-- *Literary Text Research* ---------
Summer 2024, 28 (100), 91-112
ltr.atu.ac.ir
DOI: 10.22054/LTR.2023.76189.3762

Original Research
Received: 07/May/2023
Revised: 04/Jul/2023
Accepted: 31/Aug/2023
ISSN:2251-7138
eISSN:2476-6186

Broken Lyres: Epic, Performance, and History in Mehdi Akhavān Sāles' "Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh"

Marie Huber ∗

Assistant Professor of Persian and Comparative Literature, Stanford University

Abstract

In "Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh" by Mehdi Akhavān Sāles (1929-1990), one of the foremost representatives of "New Poetry" in Iran, a fictive orality is staged: The poem becomes decipherable only to a reader attuned to the tradition of epic storytelling. This paper examines the relationship between language, perception, self, time, and world created through the fiction of storytelling. Drawing on theories of perception, narrative time, and epic performance, our discussion touches upon the nature of "I" and "we", the shifting narrative grounds and identities enacted by the narration, the imbrication of past and present in the figure of the storyteller, and the memory spaces that are created both in and through the text. The imaginary speech act of the storyteller casts the reader as audience, while at the same time, the epic past is overlayed by a tumble-down present. Language itself becomes incommensurable with what it describes. Rather than a nostalgic invocation of a lost age of epic heroes, as has often been claimed, ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH emerges as the profoundly modern diagnosis of a split consciousness that affects the individual in a society that can no longer return to epic naïveté.

Keywords: Persian poetry, epic poetry, Ferdowsi, modern Iran, storytelling.

- This article is a condensed version of the final section of the author's book on Akhavān Sāles.

∗ Corresponding Author: marieh@stanford.edu

How to Cite: Huber, M. (2024). Broken Lyres: Epic, Performance, and History in Mehdi Akhavān Sāles' "Ākhar-e Shāhnāmeh". *Literary Text Research*, 28 (100), 91-112. doi: 10.22054/LTR.2023.76189.3762.

Introduction

Mehdi Akhavān Sāles (1929-1990) is one of the foremost representatives of the "New Poetry" inaugurated by Nimā Yushij (1897-1960). Unlike Nima, however, Akhavān is engaged in a conversation with the millennial history of Persian literature and moves with ease between classical and modern frameworks. In his poems, words become openings that give, as it were, onto history itself: across decades and centuries, they recall a past moment of poetic time. Lexical resonances, intertextual associations, syntactic variations and the invocation of figures from mediaeval epics and romances all depend on the existence of a shared memory space to be meaningful. Their very condition of possibility is the vast storehouse of collective and personal references without which no sense could be made of art. Akhavān, more than any other Iranian poet of the past century, was keenly aware of the imponderable materiality that accounts for much of poetic meaning. In his poems, language is no mere vehicle of signification but memory, embodied in words, sounds and rhythms.

The following pages offer a reading of one of Akhavān's most emblematic works, ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH (1957). In the course of our analysis, questions of language, perception, self and time will be made to converge. The discussion will be interspersed with references to Akhavān's other narrative poems, from CHĀVUSHI and NĀDER YĀ ESKANDAR / KĀVEH YĀ ESKANDAR to MIRĀS, QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN, ĀNGAH PAS AZ TONDAR, MARD-O MARKAB, ĀNGAH PAS AZ TONDAR, NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH? and, belatedly, KH^{W}ĀN-E HASHTOM VA ĀDAMAK. This is not the place to attempt an exhaustive analysis of these works. However, it will be possible to touch upon the specific conception of history that is exemplified in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH and, in one way or another, informs all of Akhavān's writing. Our argument throughout will be silently guided by the pioneering and still dazzlingly insightful work of Mikhail Bakhtin. We shall also draw upon the less well-known but perceptive study *The Tower and the Abyss* by Erich Kahler, especially Kahler's

discussion of what he calls "the experience of a fractionized world" in poetry and his diagnosis of a split from within affecting the individual in the industrialised – modern – age.[1] In addition, Käte Hamburger's study of narrative time, Theodor Adorno's magisterial essay on epic naïvety and Maurice Blanchot's meditations on the death of the epic hero will help to illuminate certain aspects of ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH. Our central question will be if Akhavān's poem can be read as an epic of our time. Unsettling narrative consciousness from the outset, the relay of ever more disengaged narrators creates a void at the centre of the tale and shows the failure of the heroic deed to be ineluctable. Essentially, here, the mind's failure to understand is the failure of language to account for reality: alienation becomes visible and hierarchies are broken in the substrate of poetic speech. It is also in language that the quiet, subliminal materiality of history is manifested and guilt attributed to past and present alike. Yet, what remains in the end, once history – the illusion of a knowable historical truth – has been effaced? This is the question we shall set out to address.

