it arises)
they commissioned the coterie of whores.

*zân saliân o ruzân,
ruzi keh kheyl-e tâtâr
darvâzeh râ beh âtash o khun bast,
sâl-e ketâb suzân,
bâ mordeh bâd âtash
va zendeh bâd bâd
(az har taraf keh âyad)
mohlat beh jam '-e ruspiân dâdand.*

Of course, the reference to Tatar hordes safely places the poem somewhere in the 13th or 14th centuries, a setting that complements the lines and references that, at other points in the poem, Shafi'i appropriates from the 14th century Hafez. But the stanza also points towards the 1953 coup that ousted Mossadeq and consolidated the Shah's power. Perhaps nowhere does this reference come to the surface as clearly as in the expression "long live the wind," which captures the easily shifting allegiances that large crowds had at one time professed for Mossadeq and then shortly thereafter expressed for the Shah. In other words, the poem on one level establishes the starting point for its history as the years when masses of people shouted "long live the wind," proving that they had abandoned their commitment to the democratic, anti-imperialist Mossadeq and would now support whatever illegitimate leader blew their way. Building from this interpretation, the image of Tatar hordes suggests that the Iranian plateau has been raided and plundered by outside, heathen forces, which reads easily as a reference to the vastly expanded US presence in the country following the coup. That the stanza ends with the "coterie of whores" furthers the sense that the society has become desperate and morally bankrupt following the trauma of foreign onslaught, again serving the desires of whatever wealthy patron dispenses the highest pay. That is to say that taking the poem as a social-symbolist work, the images of invasion, burning, corruption, and so on make a historical claim that the 1953 coup has brought

¹¹⁶ Keshavarz, *Recite in the Name of the Red Rose: Poetic Sacred Making in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 72.

he began working his guile with the treacherous heavens.

şufî nehâd dâm o sar-e hoqqeh bâz kard
*bonyâd-e makr bâ falak-e hoqqeh bâz kard*¹¹⁹

At the end of the poem, Hafez counterposes the spiritually and morally bankrupt Sufi with the wayward (*rend*) who does not concern himself with outward signs of piety and, as such, is taken for a heretic among the more orthodox members of his society. The *rend*, therefore, and not the Sufi, embodies Hafez's notion of authentic spirituality.¹²⁰ Thus when Shafi'i's poem opens with its reference to a deceitful figure, it draws a parallel between Hafez's time and the present day, suggesting that contemporary society is once again filled with duplicitous agents of an official ideology who, like their 14th century counterparts, garb themselves in a manner that should bespeak their ideological/spiritual commitments but in fact reveals only their pursuit of personal gains. Shafi'i, however, introduces a significant reversal. In Hafez's ghazal, the Sufi is discredited and humiliated when he attempts his trickery before true gnostics, that is, those who possess esoteric knowledge or behold a secret truth:

Time's game of turns bit its thumb in return
because he worked his sleight of hand before the Secret beholders.

bâzi-ye charkh beshekandash bayzeh dar kolâh
*zirâ keh arz-e sho 'badeh bâ ahl-e râz kard*¹²¹

Shafi'i reverses the line, so that the deceitful figure in the present day remains unchallenged. In other words, just as "The Opening" lamented the absence of Hafez's wayward, whose actions and demeanor dared to speak truth to power in their own times, "Encounter" concludes that no one exists in the present day to discredit the one who "turns a hundred hues" or, as we learn later in the poem, presents himself as a messiah to the easily deluded masses.

But who does the deceitful figure represent in Shafi'i's poem? The Sufis' empty rhetoric of spirituality in Hafez's poem in fact closely resembles the Iranian monarch's equally empty, at least in the eyes of his opponents, rhetoric of modernization. One must keep in mind that Shafi'i's collection appeared at a time when Iranian society was nearly a decade into the throes of the so-called "White Revolution," which, to make sense of the poem in question, might simply be described as a series of top-down economic, social, and agricultural reforms with detrimental

¹¹⁹ Ghazal 133 in *Ibid.*, 180-81.

¹²⁰ See my discussion of *rend* in my reading of "The Opening" above.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 180. *bâzi-ye charkh beshekandash bayzeh dar kolâh* literally reads as "the game of [fate's] wheel broke an egg in [his] hat." The notes to the Persian edition direct the reader to Dehkhoda's dictionary, which explains that the expression "to break the egg in one's hat," while of undetermined origins, means to humiliate someone. I have rendered the expression as "to bite one's thumb at" to echo the archaic tone in the Persian.

effects on both the working and traditional ruling classes.¹²² In short, at the risk of overdetermining the poem, Shafi‘i implicitly compares the way that Sufis in Hafez’s time pretend to abide by a strict rule of piety and humility and the way that the contemporary monarch professes his commitment to modernization and progress (and “changes hues” by announcing his new reforms under the banner of a “white” revolution) while in both cases the most, if not only, tangible results appear in the Sufis’ and the royal family’s augmented incomes.

Reading “Encounter” in reference to the White Revolution or to the Shah’s modernizing policies in general highlights an intriguing word association that arises from Shafi‘i’s poetic diction. The old heretic who speaks in the poem’s second half twice uses the adjective *maşnu‘i* (manufactured, artificial, synthetic, etc.) to denounce the present conditions--first to describe the false messiah as a “healer of the manufactured ailing” (*şafâ dahandeh-ye bimâr ‘hâ-ye maşnu‘i*) and then to describe the messiah himself as the “manufactured Messiah/ of plunder and loathing” (*masiḥ-e ghârat o nefrat, masiḥ-e maşnu‘i!*). Conceptually, the term works well to capture the sense that modern industrial practices have contaminated the natural order, as observed in “The Opening.” Thus, if the poem’s messiah offers any sort of relief to his followers, it is only to alleviate the sort of manmade ailments that his own machinations have produced. One notes, furthermore, that the word Shafi‘i chooses, *maşnu‘i*, shares a common root with the word *şan‘at*. In contemporary Persian, *şan‘at* means industry, again an apt association for thinking of the poem in reference to the Shah’s outward attempts towards industrialization or modernization. But throughout Hafez’s poetry, including in the same ghazal that Shafi‘i quotes in “Encounter,” *şan‘at* means something like artifice:

Do not take up artifice, for whoever plays insincerely at affection
[sees] his love shut the heart’s door to reality.

*şan‘at makon keh har keh moḥabbat nah râst bâkht
‘eshqash beru-ye del dar-e ma‘ni farâz kard*¹²³

The romantic and mystical tones in Hafez’s use of “artifice” (*şan‘at*) resonate in “Encounter” as well; Shafi‘i’s poem implies that the artificiality that predominates in the present socio-political order--a predominance that manifests not only in the “manufactured Messiah” but in the parched landscape where the “tree’s veins” and the “desert’s vision” have grown polluted as well--ultimately obstructs its subjects from any sort of path towards a higher reality. In other words, one’s compliance with the current state will necessarily preclude a spiritually meaningful existence just as, according to Hafez, superficial, insincere, or artificial affection will never open one’s heart to the transcendent experience of sincere love, an experience that both originates in and returns to the Divine. Rather than blurring lines between “political” and “mystical,” then, Shafi‘i once again, through the poem, expresses the contention that the classical canon, in this

¹²² For a detailed discussion of the “White Revolution” see, Ali M Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1921: The Pahlavis and After* (London and New York: Pearson Education, 2003), 147-65.

¹²³ Ghazal 133 in Hafez, *Divan-e Hafez-e Shirazi*, 180-1.

case with its mystical underpinnings, provides the very vehicle by which to deliver a contemporary political critique.

The sense of a “manufactured Messiah” also invokes a broader, anti-imperialist and nativist claim that underlies the poem, particularly with its Christian references. The term “manufactured” (*maşnu‘i*) suggests that this particular messiah was produced by outside entities which, if read as a reference to the Shah, would correspond with the condemnation, especially pervasive in the 1960s and 1970s, of the Iranian monarch as an American and Western lackey. A messiah presumably delivers a message on behalf of a larger entity or power; the messiah of “Encounter” delivers an unmistakably Christian--albeit corrupted--message. Considering that the poem appears in a collection that repeatedly invokes Persian poetry’s Islamic heritage, it serves as a charged symbol for Western, which is to say foreign and inauthentic, forces dictating the messiah’s words and actions. Or, simply put, if the messiah represents the Shah, then his “lord” here represents the United States and the “Christian” message represents American interests and rhetoric.

Perhaps the most obviously Christian reference occurs in the first section of the poem, when the speaker refers to “this Jesus/who had never seen a cross” (*isâ-ye şalib nadideh*). But the Christian undertones also resonate in the second section, when the old heretic voices his strong condemnation of the false messiah and his followers:

For you I bear a thousand answerless questions,
congregated heralds for this Messiah of new!
This healer of the manufactured ailing,
captives of the tent show's lying light
and seven nations overflowing with his miracles.

*hezâr porsesh-e bi pâsokh az shomâ dâram:
goruh-e mozhdeh resân in masih-e jadid!-
shafâ dahandeh-ye bimâr 'hâ-ye maşnu‘i
miyân-e kheymeh-ye nur-e dorugh-e zendâni,
va haft keshvar
az mo‘jazât-e u labriz.*

“Seven nations” in particular carries heavy Biblical connotations, recalling the seven powerful nations in Canaan that were deposed by God in order to turn their lands over to the Israelites.¹²⁴ The reference obviously grants an apocalyptic sense to the present day, implying that a divinely sanctioned movement will soon overturn the corrupt political order and instate a nation ruled by the righteous. But the fact that Shafi‘i draws specifically from Biblical imagery also creates a sense of a foreign presence on the Iranian landscape. While a poet like Ahmad Shamlu, as I discuss in the following chapter, draws upon Old Testament figures to promulgate a notion of universal human history, Shafi‘i here uses Christianity to differentiate the Islamic Iranian self from the Western other. The poem, after all, contains a “we,” a crowd who erroneously follows

¹²⁴ See, e.g. Deuteronomy 7:1 and Acts 13:19.

this messiah but who receives only lies, fear, shame, and relief from “manufactured ailments” in return while the desert-filled land remains unquenched. The country has been plundered, society is filled with “whores” and yet the Jesus-like figure speaks of spring having arrived, again an action that is difficult not to read as the Shah’s announcements of progress. With the Christian references, therefore, the poem does not necessarily voice an attack on Christianity per se, but it does overtly and forcefully declare that the messiah and his “Christian” message, the leader and his inherently non-native ideology, provide nothing of use to the present society.

At the end of “Encounter,” Shafī‘i once again demonstrates his masterful ability to appropriate and rework Islamic mystical discourse into his own poetry. In the final lines, the old heretic calls for a scouring rain--an apt symbol for a spiritually-based revolution--before likening the messiah to a parrot before a mirror:

Where is rain to scour from your countenance
 deceitful figures
 and duplicitous shadows?
 Where is the mirror
 O parrot of concealed learning!
 to display in your gaze
 all of this
 echoing explication?

*kojâst bârân, kaz chereh-ye tow bezodâyad
 negâreh 'hâ-ye dorughin o
 sâyeh-ye tazvir?
 kojâst âyeneh,
 ay tuṭi-ye nehân âmuz!
 keh dar negâh-e tow benomâyad
 in hameh
 taqrir!*

In general, the image of a parrot relates a sense of a creature that merely imitates the words of its human master. In the social-symbolic reading that I have proposed thus far, even this basic symbol works as a reference to the Shah, who, as the logic would go, “parrots” the programs fed to him by the American and Western governments. In Shafī‘i’s poem, however, the “parrot of concealed learning” draws more profoundly from a common trope in Persian mystical poetry. Annemarie Schimmel explains the significance of parrots standing before mirrors for classical Persian poets as follows:

Poets knew that the parrot could learn to talk provided one placed him before a mirror where he could see his reflection; while his master talked from behind the mirror, the parrot would think--so one assumed--that the parrot in the mirror was speaking and would try to imitate the sound. This idea offered a good metaphor

for the disciple who learns mystical secrets from his spiritual guide, whose heart is a pure mirror of the Divine Beloved.¹²⁵

In “Encounter,” it makes little sense to read the “messiah of plunder and loathing” as a pure-hearted disciple. Instead, Shafi‘i has taken half of the trope and rewritten it into a contemporary political context. With the images of the parrot and the mirror along with the expression “concealed learning” the poet invokes the familiar concept of discipleship from classical poetry as Schimmel describes it. But, arriving at the end of the poem, the image suggests that the days of genuine mystic disciples have passed and that today’s “parrots” voice the words of a different kind of master, a master who, as we have seen, offers nothing of benefit to the crowds who are nonetheless subject to their duplicity and deceit.

Along with these final images, Shafi‘i closes “Encounter” with a particularly enigmatic term. The final word, *taqrir*, which I have translated as “echoing explication,” will no doubt be familiar to Persian audiences from Hafez’s poetry. In fact, Shafi‘i rhymes *taqrir* with *tazvir* (duplicitous), just as one encounters in at least two of Hafez’s ghazals.¹²⁶ Thus, both on the rhythmic level and in terms of poetic context, the choice to end the poem on *taqrir* makes perfect sense in Persian. Once again exemplifying how a neo-classical approach works in politically oriented poetry, Shafi‘i charges Hafezian terminology with a new, social-symbolic force, showing how the classical poet provides the language for contemporary critical discourse. However, in attempting to translate *taqrir* to English, I discovered an additional layer of meaning in the term that further suggests Shafi‘i’s poetic prowess. In Hafez’s poetry, *taqrir*, means simply “to speak, declare, or explain” as in “Do you know what the harp and oud declare?” (*dâni keh chang va ‘ud cheh taqrir mikonand*) or “With your head of ringlets [and] all my bewilderment where is dominion for me to explain in its entirety?” (*bâ sar-e zolf-e tow majmu’-e parishâni-ye khwod ku majâli keh sarâsar hameh taqrir konam*).¹²⁷ Neither “declaring” nor “explaining” in English captures the force with which Shafi‘i closes “Encounter.” The poem says something like, O parrot, where is there a mirror that will show how your actions constitute mere talking, just as a musical instrument produces meaningless pleasant sounds or as an explanation alone of a spiritual experience fails to attain the essential truth therein? In addition to this reading, the term *taqrir* also appears in Islamic legal discourse in a manner that might not be as obvious to the casual reader in Persian. In jurisprudential terms, *taqrir* refers to actions or statements “done in [the Prophet Muhammad’s] presence to which he did not object.”¹²⁸ Thus, when one wants to determine whether or not an action is permitted in Islam, evidence of *taqrir*, i.e. the Prophet’s lack of objection to such an action performed in his presence, would provide a basis for deeming that the Prophet gave his tacit approval and that the action is therefore permissible. Thinking

¹²⁵ Annemarie Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 182.

¹²⁶ See ghazals 200 and 347 in Hafez, *Divan-e Hafez-e Shirazi*.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Jonathan A.C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 10.

about “Encounter” as a critique of not just the Shah, but of the society that allows him to stay in power, it makes sense to read *taqrir* in the poem as silence or complacency before the actions of others. In this case, *taqrir* suggests the society’s silent acquiescence to the false messiah and his foreign master lurking behind the mirror. In other words, the final lines could read something like “where is a mirror to reveal all of the silence and inaction that allow this parroting to continue unchecked?” Certainly, such a reading of the term *taqrir* should be considered secondary or tertiary at best, as the Hafezian resonances remain much more obvious and explicit. But the remarkable nature of Shafi’i’s language is that all these resonances remain present and work within the poem’s logic. Indeed, the enigma contained within a poem like “Encounter” occurs precisely where the poet creates the sense of social, political, and poetic significance even as the poem eludes any singular reading.

On Living and Lyric (*Az Budan o Sorudan*)

Shafi’i’s lyrical talent, skill, and erudition converge and culminate in “On Living and Lyric” (*Az Budan o Sorudan*), the fifth poem in *On the Garden Pathways of Nishapur*.¹²⁹ The poem equally exhibits Shafi’i’s social-symbolic engagements, in a more accessible manner, perhaps, than in “Encounter,” and also his unrivaled ability to weave classical literary-cultural referents and modes, as in both “The Opening” and “Encounter,” into poetry that nonetheless feels contemporary, modern, and socially-relevant.¹³⁰

To begin with musicality, the poem’s rhymes and rhythms, more so than in the examples I discuss above, conjure the unmistakable sonic experience of the classical ghazal form. Beyond its adherence to a single meter while allowing lines of varying length, “On Living and Lyric” also maintains a mono-rhyme and refrain (*rahâ kon, sedâ kon, vâ kon, mehmân-e kucheḥ’hâ kon*, etc.).¹³¹ While I have not attempted to reproduce the mono-rhyme directly in my translation, this formal feature in the Persian warrants particular attention, as it alters the terms of the poem’s “content.” Agamben argues that “poetry lies only in the tension and difference (and hence also in the virtual interference) between sound and sense, between the semiotic sphere and the semantic sphere.”¹³² “On Living and Lyric’s” ghazal echoing especially highlights these tensions between music and meaning. Furthermore, Shafi’i’s use of poetic refrain mirrors the broader socio-political contention that runs throughout his poetry, namely, that liberation should occur through a return to an idealized past. Poetic refrain, of course, marks a return to a defined, familiar element within the poem. Thus, before decoding any specific socio-political referents, to make

¹²⁹ Shafi’i Kadkani, *A’ineh-i Bara-ye Seda-ha*, 250-53. See Appendix, page 165 for my translation of the poem in full.

¹³⁰ As further testament of its resonance, “On Living and Lyric” has inspired at least three musical arrangements. The arrangements, sung by Salar Aqili, Mohammad Motamadi, and Ali Rostamian, can all be heard at the following website: <http://parand.se/tr-kadkani-taraneh.htm>, last accessed November 22, 2013.

¹³¹ The meter is *możâre’-e akhrab-e sâlem*, which reads $\sim\sim\sim / \sim\sim\sim / \sim\sim\sim / \sim\sim\sim$ or *maf’ul fâ’elâton maf’ul fâ’elâton*

¹³² Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 109.

sense of the poem one must first consider how Shafi'i's reappropriation of the classical form simultaneously destabilizes the semantic sphere, as Agamben defines it, and reinforces it in the act of refrain. As a gesture towards the centrality of musical and semantic tensions in the Persian, I have returned to the word "way" in various forms throughout the translations ("riverway," "waywards," "alleyway," "pathway" "way") and conclude with an end rhyme ("day" and "way") to recover some of the poem's feeling of sonic coherence.

But "On Living and Lyric" does not simply take up the ghazal as a generalized form. Rather, similar to the way that "The Opening" concludes with a line from Hafez, "On Living and Lyric" ends on the first distich of a ghazal by Mowlana Rumi (*row sar beneh be bâlin tanhâ marâ rahâ kon*).¹³³ So beyond creating a sense of internal coherence, the rhymes and refrain culminate at precisely that point where their connection to Mowlana's ghazal becomes explicit. By ending his poem where Mowlana's begins, Shafi'i suggests the absolute continuity of the Persian poetic tradition and destabilizes distinctions between "modern" and "classical" or "social" and "mystical." The Mowlana line declares, in a sense, that Shafi'i's poetry will participate in contemporary social movements, that its cascading lines will present a visual style unprecedented before the 20th century in Persian, but that it will do so by appropriating and expanding upon the work of its forebears. To be sure, as the American poet Mark Strand suggests, poetry by its very nature "is always paying homage to the past, extending a tradition into the present."¹³⁴ However, Shafi'i's poem forges a qualitative difference between the way that it takes up Mowlana's meter, rhyme and refrain in this poem and the way that a rebellious modernist like Shamlu, whom I discuss in the following chapter, declares, albeit with a certain degree of staged poetic posturing that:

The matter of poetry
for the bygone poet
was not life.
In the barren expanses of his fancy
he was in dialogue
only with wine and the beloved.
Morning and night he was lost in whim,
seized in the ludicrous snare of his beloved's locks,
while others
one hand on the wine cup
the other on beloved's tresses
would raise a drunken cry from God's earth.¹³⁵

¹³³ See ghazal 2039, Jalal al-Din Mohammad Balkhi Mowlavi, *Kolliyat-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, ed. Badi' al-Zaman Foruzanfar (Tehran: Sherkat-e Motale'at-e Nashr-e Ketab-e Parseh, 1386/1997), 669.

¹³⁴ Mark Strand, *The Weather of Words: Poetic Invention* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 50.

¹³⁵ Shamlu, *Majmu'eh-ye Asar: Daftar-e Yekom: She'r*, 153. See Appendix page 174 for my translation of the poem in full.

Shafi'i's poem implicitly counters Shamlu's claim, demonstrating that the bygone poets must have concerned themselves with matters of pressing relevance, if their works can provide the canvas for "guerrilla poems" today. The force of "On Living and Lyric," then, derives from the way that Mowlana's words seem to fit perfectly and effortlessly into the lines that precede them. The Persian text includes a footnote informing the reader that the final line originates in Mowlana, but the metrical and rhythmic consistency leading up to the line create a much stronger sense of coherence and intertextuality than the footnote alone provides. To recreate the effect in English, I have made my translation of Mowlana's words share an end rhyme with my translation of Shafi'i's and marked the former with italics:

Lift your voice with me in a call
to beckon the waking day
and if you're one for sleep and dormancy
go, pillow your head, leave me on my way.

*bâ man bekhwân beh faryâd;
var mard-e khwâb o khofti,
"row sar beneh beh bâlin, tanhâ marâ rahâ kon"*

If the italics in English and the quotes and footnote in the Persian mark difference within the poem, then the final rhyme creates the opposite effect, demonstrating that the final line does, in fact, belong to the rest of the poem and forms an inextricable part of the whole.

In addition to channeling Mowlana, "On Living and Lyric" also returns to Hafez's "wayward" (*rendân*), proclaiming that a dark period has passed and the wayward may once again resume their revelry in public:

Sound again the midnight drunks
the parched-lipped wayward
into the narrow alleyways
with another cry.

*mastân-e nim shab râ
rendân-e teshneh 'lab râ
bâr-e degar beh faryâd
dar kucheh 'hâ şedâ kon.*

A footnote to Shafi'i's poem explains that the line *rendân-e teshneh lab râ* comes directly from Hafez.¹³⁶ But even without the footnote, a Persian audience would certainly recognize the classical literary-cultural resonance in the word *rend* (plural, *rendân*), which immediately signals that the poem has entered Hafez's domain and as such reaffirms the sense that the classical canon

¹³⁶ The footnote, however, does not provide the specific ghazal. The words come from Ghazal 94 (which begins *zân yâr-e delnavâzam shokrist bâ shekâyat gar nokteh dâ-e 'eshqi, beshnow tow in hekâyat*) in Hafez, *Divan-e Hafez-e Shirazi*, 130-31.

innocent natural imagery and overall optimism in Shafi'i's words and, at the same time, allow another meaning to resonate in "shoots," a meaning that corresponds to a real and violent armed struggle occurring in a not too distant place.

Finally, as the poem's title in Persian makes clear, "*Az Budan va Sorudan*" subordinates any poetic attempts at socio-political intervention to its larger ideological claim that poetry and lyrical voice form an essential component of human existence. Shafi'i's constant dialogue with his fellow poets, present and past, in itself suggests how poetry provides the vehicle for experiencing one's authentic self in and through history. The title further establishes such a view. "*Az budan va sorudan*" literally translates as "On being and singing/composing." But the expression embodies an idea that resurfaces throughout Shafi'i's poetics--so much so that his 1356/1978 collection bears the same title--and as such warrants a subtler rendering into English. The Persian title, which also occurs within the poem, contains two extremely simple and common verbs, *budan* meaning "to be" and *sorudan* meaning "to sing" and "to compose verse." By placing the words in tandem, the poem naturally suggests some commonality between the two, so that the title comes to mean that to be is inherently to sing, to make poetry, to call out, that is, to possess *voice*, a faculty that the poem from start to finish enjoins its addressees to employ. And the words do not only invite a semantic association; rather the very sound of *budan* and *sorudan*--the shared *udan* of both words--enacts how the two concepts arise from the same basic essence, even if they do not share a single etymology. Thus the English words should likewise evoke a visceral, supraconceptual affinity between the terms. Here, I have strayed from the literal to arrive at "living and lyric," two words that, like the Persian, do not derive from a common origin but at least share a basic harmony reminiscent of the more perfect Persian pair. Living and lyric, that is to say, sound as if they belong together, even before one begins to conceptualize how such an interdependence works. "On Living and Lyric" approaches an idea that life only acquires its highest meaning through lyric, meaning through the human subject's unique ability to intersect music and language in infinitely generative arrangements. One only lives or only lives fully, the poem seems to say, through lyric and one only achieves lyric through the act of living fully.

V. Conclusion: Contemplation is the Cause

"On Living and Lyric," with its implications of poetry as a liberated and liberating endeavor, provides a compelling point on which to return to Aslani's prison memoir. In thinking about the many poets and poems, including Shafi'i's, that he encountered in his cell in Komiteh, Aslani concludes that prisoners of the "Islamic regime" ultimately etch verses on their cells' walls in order to say "I write therefore I exist. I write therefore I still haven't lost my senses. Hey everyone, I still haven't fallen apart!"¹³⁹ Perhaps "On Living and Lyric" and, by extension, Shafi'i's poetry in general, addresses the prisoner's need to affirm his or her humanity as Aslani describes it precisely because the poems allow a type of open-ended contemplation that cannot fit easily within the confines of a predetermined political program. As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, neither Shafi'i's poetry nor his poetic theories attempt to address

¹³⁹ Aslani, *Kalagh va Gol-e Sorkh*, 121.

directly, much less reconcile, the demands of any single opposition group or their ideology in the manner that Sa'id Soltanpur grappled with such issues. Yet, Shafi'i's highly enigmatic poetic language, his sustained dialogue with classical Persian poetics, and his erudition in Islamic mystical discourse all contribute to a general sense that poetry's contemplative nature bears some tangible consequence in the realm of the socio-political. Interestingly, "Safe Travels" (*Safar beh Kheyr*), the same Shafi'i poem that Mehdi Aslani considers representative of his entire prison experience under the Islamic Republic, also appears in a study that celebrates the Islamic Revolution's triumph. In the introduction to his *Research and Analysis on the Literature of the Islamic Republic*, Manuchehr Akbari cites Shafi'i's poem as an "exquisite and perfect example of [social symbolism's] allegorical language" in the Pahlavi years.¹⁴⁰ While Akbari dismisses much of modern Persian poetry in the seven decades prior to the Islamic Revolution as "lacking deep faith" and "enchanted by Western culture," he describes "Safe Travels" as "lucid and pleasant" and provides the entire poem so the reader can see what he means.¹⁴¹ It would seem that the contemplative aspect of Shafi'i's poetry, that is, the necessarily undefined and enigmatic nature of his symbolic language, allows readers from conflicting, even opposing, political camps to find significance in the feeling of outrage and protest that the poems express.