Discussion

Forugh Farrokhzād (1935-1967) is one of the few intellectuals to have grasped the significance of ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH as a poem of our age. She is also one of the few never to have decried a nostalgic gaze or retrograde sensibility in Akhavān's work.[2] ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH is not about a return or reconquest but an alienation: the alienation of the individual for whom community has become sclerotised into collective. It is the unflinching diagnosis of a condition, expressed or, rather, *enacted* in language. (Who is "we" in the poem? Brittle and shot through with time, the "we" lacks a stable, unambivalent voice.) Just as in QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN, where the appeal to a dead tradition is unmasked in its absurdness, there is no apotheosis of a mythical past in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH. No halcyon days of a future

1 Kahler 1989, 112.
2 Farrokhzād in Qāsemzādeh, 76.

are adumbrated either. What answer could be imagined to the poem's recurrent "where?" other than "wherever is not here" (CHĀVUSHI)? Pharmakos for the ills of its time, the *elsewhere* remains without image, cast in the pure negativity of an unmapped noughtland devoid of properties or signs. The century's capital exists and is real only in so far as it causes real suffering. It cannot be fought or vanquished as an abstraction, as long as we fail to comprehend that history has already become sedimented in the most recondite layers of our thought.

In Akhavān's epic poems – and ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH is no exception – there are no heroes but an eternal dust without rider, standing in for the saviour. Even where there is a potential hero, like the prince of stoneland, the drama appears to be unfolding in the scenery, run down and real, of a play that has long been disbanded. In these epics, the fact of narration itself is staged, refracted through the voice of non-human, disembodied or otherwise erratic storytellers: the two doves of QESSEH-YE SHAHR-E SANGESTĀN, the decoy storyteller of MARD-O MARKAB, the somnambulist "I" of ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR, or the night-walking protagonist of NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH, fading into his own shadow. In ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, a multiple regression of voices has a bard relay the tale to his lyre and, finally, to a "we" that speaks without being incarnate. As an itinerant pronoun, "we" – less tangible even than "I" – has no place in the epic. Placeholder not for a character but for speech itself, it creates a void at the centre of the narration: a double bind of perspective, for "we" has no distance, no body, no image, it remains fatally vague yet deathless, ineradicable, haunting, like Kafka's hunter Gracchus, who is forever unable to die. In its errant atemporality, however, the "we" of ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH recalls the hapless prince of stoneland as a figure of collective prostration.

ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH sets in with a deictic gesture, perhaps even a whiff of impatience: "this broken, unruly lyre." The first three lines of the poem then mimic the strokes of a bard playing his lyre. Yet, who is the old bard with his ashen face? While the ancient Greeks liked to imagine the seer and rhapsode as blind, the bard of ĀKHAR-E

SHĀHNĀMEH is not so much sightless as disengaged, strangely absent: a demiurge who has retreated from his creation, unmoved and unmoving. By letting the lyre speak, "the old ashen-faced bard" has surrendered his tale. Who then is speaking, or rather, who is narrating? The lyre is but an echo space, a *persona* through which a "we" speaks: a "we" that never *appears*, while the place of the bard – there can be no other knowing, cognisant subject – remains empty. Another origin must be found for the words that seemingly pertain to no-one. Theodor Adorno writes of Hölderlin's late poetry: "In cutting the ties that bind it to the subject, language speaks for the subject, which [...] can no longer speak for itself."[1] ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, too, makes us the witness of an inability to speak, to speak of one's own accord, as oneself. Neither the bard nor the lyre has words of their own. Instead, both are mouthpieces that sound through an Other before, ultimately, language itself becomes subject and takes the floor to tell a story of loss, folly and incomprehension.

The words of the lyre are the vacuous boasting of a competitor doomed to defeat. Or rather, the competitor has already been defeated, for in the lyre's words we hear a tale that has been told an infinite number of times before and whose ending is more than familiar: "this broken, unruly lyre / tame to the hands of the old ashen-faced bard / sometimes it seems to be dreaming." An almost imperceptible qualification alerts us that the narration – the lyre's daydream – is neither unique nor to be trusted. The bard knows what is to come, knows the loop of delusion that recommences with each new song, knows too that the lyre's tale is outrageous and strange. As Maurice Blanchot writes: "The epic recounts an unparalleled action and reiterates it untiringly."[2] It is this circularity without beginning or end that is staged in Akhavān's epic narratives, in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH as in NĀDER YĀ ESKANDAR, KATIBEH, ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR or MARD-O MARKAB. The question remains if the lyre in its misapprehension is us. If so, then

1 Adorno 1992, 137.
2 Blanchot, 377 (translation modified).

we, too, have been duped while our language has been hollowed out, made impracticable, reduced to a husk that falls short of its pledge. We do not yet know the answer. We can only know that the past invoked by the lyre is not the memory image of a lost golden age but a spectre born from a suffering mind. Moreover, we notice a split of time and consciousness that is inscribed in the narration: *who* perceives the lights of dawn as will o' the wisps over marshes? It cannot be the lyre, for the lyre has no sense of what is to come, it forgets the future with each end of the tale. Instead, a different, *impossible* consciousness shines through in the attribution of falsehood: a retrospective consciousness that has lived defeat and remembers. There is no other sense in which the lyre's challenges and imprecations could be called "the sad story of exile." It is a voice from outside the epic fiction that speaks of sadness, a voice that is neither the lyre's nor that of the bard who watches over his tale in silence: an unfictional voice that unsettles the tale from the beginning. (The poet's? Akhavān's?) Whoever is at the source of this voice knows that our tales and narratives are incommensurable with an age on the far side of reason. Sadness and exile lie here.

The century has become an impregnable castle, while the lyre speaks from a non-place beyond the gates of an age to which it has not been and will not be admitted. Just as the lyre is impertinent to time itself so the metaphors in which the century is framed are fatally anachronistic. The tragedy lies in the utter inadequacy of language in the face of what it has set out to capture. Language rebounds from the surface of a reality to which it cannot answer, for which it cannot account.

قرن خون آشام،

قرن وحشتناک‌تر پیغام،

کاندر آن با فضله موهوم مرغ دور پروازی

چار رکن هفت اقلیم خدا را در زمانی برمی‌آشوبند.

the vampiric century
century of the direst message
in which the four pillars of God's seven climes are all at once shaken
by the phantasmal droppings of a far-flying bird.

The horror of technologised global destruction cannot be grasped on its own terms, it transcends the lyre's categories of understanding: rather than calling warplanes, rockets and atom bombs by their names and thus chiming into a contemporary idiom whose metaphors have long turned into fossils, Akhavān inscribes the lyre's incomprehension on the reality it evokes. At the same time, not calling the lord of the flies by his name is a linguistic act of apotropeia, an attempt to deflect the droppings of a far-flying bird by a refusal to name: there *must* be no repetition of war, air raids, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the words of the lyre, mystification even extends to the syntactic level, where the place of the subject remains vacant. Who is the agent of what is committed, who stands behind the poem's anonymous "they"? Beyond rational grasp, the processes set in motion remain as obscure and inscrutable as those who mastermind the destruction.

It is here that the Erich Kahler's diagnosis of a divided modern consciousness comes into its own: a split that, affecting the contemporary mind *from within*, brings forth a "second centre of perception above the individual, human centre"[1] and distances the subject from whatever experience is being lived. There is no need to evoke the suffering and devastation that proliferated in the wake of the modern psychosis. At the same time, however, the loss of a unified self also heightened the human capacity to probe into ever more complex layers of world and mind. Modern literature is testimony to this nervously honed aesthetics. As Kahler writes, "the crucial achievement of the new exploratory techniques and new sensibility that sprang from them was the *conquest of a new reality*, a reaching into new levels of

1 Kahler, 86.

reality."[1] The most modern, perhaps also the bleakest of Akhavān's works, ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH shows the objectifying dissociation of feeling and perception more relentlessly than any other Persian poem of the 20th century. ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH is the image of a sensibility that mirrors what it can no longer perceive as coherent: a *fractionized universe*. Yet, by negating all hopes in the possible conquest of a splintered and heterogeneous contemporary reality, the poem has already transcended its asymptotic ambitions.

In his clear and passionate essay on ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, Esmā'il Kho'i locates a profound sense of humiliation at the poem's heart, felt by those who were left behind, barred from their legitimate share in the achievements of modernity: *the wretched of the earth*, if you will.[2] An affective humiliation that, according to Kho'i, is brought forth by the modern scientific worldview with its dissociative consciousness and that carries within itself the potential to spawn resistance. Yet, is ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH an angry, revolutionary poem of humiliation, even in the sense of being, in the words of Kho'i, "sorrow-wrathful"? Yes and no. Above all, ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH is a *quixotic* poem in which the fault line separating two worlds is laid bare: the anachronistic ideal of a chivalrous society – a society that may never have existed – and the fact of modern civilisation with its impassible coldness. It is a poem also whose narrative passes through a number of different stages: ethereal visions, hubris, delusion, outrage and wistful longing before reaching, ultimately, a desolate awareness of the truth. At the same time, no image or body is given to an opponent who remains pure negativity: "the vast nine-layered noughtland of this impassive desert." In this respect, ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH recalls Beckett rather than Mayakovsky or Frantz Fanon. What is more, the lines are not drawn between East and West, oppressed and imperialist power. Akhavān is less affected let alone seduced by the trappings of Western culture than any other Iranian