As my discussion of the poems from *On the Garden Pathways of Nishapur* has shown, Shafi'i's pre-revolutionary poetry enters the realm of politics only in so much as it voices coded condemnations of the monarchy and of the spiritually bankrupt society of the day or as it anticipates the arrival of an Islamically inflected movement to overturn the existing order. In comparison with Sa'id Soltanpur's explicit Marxist-Leninist commitments, Shafi'i's symbolic language and neoclassical poetics no doubt seem politically innocuous. Thus it comes as no surprise that Shafi'i's academic career at Tehran University continued after the so-called "cultural revolution" purged Leftist and other "counter-revolutionary" elements from Iran's institutions of higher learning. Shafi'i never composed poetry in support of the Islamic Republic or even expressly in support of the Islamic Revolution, as Akbari studies such a phenomenon among the generation of younger poets. But neither would his scholarly approach to poetry or his allegorical language conflict directly with the rhetoric of the newly formed state. In his later poetry, Shafi'i often seems to retreat into meditations on the nature of poetry itself, leaving behind the more obvious social critiques of his earlier years.¹⁴² Nevertheless, even the later, reflective poetry still seems to hint at ways that natural poetic imagery bears some significance in matters beyond the aesthetic. To conclude my discussion of Shafi'i with an example, in one of these reflective works, a poem dated 1991 and titled simply "Poetry--II," as Dick Davis and Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak translate it, Shafi'i leaves open the question of how poetry's contemplative act relates to larger questions of liberation:

And what is poetry--what, if not
that moment of cleaning dust

¹⁴⁰ Akbari, *Naqd va Tahlil-e Adabiyat-e Enqelab-e Eslami: Bakhsh-e Avval, She'r, Jeld-e Avval*, 8.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹⁴² Bashardust, *Dar Jostojuy-e Nayshabur: Zendegi va She'r-e Mohammad Reza Shafi'i Kadkani (M. Sereshk)*, 202.

from the mirror in certainty's chamber,
the moment of seeing
in the blossoming of a rose
the liberation of the entire earth?¹⁴³

*va she 'r chist, chist, agar nist,
ân lah̄zeh-ye ghobâr zodâ 'i
â 'ineh-ye revâq-e yaqin râ;
didan,
dar lah̄zeh-ye shekoftan-e ek gol,
âzâdi-ye tamâm-e zamin râ¹⁴⁴*

¹⁴³ Mozaffari and Karimi-Hakkak, *Strange Times, My Dear: The Pen Anthology of Contemporary Iranian Literature*, 401.

¹⁴⁴ Mohammad Reza Shafî'i Kadkani, *Hezareh-ye Dovvom-e Ahu-ye Kuhi* (Tehran: Sokhan, 1376/1997), 484-85.

Chapter Three: A Weapon of the Masses: Ahmad Shamlu and the Poetics of Humanism

But it seems,/ before they can launch a song,/ poets must tramp for days with callused feet,/ and the sluggish fish of the imagination/ flounders softly in the slush of the heart./ And while, with twittering rhymes, they boil a broth/ of loves and nightingales,/ the tongueless street merely writhes/ for lack of something to shout or say.

-Vladimir Mayakovsky, "The Cloud in Trousers"

I. Introduction: A Call to Arms

In 1957, just four years after the royalist coup d'état had delivered its devastating blow to Iran's populist-Leftist coalition, leaving a cloud of terror and repression in its wake, a little-known thirty-two year old poet by the name of Ahmad Shamlu (1925-2000) published his breakthrough collection, aptly titled *Fresh Air* (*Havâ-ye Tâzeh*). Following the coup, Shamlu had spent over a year in prison for his political activities, where he witnessed the arrest, torture, and execution of his closest friends and comrades from the Communist Tudeh Party.¹ Though Shamlu avoided any official party ties after his time in prison, the poems in *Fresh Air* often express the poet's deep sense of both anguish and pride in the way that some Tudeh members sacrificed their lives for their ideological commitments.² In this regard, the collection attempts to breathe new life into the Left-oriented opposition by celebrating the memory of its heroes during an especially stifling period in Iranian history.

But *Fresh Air* does not only voice its forward-looking optimism in response to the political defeats of the day; rather the collection also heralds the arrival of an entirely new poetic movement that vows to overturn the state of literary affairs, itself stifled under the reigning traditional forms and modes. One poem in particular, "A Poetry That Is Life" (*She'ri keh zendegist*), serves as a manifesto on the newly re-imagined, emancipatory poetics.³ Dismissing the poetry of centuries past as reactionary and elitist, "A Poetry That Is Life" declares that the modern poet must arise from and fight alongside the common people:

Today
poetry
is the weapon of the masses
because poets themselves
are one branch from the forest of the masses
not jasmines and hyacinths
in the hothouse of so-and-so.⁴

¹ Shamlu, *Majmu'eh-ye Asar: Daftar-e Yekom: She'r*, 536.

² Leonardo Alishan, "Ahmad Shamlu: The Rebel Poet in Search of an Audience," *Iranian Studies* 18, no. 2-4 (Spring-Autumn 1985): 376.

³ Shamlu, *Majmu'eh-ye Asar: Daftar-e Yekom: She'r*, 153-61. See Appendix page 174 for my translation of the poem in full.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

This promise for poetry to serve the “masses” resonates loudly with the sort of politics that the poet had once professed; but it also captures the aesthetic premise of the entire collection, namely, that poetry requires new forms and dictions that more accurately mirror contemporary life. In other words, the lines assert that only a fresh new poetics will befit the mass uprising looming on the horizon. In doing so, “A Poetry That Is Life” imagines the existence of a “virtual public,” to use Sartre’s term, of downtrodden multitudes who will pick up the weapon of *she’r-e now*, or “new poetry,” meaning poetry that abandons the classical tradition’s formal constraints, in their march against their as-yet-unnamed oppressors.⁵ The new poetry, Shamlu seems to say, places its aesthetic innovations at the forefront of society’s larger structural changes.

As it turns out, Shamlu’s vision of his poetry in the masses’ hands would prove prophetic in later decades, even if the politics underneath the image did not resolve as imagined. Today, Shamlu holds a singular, quasi-mythic status in the pantheon of modernist Persian poets, a status that the scholar Mohammad Reza Shafi’i Kadkani ascribes as much to the poet’s populist-heroic persona as to any aesthetic quality in his work.⁶ Furthermore, as Shafi’i-Kadkani laments, Shamlu’s formal contribution to Persian poetics, his popularizing of *she’r-e sepid*, or free verse, has become so dominant that aspiring young poets no longer bother to learn the workings of Persian prosody before setting out to compose verse.⁷ But at the time of publication, virtually no one foresaw how *Fresh Air* would make good on its claims to relevance. In fact, where “A Poetry That Is Life” offers itself as a weapon to the masses, Shafi’i Kadkani recounts in an interview just how many people chose to pick up that weapon; in the first several years following its publication, there were no more than three copies of *Fresh Air* available for purchase in the entire city of Mashad (Iran’s second largest city) and, of those, exactly one copy had actually sold.⁸ “A Poetry That Is Life,” it would seem, foresaw the universality of its message before an audience materialized to receive it. As such, the young poet’s declaration of poetry as a weapon of the masses marks an early milestone in Shamlu’s rise to prominence and the popular and critical embrace of his modernist poetics.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Shamlu wrote extensively on the concept of “commitment” and “committed poetry” (*ta’ahhod*, *she’r-e mota’ahhed*), often re-invoking his image of poetry as a weapon of the masses, over the course of his prolific career.⁹ On the surface, declaring poetry the masses’ weapon may suggest the same combative poetics that I identified with Sa’id Soltanpur in chapter one. However, in this chapter I locate human subjectivity at the center of Shamlu’s poetics of commitment. Where the militant theory calls for objective aesthetic works to serve a pre-determined emancipatory course, Shamlu’s poetics, I argue here, fundamentally defines the masses as the collective of human beings, all endowed with creative potential and all

⁵ Sartre, *What Is Literature? And Other Essays*, 81.

⁶ Shafi’i Kadkani, *Ba Cheragh va Ayeneh: Dar Jostaju-ye Rیشه’ha-ye Tahavvol-e She’r-e Mo’aser-e Iran*, 523.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 524.

⁸ Yousef, *Poetics and Politics, East and West: The Poetries of Ahmad Shamlu and Bertolt Brecht*, 132, f.n. 50. For the original interview, see Mohammad Reza Shafi’i Kadkani, *Gozineh-ye Ash’ar* (Tehran: Morvarid, 1377/1998), 28.

⁹ As in an essay published in the journal *Ark* in 1970, which I discuss at length below. See Shams Langarudi, *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She’r-e Now (Jeld-e Chaharom 1349-1357)*, 4, 25-9.

striving for a meaningful but not-yet-conceptualized form of liberation. Thus I use the term humanist to distinguish not only how the human forms the center of and most powerful being in Shamlu's universe, but also how Shamlu understands modern poetry specifically to commit to an ideal of unhindered individuals constructing their own destinies.

Shamlu, with his unrivaled popular and critical acclaim, represents what might be called the mainstream view in the commitment debate in Persian literature. For one, Shamlu and his champions like Reza Baraheni, repeatedly used the term to describe his work. More importantly, as I have shown in chapters one and two, poets like Sa'id Soltanpur and Mohammad Reza Shafi'i Kadkani represent opposite ends on a spectrum of responses to the question of how poetry must serve society. Soltanpur used the term "combative" as much as "committed" to describe how poetry should participate directly in armed struggle. Shafi'i Kadkani would not use the term "committed" or any variant of it at all, even if other critics applied the term to his poems commenting on social problems. Shafi'i's poetry, on the contrary, freely explores Islamic mystical discourses that alter the terms of the poem's social engagements. But Shamlu falls in the center of the commitment spectrum and, when the term appears in his critical writings, seems to have its usage in European and American literatures in mind as well. Thus in this chapter, I revisit the historical development of the commitment debate both within and beyond Persian literature in order to situate Shamlu's particular humanist stance. After surveying the historical debates, I work through the assumptions of Shamlu's brand of humanism. Finally, I turn to the poetry and investigate how the image of the masses appears over the course of Shamlu's artistic career. From the changing image of the masses, I conclude that while the humanist commitment draws the poetry towards an open-ended, subjective experience, a deeply pessimistic historical view also draws the poetry in another direction, problematizing the humanism that the same poems often profess.

II. The Commitment Debate Revisited

The National Call to Commit

Shamlu was certainly not alone in imagining a revolutionary reading public for his poems to serve, even if he was slightly ahead of his time. By the 1970s, as Ghanoonparvar has shown, Shamlu's preoccupation with committed poetry had infected Iran's most prominent literary critics, just as it had writers and critics the world over.¹⁰ In fact, the anxiety of commitment was so acute during those decades that the political activities and posturing of a writer, much less the politics of his or her work, could determine how that author was received by the public at large. Commitment in this context was nothing if not the belief that the writer must chose the camp to which s/he will belong. In Persian, Reza Baraheni's seminal 1968 study of modern poetry *Gold*

¹⁰ Ghanoonparvar, *Prophets of Doom : Literature as a Socio-Political Phenomenon in Modern Iran*. The parallels between the Iranian phenomenon and its Arab counterpart are striking. For an introduction to commitment in Arabic literature, see M.M. Badawi, "Commitment in Contemporary Arabic Literature," Boullata, *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature 1945-1980*, 23-44. I might also point out that Adorno explains at the beginning of his seminal essay on commitment, first delivered as a radio talk in 1962 (I discuss the essay at length below) that he takes up the issue precisely because it has become so prevalent in his day.

in the Copper (Talâ dar Mes) pushed the concept of reactionary and progressive camps directly into the forefront of poetic debates. In his original introduction, Baraheni delineates the possible camps in which the poets or artists of his day can reside:

...creative persons fall into three categories: those seated in the ivory tower with their heads buried in the snow, the oppressive and powerful fascists with their eyes closed to human suffering, and the socially and historically responsible, bound, and committed.¹¹

Baraheni is clear on what a poet must do if s/he wishes to fall in the third category, that is, if s/he wishes to write a poetry that is life:

That is why the poet of our epoch, ladies and gentleman of today, must pass through the streets and see everything--even if he has lived in the forest and even if all of his life he has seen the sea, even if he has passed his days in the desert, he must traverse the street. For the street shows every side of a civilization that they have forced down our throats with the blows of a billy club. He must drown himself in the experiences of the street...¹²

Indeed, poetry written at the level of the street and for the people passing their lives there was, for at least two decades, the order of the day. The idea of "autonomous art" became anathema among many circles of poets and critics, for it was the duty of art and its producers to join in the national and global struggles for liberation. By 1971, according to the poet M. Azarm in a lecture delivered at Tehran University that year, the contemporary "poetry of resistance" (*she'r-e moqâvemat*) had been embraced by all the "non-castrated intelligentsia," who knew well that "there cannot be any poetry outside of the social problems."¹³

It is of course no great challenge to look back at those radically-charged decades and find the shortcomings of the theory of commitment or to dismiss the poetry that accompanied it as overly-ideological.¹⁴ However, the radical posturing of critics like Baraheni or Azarm aside, working through the logic and the assumptions of the commitment theories in the Persian and global context reveals the complexity of ideas with which Shamlu and his like-minded critics attempted to reconcile their social and poetic commitments. It therefore proves informative to turn to the debates outside of the Persian sphere to understand how Shamlu's brand of commitment achieved its dominant position in the decades before the Islamic Revolution and how critics within the secular, leftist tradition moved away from that theory after the upheavals of 1979 and the years that followed.

¹¹ Baraheni, *Tala Dar Mes: Dar She'r va Sha'eri* noh [page nine of introduction].

¹² *Ibid.*, dah [ten of introduction].

¹³ "Paygah-e She'r: She'r-e Moqavemat, She'r-e Taslim (Dar Defa' Az She'r-e Mota'ahhed)" in Shams Langarudi, *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She'r-e Now (Jeld-e Chaharom 1349-1357)*, 4, 131. Translation in Ricks, *Critical Perspectives on Modern Persian Literature*, 238-9. Shams Langarudi gives Bahman, 1349 (Jan/Feb 1971) as the date of the lecture while Ricks states that it was delivered in 1968. I have not verified which date is correct at this time.

¹⁴ And there is likewise no shortage of studies that endeavor to do just that. See, for example, Shahrokh Meskub, "Negahi beh She'r-e Mota'Ahhed-e Farsi," *Iran Nameh* 7, no. 4 (Summer 1368/1989): 555-83.

European Counterparts

The question of commitment in any literature will inevitably recall the theories and debates of Jean-Paul Sartre and Theodor Adorno. Though he did not invent the term, Sartre's 1947 essays on *engagement*, or commitment, inspired a global preoccupation with ensuring that literature serve the struggle for liberation in the literary discourse of the decades that followed. *What is Literature?* takes up a century-old debate between the defenders of autonomous writing (i.e. written for art's sake) on one side and consciously committed writing on the other.¹⁵ Sartre rejects the claims of the former, dismissing autonomous art entirely as an invention of 19th century bourgeois authors. This earlier bourgeois group, as the argument goes, acknowledged that writing inherently serves a purpose and addresses a particular audience. To avoid the accusation that their art addressed or, worse, served the ruling class, bourgeois writers concocted the defense of art in service of art alone.¹⁶ Thus Sartre's theory states that literature, because it makes use of language, always delivers a message; commitment means that the writer must simply choose the cause and the audience to which the message will be committed.¹⁷ The question of literature's message certainly carries a surface appeal for any socially-minded critic or writer, as the mid-century global anxiety of commitment suggests. However, this emphasis on message forces a deterministic reading on literature at the most basic level, for it obscures the argument that formal elements in any artwork function in a pre- or non-conceptual manner. Sartre does in fact allow that certain types of language perform non-communicative work. The first essay of *What is Literature?* immediately establishes that poetry is exempt from the theory of commitment because it operates in the domain of images; that is, poetry does not "represent" or "communicate" conceptual content in the manner that Sartre believes prose to do.¹⁸ This understanding of poetic language might in fact inform us of an essential quality of all works of imagination, beyond the problematic divide of poetry or prose.¹⁹ However, Sartre's essays quickly leave aside the special case of poetry and continue with the argument that the remaining non-exempt forms of literature must serve a noble cause.

Adorno also addresses the autonomous/committed dichotomy in his famous response to Sartre, though he immediately deconstructs the terms, arguing that the language in any piece of literature is never exactly the same as in communicative speech and therefore no literary text is either purely "committed" or "autonomous."²⁰ Furthermore for Adorno, all good literature, poetry included, exceeds the conceptually-bound sphere of politics and ideology. Literature is

¹⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-Ce Que La Littérature?* (Gallimard, 1948).

¹⁶ "What Is Literature?" *And Other Essays*, 40-41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁹ Just as Derrida demonstrates the impossibility of drawing discreet, absolute lines between genres, I would argue that poetry and prose, too, are imagined categories that we can therefore deconstruct. So if Sartre's understanding of poetry as more-than-communicative holds true, as I believe it does, then the argument might apply equally well to novels, plays, etc. Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (Autumn, 1980): 55-81.

²⁰ Adorno, *Notes to Literature: Volume Two*, 76.

supposed to be the site of subjective experience that, at its best, achieves what Kant calls “subjective universality.”²¹ Thus for Adorno, art has a radical potential to affirm our subjective humanity in defiance of the overwhelming objectification of every aspect of life under capitalism. However, when the artist attempts to commit the work to a particular cause or ideology, s/he compromises the truly radical potential of art. Adorno makes exactly this charge against Bertolt Brecht when he refers to the “false politics” expressed in some of Brecht’s work.²² Adorno claims that the German poet and playwright, in his attempts to defend a specific politics, does not take seriously enough the accuracy of his represented social realities, and this in turn makes it difficult to take either his politics or the work of art itself very seriously. According to Adorno, when Brecht puts forth a “false politics,” he compromises the aesthetic quality of his work as well, so much so that he at times develops a “false poetics.”²³

Adorno’s critique of the ways in which a “false politics” can lead to a “false poetics” may provide a useful theoretical framework for considering the more dogmatic committed poets in Iran. However, while Adorno elsewhere avoids the suggestion, critiquing a poet’s false politics open the possibility and even desirability of literary commitment when it is based on a “true politics,” whatever that may be. In other words, to identify the false politics of a poem would suggest that a poem can (and perhaps should) be committed and what is left to do is to choose the “true” cause. Sartre seems to pursue such a claim with his condemnatory assessment of Surrealism and its representative artists. In a brief respite from his sustained attack on the surrealists’ destructive form of rebellion, Sartre does concede that surrealist art may actually achieve the goals of Marx’s famous dictum about changing the world instead of interpreting it.²⁴ Nonetheless, for Sartre, even when surrealist art does manage to change the world, it does not enact the right kind of change, for it effects only attitudes, not material conditions.²⁵ On this point Sartre’s theory reveals itself to be a prescription for a particular ideological commitment--for literature to fulfill his demands, it must not only commit to changing the world, but to changing it in the way that the critic sees fit, which in this case, not incidentally, coincides with the theorist’s particular understanding of Marx.

Persian Responses

Sartre and Adorno both offer intriguing points of departure for developing a new criticism of the Persian poets working within similar ideological contexts. Historically, however, neither of the European philosophers seems to have resonated profoundly with the Iranian critics and proponents of committed literature. Perhaps the most obvious example of the disharmony

²¹ Immanuel Kant, "Critique of Judgement," in *Critical Theory since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (Fort Worth: 1992), 378.

²² Adorno, *Notes to Literature: Volume Two*, 83.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.” Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerback," in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works* (London: 1976), 8.

²⁵ “Situation of the Writer” in *"What Is Literature?" And Other Essays*, 156. *What is Literature?*, 156

between commitment in the Persian context and Sartre's theory is the total disregard for Sartre's exemption of poetry from the theory's demands. For the champions of commitment in Iran, poetry was never exempt from the realm of the conceptual and thus the poet had as much of an obligation to write for the epoch as any other writer. This difference in opinion by no means suggests a lack of awareness of Sartre's writings on the part of the Persian critics; on the contrary, in *Gold in the Copper*, Reza Baraheni directly addresses Sartre's argument before rejecting it wholesale with a typically polemical response. Baraheni first cites a poem from 14th century mystical poet Hafez, that, the critic argues, so explicitly refers to its contemporary social conditions that it needs no interpretation.²⁶ The poem begins "I see camaraderie among no one. What became of the companions? When did fellowship come to an end. What became of friends?"²⁷ With this poem as his proof that Hafez, "pitched [his] tent among the social and historical ruins," Baraheni then goes on to attack the logic and the applicability of Sartre's theory:

If a respectable gentleman should come forth and propose that Sartre has said that commitment in the case of the poet is idiotic and for this reason [this respectable gentleman] does not accept commitment in the case of poets, then he will have to first prove that the poetry of Hafez and Nima [Nima Yushij (1896-1960)] is idiotic. [This is] because both individuals [Hafez and Nima] demonstrate a commitment to presenting their own epochs vis-à-vis the contemporary social and historical situations. And since I personally do not have the capacity to prove that the poetry of Hafez or Nima is idiotic, I say with absolute explicitness that what Sartre says about poetic commitment being idiotic is an idiotic thing to say and if what he says is correct in the case of the type of poetry in the West, it is fundamentally incorrect in regards to the poetry and art of the East.²⁸

Thus Baraheni not only believes that poetry should be committed, but he suggests that accepting Sartre's "Western" notion of autonomy compromises the very authenticity of Persian or "Eastern" art.

Of course, the question of authenticity here is problematic at best. If we are to take Baraheni's claim seriously and not simply as an act of rhetorical iconoclasm, then we would have to accept a category of "pure" Persian poetry as existing in absolute opposition to non-Persian poetry. Then, somehow, we would have to decide which poems are allowed to fall into this category. Baraheni, as most likely would any Persian literary scholar, assumes that Hafez is the very epitome of authenticity in Persian verse. This move in itself is about as uncontroversial as claiming that Shakespeare embodies the "Englishness" of English literature. But then Baraheni chooses one famous ghazal, makes the again rather unproblematic claim that the poem refers to the social conditions of its day, and then determines that this social aspect provides the overriding criterion for determining whether or not a poem is authentically Persian. Obviously, one need only find a Hafez poem that does not refer to social conditions with such explicitness to problematize this category. When Hafez takes up spiritual issues, for example, is his poetry less

²⁶ Baraheni, *Tala Dar Mes: Dar She'r va Sha'eri* 242.

²⁷ *yâri andar kas nemi binam yâran râ che shod? dusti kay âkhar âmad dustdârân râ cheh shod?* See also Davis's masterful rhymed translation in Hafez, Khatun, and Zakani, *Faces of Love: Hafez and the Poets of Shiraz*, 6.

²⁸ Baraheni, *Tala Dar Mes: Dar She'r va Sha'eri* 242-3.

“Persian?” Is the poet himself in these instances less “authentic” and, if so, how do we define the antithesis of this authenticity? Does the poetry become more “Western?” I do not take these categories of Persian, Eastern, or Western in Baraheni’s claim seriously. Rather, it seems to me that Baraheni’s response formulates at least two critiques of Sartre’s theory. For one, the discussion of authenticity enacts the very absurdity in Sartre’s claim that poetry forms a distinct, pre-conceptual category of literature standing in absolute opposition to prose. The force of Baraheni’s response lies in its suggestion that the exemption of poetry (which itself remains loosely defined) from the demands imposed on all other forms of writing raises as least as many problems as the argument that poems written in Persian can be more or less authentic in their Persianness.

At the same time, Baraheni gestures towards an underlying Marxist reading of Persian literature that finds limited relevance in post-industrial European modes of thought for understanding the situation in Iran. Sartre seems to assume that “autonomy” emerges inextricably with capitalist industrialization.²⁹ Adorno makes this relationship explicit when, for example, he argues that “in an exchange society... human beings are alienated from one another and... objective spirit is alienated from the society it expresses and regulates.”³⁰ Contrary to Sartre and Adorno, when Baraheni turns to a 14th century poet for “evidence,” he implies a continuity between medieval and contemporary Iranian society, a society that has not experienced, in the logic of the argument, the rupture of modernity in its various manifestations. In other words, autonomy does not apply to Persian poetry today because the society has not undergone the industrial and economic transformations that cause such a concept to emerge.

Resistance Poetry

Regardless of how seriously one chooses to take authenticity or questions of modernity as categories for conceptual analysis, the historically recurrent claim that commitment in poetry attaches itself to questions of non-Western authenticity extends beyond both Baraheni and Persian literary criticism. For example, in his 1971 lecture on “the poetry of resistance,” M. Azarm argues that Persian poets have always written either a poetry of resistance (*she‘r-e moqâvemat*) or of submission (*she‘r-e taslim*)--no other category has ever existed. Thus Azarm imagines a direct historical line from the contemporary political poets in Iran to what he considers to be the great classical poets of resistance like Ferdowsi and Naser Khosrow, declaring to his audience that the classical poets, too, wrote against the social ills and illegitimate rulers of their day.³¹ Once again, Azarm necessarily excludes from his notion of authenticity any Persian poetry that does not meet his definition of resistance. Of historical interest, however, is not the categorical validity of Azarm’s claim, but rather the rhetorical move that the poet makes when, like Baraheni, he argues for the politicizing of poetics by declaring “resistance” to be a

²⁹ e.g. “For Whom Does One Write” in Sartre, *What Is Literature? And Other Essays*, 115-16.

³⁰ See “The Artist as Deputy” in Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature: Volume One*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 103.

³¹ Ricks, *Critical Perspectives on Modern Persian Literature*, 237.

native component of Persian literature. Here, the poet shows little interest in formulating a universally inclusive theory of literature and makes no mention of literature or literary criticism outside of the Persian language--commitment appears as a purely indigenous phenomenon.

Though she does not include Persian literature in her study, Barbara Harlow also imagines resistance to be an authentic and inherent feature of non-Western literatures and a counter-discourse that opposes the hegemonic structures of the West. As I detailed in chapter two, Harlow argues that resistance literature actively participates in political movements. But what can be added here is that Harlow argues specifically that resistance literature performs its political action by rewriting generic constructs. So when the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o divides writing into the two categories of writing in service of oppression and writing in service of liberation, he in fact

contests the ascendancy of sets of analytic categories and formal conventions, whether generic, such as novel, sonnet, tragedy, etc.; national-linguistic as in French, German, or English literature; literary-historical; or even so simple a distinction as that which is still conventionally maintained between fiction and non-fiction.³²

As Harlow then goes on to explain, these formal categories are minimally applicable when considering the literature of “cultures which have not themselves been part of Western literature and its idiosyncratic development.”³³ Thus, if we are to agree with Harlow, non-Western poetry under colonizing or otherwise tyrannical regimes plays a categorically contending role that serves the struggle directly.³⁴ Though Harlow seems to avoid drawing comparisons with Russian and Soviet criticism, her theory of literature as participating in revolutionary activities recalls the literary criticism of 19th century Russian radicals like Nikolay Chernyshevsky.

In Chernyshevsky's aesthetic theory, art and above all literature is nothing short of “a weapon for radical social transformation,” a description that echoes in Shamlu's poem a century later.³⁵ And like the Persian poets and critics, Chernyshevsky does not ascribe the weapon-like quality only to prose; in fact, where Sartre relegates poetry to the realm of the non-conceptual, Chernyshevsky argues that poetry's intense focus on objects makes it the art form most likely to transform the world. In combative poetics, this focus on objects translates into “objectivity,” a concept that, as I argued in chapter two, the more dogmatic critics understood to mean that a poem must express already-conceptualized content. But even if combative poetics neglects the subtleties of Chernyshevsky's argument in favor of an overdetermined notion of art, his biography certainly supports the call in resistance literature for poets to participate directly in struggle. Chernyshevsky, after all, not only theorized on how poetry could change the world; his political

³² Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, 9.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁵ Michael Katz, “Introduction” in Nikolay Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, trans. Michael Katz (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 17.

activities and imprisonment also established the young activist as a model revolutionary critic for radically-minded generations to come.³⁶

Historical Margins of a Debate: From Constitutionals to Guerrillas

Indeed, Chernyshevsky's understanding of poetry would resurface in the Persian poetics of commitment over the decades of the twentieth century, from the first calls for socially engaged literature to the heyday of "guerrilla poetry" in the years before the revolution.³⁷ While Shamlu reworked his understanding of poetry as a weapon to distinguish the aesthetic work from active participation in struggles for material liberation, the "guerilla" poets of the 1970s, Sa'id Soltanpur and Saeed Yousef prominent among them, carried the theory in the opposite direction, arguing that the poet can and must serve as combatant.³⁸ The execution of poet and communist organizer Khosrow Golesorkhi in February, 1974, provided this younger generation of committed poets with their own Chernyshevsky, their native archetype of the poet/activist-cum-martyr and embodiment of the theory that the poet, if not his poems, can participate in the struggle.³⁹ However, the understanding of poetry as revolutionary activity developed with its own particularities in the Persian context and not as an exact replica of its Russian predecessor. In fact, developments within early twentieth century Persian verse suggest native strands in the origins of the commitment debate.

At least as early as the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911), a generation of Persian poets began to formulate the idea that literature participates in social movements. The Constitutional poets like Ali Akbar Dehkhoda, Iraj Mirza, Mohammad Taqi Malek al-Sho'ara Bahar and Mirzadeh Eshqi enacted their conviction that, since the days of serving royal patrons within the context and confines of the court had come to an end, the epoch demanded poetry written consciously for the general reading public and thus with incorporations of this public's vernacular into verse. In "A Poetry That is Life," Shamlu seems to have formal transformations in mind when he breaks from the past and calls for a new type of poetry:

Today
the poet
must wear nice clothes
lace up a pair of clean and well-waxed shoes,
then from the busiest point in the city,
with a precision particular to him,
he must extract his subject, meter, and rhyme

³⁶ Ibid., 14-15.

³⁷ For example, at the groundbreaking 1946 Congress of Iranian Writers, the critic Fatemeh Sayyah discussed the importance of applying Chernyshevsky's and Vissarion Belinsky's theories to Persian literary criticism. See Bozorg Alavi, "The First Iranian Writers' Congress" in Ricks, *Critical Perspectives on Modern Persian Literature*, 22.

³⁸ For more on guerrilla poetry, see my discussion of combative poetics in chapter two.

³⁹ Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Iranian Left in Iran*, 69-70.

one by one from the passersby.⁴⁰

Shamlu here associates modernity with innovations in “meter and rhyme;” however, the linguistic innovations of the Constitutional poets mark one of the early milestones in the development of modern Persian poetry, in which engagement with social conditions undoubtedly features. As Karimi-Hakkak demonstrates in his study of poetic modernity in Iran, the Constitutional poets maintained classical meters and forms of Persian poetry (i.e. the *ghazal*, *qasideh*, etc.) but they introduced a new diction into these forms that would, they believed, more accurately reflect the contemporary spoken language.⁴¹ In their move towards relevance, the Constitutional poets participated in one of the driving ideas of modern poetry in general. In English, for example, William Wordsworth argued as early as 1800 that poetry should speak in “the language of men” while maintaining meter and rhyme.⁴² But the Constitutionalists’ notions on poetry’s relation to society also rehearse a later intellectual evolution in Iran, from the conviction that poetry should be relevant to society to the demand that poetry change society. Thus, without analyzing even cursorily Constitutional poetry here, I propose that Persian poetics neither imported wholesale the demand for poetry to reflect and serve the struggles of modern society from abroad, nor encountered an entirely unprecedented set of demands in the committed critics and poets of Shamlu’s generation, or even of the generation preceding his.

The debates that I have outlined above represent only one trend within the development of a Persian poetics in Iran in the last century. One of the larger assumptions of this dissertation is that literary criticism can offer as much if not more insight into the intellectual workings of the particular critic than it does into a historical understanding of the literature itself. Literary historians like Ghanoonparvar or Talattof reflect on Persian poetry in the decades before the Islamic Revolution and see commitment as the dominant discourse.⁴³ Ghanoonparvar in particular details how a writer’s political involvement on the personal level effected his critical reception as much if not more than the actual content of his writing.⁴⁴ It remains, however, to investigate the literature that fell completely outside of the critical paradigm of commitment. Such a project exceeds the scope of this chapter. Nonetheless, I note here that to contextualize fully the dominant discourse in pre-Revolutionary Iranian poetics, one might consider the poetry that was not deemed worthy of criticism at all. Talattof refers to such a literature in his outline of post-Revolution literary trends, a movement that he places under the rubric of “Literature of the Islamic Revolution.” Talattof believes that this literature, which was oriented towards the Islamic

⁴⁰ Shamlu, *Majmu'eh-ye Asar: Daftar-e Yekom: She'r*, 155. See Appendix page 174 for my translation of the poem in full.

⁴¹ Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry: Scenarios of Poetic Modernity in Iran*.

⁴² William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Second Edition of the Lyrical Ballads (1800)," in *English Romantic Writers*, ed. David Perkins (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 426.

⁴³ Ghanoonparvar, *Prophets of Doom : Literature as a Socio-Political Phenomenon in Modern Iran*. Talattof, *The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian Literature*.

⁴⁴ See for example the comparison of the critical response to Sadeq Chubak, Samad Behrangi, and Nader Naderpur in *Ibid.*, 81-96.

Revolution, was “highly influenced and informed by prerevolutionary Committed Literature in terms of its expression of commitment...as well as its use of similar metaphors...and many of the same themes,” but he does not explore the possibilities of how this same literature might also have developed autonomously in the years before the Revolution.⁴⁵ To give one example of this neglected, parallel discourse, it is striking that neither Talattof nor Ghanoonparvar mentions the poems of M. Azarm (Ne‘mat Mirzazadeh) from the 1960s in which the poet, in an act of linguistic innovation, referred to the then-exiled Ayatollah Khomeini with the title of “Imam,” the title that has remained with the founder of the Islamic Republic to this day.⁴⁶ Could it be that critics of Persian poetry have missed the signs of an early inclination towards Islamic revolutionary discourse in the poetry, not because examples of such an inclination did not exist, but because the critics themselves were oriented elsewhere? In rethinking the evolution of poetics, it might be equally informative to consider why, in his four volume history of the New Poetry in Iran, Shams Langrudi does not once mention M. Azarm’s praise for the supreme leader-to-be, why there are no serious attempts (in English anyway) to trace the evolution of a “committed” Islamic poetics,⁴⁷ and no serious engagements (again, in English) of Imam Khomeini’s poetry,⁴⁸ not only as “Suffi” or “didactic” poems but as a significant contribution to Persian literature as a whole. I make only passing mention of such lacunae here to acknowledge that the current study takes up only one discourse, at the expense of others, in the development of modern Iranian poetics.

III. Symbolism and the Subject: Poetry’s Humanist Commitment

“A Poetry that is Life” presents itself as a radical rupture in the Persian poetic tradition, not as a point on a complex continuum. If the poem does not recognize the aesthetic contributions of its early 20th century predecessors, especially the Constitutional poets and their linguistic innovations, to the development of modern Persian poetry, it is because the poem, in its search for a new form, stakes its claim as heir to the poetry of Nima Yushij (given name: Ali Esfandiari). Nima, as he is commonly known in the Persian-speaking world, is widely considered the founder of New Poetry (*she‘r-e now*) that, as mentioned above, broke from the formal line and rhythmic structures of classical Persian poetry. New Poetry fundamentally assumes that writing in simple, vernacular language and developing inherently logical, as opposed to formally mandated, meters will make poetry accessible to a wider audience. That is to

⁴⁵ Ibid., 112-13.

⁴⁶ Hamid Algar reports that the title of Imam “was first applied to [Khomeini] in poems composed in 1964 and 1969 by Ni‘mat Mirzazada, but did not enter general usage until 1977,” “Imam Khomeini, 1902-1962: The Pre-Revolutionary Years” in Edmund Burke, Ira M. Lapidus, and Ervand Abrahamian, eds., *Islam, Politics, and Social Movements*, Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 284 f.n.2. See also Hamid Algar, *Iran va Enqelab*, trans. Entesharat-e Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami (n.p.1357/1979), f.n.20.

⁴⁷ Shams Langrudi writes that the poets Ali Garmarudi, Ne‘mat Mirzazadeh (M. Azarm), and Mohammad Reza Shafi‘i-Kadkani were the first poets to write “poetry in the Nimaic and modernist framework with a religious (Islamic) approach,” idem *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She‘r-e Now*, 4:80.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Khomeini, *Badeh-ye Eshq: Ash‘ar-e Arefaneh-ye Hezrat-e Emam Khomeyni*.

say that the development of New Poetry never veered far from the idea that poetry should be written for the general public and not the elite. But the poetry that Nima and then Shamlu developed did not necessarily achieve the level of accessibility that the poets might have imagined. In fact, at the same time that he broke from familiar line and metrical structures and advocated the use of a simpler language, Nima developed a poetic language known as “social symbolism” (*sambulism-e ejtemâ’i* or *ramz-gerâ’i-ye ejtemâ’i*). Social Symbolism essentially denotes a type of poetry in which the poet refers to socio-political conditions in a coded language that will escape the censor.⁴⁹ Thus, while the “social” aspect of this form of modernist verse seeks to express its solidarity with the general public, the “symbolist” aspect always threatens to impede that goal. Which is to say that by writing in a symbolic language that will remain either incomprehensible or unthreatening to the censor, the poet also runs the risk that the symbols’ pre-determined political meanings will also remain incomprehensible to the intended audience.

Shamlu was one of the pioneers of social symbolism and in this sense, the direct, unambiguous lines from “A Poetry That is Life” are somewhat of an anomaly in his body of work. Shamlu more often wrote with a vague, even surreal language that could remain inaccessible to the uninitiated. A poem like “The Death of Nazli,” (“Marg-e Nâzli”), also published in the collection *Fresh Air* perhaps better represents Shamlu’s brand of committed poetry. “Death of Nazli” opens with the words of a speaker--not the poet--addressed to a figure named “Nazli.” The speaker attempts to convince Nazli to do something though, from these lines alone, what exactly it is that Nazli is supposed to do may not be readily comprehensible:

“Nazli, spring fell into laughter and the Judas-tree blossomed.
At home, the old lilac beneath the window bloomed.
Let go of illusion,
don’t raise a fist towards ominous death!
Better existence than becoming extinct, especially in the spring. . .”⁵⁰

Here, the reader must be familiar with the semiotics of Shamlu’s political poetry to make sense of the lines. Nazli, as Shamlu himself later divulged, refers to the poet’s close friend Vartan Salakhanian (who appears as “Vartan” at the end of “A Poetry That is Life”), a member of the Communist Tudeh Party who was tortured to death in the first days following the 1953 coup d’état in Iran.⁵¹ The reader familiar with Shamlu’s poetry and its historical context would recognize almost immediately that this speaker is a torturer who presses “Nazli” to talk and betray her comrades.⁵² This initiated reader would, presumably, read the opening description of

⁴⁹ Shafi’i Kadkani, *Advar-e She’r-e Farsi az Mashrutiyat ta Soqut-e Saltanat*, 55.

⁵⁰ Shamlu, *Majmu’eh-ye Asar: Daftar-e Yekom: She’r*, 147. For my translation of the poem in full, see Appendix, page 184.

⁵¹ Shamlu explains in a footnote how the poem is for Vartan Salakhanian but that he gave it the title of “Death of Nazli” so that it would “pass through the censor’s dam,” *Ibid.*, 536-7. See also Parvin Salajeqeh, *Naqd-e She’r-e Mo’Asser: Amirzadeh-ye Kashi’ha: Ahmad Shamlu* (Tehran: Morvarid, 1384/2005), 470-74.

⁵² Nazli is in fact a woman’s name. However, considering Shamlu’s explanation for his choice of name (see f.n. above) I do not find the question of how gendering might affect various readings of the poem especially relevant to my discussion of social symbolism here.

spring blossoms and understand that the speaker refers to Nazli's friends who have confessed and collaborated with their torturers. Furthermore, the initiated reader might see a word like "Judas-tree" (*arghavân*), picture the purple flowers that open before that tree sprouts leaves, and associate the image with bruises and welts on the tortured hero's body (the English name of the tree of course makes another association with betrayal readily accessible but this is not present in the Persian word). One can only speculate on how many readers in 1957 would grasp these referential and symbolic gestures and read the poem as an act of political defiance. By the 1980s, however, at least one segment of society had learned to navigate the social-symbolic language. According to Ervand Abrahamian, in the years after the Islamic Revolution, Leftists from various factions, some of them anti-Tudeh, would recite the poem's refrain, "Nazli didn't say a word" (*nâzli sokhan nagofî*), in coded commemoration of any comrade lost to the torture chambers and firing squads.⁵³ Shamlu's social symbolism, it would seem, had succeeded in reaching an audience who in turn demanded political readings of its codes.

But if social symbolism assumes that a poem should transfer pre-determined semantic content from poet to audience, then the particular imagery and form through which the symbols occur in the poetry allow for a more open ended-experience, mirroring the poet's commitment to a more libertarian social order. "Death of Nazli," as Purnamdarian argues, forges a system of natural images that contain no precedent in classical poetry.⁵⁴ So even if the poem expects its audience to arrive at an already-conceptualized political message, it requires them to do so by experiencing the images, as opposed to simply recognizing poetic tropes or ideological slogans. Therein lies the essence of Shamlu's humanist poetics; the poem presents a site for individuals to test and experience their creative capacities. The form of the poem further suggests the effort to create an un-restricted space. "Death of Nazli" does not appear in a pre-existing classical form. Instead, the poem's three stanzas seem to arise from the internal logic of the poem itself, which Salajeqeh describes as a triangulation of death around Nazli's character with her silent resistance forming the triangle's three sides.⁵⁵ Thus Shamlu invents a new form based on the need of the poem. Here, the creative process parallels the American poet Robert Duncan's pursuit of unrestricted liberty in the aesthetic work. As the critic Albert Gelpi explains, Duncan sought a constantly renewed form of social freedom, which manifests aesthetically in the perpetual destruction and creation of form. In other words, imagining and reimagining poetic forms parallels a process that must take place throughout society, a process in which we must "destroy present social and economic systems" and "create new kinds of organization in which the freedom and integrity of the individual will flourish"⁵⁶ The idea of destroying and rebuilding plays a fundamental role in Shamlu's symbolism too as each poem organizes its images and

⁵³ Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions : Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran*, 89.

⁵⁴ Taqi Purnamdarian, *Safar Dar Meh: Ta'ammoli Dar She 'r-e Ahmad Shamlu* (Tehran: Nowruz, 1374/1995), 160.

⁵⁵ Salajeqeh, *Naqd-e She 'r-e Mo 'Asser: Amirzadeh-ye Kashi'ha: Ahmad Shamlu*, 471.

⁵⁶ "Decision at the Apogee: Robert Duncan's Anarchist Critique of Denise Levertov" in Albert Gelpi and Robert J. Bertholf, eds., *Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Politics, the Politics of Poetry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 5.

ideology nor refer to specific events or people. The poem does not treat “ship,” “wave,” “blood,” “heart” as place-holders for political concepts or at least it does not treat them only as such; rather, the “poetic attitude,” to use Sartre’s definition, treats these images “as things and not as signs.”⁵⁸ And if the metaphors do not serve the poem’s politics, then they serve the poem as a particular form of language with its own exigencies. Indeed, in composing poetry, even Soltanpur the activist and opponent of social symbolism demonstrates how a poem eludes its own politics.

Few critics, however, saw the potential for such a favorable reading of Soltanpur as I have offered above.⁵⁹ Shamlu and Baraheni vehemently rejected the young poet as intellectually unserious, a sloganeer whose lines could not be mistaken for poetry.⁶⁰ This stance towards Soltanpur and the work of the younger poets in general reveals the range of ideas within the framework of the commitment debate. Soltanpur complicates the theory of commitment in Iran because, in many ways, he seems to have achieved in his poems what other theorists argued that poetry should do. In the sense that his poems address politics and society more openly than the poets before him, Soltanpur’s poetry might even be considered more “committed” than that of his more-established peers. In fact, Soltanpur may have developed a type of poetry that appealed to and roused his audiences exactly as Shamlu had claimed that his own poetry would do. But Shamlu and Baraheni would reject this claim entirely, as both considered Soltanpur’s writing mere “sloganeering” (*sho’âr*) and not true poetry (*she’r*). It would seem that the older, more-established poets and critics felt that Soltanpur allowed political commitment to compromise the aesthetic dimension of his work. These detractors, however, certainly could not criticize the political effectiveness of Soltanpur’s performances. The writer Mohammad Ali Sepanlu relates how, at the Ten Nights (*Dah Shab*) poetry event in 1977, Soltanpur and his politically agitating poems had such a strong following among the most radical elements in the audience that the organizers considered barring the young poet from taking the stage.⁶¹ Soltanpur was, in the end, allowed to read his poems, and as Sepanlu reports, he was among the most well-received poets of the ten-night event. If Soltanpur could achieve such a rapport with his audience and since his Marxist politics were essentially in accordance with Shamlu’s, the question remains as to why Shamlu did not approve of the poetry. Saeed Yousef concludes that this dismissal of Soltanpur’s poetry was simply a way for Shamlu to defend his own poetry as the sole legitimate form of

⁵⁸ Sartre, *“What Is Literature?” And Other Essays*, 29.

⁵⁹ For an exception to Soltanpur’s detractors, see Yusof, *Now’i az Naqd Bar Now’i az She’r: Barresi-ye She’r-e Dowran-e Siyahkal va She’r-e Sa’id Soltanpur*.

⁶⁰ In his introduction to a collection of poetry from a 1968 festival, Shamlu cites Baraheni on the difference between poetry (*sh’er*) and sloganeering (*sho’âr*). See the second and third (unnumbered) pages of Shamlu, *Khusheh: Yadnameh-ye Nokhostin Hafteh-ye She’r-e Khusheh, 24-28 Shahrivar Mah 1347*. Though Shamlu does not mention him by name, his exclusion from the collection—despite Soltanpur’s popularity at the festival—leaves no doubt that Shamlu has Soltanpur in mind when he accuses “some younger poets” of unpoetic sloganeering. Saeed Yousef confirms this fact and describes his personal experience with Shamlu’s contempt towards Soltanpur in *Poetics and Politics, East and West*, 151-3. Shams Langrudi also describes how Soltanpur and M. Azarm (Ne’mat Mirzazadeh) were excluded from the collection, idem *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She’r-e Now (Jeld-e Sevvom 1341-1349)*, 3, 588.

⁶¹ Sepanlu, *Sargozasht-e Kanun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran*, 75-77.

political verse.⁶² To Yousef's argument we should add, however, that Shamlu may also have recognized an authoritarian aspect of combative poetry and its singularly political reading, whereas social symbolism's ambiguity allows the possibility for each reader to construct meaning pursuant to the situation at hand.

IV. Lyric Vanguard, Imagined Masses: Voice and Commitment in Shamlu's Poetry

Shamlu certainly considered himself an exemplary poet of commitment, an assessment repeated by critics like Reza Baraheni. In a 1978 interview, the poet explains just how he has managed to triumph over the oppressive policies of the monarchy and, through his poetry, to make contact with the masses yearning for freedom. The pressures of life under dictatorship have necessitated the development of social symbolism, but this poetry now serves the struggle against the illegitimate regime:

The matter of political repression, of *strangling* [sic], in Iran has given a very peculiar shape to our poetry because poetry is the national weapon, above all in Iran...a language has come into existence in contemporary poetry which the censors do not understand, but which the people themselves understand as soon as they hear the poetry.⁶³

To demonstrate just how thoroughly the censors have remained oblivious to his poetry's revolutionary content, Shamlu then gives the example of a book confiscated only after its eighth printing. Clearly, the poet feels that his words have evaded the watchful eyes of the regime's security apparatus, reached their intended audience, and resounded among the struggling people. But how exactly does poetry form a weapon against despotism? Even assuming that a poem's words circulate among potentially revolutionary audiences, what do those words *do* to bring about change?

Standard Bearers of Humanity

Shamlu formulated one version of his theory for how poetic commitment works in a 1970 publication under the cumbersome title of "Draft of an Introduction to a Lecture by Shamlu at the College of Literature, Tabriz."⁶⁴ In this preface, Shamlu repeats his pronouncement that "today, poetry is the weapon of the masses," but then elaborates on his understanding of the subversive function of poetry and art in a manner that departs from the surface dogmatism in the poem's claim.⁶⁵ Ultimately, poets are the "standard bearers of humanity," for poetry manifests

⁶² Yousef, *Poetics and Politics, East and West: The Poetries of Ahmad Shamlu and Bertolt Brecht*, 151-2.

⁶³ Shamlu, "Modern Persian Poetry: The National Weapon in Iran, 1950-1970 in Ricks, *Critical Perspectives on Modern Persian Literature*, 250.

⁶⁴ Shamlu, "Pish Nevis-e Moqaddameh-ye Sokhanrani-ye Shamlu dar Daneshkadeh-ye Adabiyat-e Tabriz" in Shams Langarudi, *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She'r-e Now (Jeld-e Chaharom 1349-1357)*, 4, 25-29. According to Shams Langarudi, the essay originally appeared in *Jong-e Ark*, summer 1349.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

our “creativity...elevated compassions...and capacity for contemplation.”⁶⁶ That is to say that poetry activates the qualities that, according to Shamlu, distinguish humans from all other animals. While politics follows “the law of the jungle” and politicians embody “trickery and lies,” poetry, like other artistic works, “comprises the museum of humanity and the humane.”⁶⁷ Thus poetry resists despotic political, social, or economic orders by restoring a sense of humanity to the masses. Though he never exactly uses a term like “subjectivity,” Shamlu’s argument here on poetry’s humanizing function recalls Adorno’s commitment theory and its foundation in “subjective universality.” In both cases, the theory claims that poetry very well might change the world, but only through inciting individuals to exercise their full capacity for experiencing thought. Poetry’s work therefore necessarily differs from the work of ideology; for while poetry invokes experience, which is by nature subjective, ideology imposes objective, pre-determined programs for structural or institutional change. Shamlu concludes that what earlier generations named poetry (*she‘r*) today we call verse (*nazm*). Verse in contemporary society only merits the title of true poetry when it commits to art’s humanizing/subjectifying cause. In Shamlu’s words, his own century’s devastating assaults on humanity have forced poetry to assume its current mission:

When the agonies of the second [world] war afflicted the intellectuals’ hearts and when [French Surrealist poet Robert] Desnos fell dead to the ground in the Nazi detainment camps...it was from among these agonies that true poetry ignited and rose like a sun among the darkness. Let us fall to our knees before the sun that is rising”⁶⁸

Of course the poet’s conviction here that poetry can resist even the severest dehumanizing crimes of the Nazis does not quite parallel Adorno’s famous pronouncement that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”⁶⁹ Nonetheless, Shamlu’s theory affords modern poetry the possibility of subjective experience, a possibility that Adorno eventually seems to recognize in the post-Auschwitz poetry of Paul Celan.⁷⁰

According to the propositions described thus far, Shamlu’s poetry succeeds when it reaches “the people” and fosters their liberation by allowing them to exercise subjective judgement, which in turn restores their humanity. But how and to what extent does the poetry itself fulfill these theoretical demands? On the surface, Shamlu’s poetic voice certainly proclaims its commitment to collective but not-yet-determined judgement and action, at least at times, as when it declares poetry the masses’ weapon. That is to say that “arming” the people empowers them to exercise their agency--presumably to resist their oppressors--but the act does not in itself determine a specific program for liberation. Poetry is the weapon of the masses, but they may use

⁶⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 28-29.

⁶⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms*(Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983), 34.

⁷⁰ In dedicating “Valéry’s Deviations” to Celan, it seems to me that Adorno departs from his earlier statement on barbarism and suggests that Celan’s German-language poetry allows subjective experience and thus resists the fascist drive towards annihilation of the subject in some significant way, *Notes to Literature: Volume One*, 137.

their weapons however they see fit. And if the act of arming refers to restoring subjectivity, that is, inciting the freedom to think, feel, and experience, then Shamlu's poetry in its profound aesthetic mastery--its musicality, its historically dense and resonant lexicon and its deeply personal lyric voice--does invite a type of experience that might fulfill this claim.

Individuals, Masses, and Multitudes

At the same time, however, and sometimes even in the same poems that outwardly declare their emancipatory charge, Shamlu's poetry also projects a recurrent image of the masses that does not quite accord with either the theory or the poetic voice's professed humanism. In this imagining, contrary to the argument that liberation requires subjective and particularized individuals acting on their own free will, the people are at best faceless and at worst completely passive. For beneath these imagined, generalized multitudes lies an ideological demand for exceptional leadership (i.e. a vanguard) to liberate the masses--since they are unwilling or unable to liberate themselves--a demand that contradicts both the claim that the poems will incite subjectivity and the actual work that the poems do.

How exactly the poetic voice imagines these generalized masses and positions itself vis-à-vis this imagined public thus complicates questions of commitment in Shamlu's poetry. In the poems I consider here, the poetic voice in fact rarely explores the masses' particularity. On the contrary, the masses appear in an already conceptualized form; that is, they appear with objective, pre-determined value. While Shamlu in his role as critic seems to think that poetry should work towards restoring subjective experience, the authoritarian voice in some poems denies the masses that same subjectivity by portraying them as an objectified image. In fact, the poetic voice more often celebrates modern-day heroes and their legendary acts of defiance as fundamentally distinct from the features of the common public. Thus the masses, by very nature of constituting a generic mass, cannot achieve the merit of Shamlu's contemporary epic heroes.

Of course the question of serving the masses does arise throughout Shamlu's verse. In "A Poetry that is Life," the lyric voice is clear on how the true poet must engage his social realities:

The poet of today
 is no stranger
to the collective toils of the masses:

With the lips of the people,
 he smiles.

He grafts the hopes
and pains of the people
 upon his bones.⁷¹

⁷¹ Shamlu, *Majmu'eh-ye Asar: Daftar-e Yekom: She'r*, 155. See also Appendix, page 174.

But while the obligation to remain ideologically committed to these masses and to show solidarity with their struggles is clear, nowhere in “A Poetry that is Life” do we get a picture of the individuals who make up this mass. The poem declares that the new poetry will derive its meters, rhymes and diction from the people in the streets, but offers no details of these inspirational “passersby” (*âberân*). Shamlu’s faceless crowd here resembles the masses that Walter Benjamin encounters in Charles Baudelaire’s poetry. Benjamin’s conclusion in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” that the multitudes “do not stand for classes or any sort of collective; rather, they are nothing but the amorphous crowd of passers-by, the people in the street” could be applied to “the people” in Shamlu’s poem as well.⁷² Of course behind Benjamin’s implication stands the views of Engels and Marx that “the masses” designates workers who do not experience their subjectivity but see themselves only as objectified. The masses become the “proletariat” when they exercise reflective judgement and grow conscious of themselves as subjects, as particulars that have potentially universal claims. “The people” in “A Poetry That is Life,” likewise, appear not as a radicalized proletariat but rather as a typical urban mass, a crowd of shoppers and workers hurrying to or from their jobs.

That is not to say that Shamlu never ventures a more detailed characterization of his imagined audience. In an oft-quoted passage from another poem in *Fresh Air*, Shamlu singles out his representative figures from among the masses. In this poem, which Alishan translates as “A Nocturnal Song for the Street,” the poet states his allegiance to the most downtrodden elements of society when he declares:

I write
for the prostitutes and the bare,
for the tubercular,
the destitute,
for those who, on the cold earth
 are hopeful,
and for those who believe no more
 in heaven.⁷³

This is one point where Shamlu’s poetry comes closest to particularizing, at least in the sense of naming, some of the characters in his virtual public. The poem affords an agency to the lumpen masses in their rejection of the metaphysical hereafter and their hope in material progress. This imagined agency, I argue, is in fact quite exceptional for the common people who populate Shamlu’s poetry and one is hard-pressed to find another example in either *Fresh Air* or in later collections of the faces in the crowd.

If the “people” appear as a nebulous mass in “A Poetry that is Life,” Baraheni lends a theoretical and critical authority to the undeveloped image in Shamlu’s poetry. In Baraheni’s introduction to the 1968 edition of *Gold in the Copper*, the features of the committed poet’s

⁷² Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 165.

⁷³ Alishan, “Ahmad Shamlu: The Rebel Poet in Search of an Audience,” 380. For original Persian see “Avaz-e Shabaneh bara-ye Kucheh-ha,” Shamlu, *Majmu'eh-ye Asar: Daftar-e Yekom: She'r*, 269.

intended audience remain vague.⁷⁴ Baraheni's introductory essay does not proffer any details about the people that poetry should serve, concluding only that the poet must "pass through the streets" in order to become aware of the social and historical context of his work. One is left to imagine what, exactly, the poet will encounter on those streets.

Singular Martyrs at the Vanguard

One explanation for why Shamlu's masses do not shed their amorphous quality might be found in the poet's recurring image of fallen heroes. These recurring heroic figures elevate themselves to a status above that of the common man through their acts of resistance. In "Death of Nazli," for example, the hero's refusal to break down under torture is an indication of his singular courage, his ability to defy and rise above the horrors of his dark times:

Nazli didn't say a word:
 like the sun
he rose from the darkness and lay in his blood and left.

Nazli didn't say a word
Nazli was a star
He shone in this darkness for a moment and flickered and left. . .

Nazli didn't say a word
Nazli was a violet
he blossomed
and delivered the good news: *Winter has cracked!*
 and
 he left...⁷⁵

Without limiting this analysis of the poetry to its historical context, it might be worth noting here that the vision of exceptional heroism that emerges from "Death of Nazli" mirrors Shamlu's personal experience of disillusionment with the pro-Soviet Tudeh party. The poet had been active in the party before the 1953 coup d'état. Following Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq's ouster, several Tudeh party leaders fled the country while others gave "confessions" that led to the execution of their presumed comrades. These betrayals led an embittered Shamlu to abandon the party and to avoid any party affiliation--communist or otherwise--for the rest of his life.⁷⁶ Shamlu's disillusionment with Tudeh leaders opens troubling questions on the poet's stance towards torture. If "The Death of Nazli's" titular hero achieves heroism by resisting torture, then the poem would suggest that the reverse also holds true, that those who succumb to torture act unheroically. Shamlu is not alone in putting forth such a suggestion. In reference to the Nazi

⁷⁴ "Beh Ja-ye Moqaddemeh" in Baraheni, *Tala Dar Mes: Dar She'r va Sha'eri*. This introduction is not included in the 1992/3 edition of the book.

⁷⁵ Shamlu, *Majmu'eh-ye Asar: Daftar-e Yekom: She'r*, 147-8.

⁷⁶ Alishan, "Ahmad Shamlu: The Rebel Poet in Search of an Audience," 380.

observes the influence of Mayakovsky, with whom Shamlu was acutely familiar when the Russian poet calls for a poetic vanguard.⁸⁸ In Mayakovsky's estimation, "to fulfill the social command as well as possible you must be in the vanguard of your class, and carry on the struggle, along with your class, on all fronts. You must smash to smithereens the myth of an apolitical art."⁸⁹ The masses in "On the Cobblestones" likewise have shown themselves to be in dire need of a vanguard and a politically explicit art to lead them to better times and the poem fulfills this need by sending its lyrical messenger to awaken the people from their political slumber.

The Poet as Subject

However, the poem, even as it outwardly claims to possess a message, problematizes and ultimately exceeds the boundaries of ideology; the poem defies its own politics, demonstrating that the poet does not and cannot fulfill the vanguard role that the poem at the same time prescribes. To begin with, Shamlu borrows the refrain of the poem, "See the blood on the cobblestones," from Pablo Neruda's poem after the Fascist bombing of Madrid and the defeat of the Spanish Republic. In Neruda's "Explico Algunas Cosas," the lyric voice invites anyone who questions why the poet writes political verse to "come see the blood in the streets."⁹⁰ Shamlu picks up the Chilean poet's invocation as if to say that poetry's mission exceeds not only national or linguistic boundaries but ideological lines as well, that poetry works towards universal human liberation as befitting the particularities of each time and place. And beyond forging a universal poetics, "On the Cobblestones" also defies its politics by gesturing towards a different notion of universality, a universality achieved through the subjective, the experiential, and the personal, not through the objective or political. Hence the poetic voice both imagines itself in a vanguard role and questions the possibility of such a role for itself.

One way in which the poem gestures towards subjective universality can be traced in the profoundly personal voice that resonates throughout. Indeed, the poem never claims to remove itself from the "I" that grounds the individuality or particularity of its speaker. For example in the following lines:

âhang-e por salâbat-e tapeshe-e qalb-e khorshid ra
man
rowshan tar
por khashm tar
*por zarbeh tar shanideh-am az pish...*⁹¹

⁸⁸ On Shamlu's familiarity with Mayakovsky's work, see Shafi'i Kadkani, *Ba Cheragh va Ayeneh: Dar Jostojuyeh Risheh'ha-ye Tahavvol-e She'r-e Mo'aser-e Iran*, 513-14.

⁸⁹ Vladimir Mayakovsky, *How Are Verses Made?*, trans. G. M. Hyde (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1970), 56-57.

⁹⁰ The original Spanish is "Venid a ver la sangre por las calles." "Explico Algunas Cosas," translated as "A Few Things Explained" in Pablo Neruda, *Selected Poems of Pablo Neruda*, trans. Ben Belitt (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 108-13.

⁹¹ Shamlu, *Majmu'eh-ye Asar: Daftar-e Yekom: She'r*, 352-3.

The *man* (the “I” or the “me”) in these lines is grammatically and semantically superfluous, it is not necessary to make the sentence grammatically correct or to make the meaning clear (and the way the meter works it is likewise consistent but unnecessary). I have tried to render a similar act into my English translation:

I have heard the fierce song
of the sun's heartbeat
I
more glaring
more enraged
more repercussive than before...

But in both the Persian and English, if the “I” does nothing for the syntactic or semantic value of the lines, it does add something fundamental to the poem, for the poet writes himself into the poem; the “I” says, in essence, that there can be no message without me. So, a political message might exist, but only as mediated through the subjective voice of the poet. Indeed, poetry enacts experience, not ideology.

And thus the personal voice suggests not only why the masses remain dormant and un-particularized in the the poem, but why liberation necessarily remains metaphorical. Again, on the surface and with a certain social symbolist reading, we might take the “events” of the poem as an allegory that equates reciting poetry to liberating the people: the poet carries his lantern, i.e. light, through the darkened street, sings of the crimes committed there, awakens his slumbering neighbors and thus ushers in the morning (i.e. the end of darkness). But liberation in this allegory is not and cannot be anything more than allegorical precisely because it occurs in a poem. The lyric voice seems aware that only metaphors are at stake, for the poem reaches its climax with the sun and stars breaking free--not the people--and with the poet’s hope restored:

Sun shoots sprung upon the ivy
by the gate in the rundown garden.

The jovial lanterns of stars
strung across the portico
where the sun had passed...

I returned from the road
my spirit full of hope
my heart aflutter.⁹²

The poem never states that it liberates the people, even if one allegorical reading implies such an act because it is aware that a poem can never literally commit such an act. Therefore, even as the speaker renders himself into a vanguard role, imagining himself the bearer of an emancipatory message for the people, the poem undermines its imagined vanguard and explodes the message

⁹² Ibid., 353-54.

that the political aspect of the voice claims to carry. And it explodes its message by enacting a figurative sunrise--a poetic and therefore subjective one--and by mediating its presumably universal message through the always personal voice and experience of the poet.

The Disillusioned Voice

If “On the Cobblestones” imagines a possibility for subjective universality, however, Shamlu was not always so optimistic in his characterization of the masses, as a poem like “Tablet” demonstrates. In “Tablet” (*Lowh*), the prophetic lyric voice expresses dismay at the realization that its reactionary audience opposes its own liberation, or at least liberation as the speaker imagines it.⁹³ In this poem, first published in *Ayda: The Tree, The Dagger, and a Memory* (*Âydâ: Derakht va Khanjar va Khâtereh*) (1965), there emerges a sense of just what the lyric voice makes of those oppressed masses who for so long have remained faceless in Shamlu’s verse. The public, as the poem’s distressed narrator realizes, is moved by its religious leaders, not by the secular-minded poets who have dedicated their work to this beloved audience. The narrator describes how he descends, prophet-like, to a pulpit and delivers the message on his clay tablet to the crowd. The poem’s narrator announces that the days of religious faith have ended and that liberation will come with the people realizing that their heroes and martyrs come not from holy books but their own reality:

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 Cruciform⁹⁴

For Shamlu, the struggles of contemporary society are no less epic, no less divine than those of the crowd’s sacred books. It is only the weapons and the means of warfare that have changed with time:

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.⁹⁵

However, as the speaker laments, the crowd has no interest in his prophecy. Since he has delivered his message “without mentioning the word heaven,” it has fallen upon deaf ears:

⁹³ Ibid., 629. Translation from Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, ed. *An Anthology of Modern Persian Poetry*, Modern Persian Literature Series (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1978), 56-59.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 57.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

but the crowd had no ear or heart for my words
I knew that they were awaiting
not a clay tablet but a Gospel
a sword and some constables
to ambush them with whips and maces
to drop them to their knees
before the heavy steps of the one
who will descend the dark stairway
with a sword and a Gospel.⁹⁶

These lines provide a compelling insight into the poet's conception of his public, not only because here the masses oppose the speaker's apparent theory of poetic commitment, but because the bitterly prophetic voice seems to have achieved some historical accuracy in its prophecy. That is to say that "Tablet" is not only prophetic in tone but in content as well. As Alishan explains, Shamlu wrote the poem in 1965, four months after widespread protests and demonstrations had erupted throughout Iran in response to Khomeini's forced exile.⁹⁷ While committed poetry had announced its allegiance to the people for years, the people, when given the opportunity, demonstrated that their allegiances lay elsewhere.

There is, finally, among Shamlu's various images of the masses as I have presented them here, an underlying lack of particularity. That is to say that the same poems that declare solidarity with the individuals in a crowd do not necessarily complicate the sense of homogeneity and facelessness that come with representing a general mass. The task of the "committed" poet according to the logic of these examples seems to end at the act of professing commitment to the faceless crowd. And from this act arises the conundrum of Shamlu's poetics: while the poetry states its support of the people's liberation, in the universalizing move of representing the people as a uniform mass, the poetry denies the very subjectivity that liberation is meant to restore. Here, Shamlu's poetics might benefit from an Adornian critique of universality in great works of art. Adorno argues that great art achieves a sense of universality, but that it only does so through engaging the particularities of human experience and existence and thus "discovering" the previously unconceptualized universal possibility at issue. That a lyric poem can achieve universality does not mean for Adorno that it produces an ideological maxim to be applied in every situation. On the contrary, for Adorno "the greatness of works of art...consists solely in the fact that they give voice to what ideology hides."⁹⁸ Where Shamlu's poetic voice searches for a conceptually pre-determined and universally applicable theory of liberation for the masses, the poems seem to fall short of "that good universality that does not leave the particular out but rather preserves it and drives it, with the force of its own movement, to cogency."⁹⁹

Perhaps a poem like Simin Behbehani's "A Man Without a Leg," as Farzaneh Milani and Kaveh Safa translate it, (*Mardi Keh Yek Pâh Nadârad*) could offer a point of departure for

⁹⁶ Ibid., 58.

⁹⁷ Alishan, "Ahmad Shamlu: The Rebel Poet in Search of an Audience," 387.

⁹⁸ "On Lyric Poetry and Society" in Adorno, *Notes to Literature: Volume One*, 39.

⁹⁹ "The Artist as Deputy" in Ibid., 100.

rethinking universality and commitment in post-revolutionary poetics. In Behbehani's poem, the speaker begins with the simple observation that "A man with a missing leg/ has one leg of his pants folded."¹⁰⁰ The lyric voice reflects on the personal experience of interacting with this embittered, legless man. In doing so, the poem suggests something of life in a society (i.e. Iran in the 1980s) defined by war and the veterans that it has produced, though the speaker never mentions a context outside of the street scene where she encounters the disabled man. Indeed, where Shamlu's prophet-like lyric voice in a poem like "Tablet" descends upon the people with its fiery messages from above, Behbehani seems to allow her poetry to speak at the level of the street, from among the "people," though without explicitly professing any commitment or defending an emancipatory power in her verse. That is not to say that Behbehani's poetry is more "committed" than Shamlu's or that one is a superior poet to the other. Rather, the example of social particularity in "A Man without a Leg" vis-a-vis Shamlu's universal image of the "people" suggests that socially-minded poetics can develop in various directions.¹⁰¹

From the examples I have presented, there arises a conundrum in Shamlu's humanist commitment: while the poetry states its support of the people's liberation, in universalizing the people as a uniform mass with an objective, pre-determined value, and furthermore by positioning both the lyric voice and the heroic subjects of the poems in a vanguard before the masses, the poetry denies the very subjectivity that the theory of liberation seeks to restore. But, even as the masses or the vanguard appear in a conceptualized form, the poems also open a possibility for universality through subjective experience, a possibility that complicates any single reading of commitment as a coherent discourse.

V. Bloodied Nightmare of the Awakened:¹⁰² Humanism After Revolution

The triumph of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, of course, did not bring to power the forces to which Shamlu and his fellow committed poets and critics gave their support. The humanist understanding of commitment, in Persian as in other national literatures, was a discourse dominated by the various champions of Marx. In Iran, as several contemporary historians have documented, the Iranian Left, whether Islamic or secular, pro- or anti-Soviet, did not fare well under Imam Khomeini's Islamic Republic.¹⁰³ Following Sa'id Soltanpur's execution in June of 1981, several outspoken poets like Esmail Khoi and Saeed Yousef promptly went underground, fled the country, and remain in exile. Reza Baraheni likewise fled the country

¹⁰⁰ Simin Behbahani, *A Cup of Sin: Selected Poems*, trans. Farzaneh Milani and Kaveh Safa (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 31.

¹⁰¹ Behbahani in fact develops similar moments of social particularity throughout her poetry. For another example, see "The Dancing Girl" (*raqâseh*), which describes the performance and brief outcry of a young dancing girl in a tavern. For a translation of the poem and an analytical semiotic reading, see Mahdi Tourage, "Text and the Body in a Poem by Simin Behbahani," *Iranian Studies* 41, no. 1 (February 2008): 60-74.

¹⁰² The title of a collection of poems by Esmail Khoi (*Kâbus-e Khunsereshteh-ye Bidârân: Daftari az She'r-e Esmâ'il-e Khu'i*) first published in 1984.

¹⁰³ Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran*. Cronin, *Reformers and Revolutionaries in Modern Iran: New Perspectives on the Iranian Left*.

in 1996. Shamlu's immense popularity guaranteed him a certain amount of security. Still, his books were banned in 1984 and pulled from bookstore shelves (the situation has improved considerably and today collections of Shamlu's poetry are ubiquitous among booksellers in Iran). Unsurprisingly, in the wake of the Islamic Revolution and the failure of the Left, commitment in the 1980s and 1990s no longer appeared as a recurring theme in Iranian criticism or poetry, at least not with the fervor or the Marxist overtones that it had carried in the decades before.

It would seem reasonable, then, for the committed poets and critics who survived the Revolution to question the wisdom in their former defense of poetry as a politically emancipatory endeavor. Such is the case with Reza Baraheni, whose later versions of *Gold in the Copper* do not include the same polemical introduction as the 1968 edition.¹⁰⁴ Baraheni himself explains that a critic naturally rethinks his assumptions over the course of his career.¹⁰⁵ In his own case, the later introduction to *Gold in the Copper* dispenses with the revolutionary rhetoric of 1968, replacing the battle-worn imagery or "ivory towers," "gallows" and "the street" with a more muted and introspective reflection on literature's social dimension. Baraheni eventually embraces post-structuralist theory with the same fervor of his earlier work, only now applied towards his rejection of not only the commitment question but also of Nimaic poetics wholesale.¹⁰⁶ Shamlu's poetry in the decade following the revolution continued to express its opposition to despotism, but in the move to reject the religious government, the poetry at times retreats into a vague, xenophobic Iranian nationalism. For example, in "It wasn't just this morning..." the poet imagines a coherent Iranian nation brutalized by centuries of conquering foreigners, a thinly-veiled characterization of the newly "Arabized" regime.¹⁰⁷

It is perhaps here that we can begin to trace the development of a post-Revolutionary poetics of commitment. In chapter four, I introduce the critical writings and poetry of Mohammad Mokhtari as representative of a post-revolutionary commitment discourse. Mokhtari, I argue, raises the possibility of moving beyond the binaries of good and evil, the "people" and the "oppressor" and writing a post-ideological humanist verse. In general, as I will demonstrate, Mokhtari's writings on commitment after the establishment of the Islamic Republic attempt to rework the theory from within the tradition of the secular Left, and do not abandon the discourse entirely. Unfortunately, Mokhtari was kidnapped and murdered in 1998, bringing one of the more compelling threads in the afterlife of commitment theory to an abrupt end.¹⁰⁸

As for Shamlu, the poet might have come closest to a "true politics," to repeat Adorno's term, in imagining the zealous crowds of "Tablet" than he did in bestowing his vision of

¹⁰⁴ The essay titled "*Beh Jâ-ye Moqaddameh*" [In Place of an Introduction] is not included in the three volume edition of *Talâ dar Mes* published in 1992/3.

¹⁰⁵ See introduction to Baraheni, *Tala Dar Mes: Dar She'r va Sha'eri*

¹⁰⁶ See the essay "Chera Man Digar Sha'er-e Nima'i Nistam?" (Why I am no longer a Nimaic Poet) in *Khetab beh Parvaneh-ha va Chera Man Digar Sha'er-e Nima'i Nistam*.

¹⁰⁷ See Appendix page 192 for my translation of the poem in full.

¹⁰⁸ "Body of Missing Iranian Writer Found" *BBC News Service* Dec. 9, 1998 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/231945.stm accessed on March 26, 2010.

revolution to the anonymous masses in his more idealistic verse.¹⁰⁹ In these shifting representations of the masses, nonetheless, one observes the tumults of Shamlu's poetic universe, with the human being placed firmly in its center.

¹⁰⁹ Adorno, *Notes to Literature: Volume Two*, 83.

Chapter 4: Conclusions and Afterlives: Commitment After Revolution

Do not write history in verse, for the weapon is the historian.

Mahmoud Darwish

Ruptures and Repercussions: Literary History Following The Islamic Revolution

Each of the three case studies presented in this dissertation has inevitably if indirectly gravitated towards the historical experience of the Islamic Revolution, even as I have argued that literary criticism in general and critical studies of “committed” poetry in particular should be decoupled from contemporaneous extra-literary developments. Having demonstrated how profoundly Soltanpur, Shafi‘i, and Shamlu diverge in their poetics and politics despite their shared dissatisfaction with the Pahlavi regime and their general desire for revolution, it is perhaps worthwhile to return here to a broader historical consideration.

The Islamic Revolution as a political and sociological phenomenon also carried enormous consequences in the literary-poetic realm. The previous chapters have described some of those radical transformations as they relate to the individual poets in question. But the Revolution has left its indelible mark on the very study of literary history as well. To give one example, Shams Langarudi’s chronologically arranged “analytic history” of modern Persian poetry which I have referenced throughout this dissertation ends on the year 1357/1979, concluding that the “traditionalist” Islamic Revolution of that year marked a society-wide rejection of the Pahlavi dynasty’s “modernist” projects in its fifty-two year rule.¹ Obviously, the history of neither modern nor modernist Persian poetry, objectively speaking, comes to a decisive end with the Islamic Revolution, as even an isolated example like Mohammad Mokhtari’s “Sleeplessness” from 1995, which I present in this chapter, would suggest. Rather, the fact that Shams Langarudi’s study ends with the events of 1979 reflects how a critic or scholar must negotiate the redefined parameters of publication in the new political order. While Shams Langarudi can document certain writings and ideas of Leftist poets under the former regime--particularly those like Khosrow Golesorkhi whose death at the hands of the Pahlavi state renders his Marxist-Leninist commitments harmless to the Islamic Republic--there exist other areas where the mere act of historical documentation would present a direct challenge to the Islamic Republic’s official history.² For example, in the course of my research, it at first struck me as a glaring and surprising omission for Shams Langarudi to never mention that it was a poet who first bestowed the title of “Imam” to Khomeini’s name in the 1960s.³ The poet who did so, M. Azarm (Ne‘mat Mirzazadeh) figures prominently in the third and fourth volumes of Shams Langarudi’s study; likewise, Khomeini’s rise to prominence in poetic as with popular imagination marks an important moment in modern Iranian history. Why the omission, then? One can only speculate on Shams Langarudi’s particular motivations but the fact that Azarm grew disillusioned with the

¹ Shams Langarudi, *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She ‘r-e Now (Jeld-e Chaharom 1349-1357)*, 4, 570-71.

² For more on Golesorkhi, see my discussion in chapter one.

³ See chapter three, f.n. 46.

Islamic Revolution and went into exile after Soltanpur's execution in 1981 provides at least one convincing reason to omit Azarm's early praise for the Supreme-Leader-to-be.⁴ In other words, for Shams Langarudi to tell the complete history, he would have to mention not only the benign fact that Azarm dubbed the nascent leader "Imam," but also that the much more contentious fact that the same poet later renounced that act in his role as exiled dissident, a fact that likely would not meet the censors' approval in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Perhaps even more to the point, Shams Langarudi can discuss Soltanpur's poems that oppose the Pahlavi monarchy without incriminating the Islamic Republic in any way. However, were the critic to extend his study into the next decade, he would no doubt have to mention that Soltanpur also opposed the new state and met his death among the summary trials and executions that permeated the Islamic Republic's early years. Thus, by ending with the events of 1979, Shams Langarudi's study avoids the unsavory details of the Revolution's impact on literary developments. Interestingly, it was another poet, Simin Behbahani (introduced in the previous chapter), who defied the unofficial ban on referring to Soltanpur's death when she dedicated her poem "A Florid Image" (*Negâreh-ye Golgun*) to the late Soltanpur at a public reading in the early 1990s.⁵ Behbahani has never considered herself a "committed" poet and her poetry does not define itself as an arena for political struggle.⁶ However, before the Revolution, too, she wrote elegiac ghazals for various Leftist figures including the executed Khosrow Golesorkhi and his comrade Karamatollah Daneshiyan in 1974.⁷ These poetic acts of mourning, it seems, reflect a larger humanist drive in Behbahani's poetry, a humanism that pays little regard to the political affiliations of the silenced subjects. Indeed, Behbahani's poetic interventions against a perceived socio-political injustice represent one means by which the idea of deploying poetry to resist or oppose the ruling power survived and even flourished after the Islamic Revolution.

But where Behbahani's poetry represents a broad secular-humanist impulse spanning the years on either side of the Revolution, two Marxist intellectuals in the 1980s and 1990s, the critic Ja'far Puyandeh (1954-1998) and the critic and poet Mohammad Mokhtari (1942-1998) went much further in engaging and reworking commitment discourses in the wake of the Islamic Revolution and the failures of the various Marxists groups to play any meaningful role in the political structures that arose with the Islamic Republic. By way of concluding the dissertation, this chapter presents a brief overview of Mokhtari's and Puyandeh's post-revolutionary commitments and introduces Mokhtari's efforts to write the history of both his own revolutionary commitments and the realities of the Islamic Revolution into his verse.

⁴ Karimi-Hakkak, "Protest and Perish: A History of the Writers' Association of Iran," 225.

⁵ Saeed Yousef refers to this act without citing the poem. Idem, "Gami Doshvar Beh Su-ye Sadegi." Accessed online at <http://www.fis-iran.org/fa/irannameh/volxxiii/complicated-simplicity>, December 16, 2013. Sadr al-Din Elahi refers to the poem and the daring nature of Behbahani's dedication but he does not mention that Behbahani was the first person to risk speaking Soltanpur's name in public. Idem, "Mozd-e Jor'at," in Ali Dehbashi, ed. *Zani Ba Damani She'r: Jashn Nameh-ye Simin Behbahani*. (Tehran: Mo'asseseh-ye Entesharat-e Negah, 1383/2004), 343.

⁶ Behbahani, *A Cup of Sin: Selected Poems*, xxiii. See also Farzaneh Milani, ed. *Iranian Studies* 41, no. 1 Special Issue: Simin Behbahani (February 2008).

⁷ See, "Ay Jahani Sugvar" (O World in Mourning) in Mohammad Azimi, ed. *Az Panjereh'ha-ye Zendegani: Bargozideh-ye Ghazal-e Emruz-e Iran* (Tehran: Mo'asseseh-ye Entesharat-e Agah, 1369/1990), 525-6.

Post-Revolutionary Commitments: Mohammad Mokhtari and Ja'far Puyandeh

Despite the upheavals and purges of the 1980s, neither Mohammad Mokhtari nor Ja'far Puyandeh ever abandoned his Marxist analyses of literature and society entirely nor rejected the committed poetry of the Pahlavi period wholesale; however, both critics attempted to move beyond the militancy and dogmatism that they perceived as rampant among the Pahlavi-era Iranian Left and to develop instead an intellectually rigorous, post-revolutionary critical discourse.⁸ In *Ensan Dar She'r-e Mo'aser ya Dark-e Hozur-e Digari (The Human in Modern Poetry or Perceiving the Presence of the Other)*, for example, Mokhtari re-reads the poetries of Nima, Shamlu, Mehdi Akhavan-Sales and Forugh Farrokhzad--the four most celebrated Persian modernists--as articulations of a secular humanist worldview.⁹ As the title suggests, Mokhtari frames the poems within democratic and human rights discourses, essentially arguing that the pre-revolutionary modernist poets developed a vision of tolerance that could acknowledge and enter dialogue with the "other" at a time when the society at-large and committed Marxist intellectuals like Mokhtari himself in particular held more dogmatic and intolerant views. Mokhtari thus makes clear that his literary criticism carries with it an extra-literary political critique; unlike the exceptional modernist poets, Mokhtari argues, most dissident intellectuals, even those who outwardly called for democracy and expanded personal liberties, in fact confined themselves within "despotic cognitive structures" (*sâkht-e estebdâdi-ye zeh*n), manifested as authoritarian conceptions of truth and visceral attachments to autocratic and undemocratic leaders.¹⁰ Indeed, just as his critical readings of modern Persian poetry directly reflect his attempts to rethink the Left's involvement in the Revolution, so, too, do his translation projects suggest that Mokhtari, who himself published multiple collections of original poetry over several decades, thought seriously about the role of poets in post-revolutionary societies. In the final years of his career, between 1994 and 1997, Mokhtari published translated biographies of the Russian/Soviet poets Marina Tsvetaeva, Anna Akhmatova, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Osip Mandelstam, who, not coincidentally, lived and wrote in the wake of the Russian Revolution and the Stalinist purges that eventually followed.¹¹

Puyandeh's sociological studies of literature and his translations of European critics likewise suggest his intellectual engagement with Marx and his political commitments to liberal

⁸ For a timeline of each writer's life, including his publications, see "Vizheh-ye Mohammad Mokhtari va Mohammad Ja'far Puyandeh," *Adineh*, no. 136 (Bahman 1377/February 1999): 4-5.

⁹ Mohammad Mokhtari, *Ensan Dar She'r-e Mo'aser Ya Dark-e Hozur-e Digari: Ba Tahlil-e She'r-e Nima, Shamlu, Akhavan, Farrokhzad* (Tehran: Tus, n.d.). According to timeline's of Mokhtari's life, the book was first published in 1372 (1993/4). See e.g. *Vazn-e Donya: Majmu'eh-ye She'r* (Tehran: Tus, 1378/1999), 6.

¹⁰ *Ensan Dar She'r-e Mo'aser Ya Dark-e Hozur-e Digari: Ba Tahlil-e She'r-e Nima, Shamlu, Akhavan, Farrokhzad*, 16-20.

¹¹ Qezvanchahi, *Seda-ye Avaz: Yadnameh-ye Mohammad Mokhtari va Mohammad Ja'far Puyandeh*, 104.

post-Enlightenment concepts like universal human rights and freedom of expression.¹² Though he avoided any party or revolutionary group affiliation, Puyandeh's familiarity with European critical theory, his interest in dialectics and his rejection of Stalinist or "orthodox" Marxism are all reflected not only in his own writings but also in his translations of Adorno, Bakhtin, Lukács and Goldmann, among others.¹³ Like Mokhtari's critical writings, Puyandeh, too attempts to move beyond "one-sided and superficial materialism that limits [its understanding of] all superstructural phenomena, including literature, to mere reflections of social and particularly economic issues" and to incorporate instead more nuanced Marxist analysis into his studies of literature.¹⁴

Unsurprisingly considering their intellectual and political commitments, both Mokhtari and Puyandeh worked tirelessly to reinstate the Association of Iranian Writers in the 1990s and to guarantee freedom of expression for writers and artists.¹⁵ Unlike the three poets studied in this dissertation, then, neither Mokhtari's nor Puyandeh's writings advocated, implicitly or otherwise, a violent overthrow of the socio-political order that they critiqued; rather, their calls for expanded liberties and protected rights implied that the existing system could be reformed. With this distinction, I would argue, one can begin to trace the formation of a post-revolutionary poetics of commitment, a poetics that remains committed to the emancipatory potential of aesthetic works while responding to the collective historical trauma of an emancipatory socio-political movement gone horribly awry. In the next section, I present a close reading of one of Mokhtari's poems to consider how such a post-revolutionary poetics manifests in the aesthetic work. Mokhtari's focus on the intensely personal and patently non-heroic experience of politically-motivated incarceration, I argue, contrasts with the celebrations of collective and heroic resistance that one encounters in much of the pre-revolutionary opposition-minded verse. At the same time, Mokhtari's poem unmistakably stakes its claim as a critique of certain policies and attitudes under the Islamic Republic. Unfortunately, as I detail below, both Mokhtari and Puyandeh met their untimely deaths in 1998, bringing the development of this particularly compelling strand of post-revolutionary commitment to its premature conclusion.

¹² See e.g. Puyandeh's collected translations in Theodor W. Adorno and Lucien Goldmann, *Daramadi Bar Jame'e Shenasi*, trans. Mohammad Ja'far Puyandeh (Tehran: Nashr-e Cheshmeh, 1381/2002). Puyandeh's essays and interviews are collected in idem, *Ta Dam-e Akhar: Gozideh-ye Goftogu'ha va Maqaleh'ha*, ed. Sima Sahebi Puyandeh (Tehran: Nashr-e Cheshmeh, 1378/1999).

¹³ For a brief biography, see Mohsen Hakimi, "Jan Bakhteh-ye Rah-e Azadi: Moruri bar Zendegi va Asar-e Mohammad Ja'far Puyandeh" in Qezvanchahi, *Seda-ye Avaz: Yadnameh-ye Mohammad Mokhtari va Mohammad Ja'far Puyandeh*, 105-12.

¹⁴ "Negahi be Jame'eh Shenasi-ye Adabiyat" in *Ta Dam-e Akhar: Gozideh-ye Goftogu'ha va Maqaleh'ha*, 97-98.

¹⁵ Shahidian (tr.), "We Are the Writers! A Statement by 134 Iranian Writers," 291-93.

Poetry After Velâyat-e Faqih: History and Memory in a Poem by Mohammad Mokhtari

Mohammad Mokhtari's "Sleeplessness" focuses its history and its politics through an intensely personal lens.¹⁶ On the most basic level, the poem captures a simple event: the speaker wakes in the night, haunted by his memories and unable to return to his sleeping state. As such, the poem represents and recreates the fragmented images and disjointed thoughts running through this speaker's restless mind. Through his agitated state of semi-consciousness, we come to experience specifically the speaker's memories of prison, memories that one assumes reflect Mokhtari's own experiences with imprisonment in the early years of the Islamic Revolution.¹⁷ And through the act of remembering, a necessarily personal and thus subjective process, "Sleeplessness" also touches upon something of a larger, collective historical experience, a shared history of the Revolution and its aftermath, at least as experienced by the poet's generation of dissident secular-minded intellectuals. Thus, when the poem begins with its interrupted dream, one senses both the personal, literal experience of an individual's sleep ruptured by nightmare but also of a wider, societal dream, a utopian vision that collapses into bitterness and despair. The poem begins:

*che farq mikard zendâni dar cheshmandâz bâshad yâ dâneshgâhi?
agar keh ro'yâ tanhâ ehtelâmi bud bâzigushâneh
tashanoj-e pustam râ keh mishanavam suzan suzan keh mishavad kaf-e pâ
alâmat-e in ast keh chizi kharâb mishavad*

What difference would it have made
had the view been of a prison or a university
if the dream had only been a playful nocturnal emission?

Hearing my skin convulse, feeling pins and needles in my feet,
these are signs of something undergoing ruin.

What is undergoing ruin here, as it will unfold in the poem, is not only the speaker's peace of mind in the present moment or his imprisoned body in the past, but the entire dream of revolutionary emancipation and a more just social order.

Though "Sleeplessness" conveys some possibility for poetry as historical documentation and commemorative act, what particularly stands out about Mokhtari's poem is the way that it treats poetic language and form as individualized, personal, and imaginative in nature. In other words, history in the poem, precisely because it occurs through the poet's imagination, is always fundamentally subjective. Even before turning to its referents and imagery, one observes this sense of historical subjectivity in the poem's very form. "Sleeplessness" appears in free verse, completely devoid of any external rules governing rhyme or meter. While a pre-established

¹⁶ "Bikhwabi" in Mokhtari, *Vazn-e Donya: Majmu'eh-ye She'r*, 75-78. See Appendix page 195 for my translation of the poem in full.

¹⁷ Qezvanchahi, *Seda-ye Avaz: Yadnameh-ye Mohammad Mokhtari va Mohammad Ja'far Puyandeh*, 103.

poetic form like the ghazal or qasida draws more consciously upon its own aesthetic past, binding the poem on one hand to a specific tradition and on the other hand to sonic structures outside of or at least auxiliary to the semantic value of words, the free verse poem follows its own internal logic to create a sense of coherence or organic unity (*ensejâm*). As such, every free verse poem presents itself as an instantiation of reinvented poetic form. That is to say that in pre-modern poetics, as in the qasida or ghazal forms, the poet follows a quantified, systematized, and therefore mechanically reproducible, set of rules while the free verse poet turns to a logic specific to him or herself to determine the form. In Mokhtari's poem, in place of easily objectified sound patterns, it seems to be the free association of words and images that draws one line to the next and drives the poem forward. This seemingly free association works especially well for the matter at hand, as the poem mirrors the thought processes in the speaker's subconscious. Thus in one moment we move from the physical site of the speaker's sleeplessness, i.e. his bed, to the prison in his memories, as when the poet asks:

*cheqadr bâyard dar in dow metr jâ mând tâ taḥlil-e jesm ḥadd-e zabân râ re'âyat
konad?*

How long must one remain within these two meters
until the body's dissection heeds the tongue's confines?

Then just as suddenly we are carried out into the streets:

*taẓâhorât-e tavarrom râ tay mikonam dar gozar-e dallâlân
sar-e chahâr-râh şedâ'i dorosht miporsad
vide'o mokharrebtar ast yâ bomb-e atom?*

I follow the demonstrations against the swollen economy
along brokers' row,
at the head of an intersection, a gruff voice inquires,
"Is video more ruinous or the atomic bomb?"

And in yet another moment we are transported to an inverted domestic space where:

*şedâ hamân keh mishenavi nist
sag az sokut beh vajd miâyad
va dozd bar sar-e bâm-e boland samâ' mikonad bâ mâh*

the sound is not that which you hear
the dog revels at the silence
and the thief on the lofty roof whirls ecstatically in the presence
of the moon.

In each of these instances, the poem seems to follow the anarchic wanderings of the poet's restless mind, just as the line and stanza lengths themselves conform to the logic of whatever image or thought arises, not to a predetermined metric or rhythmic value.

Like the form, Mokhtari's diction also points towards the inherently unstable nature of language, a quality that further precludes the possibility of a historically objective verse. The speaker's free association among sounds and images suggests that one cannot rely upon words to contain and convey a single meaning. Through such associations, we begin at the seemingly harmless image of stones, trees, and starlings and arrive at the disturbingly violent images of stoning and gallows:

*dami keh yek kalameh ham ziyâdist
derakht o sang o sâr o sangsâr o dâr
sâyeh-ye dastist keh mipendârad donyâ râ bâyard az chiz'hâ'i pâk kard*

In the moment when even one word is too many,
tree and stone and starling and stoning and gallows
are decreed by a hand that believes
the world must be wiped clean of certain things.

In Persian, the movement from stone (*sang*) to gallows (*dâr*) mirrors the way that word associations flow through the mind, but this fluidity also demonstrates how words carry multiple resonances, how the violence-laden word for stoning (*sangsâr*) dissolves into the innocuous constitutive elements of *sang* and *sâr* (starling or martin, i.e. a type of bird). The fact that the *sâr* in *sangsâr* bears no logical relation to the *sâr* meaning starling in fact further supports the point--language does not always accord to reason or logic. Just as a once neutral image of a tree can suddenly become the stage for a hanging, so too can any series of phonemes and lexemes give rise to multitudinous, at times sharply conflicting associations. And if language cannot be relied upon to convey one stable meaning, then how, the poem seems to ask, can we rely upon language in general and poetry specifically to relate our history objectively?

And yet, even with its fluid associations and dream-like imagery, the poem differs sharply from deconstructive exercises or surreal aesthetic experimentations as in, for example, the so-called "Language Poets" in the American context.¹⁸ Rather, "Sleeplessness" maintains a sense of purposiveness and performs its own historical intervention precisely because we gain a feeling for, if not identify directly with, the subject's prison experience through his words and we can locate the society and its historical moment from which the poetic images arise. Thus, for example, in the aforementioned lines, when the speaker determines that "tree" and "stone" and so on are decreed by a hand, he not only enacts language's latent potential for violence. Rather, he ascribes the violence to a specified source: *sâyeh-ye dast* in Persian literally means "shadow of a hand" but means something like "consent" or "decree" and conjures associations with the much more semantically determined term *fatwa* (*fatvâ*). In other words, the poem might make a

¹⁸ For more on the Language poets, see O. Izenberg, "Language Poetry" in Roland Greene and Stephen Cushman, eds., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 784-86.

general philosophical claim that language can contain violence but it also points specifically to a group of individuals who issue decrees on stoning and hangings, that is, who order executions and in doing so perpetrate very literal forms of violence.

Mokhtari uses such culturally resonant terminology and imagery throughout the poem to intervene in the history of the Revolution and the Islamic Republic. For example, the poem later takes a mocking tone towards religious pronouncements as fundamentally irrational, declaring that

*khelâf-e ra'y-e owl-ul-albâb nist
keh mâh rang 'avaz kardeh bâshad yâ shab mesl-e âzâdi zang zanad*

it does not oppose the Men of Understanding in their view
that the moon could turn up in different hues
or the night ring out like liberty.

Here, Mokhtari uses the Quranic term *owl-ul-albâb* or “Men of Understanding” to leave no question as to what sort of authorities he has in mind.¹⁹ Of course the moon does not, objectively speaking, change colors, so the pronouncement in this context recalls the view, prevalent in the early days of the Islamic Revolution, that Imam Khomeini’s countenance could be seen in the full moon. Similarly, Mokhtari plays with the double meaning of *zang zadan* in Persian so that the line can read both that the night “rings” like liberty but also that it “rusts” like liberty. The dual meanings perhaps suggest how quickly, for this particular poet, the feeling of resounding liberation that came with the Revolution could turn to rust, collapse and decay.

Elsewhere, too, in his careful choice of cultural referents, Mokhtari critiques the state of belatedness if not backwardness that he locates among at least certain members of his society, as when he refers to his generation as “very late comers” who only now stumble upon the discoveries of Isaac Newton or Archimedes, a few hundred and a few thousand years too late, respectively:

*naşib-e nasli keh khayli dir resideh ast
va fekr-e sib o zamin dar şîşadsâlegi-ye jâzebeh
va kudakân-e chand hezâr sâleh keh engâr
barâ-ye avalin bâr hasti râ dar vân-e hamâm saboktar yâfteh 'and*

these are the shares for a generation of very-late-comers

¹⁹ e.g. Quran 2:269. Mokhtari seems here also to be playing with the term as it appears in the opening to Sa’di’s 13th century *Golestan*, whose canonical status can be summarized with the fact that Persian speakers begin memorizing its aphorisms and anecdotes as early as the first grade. Sa’di writes that it is “contrary to the view of the men of understanding that Ali’s sword should remain sheathed and Sa’di’s tongue cleft” (*naqş-e ra'y-e owlulalbâb zu-l-faqâr-e 'ali dar niyâm o zabân-e sa'di dar kâm*) *Kolliyat-e Sa'di*, ed. Mohammad Ali Forughî and Abbas Eqbal Ashtiyani (Tehran: Entesharat-e Forughî, 1368/1989), 7. Mokhtari gives the line a satirically archaic tone by invoking Sa’di and perhaps even implicates the leaders and religious followers of the Islamic Republic who commit acts of violence against their opponents by invoking a passage that refers to the Ali, the Shi‘i’s first Imam, and the sword with which he commanded the Muslim armies.

along with the contemplation of apples and earth on gravity's
three hundredth year
and children a few thousand years old who seem
to have found the lighter property of entities
in their bathtubs for the very first time.

Thus through the poet's imagining, history--objective in the sense that the people and events exist in collective memory--emerges as a discursive means for critiquing and intervening in the present.

Indeed, history, both personal and collective, weighs heavily on the poem and the sleepless condition that gives its rise. In the final stanza, we return unmistakably to the prison cell where

*gach-e sefid jâ-ye saret râ neshân mi dahad
ke chand sâli engâr dar injâ mi-neshasteh 'i
va radd-e enkârat oftâdeh 'ast bar divâr
yâ shâyad naqshi mândeh 'ast az taslimat*

The white plaster betrays your head's place
where you seem to have been sitting for years
and your denial-prints are left on the wall
or perhaps a figure of your surrender has remained.

Here, the poem relives the personal trauma of imprisonment as individual, embodied experience. As such, Mokhtari's poem differs significantly from the protest poems of the pre-Revolutionary years when Soltanpur, Shafi'i Kadkani, and Shamlu, albeit through their differing poetic visions, celebrated the heroic resistance of the guerrillas and political prisoners who combatted the regime to usher in an imminent dawn. In Mokhtari's poem, the prison cell contains primarily a personal history of suffering and such suffering begets only restlessness and disquietude, even years after the prisoner has been released. Gone is the grand revolutionary narrative wherein the dissident offers his own body as sacrifice for a historically objective concept of liberation.

And yet, the history that weighs on Mokhtari's sleeplessness undoubtedly extends beyond the personal. In the end, it is the poet's entire generation who has experienced silencing, censorship, and the dissolving, if only temporary, of universities. Thus, when the poet ends on an image of a skull that tosses and turns (*kâseh-ye sar / keh hamchenin ghalt mi khorad...*) he manages to depict both his own head rolling restlessly on his pillow, but also a collective history of instability and ruptures, a history of severed heads rolling down the executioners block, as it were, an image that the Persian verb *ghalt khordan* distinctly invites.

And with that final image, the poem ends on ellipses, a perfect embodiment of the ever-present dialectic between the historical and the aesthetic, the collective and the personal. Indeed the unfinished punctuation leaves us in the unresolved and unresolvable state of tension where the sleepless subject finds himself in history.

Unfortunately, just three years after composing “Sleeplessness,” Mokhtari would find himself at the center of a particularly volatile turning point in post-revolutionary Iranian history. Though released from prison in 1983, Mokhtari’s sentence included a lifetime ban on any form of government or state-sponsored employment.²⁰ Nonetheless, he continued to champion freedom of expression, leading the effort to reinstate the recently defunct Association of Iranian Writers as I describe in the introduction to this dissertation. The poet, critic, and translator was detained several times over the following years and warned that his writings and organizing activities were placing him in harm’s way. Finally, Mokhtari disappeared from near his home on the afternoon of December 3, 1998; his murdered body was recovered on the outskirts of Tehran five days later. His friend and fellow Writer’s Association member Mohammad Ja’far Puyandeh also disappeared and was discovered murdered within the same week.²¹ Iran’s Ministry of Information eventually declared Mokhtari and Puyandeh early victims of the so-called “chain-killings” that terrorized the country’s dissident intellectuals in those years and left dozens of writers and activists dead. Investigations later revealed that “rogue elements” within the same ministry had ordered and carried out the murders.²² With their untimely deaths, what could have become another rich chapter in the history of dissident Iranian writers working through and reconciling their political, intellectual, and aesthetic commitments came to an abrupt end.

Conclusion: Resurfacing Commitments

In spring of 2013, as I was completing this dissertation, a thirty year old Iranian exile and doctoral student at Oxford University published her remarkable first collection of poems. In *88*, Fatemeh Shams displays not only her immense poetic talent and skill, but also her erudite knowledge of Persian poetry and poetics.²³ Shams moves effortlessly between classical and modern poetic forms, developing fresh, stark, and often surprising images from life in Iran and the UK, whether composing within the formal restraints of ghazals and rhymed couplets (*masnavi*) or in the less rigidly defined framework of Nimaic structures and free verse (*she’r-e sepid*). But the most remarkable feature of *88*, at least as it relates to this dissertation, is the way that Shams seems at once to have absorbed the debates and discourses surrounding committed poetry in the decades before and after the Iranian revolution and at the same time to forge new territory in the realm of politically-minded verse. *88* of course refers to 1388, the Iranian calendar year corresponding to 2009, when disputed presidential elections in Iran resulted in protests and a new wave of government crackdowns. And Shams’ poems do not shy away from depicting the personal upheavals that came with the post-election unrest, at times paying tribute to dissident figures and victims of state violence and other times reflecting on the experiences of estrangement and longing in exile. But, as the collection’s titular final poem brings to light, the title need not be confined to a political reading. To make sense of the short, free verse poem in

²⁰ Qezvanchahi, *Seda-ye Avaz: Yadnameh-ye Mohammad Mokhtari va Mohammad Ja’far Puyandeh*, 103.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

²² *Ibid.*, 47-49.

²³ Fatemeh Shams, *88: Daftar-e She’r’ha-ye Fatemeh Shams* (Berlin: Gardoon, 1392/2013).

translation, one must picture the Persian numeral eighty-eight, which looks more or less like two upside letter v's. As such, the poet finds new meaning in the politically loaded symbol:

I write just a numeral
I don't know why it seems at once
the brain scatters birds
on the blankness of the page
one eight falls on this side
one eight falling on the other.²⁴

Thus Shams in this deceptively simple reflection demonstrates how politically suggestive signs, even politically explicit content, in the hands of a skilled poet take flight into other imaginative realms. Shams' 88, both in terms of its historical context and in terms of the poetry itself proves that the debates and discourses with which this dissertation has engaged continue to shape the Persian poetic landscape. Just as the 2009 elections suggested that Iranians would and will continue to redefine their revolution's legacy on their own terms, Shams' poems confirm that this and future generations of poets will continue to reconcile their political and aesthetic commitments through variegated, divergent, even conflicting poetic visions. Indeed, the poetics of commitment in twenty-first century Persian poetry remains to be written.

²⁴ Ibid., 68.

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Appendix: Parallel Translations

Sa'id Soltanpur

سعید سلطانیپور

Prison Lyric**

غزل بند*

Until one joint of mine remains in prison
O burnt one, my bond remains with you.

تا که در بندی بدم هست
با تو ای سوخته پیوندم هست

I share my secrets with none but the sun
for my pact is sown in my blood.

نبرم راز، مگر با خورشید
تا به خون ریشه سوگندم هست

A poniard thorn in the mouth of blood
if they should ask me of the flower bed.

خنجر خاری در خون دهان
گر گلزار بپرسندم هست

14. Or if they burn gently and even-handed
then I have my amphibian tricks.

گر بزیمی گذرند آتشوار
جادوی آبی ترندم هست

Obstinate crimson thoughts brand me
with my cherished bloodied wound.

داغ سرسختی اندیشه سرخ
زخم خونین خطرمندم هست

Prison becomes a hothouse of blood
watered with my red heart's verse.

بند ، گلخانه خون خواهد شد
تا دل سرخ غزلبندم هست

* سلطانیپور، سعید. «غزل بند»، از انکشتارگاه: بهار ۵۱ تا تابستان ۵۶. از زندان تا تبعید (سازمان چریکهای فدایی خلق ایران) ص. ۹-۱۱.

** Soltanpur, Sa'id. "ghazal-e band" in *Az Koshitargah: Bahar-e 51 ta Tabestan-e 56*. n.p.: Az Zendan ta Tab'id [Sazman-e Cherik'ha-ye Feda'i-ye Khalq-e Iran], n.d., 9-11. Translated by Samad Alavi.

I flower blood blossoms and leave in a cry
the garden bestrewn forms my likeness.

You're of a mind that I stand alone
I'm of a mind that Mt. Damavand stands behind me.

Should I sprout this fist from love's stone fortress
I will clutch a flame-hued pomegranate within.

If my heart today lays in blood
the same heart arises tomorrow contented.

O pigeon, do not take flight from my shoulder
while these smiling lips hold their bough.

I may be in winter but among such flowers
spring's blood courses through my veins.

گل خون می شکتم ، می روم... ی
باغ را گل گل ، مانندم هست

تو بر آنی که مرا پیشتی نیست
من بر آنم که دما وندم هست

پنجه گر رویدم از سنگر عشق
گل نارنج تشاکندم هست

دل اکنونم اگر خفته بخون
دل فردائی خرسندم هست

ای کبوتر مرو از شانه من
تا بلب شاخه لبخندم هست

در زمستانم اگر ، خون بهار
با چه گل ها که در آوردم هست

Winter Squall**

Such as the days transpire
such as the wind gusts
with its gasps
and rears it head
to probe each door
and rears its head
at every roof
and raids the cracks of every wall
and rushes savagely

اسفند باد*

چنین که می گذرد ایام
چنین که می گذرد باد
با نفس هایش
و می کشد سر
از هر در
از هر بام
و می برد ره، در رخنه های هر دیوار
و می شتابد دودوار

* سلطانپور، سعید. «اسفند باد.» در آوازه های بند، داتره انتشارات سازمان دانشجویان ایرانی در آمریکا، ۱۳۵۴: ۴۸-۴۹.

■ نظهرات عظیم صدها هزار نفری از دستجات مختلف در پایان میتینگ سرود... را به هیات اجتماع خواندند ■ باشگاه... به سرپرستی... با دو هزار نفر اعضای باشگاه و اعضای وابسته در نظهرات امروز شرکت جست ■ در این روز خجسته یکپارچگی و وحدت ملی ما در اوج خود نمایان است.

کیهان - سه شنبه ، دهم اسفند ماه پنجاه

** Soltanpur, Sa'id. "Esfand Bad," in *Avazha-ye Band*, n.p.: Da'ereh-ye Entesharat-e Sazman-e Daneshjuyan-e Irani Dar Amrika, 1354/1976, 48-9. Translated by Samad Alavi. The title literally translates as *Esfand Wind*, Esfand referring to the final month of the Persian calendar year. Since *Esfand* carries little or no meaning for the English reader, I have tried to conjure some associations with impermanence in both words of my translated title. Of course the word *Esfand* also recalls *Esfandyâr*, a tragic hero of the *Shahnameh* (the 10th-11th Century Persian epic) betrayed by his father, the king Goshtasp, and killed by the hero Rostam. The epic undertones reverberate throughout the poem.

The Persian title includes the following footnote, a quote from the widely-circulating newspaper *Kayhan*: "Massive demonstration of hundreds of thousands of people from different groups sang the hymn... [sic] at the end of the community board meeting ■ The... Club under the leadership of... participated in today's demonstrations with two thousand of its own members and affiliates ■ On this auspicious day, the signs of our nation's solidarity and unity are at a zenith.

and sets with its covert paws
before the valiant man
on the path of peril and blood, its snare

Such as the scheming old wind wears on
crying out in dread, at the jungle's head
shrilling in fear, at the massif's heart
and wrangles through entangling alleys

Such as it breaks us
and flees but now it too more broken
from fear of standing still, away from the mighty stones

Such as it passes babbling and cloaked
glass and beads adorned on a thousand limbs
standard and scripture clutched in a thousand fists
glowing flamelike in rage
pounding dirt and blood upon its crown in rancor
its body armored with a thousand spikes and barbs
and turns circles and yelps deranged
and rams its horns into the sprouts of the red rose
and thrashes its tail against the people's windows
and claws at the walls of their homes
and punctures the veins of the living and dead
and cooks up a thousand dreams and delusions:

و می‌گذارد با پنجه‌های پنهان‌کار
ز راه خون و خطر
به راه مرد دل‌داور، دام

چنین که می‌گذرد باد حیل‌پرور
نهیب می‌زند از خوف، بر سر جنگل
نفیر می‌کشد از بیم، در دل گهسار
و می‌سستیزد در کوچه‌های دام‌گیر

چنین که می‌شکند ما را
و می‌گریزد، اما، شکسته‌تر از پیش
ز هول ماندن، از حول صخره‌های دلیر

چنین که می‌گذرد ژاژخای و رنگ‌آمیز
نشانده شیشه و منجوق بر هزاران شاخ
گرفته پرچم و اوراق در هزاران مشت
زخشم، تافته آتشوار
ز کینه کوفته بر فرق، خاک و خون ناچار
به تن، کشیده زره، با هزار خنجر و خار
و قیبه می‌کشد آشفته‌وار و می‌چرخد
و بر نهال گل‌سرخ، شاخ می‌کوبد
و می‌زند دم، بر شیشه‌های خانه‌ی مردم
و می‌زند سم، بر دیوار
و می‌خلد در رگ‌های زنده و مرده
و می‌پزد در سر، هزار خواب و خیال:

as the sun which arises, signs appear
in its tactics and its rush
signs of demise

چو آفتاب که می آید، آفتابی شد
در این شگرد و شتاب
نشانه‌های زوال

In Pahlavi Prison**

*** در بند پهلوی**

In Pahlavi prison
a man has fallen fatigued and bloodied
fire set alight from the soles of his feet
blood from his veins' blazing walls
like fire drops
flows calmly in the leaves of the wound
the wire lashes
having traveled circuits of his blood
have not travelled
another circuit, his resolve
it shines like a spring and spills
on his broken face

در بند پهلوی
افتاده مرد خسته و خون آلود
آتش دمیده از کف پایش
آرام می تراود در برگ های زخم
چون قطره های آتش
خون از جدار تفته رگ هایش،
شلاق های سیم
روی مدار خون
بسیار گشته است و نگشته ست
روی مدار دیگر، رایش،
چون چشمه می درخشد و می ریزد
بر چهره شکسته
- مهتاب ماه دی -

- moonlight of December moon -

* سلطانیور، سعید. «در بند پهلوی.» در شمس لنگرودی، محمد. تاریخ تحلیلی شعری نو: جلد چهارم ۱۳۴۹-۱۳۵۷، تهران: نشر مرکز، ۱۳۷۷. ص ۵۴۲-۵۴۶.

** Soltanpur, Sa'id. "Dar Band-e Pahlavi," in *Tarikh-e Tahltli-ye She'r-e Now: Jeld-e Chaharom 1349-1357* ed. Mohammad Shams Langrudi. Tehran: Nashr-e Markaz 1377/1998, 542-546. Translated by Samad Alavi.

quicksilver of his patient cries
close-lipped on the bellow's fire
he burns

in the blossoming fire of the wound-flower
in his narrow corner
he stays restless like a flame.

But in the heavens of the window
the full moon, the crimson pupil of revenge,
in the clouds' sinister sockets
stays awake.

146. Glowing crimson and scorched in the prison's narrows
on sweetbrier boughs
he sees
the broken moon
in nightly garden-stroll solitude
he plucks
blood-flower mementos
from the branches of the wound
to release himself as if from pain
like a broken branch
he plants his head on the wall's chest
calmly he sits:
I am not alone here broken

سیماب گریه‌های شکیبایش
لب بسته روی آتش فریاد
در آتش شکفته گلزخم
می سوزد

در کنج تنگنایش
چون شعله بی قرار است

در آسمان پنجره، اما
ماه تمام، مردمک سخ انتقام
در چشمخانه‌های مهیب ابر
بیدار است

تا بیده سخ و سوخته در تنگنای بند
بر شاخ نسترن
ماه شکسته را

می بیند
در خلوت شبانه گلگشت
از شاخه‌های زخم، گل خون به یادگار
می چیند

تا مرد وارهد مگر از درد
چون شاخه شکسته
سر می‌نهد به سینه دیوار
آرام، می نشیند:

تنها نه من شکسته‌ام اینجا
تنها نه من نشسته‌ام اینجا میان خون

I am not alone here seated in this blood
what branches, broken in this plain
what wounds, blossomed in this garden
here, what countless springs have burned.

The wound-flowers
burn with fire-drops
fiercer
and sleep-flames ignite
the man's eyes
more triumphant and more lit with blood:
at home far away
midnight moonbeams through window panes
scattering grief's ashen dust
there my mother sits in smoke and tears
there my father clutching sorrow's knees
with dew drops spilled, with dripping cheeks
my brother asleep on his nightly assignments
my wife's disheveled ringlets spill
on Dawn's chest
lullaby mingled
with her bouts of weeping
mother until the dawn of execution
involuntarily breaks her sobs
but father still

چه شاخه‌ها شکسته در این دشت
چه زخم‌ها شکفته در این باغ
اینجا، بهار سوخته بسیار است

گل‌زخم‌ها
با قطره‌های آتش می‌سوزند
پرسوزتر
و شعله‌های خواب می‌افروزند
در چشم مرد چیره‌تر و خون‌فروزتر:
در خانه‌ام، چه دور
از شیشه‌های پنجره مهتاب نیشب
افشانده گرد سوخته‌اندوه
آنجا در اشک و دود نشسته‌ست مادرم
آنجا گرفته زانوی غم در بغل، پدر
با ژاله‌های ریخته، با گونه‌های خیس
خوابیده روی مشق شبانه، برادرم
بر سینه «سحر»
آشفته‌وار ریخته گیسوی همسرم
آمیخته ترانه لالائی
با گریه‌های او
مادر رسیده تا سحر اعدام
بی اختیار می‌شکند های های او
اما پدر هنوز
تابیده روی زانوی اندوه

curled on sorrow's knees
weighted by the sleeping cries.

Calmly, mother, calm
allow the morning light to rise
allow them to bind at first light
my aspirations to the stake
allow the call of "fire" to rise
allow the star of the discharge
to pass madly through this galaxy of blood
the blood to grow flame-like
the blood garden
to scatter
on the bullet-hail's field
the summer seed*
to forest in the blood-lit sun
to cry
these seeds will not lay grounded
from the earth's heart like lightning they will bloom
and will traverse the plateau like thunder

* The summer seed=*bazr-e tir*. As the quotes around the word *tir* in the original emphasize, *tir* should not be read literally here as "bullet" but rather as the name of the fourth month of the Persian calendar, corresponding to June/July. In this reading, *tir* refers to the 30th of Tir, 1331 (July 21, 1952) the day that Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq returned to power following massive popular protests in his support and with the open backing of the Communist Tudeh party. In other words, the lines read something like "allow these seeds [of liberation that were planted in the month] of *Tir* [and that here appear in the form of bullets]/to grow like a forest in the sun of blood."

از گریه‌های خفته گرانبار است

آرام... آی مادرم، آرام
بگذار تا سپیده برآید
بگذار با سپیده ببندند
پشت مرا به تیر
بگذار تا برآید «آتش»
بگذار تا ستاره شلیک
دیوانه‌وار بگذرد از کهنکشان خون
خون شعله‌ور شود
بگذار باغ خون
بر خاک تیرباران
پرپر شود
بگذار بدر «تیر»
چون جنگلی بروید در آفتاب خون
فریادگر شود
این بذرها به خاک نمی‌ماند
از قلب خاک می‌شکفتد چون برق
روی فلات می‌گذرد چون رعد

this is blood and will remain.

Sleep's blood flames

hang on the man's eyelids

he frees his body from the wall
and sleeps

in blazing anguish

sifting dreams of morning

through his sleep and blood

and night, bloodthirsty, monstrous night

like a hangman, furious arms at the ready

elbows exposed from rolled up, blood-stained sleeves

eyeless sockets filled with blood

in the fortress of Evin

in the fortress of Hesar

in the dreaded buried halls of Qezel Qal'eh

in the fortress of the Committee's slaughterhouse*

hunches over the darkened pit

at work with his bloody arms.

The man asleep, fevered in his visions

خون است و ماندگار است

خونشعله‌های خواب

در پلک‌های مرد می‌آویزد

تن می‌رهاوند از تن دیوار

بر سوز التهاب

می‌خوابد

روئیای صبح

در خواب و خونش می‌بیزد

و شب، شب مهیب، شب خونخوار

جلادوار، بال غضب بسته با کمر

آرنج بسته با گره آستین خون

خون جای چشم ریخته در چشمخانه‌ها

در قلعه‌ اوین

در قلعه‌ حصار

در نقب خونناک قزل قلعه

در قلعه‌ کمینۀ کشتارگاه

خم گشته روی حفره‌ تاریک

با دست و بال خونین در کار است

خوابیده مرد با تب رؤیایش

* Evin, Hesar, Qezel Qal'eh, and Committee all refer to well-known and feared Pahlavi prisons. Committee (Persian=*komiteh*) is short for *komiteh-ye mosharak-e zedd-e kharābkāri* (The Joint Committee Against Subversion), which the regime used especially for prisoners suspected of guerrilla activities.

a thorn from the flower bed of the wound
piercing him each moment in blood
and the crimson moon
glowing past the prison window.

Communist Victor**

A bullet in the mouth
a bullet in the eye.

On the blocks of ice
in the freezer of the state morgue
two frozen blood-flames glow
a firelight in the mouth
a firelight in the eye.

In the February sixth meeting***

هر لحظه خا می خلدش در خون
از گلشن گزند
و ماه سرخ
تا بیده پشت پنجره بند

جهان کمونیست*

گلوله‌ای در دهان
گلوله‌ای در چشم.
در تگه‌های یخ
در سردخانه پزشک فانونی
دو شعله منجمد خون می تابند
شعله‌ای در دهان
شعله‌ای در چشم.

در میتینگ هفدهم بهمن

۱۹۸۷ / ۱۳۶۵ : انتشارات نوید. آلمان غربی: سلطانپور. شعر سعید سلطانپور و شعر دوران سیاهگل و شعر سعید سلطانپور. نوعی از نقد بر نوعی از شعر: بررسی شعر دوران سیاهگل و شعر سعید سلطانپور. ص. ۱۵۸-۱۶۶.

** Soltanpur, Sai'd, "Jahan-e Comunist" in Yusof, Sa'id, *Now'i az Naqd bar Now'i az She'r: Barresi-ye She'r-e Dowran-e Siyahkal va She'r-e Sa'id-e Soltanpur*. West Germany: Navid, 1365/1987, 158-166. Translated by Samad Alavi.

*** The Persian reads "At the seventeenth of Bahman meeting," an especially significant date for members of the *Sazman-e Feda'iyan-e Khalq-e Iran Aqaliyat* (OIPFG Minority) like Soltanpur and the poem's titular hero. The Islamic Republic officially recognizes the 22nd of Bahman (February 11) as the date of the revolution. However, the OIPFG maintains that it was their own underground cells, and not the Islamists, who distributed arms to the people several days before the 22nd and, in doing so, led the attacks against the air force bases that brought the monarchy to its end. So the poem (like the meeting it documents)

| | |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| in the throgs of supporters | در انبوه هواداران و |
| and the people | مردم |
| among the slogans and signs | در میان پلاکاردها و شعارها |
| under the patrol of armed republicans | در گردش تفنگداران جمهوری و |
| and droves of guards and thugs | گله‌های پاسدار و اوباش |
| in the preserve of nunchucks, maces and chains | در قرق چماق و زنجیر و "نانچو" |
| in discharges of fear | در صدای شلیک‌های ترس و |
| and maniacal gibes | دشنام‌های جنون |
| in the glimmer of bayonets | در کورسوی ستاره‌های حلبی و |
| and tin stars | سرنیزه‌ها |
| in the caws of surveilling crows | در قارقار کلاغ‌های تفتیش و |
| and clobbering vultures | لاشخوران سرکوب |
| in the February sixth meeting | در میتینگ هفدهم بهمن |
| in the red meeting of the uprising | در میتینگ سخ قیام |
| in the red Siyahkal meeting | در میتینگ سخ سیاهکل |
| two incendiary solar cries | دو خورشید منفجر فریاد |
| radiate from Victor's lashes and lips | در پلک‌ها و لب‌های "جهان" می‌درخشد |
| a sunburst in the mouth | خورشیدی در دهان |
| a sunburst in the eye. | خورشیدی در چشم. |

contests the Islamic Republic's official narrative with its own, celebrating the Left's and the masses' victory over the monarchy several days before the Islamic leaders lent their nominal support. As becomes clear later in the poem, the meeting also occurred two days before the anniversary of the guerrilla attacks or "uprising" in Siyahkal on Bahman 19, 1349, i.e. February 8, 1971, further countering the Islamic Republic's narrative by locating the revolution's origins in the Marxist-Leninist armed struggle.

| | |
|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Victor the Communist | "جهان کمونیسست" |
| Victor of today | "جهان امروز" |
| and the future Victor | "جهان آینده" |
| The workers' Victor | "جهان کارگران" |
| Victor of the world | "جهان" |
| Victor of sickle | "جهان پُتک" |
| Victor of red flag | "جهان داس" |
| Communist Victor | "جهان پرچم سرخ" |
| springing Victor of the meeting | "جهان کمونیسست" |
| springing from Shoosh Square | "جهان جهنده میتینگ" |
| to the restricted square | "جهنده از میدان شوش" |
| - Liberation Square - | تا میدان فرُّق |
| springing from the restricted Liberation | - میدان آزادی - |
| to Revolution Square | جهنده از فرُّق آزادی |
| springing above the heights of the murderous convoys | تا میدان انقلاب |
| and the wounding bayonets | جهنده از فراز خودرودهای کشتار و |
| springing from the ricochets of the blasts | سرنیزه‌های زخم |
| springing from blind alleys and roofs | جهنده از فراز کمانه شلیک‌ها |
| to Avenue of the Flag | جهنده از بن بست‌ها و بام‌ها |
| - avenue of patrol and bullets and blood - | تا خیابان پرچم |
| springing Communist Victor | - خیابان گشتی و گلوله و خون - |
| Victor of revolution | "جهان جهنده کمونیسست" |
| in the suffocating republican air | "جهان انقلاب" |
| with lips of flint and steel | در هوای خفه جمهوری |
| | با پلک‌هایی از چخماق |

eyelids of flint and steel
lightning bolt in the mouth
a bolt of lightning in the eye.

Meat prices inflated
bean prices inflated

unemployment
and lusting for bread

Arise, arise
toilers!

Toilers
arise, arise!

Victor of slogans
slogans of toil
slogans of labor
incendiary throat of fire
volcanic burst of blood and uproar
heaving in the meeting's sky
a galaxy in the mouth
a galaxy in the eye.

Born of toil
in alleys of dust and hunger
yesterday's little Victor
at the threshold of awaiting bread

لب‌هایی از چخماق
آذرخشی در دهان
آذرخشی در چشم.

گوشت گران
بُشن گران

بی‌کاری و
حسرت‌نان

پیا، پیا
زحمتکشان!

پیا، پیا
زحمتکشان!

"جهان" شعارها
شعار زحمت

شعار رنج
گلوی منفجر آتش

صخره آتشفشانی خون و خروش
گردان در آسمان میتینگ

کَهکشانِی در دهان
کَهکشانِی در چشم.

زاده زحمت
در کوچه‌های کرسنگی و غبار
"جهان" کوچک دیروز
بر آستانه انتظار نان و

and smiles

on the knees of labor

in the coarse caress of toil's hands

in the skirt-folds of travail

with motherly songs and tears

grown up Victor of today

Victor bearing standard

red Victor

Victor of meetings and struggle

revolving Victor springing forward

Victor of workshop

Victor of work

Victor of smoke and fumes and fire

Victor of stone and lava and flame

a volcano in the mouth

a volcano in the eye.

At the meeting Victor did the rounds

and the pages of communiqués

took flight from his fingertips

hovering above the meeting

and the people

- melodious islands of doves

on a tumultuous sea of shouts and fists -

Victor the messenger

لیخند

برزانوی کار

در نوازشِ دُرشتِ دست‌های زحمت

در دامنِ رنج

با ترانه‌های مادرانه و اشک

"جهانِ بزرگِ امروز

"جهانِ پرچمدار

"جهانِ سرخ

"جهانِ میتینگ و مبارزه

"جهانِ چرخنده و پیش‌رونده

"جهانِ کارخانه

"جهانِ کار

"جهانِ دود و دمه و آتش

"جهانِ سنگ و گدازه و حریق

آتشفشانی در دهان

آتشفشانی در چشم.

"جهانِ در میتینگ می‌گشت

و برگ‌های اعلامیه

بر فراز میتینگ و

مردمان

از انگشتانش بر می‌کشیدند

- جزیره‌های نغمه‌خوانِ کبوتر

در دریای توفندهٔ مُشت‌ها و فریادها -

"جهانِ کبوتر

a pigeon in the mouth
a pigeon in the eye.

At six o'clock in the morning
with bundled manifestos
at suppliers' square*
ten minutes past eight
with leaves of slogans and tracts
at the Gomrok Press
nine o'clock with the "Defense" comrades
behind the greenery of "Liberation"
with the long sickle of love

155. and the weighty hammer of a cry
a panther in the mouth
a panther in the eye.

At half past ten
on Worker's Avenue
binding a comrade's wounds
in the people's house
and in the tumult of patrols and alarms
carrying on his shoulders

کیوتری در دهان
کیوتری در چشم.

ساعت شش صبح
با بسته بیانیه‌ها
در میدان بار
ساعت هشت و ده دقیقه
با اوراق شعارها و تراکت‌ها
در چایخانه گمرک
ساعت نه با رفیقان "دفاع"
پشت چمن‌های "آزادی"
با داس بلند عشق و
پتک سنگین فریاد
پلنگی در دهان
پلنگی در چشم.

ساعت ده و نیم
در خیابان کارگر
زخم رفیقی را می‌بست
در خانه مردم
و در هیاهوی گشتی و آژیر
رفیقی را

* *dar maydân-e bâr*, referring to the wholesale market where restaurant or shop owners would buy fruits and vegetables in large quantities for resale.

a comrade
 with a bullet through his cheek
 through the alleys of "Khosh"
 a future in the mouth
 a future in the eye.
 The leaden bows
 and canopies of gas
 suspended between earth and sky
 and Victor calling from his volcanic throat
 " ... persist , persist!
 toilers
 struggle
 resist, resist!"
 a revolution in the mouth
 a revolution in the eye.
 Victor the Feda'i
 Florid Victor of redemption and love
 flowers of '71
 flowers from then until now
 eternal flowers
 forest flowers
 and ambrosial flowers
 Feda'i flowers

با گلوله‌ای در گورنه
 بردوش می‌برد
 در کوچه‌های "خوش"
 فردائی در دهان
 فردائی در چشم.
 هنوز کمانه‌های سُرپ و
 چترگاز
 در هوا و زمین بود
 و "جهان" با گلولی آتشفشان‌ها می‌خواند:
 "... مداومت ، مداومت!
 زحمتکشان
 مبارزه
 مقاومت ، مقاومت!"
 انقلابی در دهان
 انقلابی در چشم.
 "جهان" فدائی
 "جهان" گل‌های رهائی و عشق
 گل‌های چهل و نه
 گل‌های تا امروز
 گل‌های همیشه
 گل‌های جنگل و
 گل‌های شهد
 گل‌های فدائی

harvests in heaps and heaps
from Siyahkal
to the Uprising*
harvested heaps
from the uprising
until today.
Communist Victor
with red arrangements for Comrade Tomaj**
a bouquet in the mouth
a bouquet in the eye.

Brass knuckles and knives
snorts and hoofbeats
Ay!

Wounded Victor
Victor spilling blood
in the bloodied convoy of the Republic.
Rifle butts and boots
whipping and swelling and wounds
Ay!

* Soltanpur makes deliberate use of *qiyām* (uprising) instead of *enqelāb* (revolution). The OIPFG Minority did not consider the Shah's overthrow a "revolution," since it resulted in theocracy instead of the masses' liberation. The poem once again contests the IRI's official history with its own set of dates, concepts, and terms, here reminding us that the peoples' authentic revolution has yet to occur.

** Mohammad Derakhshandeh Tomaj--one of four Turkmen leaders and Feda'i members kidnapped and killed in 1980.

خرمن، خرمن،
از سیاه‌هکل
تا قیام
خرمن خرمن
تا امروز.
"جهانِ کمونیست
با دسته‌گل‌های سرخِ "توماج"
دسته‌گلی در دهان
دسته‌گلی در چشم.

پنجه بکس‌ها و چاقوها
شبهه‌ها و سُمُضْرِبِه‌ها
آ... آی
"جهانِ مجروح
جهانِ خونچکان
در خودر و خون‌الودِ جمهوری.
فُنداَق‌ها و چکمه‌ها
شلاق و آماس و زخم
آ... آی

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Victor withstanding torture | "جهانِ شکنجه‌شکن" |
| Victor refusing to break | "جهانِ شکست‌ناپذیر" |
| Communist Victor | "جهانِ کمونیست" |
| with two bolted locks of blood | با دو قفلِ بستهٔ خون |
| in the torture chamber | در شکنجه‌گاه |
| a padlock in the mouth | قفلی در دهان |
| a padlock in the eye. | قفلی در چشم. |
| Hands bound with the Republic's cuffs | دستبندِ جمهوری بر دست |
| Republican boots on chest | چکمهٔ جمهوری بر سینه |
| Republican fists | مشتِ جمهوری |
| on Victor's bloodied jaws | در فک‌های خونینِ "جهان" |
| worn Colt barrel | کلیدِ کهنهٔ کلت |
| in the mouth | در کام |
| against closed eyes | کلیدِ کهنهٔ تفنگ |
| a bullet in the mouth | بر پلک |
| a bullet in the eye. | گلوله‌ای در دهان |
| In the freezer of the state morgue | گلوله‌ای در چشم. |
| documents of Republican crimes | در سردخانهٔ پرشکِ قانونی |
| on blocks of ice. | سندِ جنایتِ جمهوری |
| Banners in the intersections | در تگه‌های یخ. |
| manifestoes in factories and streets | پلاکاردها در چهارراه‌ها |
| Communist Victor | بیانیه‌ها در کارخانه‌ها و خیابان‌ها |
| | "جهانِ کمونیست" |

in hands
 on walls
 Communist Victor
 in tracts
 in air
 in schools
 in hearts
 in mouths
 partisan's flint and steel*
 in the jungle of the toilers' rage
 and the toilers surrounding the banners
 beside the manifestoes
 and the meeting's air
 the Feda'i air
 circulates in the homeland of struggle
 with Victor's shining voice
 "...persist, persist!
 Toilers
 struggle
 resist, resist!"

در دست‌ها
 بر دیوارها
 "جهانِ کمونیست"
 در تراکت‌ها
 در هوا
 در مدرسه‌ها
 در خانه
 در قلب‌ها
 در چشم‌ها
 در دهان‌ها
 آتش‌زنه‌های هوادار
 در جنگلِ خشمِ زحمتکشانشان
 و زحمتکشانشان گرداگردِ پلاکاردها
 کنار بیابانیه‌ها
 و هوای میتینگ
 هوای فدائی
 که در میهنِ مبارزه می‌گردد
 با صدای درخشانِ "جهان"
 "...مداومت ، مداومت !"
 زحمتکشانشان
 مبارزه
 مقاومت ، مقاومت !

* *havâdâr* = supporter. The historically-loaded "partisan," though, neatly fits the poem's ideological context.

Among the banners
the Revolution
with its forehead split and bleeding
calls
with Victor's shining voice
and rivers
and Victor's comrades
sing
"Communist Victor"
and they sing
with bouquets of blood
at the head
of the meeting
of history.

در میان پلاکاردها
"انقلاب"
با پیشانی شکسته و خونچکان
می خواند
با صدای درخشان "جهان" و
رودخانه ها
و رفیقان "جهان"
"جهان کمونیست" را
می سرایند و
با دسته گل های از خون
بر فراز میتینگ تاریخ:

Mohammad Reza Shafi'i Kadkani (M. Sereshk)

محمد رضا شفیعی کدکنی (م. سرشک)

The Opening*

Recite, in the name of the rose,
in the desert of night
that the gardens may awaken and flourish.
Recite, again recite, that the white doves
might return again to their bloodied roosts.

بخوان به نام گل سرخ،
در صحاری شب،
که باغ‌ها همه بیدار و بارور گردند.
بخوان، دوباره بخوان، تا کبوتران سپید
به آشیانه خونین دوباره برگردند.

Recite, in the name of the rose,
in the cloister of silence
that its heights of melodious waves
might pass through the plains;
the illumined message of the rain
from the indigo roof of night
may take passage on the breeze
to call on every shore.

بخوان به نام گل سرخ، در رواق سکوت،
که موجِ طنینش زدشت‌ها گذرد؛
پیام روشنِ باران،
ز بام نیلی شب،
که رهگذارِ نسیمش به هر کرانه برد.

Why do you fear the drought?

ز خشک‌سال چه ترسی!

* Shafi'i Kadkani, Mohammad Reza. "Dibâcheh" in *Âyeneh'i Barâ-ye Sedâ'hâ: Haft Daftar-e She'r*. (Originally published in *Dar Kūcheh Bâgh'hâ-ye Neshâbur*; 1971). Tehran: Sokhan, 1376/1997, 239-241. Translated by Samad Alavi.

** شفیعی کدکنی، محمد رضا. «دیباچه» در آینه‌ای برای صداها: هفت دفتر شعر. تهران: سخن، ۱۳۷۶. ص. ۲۳۹-۲۴۱.

When many a dam they've constructed

not to level water
but to level illumination
and to level song and exhilaration...

In these wanting times
they've granted leave to the poets of the day
to balladize the couplings of the cypress and tulip and dove
in ballads deeper than slumber
more limpid than a spring.

If you remain silent, who will recite?

You depart, then who will remain?

Who will chant odes to our leafless sapling?

Look out, from this mound to afar
on that other shore, see:
spring has arrived

having passed
the barbed wire.

How beautiful the flicker of sulfurous violet flames!

A thousand mirrors flow.

A thousand mirrors
behold

beating fervently in chorus with your heart.

The earth is emptied of the wayward.

- که سد بسی بستند:

نه در برابر آب،
که در برابر نور
و در برابر آواز و در برابر شورش...

در این زمانهٔ عسرت،
به شاعرانِ زمانِ برگِ رخصتی دادند
که از معاشقهٔ سرو و قمری و لاله
سرودها بسرایند زرف تراز خواب
زلال تراز آب.

تو خامشی، که بخواند؟

تو می روی، که بماند؟

که بر نهالکِ بی برگِ ما ترانه بخواند؟
از این گریه به دور،
در آن کرانه، ببین:
بهار آمده،

از سیم خاردار
گذشته.

حریقِ شعلهٔ گوگردی بنفشه چه زیباست!

هزار آینه جاری است.
هزار آینه
اینک

به همسرایِ قلبِ تو می تپد با شوق.

زمین تهی ست ز ندان؛

Only you remain
to recite again the most amorous melodious refrain.
Recite in the name of the rose and amorously recite:
*Speak love's revelation with whatever tongue you know.**

Hallaj^{***}

He appeared in the mirror again:
with clouds of his curls in the wind—
that red chant of *I am the Truth*
again the invocation on his tongue.

What did you recite in your prayer of love
that years have passed
since you mounted the gallows
and these old prefects

* A footnote to the final line of the poem, which appear in quotes in the Persian and in italics in translation, reads "[the line] is from Hafez." For the Hafez poem from which Shafi'i takes this line, see Ghazal 476 (*nasim-e şobh-e sa'âdat bedân neshân keh tow dâni / gozar beh ku-ye folân kon dar ân zamân keh tow dâni*) in Khalil Khatib Rahbar's edition.

*** Shafi'i Kadkani, Mohammad Reza. "Hallâj" in *Âyeneh'i Barâ-ye Sedâ'hâ: Haft Daftar-e She'r*. (Originally published in *Dar Kucheh Bâgh'hâ-ye Neshâbur*; 1971). Tehran: Sokhan, 1376/1997, 275-277. Translated by Samad Alavi.

*** شفیعی کدکنی، محمد رضا. «حلاج» در آینه‌ای برای صداها: هفت دفتر شعر. تهران: سخن، ۱۳۷۶، ص. ۲۷۵-۲۷۷.

همین تویی تنها

که عاشقانه‌ترین نغمه را دوباره بخوانی.
بخوان به نام گلِ سرخ و عاشقانه بخوان:
« حدیثِ عشق بیان کن بدان زبان که تو دانی. » **

حلاج^{****}

در آینه، دوباره، نمایان شد:
با ابرگیسوانش در باد،
باز آن سرودِ سرخِ «انا الحق»
وردِ زبانِ اوست.

تو در نمازِ عشق چه خواندی؟ -
که سال‌هاست
بالایِ دار رفتی و این شحنه‌های پیر
از مردهات هنوز

** از حافظ است.

still avoid your corpse?

The chest-rent waywards of Nishapur
in times of drunkenness
drunkenness and candidness
gently beneath their breaths
repeat your name in code.

When you were on your gallows pole
stunned and silent
we remained
in the spectating crowds of vultures
among the ordered guards,
the exempted agents,
concordant and concordantly silent.

Wherever the dawn breeze
carried your ashes
a man grew from the earth.

پرهیز می‌کنند.

نام تو را، به رمز،
زندانی سینه چاک نیشاپور
در لحظه های مستی
- مستی و راستی -

آهسته زیر لب
تکرار می‌کنند.

وقتی تو،
روی چوبه دارت،
خموش و مات

بودی،
ما:
انبوه کرکسان تماشا،
با شخه های مأمور:
مأمورهای معذوره،
همسان و همسکوت
ماندیم.

خاکستر تو را
با دسحرگهان
هرجا که برد،
مردی ز خاک رویید.

In the garden pathways of Nishapur
the singing midnight drunks
once again
murmured the refrain
of your red songs.

Your name is still an invocation on our tongues.

Tehran 1348 (1969/70)

On Living and Lyric*

15. Arise, morning has arrived
(so the rooster crows)
and leave this slumber and fatigue
in the riverway of night.

Sound again the midnight drunks

در کوچه باغ‌های نشاپور
مستان نیم‌شب، به ترنم،
آوازه‌های سحر تو را
باز

ترجیع وار زمزمه کردند.

نامت هنوز وِردِ زبان‌هاست.

تهران، ۱۳۴۸

از بودن و سرودن**

- صبح آمده‌ست، برخیز
(بانگ خروس گوید)
- وین خواب و خستگی را
در شطِّ شب رها کن.

مستان نیم‌شب را

* Shafi'i Kadkani, Mohammad Reza. "Budan va Sorudan" in *Âyeneh'i Barâ-ye Şedâ'îhâ: Haft Daftâr-e She'r*. (Originally published in *Dar Kucheh Bâgh 'îhâ-ye Neshâbur*; 1971). Tehran: Sokhan, 1376/1997, 250-253. Translated by Samad Alavi.

** شفیعی کدکنی، محمد رضا. «بودن و سرودن» در آینه‌ای برای صداها: هفت دفتر شعر. تهران: سخن، ۱۳۷۶، ص. ۲۵۰-۲۵۳.

the parched-lipped waywards*
into the narrow alleyways
with another cry.

Smash the slumber of the shutters
with a howlstone.
Open once again
the nocturnal gates
joyfully
towards the ascending dawn.

The rooster's crow commands:
raise the call of passion
level the prison of lexemes wall by wall
and summon the song of lovers
to revel on the pathways.

* The footnote in Persian reads: "*rendân-e teshmeh lab râ âbi nemi dahad kas...*" [No one gives water to the parched-lipped waywards...] (Hafez). " For the entire poem in which the line occurs, see Hafez, ghazal 94 (*zân yâr-e delnavâzam shokrist bâ shekâyat / gar noktehdân-e 'eshqi beshmow tow in hekâyat*) in Khalil Khatib Rahbar's edition.

رندآن تشنه لب را**
بارِ دگر به فریاد
در کوچه‌ها صدا کن.

- خوابِ درِیچه‌ها را
با نعره‌سنگ بشکن.
بارِ دگر به شادی
دروازه‌های شب را،
رو بر سپیده،
واکن.

بانگِ خروس گوید:
- فریادِ شوق بکن؛
زندآن واژه‌ها را دیوار و باره بشکن؛
و آوازِ عاشقان را
مهمانِ کوچه‌ها کن.

** رندآن تشنه لب را آبی نهد کس ... (حافظ)

Saddle the zephyrous breeze
to traverse this ocean
and from those two apertures of morning
in the garden pathways of drunkenness
let the dawn rain
gathered on the acacia
mirror the Divine.

Behold those saplings, those high-minded youths!

The same sullied warp and weft
yesterday's barren garden
today springs forth tendrils and shoots.*

See the untamed roses
on the shoulders of the wall,
weave a melody

- زین بر نسیم بگذار
تا بگذری از این بحر،
وز آن دو روزنِ صبح
در کوچه باغِ مستی
بارانِ صبحدم را
بر شاخهٔ اقاقی
آینهٔ خدا کن.

- بنگر جوانه‌ها را، آن ارجمندها را،
کان تار و پودِ چرکین،
باغِ عقیمِ دیروز
اینک جوانه آورد.
بنگر به نسترن‌ها
بر شانه‌های دیوار؛
خوابِ بنفشگان را،

* The footnote in Persian reads: "*ay derakhtân-e 'aqim-e rishetân dar khâk'hâ-ye harzeji mastur! yek javâneh'ye arjomand az hich jâtan rost natavânad.* [O barren trees, your roots veiled in perversion/ a noble sapling cannot arise from any part of you.] (M. Omid)." The lines come from Shafi'i's contemporary and friend Mehdi Akhavan Sales (pen name, M. Omid) in his poem "*Payvand 'hâ va Bâgh*" ("Graftings and the Garden"). See Mehdi Akhavan Sales, *Mehdi Akhavan Sales : She 'r-e Mehdi Akhavan Sales Az Aghaz Ta Emruz*, ed. Mohammad Hoquqi, She 'r-e Zaman-e Ma (Tehran: Entesharat-e Negah, 1386/2007), 191-94. Originally published in *Dar In Avesta* (1965).

** ای درختانِ عقیمِ ریشه‌تان در خاک‌های هرزگی مستورا
یک جوانهٔ ارجمند از هیچ جاتان رُست نتواند. (م. امید)

with the violets' dreams

and take up dawn's illumination

in the poems of gushing streams

to deliver an exegesis

on living and lyric.

Lift your voice with me in a call

to beckon the waking day

and if you're one for sleep and dormancy

go, *pillow your head, leave me on my way*.*

با نغمه‌ای در آمیز؛

و اشراقِ صبحدم را،

در شعرِ جویباران،

از بودن و سرودن

تفسیری آشنا کن.

با من بخوان به فریاد؛

و مردِ خواب و خفتی،

«روسر بنه به بالین، تنها مرا رها کن.»**

* The footnote in Persian reads: "[the line] is Mowlavi [Rumi]." The note refers to the final line of the poem, which appears in quotes in Persian and in italics in the translation. Shafi'i takes this line from the first line of Rumi's ghazal 2039 (*row sar beneh be bâlin, tanhâ marâ rahâ kon / tark-e man-e kharâb-e shab gard-e mobtalâ kon*) in Forunzanfar's edition.

** از مولوی است.

Encounter*

دیدار**

1. Did you see how once again
he turned a hundred hues
and time's game of turns
bit not a single thumb in return?***
This is a miracle
not sorcery nor wizardry
such that

*he worked his sleight of hand before the Secret beholders.******

16. Since those days and years
when the Tatar hordes
sealed the gate with fire and blood,

دیدید که باز هم
صدگونه گشت و بازی ایام
یک بیضه در کلاهِش نشکست؟
این معجزه‌ست،
سحر و فسون نیست:

چندین که
«عرض شعبده با اهل راز کرد»****

زان سالیان و روزان،
روزی که خیلِ تاتار
دروازه را به آتش و خون بست:

* Shafi'i Kadkani, Mohammad Reza. "Didar" in *Āyeneh'i Barā-ye Šeda'ha: Haft Daftār-e She'r*. (Originally published in *Dar Kūcheh Bâgh'hâ-ye Neshâbur*, 1971). Tehran: Sokhan, 1376/1997, 286-9. Translated by Samad Alavi.

** شفیع کدکنی، محمد رضا. «دیدار» در آینه‌ای برای صداها: هفت دفتر شعر. تهران: سخن، ۱۳۷۶، ص. ۲۸۶-۲۸۹.

*** *yek bayzeh dar kollâhash nashkast* = literally, "it did not break one egg in his hat."

**** از حافظ است.

***** The footnote in Persian reads "[the line] is from Hafez." The line (*'arz-e sho 'badeh bâ ahl-e râz kard*), which appears in quotes in Persian and in italics in the translation, comes from Hafez's ghazal (*šuft nehâd dâm o sar-e hoqqeh bâz kard / bonyâd-e makr bâ falak-e hoqqeh bâz kard*), #133 in Khali Khatib Rahbar's edition.

the year of burning books
with "death to fire!"
and "long live the wind!"
(from whichever side it arises)
they commissioned the coterie of whores.

We in the line of beggars
with the sickle of whatever crescent
reaped hunger and wanting in heaps
from the grace-fields of this Jesus
who had never seen a cross.

We would hear the resounding call
of an old heretic from afar;
his cries ringing with a different tune:

2

For you I bear a thousand answerless questions,
congregated heralds for this Messiah of new!
This healer of the manufactured ailing,
captives of the tent show's lying light
and seven nations
overflowing with his miracles.

No one told and no one asked

سال کتاب سوزان،
با مرده باد آتش
و زنده باد باد
(از هر طرف که آید)
مهلت به جمع روسپیان دادند.

ما، در صف گدایان،
خرمن خرمن گرسنگی و فقر
از مزرع کرامت این عیسی صلیب ندیده
با داس هر هلال درودیم.

بانگ رسای ملحد پیری را
از دور می شنیدیم؛
آهنگ دیگری داشت فریادهای او:

۲

هزار پرسش بی پاسخ از شما دارم:
گروه مزده رسان این مسیح جدید! -
شفا دهنده بیمارهای مصنوعی،
میان خیمه نور دروغ زندانی،
و هفت کشور
از معجزات او لبریز.

کسی نگفت و نپرسید،

you even once
among this blindness and dryness and desert and thirst
where is pride or shame that your Messiah might see
and scour the blemishes
of his spring
from this desert
from this duress
and like a pallid drop from his magic cloud
trickle on the earthen path.

Which springtide souls?

Which clouds and breeze?

Does he not see
that fear and shame
course through the tree's veins
that loathing and rage
assail the desert's vision
the thorn's plaintive tongue
pierces through the breeze
and you dare to speak of liberation
for the garden and the spring?

Manufactured Messiah
of plunder and loathing!

از شما،

یک بار:

میان این همه کور و کویر و تشنه و خشک،
کجاست شرم و شرف؟ - تا مسیح تان ببیند
و لکه‌های بهارش را
ازین کویر،

ازین ناگزیر،

بزداید؛

و مثل قطره زردی ز ابرِ جاودیش
به خاک راه چکد.

کدام روح بهاران؟

کدام ابر و نسیم؟

مگر نمی‌بیند

عبورِ وحشت و شرم است

در عروقِ درخت؛

هجومِ نفرت و خشم است

در نگاهِ کویر؛

زبانِ شکوه خار

از تنِ نسیم گذشت -

تو از رهاییِ باغ و بهار می‌گویی؟

مسیحِ غارت و نفرت!

مسیحِ مصنوعی!

Where is rain to scour from your countenance
deceitful figures

and duplicitous shadows?

Where is the mirror

O parrot of concealed learning!

to display in your gaze

all of this

echoing explication?

Tehran, 1969/70

Threnode*

Wave after wave of the Caspian in mourning wears black,
the grove is anguished and the plants all still.

172.

Look at the dark-robed on the horizon at dawn
they are the soul of the garden and thus dress this way in black.

My God what kind of spring is this? In the grievous plain
the tulips are mirrors of every Siyavash's blood.

* Shafi'i Kadkani, Mohammad Reza. "Suknâme'h" in *Âyeneh'i Barâ-ye Şedâ'ihâ: Haft Daftar-e She'r*. (Originally published in *Dar Kucheh Bâgh'hâ-ye Neshâbur*, 1971). Tehran: Sokhan, 1376/1997, 301-302. Translated by Samad Alavi.

** شفیعی کدکنی، محمد رضا. «سوک‌نامه» در آینه‌ای برای صداها: هفت دفتر شعر. تهران: سخن، ۱۳۷۶، ص. ۳۰۱-۳۰۲.

کجاست باران، کز چهره تو بزاید
نگاره‌های دروغین و
سایه تزویر؟

کجاست آینه،

ای طوطیِ نِهانِ آموز!

که در نگاه تو بنماید

این همه

تقریر؟

تهران، ۱۳۴۸

سوک‌نامه**

موج موج خزر، از سوک، سیه پوشان‌اند.
بیشه دلگیر و گیاهان همه خاموشان‌اند.

بنگر آن جامه کبودان افق، صبح دمان
روح باغ‌اند کزین گونه سیه پوشان‌اند:

چه بهاری‌ست، خدا را! که درین دشتِ ملال
لاله‌ها آینه خونِ سیا ووشان‌اند.

Those trampled flowers, scattered in the wind,
senseless off the wine of martyrdom,

may their names be the midnight chants of the drunks
so they never say they were forgotten.

If, from this poisoned wind that passed over the garden,
all the red spring roses lie unconscious,

still, with your bloodied arrival, O soul of spring!
grove by grove, the trees welcome you with their arms.

آن فروریخته گل‌های پریشان در باد
کز می جام شهادت همه مدهوشان‌اند،

نامشان زمزمه نیمه‌شب مستان باد!
تا نگویند که از یاد فراموشان‌اند.

گرچه زین زهر سمومی که گذشت از سرباغ
سرخ گل‌های بهاری همه بی‌هوشان‌اند،

باز در مقدم خونین تو، ای روح بهارا
بیشه در بیشه، درختان، همه، اغوشانند.

Ahmad Shamlu

احمد شاملو

A Poetry That is Life*

شعری که زندگیست**

The matter of poetry
for the bygone poet
was not life.
In the barren expanses of his fancy
he was in dialogue
only with wine and the beloved.
Morning and night he was lost in whim,
seized in the ludicrous snare of his beloved's locks,
while others
one hand on the wine cup
the other on beloved's tresses
would raise a drunken cry from God's earth.

موضوع شعر شاعر پیشین
از زندگی نبود.
در آسمان خشک خیالش، او
جز با شراب و یار نمی کرد گفت و گو.
او در خیال بود شب و روز
در دام گیس مضحک معشوقه پای بند،
حال آنکه دیگران
دستی به جام داده و دستی به زلف یار
مستانه در زمین خدا نعره می زدند!

□

موضوع شعر شاعر

□

Since the poet's concerns

* Ahmad Shamlu. "She'ri keh Zendegist" in *Majmu'eh-ye Ash'âr* [Collected Works]. Tehran: Zamaneh, 1378 [1999], 153-161. Originally published in *Havâ-ye Tâzeh* [Fresh Air], 1957. Translated by Samad Alavi.

** شاملو، احمد، زیر نظر نیاز یعقوبشاهی. «شعری که زندگیست» در مجموعه آثار (دفتر یکم: شعر، ۱۳۲۳-۱۳۷۶، بخش اول). تهران: زمانه، ۱۳۷۸، ۱۵۳-۱۶۱.

were nothing but this

the effect of his poetry

was nothing but this:

it could not be used in place of an auger;

in times of battle

the handiwork of poetry

was unable to move

aside any stone demon

from before the masses.

Meaning its existence left no trace
being or not being made no difference

it never served in place of a gallows.

While I

personally

at one time

along with my own poetry

fought side by side

with the Korean Shen Chu

once several years ago

I also sent

چون غیر از این نبود

تأثیر شعرا و نیز

چیزی جز این نبود:

آن را به جای مته نمی شد به کار زد؛

در راه های رزم

با دست کار شعر

هر دیو صخره را

از پیش راه خالق

نمی شد کنار زد.

یعنی اثر نداشت وجودش

فرقی نداشت بود و نبودش

آن را به جای دار نمی شد به کار برد.

حال آنکه من

بشخصه

زمانی

همراه شعر خویش

همدوش شن چوری گزیدی

جنگ کرده ام

یک بار هم «حمیدی شاعر» را

در چند سال پیش

"The Poet Hamidi"

to the gallows of my poetry...

□

The subject of poetry

today

is a different matter...

Today

poetry

is the weapon of the masses

because poets themselves

are one branch from the forest of the masses

not jasmines and hyacinths

in the hothouse of so-and-so.

The poet of today

is no stranger

to the collective toils of the masses:

With the lips of the people

he smiles,

He grafts the hopes

بر دار شعر خویشتن

آونگ کرده ام...

□

موضوع شعر

امروز

موضوع دیگر نیست...

امروز

شعر

حربه خلق است

زیرا که شاعران

خود شاخه‌ئی از جنگل خلقتند

نه یاسمین و سنبل گلخانه فلان.

بیگانه نیست

شاعر امروز

با دردهای مشترک خلق:

او با لبان مردم

لبخند می زند،

درد و امید مردم را

and pains of the people
upon his bones.

Today
the poet
must wear nice clothes
lace up a pair of clean and well-waxed shoes,
then from the busiest points in the city,
with a precision particular to him,
he must extract his subject, meter, and rhyme
one by one from the passersby.

"-- Come with me, dear fellow city dweller!

For three whole days
I've sought you
door to door!"

"For me?
How strange!
Surely, sir, you must
have mistaken me for someone else."

با استخوان خویش
پیوند می زند.

امروز
شاعر

باید لباس خوب بپوشد
کفش تمیز واکس زده باید به پا کند،
آنگاه در شلوغ ترین نقطه های شهر
موضوع و وزن و قافیه اش را، یکی یکی
با دقتی که خاص خود اوست،
از بین عابران خیابان جدا کند:

« -- همراه من بیایید، همشهری عزیز!

دنیا لتان سه روز تمام است
در بدر
همه جا سر کشیده ام!»

« -- دنبال من؟

عجیب است!
آقا، مرا شما
لابد به جای یک کس دیگر گرفته اید؟»

"- Not at all, dear sir, impossible:

I can spot the meter
of a new poem from afar."

"- What's that you say?

The meter of a poem?"

"- Consider it, comrade...

I have always sought

meter, idiom and rhyme

within these alleys.

The figures of my poetry are all

individuals from among the people

from "life" [which is more "lyrical subject"]

to "diction," "meter," and "the rhyme scheme," them all

I seek out among the people

this manner

improves the poetry's life and the soul.

□

Now

the time has come for the poet

«- نه جانم، این محال است:

من وزن شعر تازه خود را
از دور می شناسم»

«- گفتی چه؟

وزن شعر؟»

«- تأمل بکن رفیق...»

وزن و لغات و قافیه ها را

همیشه من

در کوچه جسته ام.

آحاد شعر من، همه افراد مردمند،

از «زندگی» [که بیشتر «مضمون قطعه» است]

تا «لفظ» و «وزن» و «قافیه شعر»، جمله را

من در میان مردم می جویم...

این طریق

بهتر به شعر، زندگی و روح می دهد...»

□

اکنون

هنگام آن رسیده که عابرا را

to persuade the passerby
with a logic particular to poems
so that he may resume his work with relish,
if not, all his efforts go to waste...

□

Well,
now that the meter has fallen in place
time to go seek out a diction:

179. Any lexeme
as can be seen from its name
is a lovely and jovial virgin...

The poet must seek a suitable diction
to match the meter he has found.
This business is difficult and draining
but
not

optional:

شاعر کند مجاب
[با منطقی که خاصه شعر است]
تا با رضا و رغبت گردن نهد به کار،
ورنه، تمام زحمت او، می رود ز دست...

□

خب،
حالاکه وزن یافته آمد
هنگام جست و جوی لغات است:

هر لغت
چندانکه برمی آیدش از نام
دوشیزه نیست شوخ و دلارام...

باید برای وزن که جست‌ست
شاعر لغات در خوران جست و جو کند.
این کار، مشکل است و تحمل سوز
لیکن
گزیر

نیست:

If Sir Meter and his wife Lady Diction
are not matching and harmonious then
the outcome of their lives will not be pleasing.
Like my wife and me:

I was meter, she was the words [the axes of meter]
the subject of poetry too
was the eternal vow on love's lips...

Even though our children's smiles [these joyous blows]
lay happily in this poetry,
but to what avail! Since the cold black words
gave it an ominous elegiac sense:
they broke both the meter
and the joyous blows
the poetry grew both fruitless and senseless
and pointlessness wore out the master!

In short, this discourse has dragged on
and this painful wound opened
to shed its pallid blood...

آقای وزن و خانم ایشان لغت، اگر
همرنگ و همتراز نباشند، لاجرم
محصول زندگانشان دلپذیر نیست.
مثل من و زخم:

من وزن بودم، او کلمات [آسه‌های وزن]
موضوع شعر نیز
پیوند جاودانه لب‌های مهر بود...

با آنکه شادمانه در این شعر می‌نشست
لبخند کودکان ما [این ضربه‌های شاد]
لیکن چه سود! چون کلمات سیاه و سرد
احساس شوم مرثیه‌واری به شعر داد:
هم وزن را شکست
هم ضربه‌های شاد را
هم شعر بی‌ثمر شد مهمل
هم خسته کرد بی‌سببی اوستاد را!

باری سخن دراز شد
وین زخم دردناک را
خونابه باز شد...

□

The pattern for the poetry of today
we said

is life!

It is from life that the poet
with the colors and water of poetry
depicts an image

upon the designs of another:

He writes poetry

meaning

he lays a hand on the wounds of the old city

meaning

he tells a tale

at night

of the sweet morning to come.

He writes poetry

meaning

he cries out the pains

□

الگوی شعرِ شاعرِ امروز
گفتیم:

زندگیست!

از روی زندگیست که شاعر
با آب و رنگ شعر
نقشی به روی نقشهٔ دیگر

تصویر می‌کند:

او شعر می‌نویسد،

یعنی

او دست می‌نهد به جراحات شهر پیر

یعنی

او قصه می‌کند

به شب

از صبح دلپذیر

او شعر می‌نویسد،

یعنی

او دردهای شهر و دیارش را

of his city and province

فریاد می کند

meaning

یعنی

with his songs

او با سرود خویش

he restores

روان های خسته را

the worn out souls.

آباد می کند.

He writes poetry

او شعر می نویسد،

meaning

یعنی

he overflows

او قلب های سرد و تهی مانده را

the frigid and almost-empty hearts

ز شوق

with passion

سرشار می کند

meaning

یعنی

with a face to the ascending morning

او روبه صبح طالع، چشمان خفته را

he awakens

بیدار می کند.

the eyes of the slumbering.

He writes poetry

او شعر می نویسد،

meaning

یعنی

he delivers an exegesis

او افتخارنامه انسان عصر را

on the encomium

تفسیر می کند.

for the human of the epoch.

Meaning

he recites the victory speeches

of his age.

□

This dry debate on the significance

of particular utterances

also does not serve poetry...

if poetry is life

then in each of its darkest verses

we can sense the solar warmth

of love and hope:

Kayvan

has sung

the song of his life in blood

Vartan

the bellow of his life

in the framework of silence,

but even if the rhyme of life

therein

is nothing but the protracted blow of death

یعنی

او فتح‌نامه‌های زمانش را

تقریر می‌کند.

□

این بحثِ خشکِ معنی‌الفاظِ خاصِ نیز

در کار شعر نیست...

اگر شعر زندگی‌ست،

ما در تک‌سیاه‌ترین آیه‌های آن

گرمایِ آفتابیِ عشق و امید را

احساس می‌کنیم:

کیوان

سرود زندگی‌اش را

در خون سروده است

و ارتان

غریب زندگی‌اش را

در قالب سکوت،

اما، اگرچه قافیه‌ی زندگی

در آن

چیزی به غیر ضربه‌کشدار مرگ نیست،

in both poems

the meaning of each death

is life!

در هر دو شعر

معنی هر مرگ

زندگی است!

The Death of Nazli*

"Nazli, spring fell into laughter and the Judas-tree blossomed.

At home, the old lilac beneath the window bloomed.

Let go of illusion,

don't raise your fist towards ominous death!

Better existence than becoming extinct, especially in the spring."

« نازلی! بهار خنده زد و ارغوان شکفت.

در خانه، زیر پنجره گل داد یاس پیر.

دست از گمان بدار!

با مرگ نحس پنجه میفکن!

بودن به از نبود شدن، خاصه در بهار...»

Nazli didn't say a word

proud

he clenched his tired teeth upon his tongue and left...

نازلی سخن نگفت؛

سرافراز

دندان خشم بر جگر خسته بست و رفت...

□

"Talk, Nazli!

The silent bird sits in her nest

on the egg of the hatchling

of a tragic death."

« نازلی! سخن بگو!

مرغ سکوت، جوجه مرگی فجیع را

در آشیان به بیضه نشسته است!»

Nazli didn't say a word:

like the sun

نازلی سخن نگفت؛

چو خورشید

* Ahmad Shamlu. "Marg-e Nazli" in *Majmu'eh-ye Ash'âr* [Collected Works]. Tehran: Zamaneh, 1378 [1999], 147-148. Originally published in *Havâ-ye Tâzeh* [*Fresh Air*], 1957. Translated by Samad Alavi.

* شاملو، احمد، زیر نظر نیاز یعقوبشاهی. «مرگ نازلی» در مجموعه آثار احمد شاملو (دفتر یکم: شعر، بخش اول). تهران: زمانه، ۱۳۷۸، ۱۴۷-۱۴۸.

he rose from this darkness and lay in his blood and left...

□

Nazli didn't say a word

Nazli was a star

He shone in this darkness for a moment and flickered and left...

Nazli didn't say a word

Nazli was a violet

he blossomed

and delivered the good news: *Winter has cracked!*

and

he left.

On the Cobblestones*

My unknown friends

like incinerated stars

fell cold upon the dark soil

in such numbers

that you'd say

the earth

forever

remains a starless night.

* Ahmad Shamlu. "Bar Sangfarsh" in *Majmu'eh-ye Ash'ar [Collected Works]*. Tehran: Zamaneh, 1378[1999], 351-354. Originally published in *Bagh-e Ayeneh [The Garden of Mirrors]*, 1960. Translated by Samad Alavi.

* شاملو، احمد، زیر نظر نیا ز یعقوبشاهی. «بر سنگفرش» در مجموعه آثار (دفتر یکم: شعر، ۱۳۲۳-۱۳۷۶، بخش اول). تهران: زمانه، ۱۳۷۸، ۳۵۱-۳۵۴.

از تیرگی برآمد و در خون نشست و رفت...

□

نازلی سخن نگفت

نازلی ستاره بود

یک دم درین ظلام درخشید و جست و رفت...

نازلی سخن نگفت

نازلی بنفشه بود

گل داد و

مژده داد: «زمستان شکست!»

و

رفت...

بر سنگفرش**

یاران ناشناخته ام

چون اختران سوخته

چندان به خاک تیره فرو ریختند سرد

که گفتمی

دیگر

زمین

همیشه

شبی بی ستاره ماند.

□

Then I
who was
the owl of silence
in the darkened nest of my suffering
put aside
the broken-stringed harp,
I emerged to the passageway
with a lantern in hand
and passed along the alleys of the people
with this call on my spark-strewn tongue:
"- *âhây!*
From behind your windows look into the street!
See the blood on the cobblestones!...
This you'd say is the blood of dawn on the cobblestones
the heart of the sun beats this way
in each drop..."

□

A gusting wind rushed
across the slumbering of the earth
flinging the crow's deserted nest
from the naked branches
of the old fig in the garden...

"- The sun is alive!

in this black night [whose vile blackness

renders its entire being into a mouth

as long as it chews the rancorous terebinth,]

□

آنگاه
من که

بودم

جغد سکوت لانهٔ تاریک درد خویش،

چنگ ز هم گسیخته زه را

یک سوز نهادم

فانوس برگرفته به معبر در آمدم

گشتم میان کوچهٔ مردم

این بانگ با لبم شررا افشان:

«- آهای!

از پشت شیشه‌ها به خیا بان نظر کنید!

خون را به سنگفرش ببینید!...

این خون صبحگاه است گویی به سنگفرش

کاینگونه می‌تپد دل خورشید

در قطره‌های آن...»

□

بادی شتابناک گذر کرد

بر خفتگان خاک،

افکند آشیانهٔ متروک زاغ را

از شاخهٔ برهنهٔ انجیر پسر باغ...

«- خورشید زنده است!

در این شب سیا [که سیاهی روسیا

تا قندرون کینه بخاید

] از پای تا به سر همه جانش شده دهن،]

I have heard the fierce song
of the sun's heartbeat

I

more glaring
more enraged
more percussive than before....

From behind your windows look into the street!

From behind your windows
look into the street!

From behind your windows look
into the street!

From behind your windows...

.....

□

Sun shoots sprung upon the ivy
by the gate of the rundown garden.
The jovial lanterns of stars
strung across the portico
where the sun had passed...
I returned from the road
my spirit full of hope
my heart aflutter.

I strung the broken-stringed harp
At the foot of a shuttered window

I sat

آهنگ پر صلابت تپش قلب خورشید را
من

روشن تر
پر خشم تر
پر ضربه تر شنیده ام از پیش... ..

از پشت شیشه ها به خیابان نظر کنید!

از پشت شیشه ها
به خیابان نظر کنید!

از پشت شیشه ها به خیابان
نظر کنید!

از پشت شیشه ها... ..

.....

□

نورک های خورشید
بر پیچک کنار درباغ کهنه رست.

فانوس های شوخ ستاره
آویخت بر رواق گذرگاه آفتاب... ..

من باز گشتم از راه،
جانم همه امید

قلبم همه تپش.
چنگ ز هم گسیخته زه را

زه بستم

پای دریچه
بنشتم

and the fervent melody
I sang
broke the cold-lipped chalice
of the alley's martyrs
with a victorious smile:

"-âhây!
This you'd say is the blood of dawn on the cobblestones
the heart of the sun beats this way
in each drop...

From behind your windows look into the street

See the blood upon the cobblestones!

See the blood
upon the cobblestones!

The blood
upon the cobblestones..."

وز نغمه‌ئی
که خواندم پرشور
جام لبان سرد شهیدان کوچه را
با نوش‌خنده فتح
شکستم:

«- آهای!
این خون صبحگاه است گوئی به سنگفرش
کاینگونه می‌تپد دل خورشید
در قطره‌های آن...»

از پشت شیشه‌ها به خیابان نظر کنید

خون را به سنگفرش ببینید!

خون را به سنگفرش
ببینید!

خون را
به سنگفرش...»

Song of Abraham in the Fire*

The Execution of Mehdi Rezaei in Chitgar Square

سرود ابراهیم در آتش**

اعدام مهدی رضائی در میدان تبر چیتگر

In the bloodied debris of dawn
behold, a transfigured man
who wanted the soil to be green
and love fitting of the fairest women -
this
in his view
was not so worthless a gift
as to be fitting of soil and stones.

Such a man! Such a man!
Who would say
the heart more befitting the one
who lies in the blood
of the seven swords of love
the throat better serving
the one who proclaims
the most beautiful of names.

And the lion-iron-mountain of a man
this cast of lover
traversed
the bloodied battlefield of destiny

در آوار خونین گرگ و میش
دیگر گونه مردی آنک،
که خاک را سبز می خواست
و عشق را شایسته زیباترین زنان -
که اینش

به نظر
هدیته نه چندان کم بها بود
که خاک و سنگ را بشاید.

چه مردی! چه مردی!
که می گفت

قلب را شایسته تر آن
که به هفت شمشیر عشق

در خون نشیند

و گلو را بایسته تر آن
که زیباترین نام ها را
بگوید.

و شیر آهنکوه مردی از این گونه عاشق
میدان خونین سرنوشت
به پاشنه‌ی آشیل
در نوشت. -

* Ahmad Shamlu. "Sorude Ebrahim dar Atash" in *Majmu'eh-ye Ash'ar* [Collected Works]. Tehran: Zamaneh, 1378[1999], 774-777 Originally published in *Ebrāhīm Dar Ātash* [Abraham in the Fire], 1973. Translated by Samad Alavi.

** شاملو، احمد، زیر نظر نیاز یعقوبشاهی. «سرود ابراهیم در آتش» در مجموعه آثار (دفتر یکم: شعر، ۱۳۷۳-۱۳۷۶، بخش دوم). تهران: زمانه، ۱۳۷۸، ۷۷۴-۶.

on Achilles' heel. -

A brazen body
the secret of whose demise
was the suffering of love
and the grieving of solitude.

□

" - O sorrowful Esfandiyar!
Better for you such
than for your eyes
to be covered!"

□

" - Was it no
a single no
that sufficed
to construct my destiny?

190.

I
alone raised the cry
no!
I
withstood
the plunge.

I was a sound
- a figure among the forms -
and I acquired a significance.

I was
and became,

روئینیه‌تنی
که راز مرگش
اندوه عشق و
غم تنهائی بود.

□

«- آه، اسفندیار مغموم!
تو را آن به که چشم
فرو پوشیده باشی!»

□

«- آیا نه
یکی نه
بسنده بود
که سرنوشت مرا بسازد؟»

من
تنها فریاد زدم
نه!
من از
فرو رفتن
تن زدم.

صدائی بودم من
- شکلی میان اشکال -،
و معنائی یافتم.

من بودم
و شدم،

not in the manner that a bud becomes a rose
or a root
a sapling
or one seed a forest
but exactly as the common man
becomes a martyr
until the heavens prostrate before him.

□

Some helpless slave on the path
I was not
nor was my celestial heavenly path
the sheep tracks of obedience and humility:

191.

I required another form of god
worthy of a creature
whose neck does not crook
for a morsel of daily bread.

And I created
a different form
of God."

□

نه زان گونه که غنچه‌ئی
گلی
یا ریشه‌ئی
که جوانه‌ئی
یا یکی دانه
که جنگلی -
راست بدان گونه
که عامی مردی
شهییدی؛
تا آسمان برا و نماز برد.

□

من بینوا بندگی سر به راه
نبودم
و راه بهشت مینوی من
برزو طوع و خاکساری
نبود:

مرا دیگرگونه خدائی می بایست
شایسته آفرینه‌ئی
که نواله ناگزیر را
کردن
کج نمی کند.

و خدائی
دیگرگونه
آفریدم).

□

Alas, lion-iron-mountain of a man
as you were
before you fell upon the soil
mountainous
steadfast and standing
you had died.

But not God, not Satan
an idol
drew your destiny
that others
would worship.
An idol
that others
would worship.

192. **It wasn't just this morning...***

It wasn't just this morning
that my mother bore me
no
The world's lifetime has transpired over me.
My closest recollections are of centuries past.
Remember
all the many times they drew our blood

* Ahmad Shamlu. "Jakh Emruz Az Madar Nazade'am" in *Majmu'eh-ye Ash'ar* [Collected Works]. Tehran: Zamaneh, 1378[1999], 921-923 Originally published in *Madayeh-e Bi Selle* [*Panegyrics Without Reward*], 1992. Translated by Samad Alavi.

* شاملو، احمد، زیر نظر نیاز یعقوبشاهی. «جخ امروز از مادر نژاده‌ام» در مجموعه آثار (دفتر یکم: شعر، ۱۳۷۳-۱۳۷۶، بخش دوم). تهران: زمانه، ۱۳۷۸، ۹۲۱-۹۲۳.

دریغا شیر آهنکوه مردا
که تو بودی،

و کوهوار
پیش از آن که به خاک افتی
نستوه و استوار
مرده بودی.

اما نه خدا و نه شیطان -
سرنوشت تو را
بتهی رقم زد
که دیگران
می پرستیدند.
دیگرانش
می پرستیدند.

جخ امروز از مادر نژاده‌ام...**

جخ امروز
از مادر نژاده‌ام
نه
عمر جهان بر من گذشته است.

نزدیک ترین خاطره‌ام خاطره قرن هاست.
بارها به خون مان کشیدند
به یاد ار،

and the single spoil of killing
was the ungarnished morsel from our measly spread.

The Arabs deceived me
I opened the gate to the rusted tower with my calloused hands;
they seated me and everyone else upon an ebony rug and
they chopped off heads.

I performed my prayers and was slaughtered
when they called my Shiism heresy.
I performed my prayers and was slaughtered
when they called me an Ismaili heretic.
from that time they resolved that we and our brothers
would kill one another and
this
was the shortest path to paradise.

Remember
that the single spoil of killing
was the scant ragscrap smaller than our barest decency.
Your brother's optimism sounded the Turks
they chopped off your and my heads.
My foolishness sounded the Genghisids
they chopped of your and everyone's heads.
They fastened an oxbow upon our necks,
harnessed us to their plow,
seated themselves upon our withers
and tilled a graveyard so vast
that the survivors
still shed

sorrowful tears of blood.

و تنها دستاورد کشتار
ناپایره بی قاتق سفره بی برکت ما بود.

اعراب فریبم دادند
برج موربانه را به دستان پر پینه خویش برایشان درگشودم،
مرا و همگان را بر نطع سیاه نشاندند و
کردن زدند.

نماز گزاردم و قتل عام شدم
که رافضیم دانستند.

نماز گزاردم و قتل عام شدم
که قرمطمیم دانستند.
آنگاه قرار نهادند که ما و برادران مان یکدیگر را بکشیم و
این
کوتاه ترین طریق وصول به بهشت بود!

به یاد آر
که تنها دستاورد کشتار
چلیپاره بی قدر عورت ما بود.
خوشبینی برادرت ترکان را آواز داد
تورا و مرا کردن زدند.
سفاقت من چنگیزیان را آواز داد
تورا و همگان را کردن زدند.
بیوغ و رزا و بر کردن مان نهادند.
گاواهن بر ما بستند
بر کرده مان نشستند
و گورستانی چندان بی مرز شیار کردند
که باز ماندگان را
هنوز از چشم

خونابه روان است.

Remember the estranged migration
from one exile to another
so that the search for faith
may be our single virtue.

Remember:
our history was one of instability
not belief
not mother country.

No,
it wasn't just this morning
that my mother
bore me.

'84۶۳

کوچ غریب را به یاد آر
از غربتی به غربت دیگر،
تا جست و جوی ایمان
تنها فضیلت ما باشد.

به یاد آر:
تاریخ ما بیقراری بود
نه باوری
نه وطنی

نه،
جنگ امروز
از مادر
تزاده‌ام.

Mohammad Mokhtari

Sleeplessness*

What difference would it have made
had the view been of a prison or a university
if the dream had only been a playful nocturnal emission?

Hearing my skin convulse, feeling pins and needles in my feet,
these are signs of something undergoing ruin.
In the moment when even one word is too many,
tree and stone and stoning and stoning and gallows
are decreed by a hand that believes
the world must be wiped clean of certain things.

19. How long must one remain within these two meters
until the body's dissection heeds the tongue's confines?
Whether from your feet having felt the bastinado,
or from blood pressure inherited in your genes,
you have experienced suffering,
calm cedes its place to unrest
which, moment by moment, trailing in your shadows,
straining you vein by vein,
has pursued you to this sleeping state.

* Mokhtari, Mohammad. "Bikhwabi" in *Vāzn-e Donya: Majmu'eh-ye Ash'ar*. Tehran: Entesharat-e Tus, 1378[1999]. 75-78. Translated by Samad Alavi.

محمد مختاری

بی خوابی**

چه فرق می‌کرد زندانی در چشم انداز باشد یا دانشگاہی؟
اگر که رویا تنها احتلامی بود بازگو شانه

تشنج پوستم را که می‌شنوم سوزن‌سوزن که می‌شود کف پا
علامت این است که چیزی خراب می‌شود
دمی که یک کلمه هم زیادی‌ست
درخت و سنگ و سار و سنگسار و دار
سایه‌ی دستی‌ست که می‌پندارد دنیا را باید از چیزهایی پاک کرد.

چقدر باید در این دو متر جا ماند تا تحلیل جسم حد زیان را رعایت کند؟
چه تا زیانه کف پا خورده باشد،
چه از فشار خونی موروث در رنج بوده باشی،
قرار، جایش را می‌سپارد به بی‌قراری
که وقت و بی‌وقت سایه‌به‌سایه رگ‌به‌رگ
دنبالت کرده است تا این خواب

** مختاری، محمد. «بی‌خوابی» در *روزن دنیا: مجموعه اشعار*. تهران: انتشارات توس، ۱۳۷۸. ص. ۷۵-۷۸.

I follow the demonstrations against the swollen economy
along brokers' row,
at the head of an intersection, a gruff voice inquires,
"Is video more ruinous or the atomic bomb?"

If the Messiah is to come it seems that he too will have to auction
off his cross.

The ringing of metal on gold teeth
and the scratching of mold in the ear's outer folds,
these are the shares for a generation of very-late-comers
along with the contemplation of apples and earth on gravity's
three hundredth year
and children a few thousand years old who seem
to have found the lighter property of entities
in their bathtubs for the very first time.

18. Neither a cinema nor a banquet occurring in history
the delayed onslaught of discoverers
a thousand people come and a thousand people go
and no one pays anyone any mind
the sound is not that which you hear
the dog revels at the silence
and the thief on the lofty roof whirls ecstatically in the presence
of the moon.

Is the tongue more endeared now or the mouth?
For the stone has rehearsed the mouth's path a thousand times.
When the voice breaks, when the word festers, when the
sentences are elided with dots,
when an elder or a youth commits suicide, suddenly the meaning
comes to light.

تظاهرات تورم را طی می‌کنم درگذر دلالات
سر چهارراه صدایی درشت می‌پرسد:
ویدئو مخرب‌تر است یا بسبب اتم؟

مسیح هم که بیاید انگار صلیبش را باید حراج کند
صدای زنگ فلز در دندان‌های طلا
و خارش کیک در لاله‌های گوش
نصیب نسلی که خیلی دیررسیده است
و فکر سیب و زمین در سیصدسالگی جاذبه
و کودکان چند هزار ساله که انگار
برای اولین بار هستی را در وان حمام سبک‌تر یافته‌اند.

نه سینما و نه مهمانی در تاریخ
هجوم کاشفانی با تاخیر حضور
هزار کس می‌آیند و هزار کس می‌روند
و هیچکس هیچکس را به خاطر نمی‌آورد
صدا همان که می‌شنوی نیست
سگ از سکوت به وجد می‌آید
و دزد بر سر بام بلند سماع می‌کند با ماه
زبان عزیزتر است اکنون یا دهان؟
که سنگ راه دهان را هزار بار تمرین کرده است.
صدا که می‌شکند حرف که چرک می‌کند جمله‌ها که نقطه چین می‌شوند
پیری یا پچه‌ای که خود را می‌کشد تازه معنا روشن می‌شود.

The dog that would fall in the salt flats [and in transubstantiating
lose its unclean state]
and this salt itself that has fallen,
it does not oppose the Men of Understanding* in their view
that the moon could turn up in different hues
or the night ring out like liberty.

Be the tulip yellow or black
the metaphor for blood
will finally arrive at travesty.

The white plaster betrays your head's place
where you seem to have been sitting for years
and your denial-prints are left on the wall
or perhaps a figure of your surrender has remained.

An entirely incomplete statement
and this restlessness of late
that nothing can settle
inflamed by doors that are opened and doors that are shut
books that are opened and hands that are bound
and hands that cast stones
and starlings that cast themselves from trees
trees that become gallows mouths that crook
tongues that grow dumbstruck
muted sounds and muted views and muted sleep
and the babel when it amasses, erupts, the dream when it shatters
to pieces

* *owlu-l-albâb* See Quran 2:269. "He gives wisdom to whom He wills, and whoever has been given wisdom has certainly been given much good. And none will remember except those of understanding." (Sahih International)

سگی که می افتاد در نم‌زار و این نمک که خود افتاده است
خلاف رای اولوالالباب نیست
که ماه زنگ عوض کرده باشد یا شب مثل آزادی زنگ زند.

اگر که لاله زرد باشد یا سیاه
استعاره‌ی خون
به مضحکه خواهد انجامید.

گچ سفید جای سرت را نشان می دهد
که چند سالی انگار در اینجا می نشسته‌ای
و رد انکارت افتاده است بر دیوار
یا شاید نقشی مانده است از تسلیمت.

گزاره‌ای اصلاً ناتمام
و تازه این بیتابی
که هیچ چیز آرامش نمی کند
در انتها ب درهایی که باز می شوند و درهایی که بسته می شوند
کتاب‌هایی که باز می شوند و دست‌هایی که بسته می شوند
و دست‌هایی که سنگ‌ها را می پرانند
و سارهایی که از درخت‌ها می پرند
درخت‌هایی که دار می شوند دهان‌هایی که کج می شوند
زبان‌هایی که لالمانی می گیرند
صدای گنگ و چشم انداز گنگ و خواب گنگ
و همه‌می که می انبوه می ترکد رویا که تکه تکه می پراکند
دانشگاهی که حل می شود در زندانی و

a university when it dissolves into a prison and
a view when it disintegrates
slumber when it breaks in the eye and the eye
when it is nailed to a point and a point when it lies dazed
in a corner of a skull
that tosses and turns and tosses and turns and tosses....

Tehran, 18 Mordad, 1374 (August 9, 1995) ۷۴/۵/۱۸ تهران، ۱۸ مرداد، ۱۳۷۴

چشم اندازی که از هم می‌پاشد
خوابی که می‌شکند در چشم و چشم
که میخ می‌شود در نقطه‌ای و نقطه‌ای که می‌ماند منگ
در گوشه‌ای از کاسه‌ی سر
که همچنان غلت می‌خورد غلت می‌خورد غلت می‌خورد...