1 Kahler, 151.
2 Kho'i in Qāsemzādeh, 274–278.

author of the 20th century. In his writings, there is no trace of a fawning or defiant deference to the West that could give rise to a feeling of humiliation. Rather, Akhavān knows that the split, running through western and eastern consciousness alike, is final and cannot be made undone. As he explains in a note at the end of MĀR-E QAHQAHEH: "It seems that I am addressing the twain of West and East, as always."[1]

The words of the lyre only take on their full meaning if in them, we hear the epic cadence: the resonance of something that belongs to another time. Anonymous and nomadic, a "we" speaks in the lyre's song, as if hailing from a forgotten past and intoning an aboriginal tale that has long disappeared from the chronicles of history. There is no-one to answer the taunts and epic bragging, no adversary to be fought on equal terms. Instead, the clang of sabres, the roll of war drums and the whistle of arrows are met by a deafening silence. Something appears to be subtly askew. Is speech itself split or is it us who perceive the words of the lyre as double, suspended between past and future? Both. ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH is about a temporal – historical – ecstasis: the foreignness of a "we" facing the unassailable fortress of an age. At the same time, a consciousness speaks in the poem that, hubris-ridden and deluded, pitiful and suffering, both is and is not us. In its ambivalence, the "we" offers no ground for identification. Where are we, where do we belong, in what kind of age do we live? There is no more radical, no more acute exile than that of being rejected by time itself. Kho'i states the predicament clearly: "For me, ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH is a poem of seeking and not finding shelter: it is a cry of shelterlessness."[2]

Nowhere else does Akhavān speak as insistently of and as "we":

ما

فاتحان قلعه‌های فخر تاریخیم،

1 Akhavān in Kākhi, 629.
2 Kho'i in Qāsemzādeh, 279.

شاهدان شهرهای شوکت هر قرن.

ما

یادگار عصمت غمگین اعصاریم.

ما

راویان قصه‌های شاد و شیرینیم.

we
are the conquerors of history's proud castles,
witness to each century's splendid cities.
we
are memorial to the sad chastity of the ages.
we
are the tellers of joyful, sweet tales.

However, is Akhavān not at the same time suspicious of the words uttered by this obdurate "we": exposed, isolated, cut off from the sentence whose subject it is and – over the course of the poem – five times ostracised into a verse of its own? A moat of loneliness surrounds the "we" in its delusion, as if the thrownness of the itinerant pronoun were an indictment, a sentence of exile.

Shafi'i Kadkani writes that Akhavān's language "is the language of the poets of Khorāsān, that is, the birthplace and cradle from which the Dari language emerged."[1] Yet, Akhavān's language both is and is not that of Ferdowsi, Farrokhi and Khayyām: it is a language into which temporality has entered as the consciousness of distances, crystallised in the synchrony of the poetic *now*.[2] It is an estranged language also that finds no belonging in either the past or the present. Like the poem evoked by Celan in his *Meridian* speech, so ĀKHAR-E

1 Shafi'i Kadkani, 177.
2 Kho'i (in Qāsemzādeh, 274) puts it beautifully when he says that ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, "tells of a *now* that is replete with the past."

SHĀHNĀMEH too is mindful of its dates and speaks from its own, specific moment in time.[1] This is why both praise and criticism of Akhavān fail to grasp what his language actually *does*. There is no revival nor retrogression. Rather, a multiplicity of tones and registers, of historical echoes and literary allusions is refracted through the prism of a modern mind and sublated – made to converge – in the poem. Thus, what to some appears as the empty, autotelic virtuosity of a poet beset by nostalgia is in fact the *mise en abîme* of an alienation, a dissociation of consciousness enacted in words.

The extreme *temperance* of Akhavān's language – rather than its virtuosity – is disconcerting, all the more so as the measure of words stands in contrast to the measurelessness of an aborted, quixotic heroism. In his magisterial essay on epic naïvety, Adorno writes that "the precision of the describing word seeks to compensate for the falseness of all discourse," and continues to say that all attempts to free epic description of the shackles imposed by reflective reason are "the attempt of language, futile from the outset, […] to let the real emerge in pure form, undisturbed by the force of orders."[2] Language – *epic* language – here counterpoises the epistemological orders that unsettle the real before it can be captured in words. For Adorno, the exactitude of epic speech points to an awareness that the truth-value of language has always already been weakened by our categories of understanding. No analysis could be more pertinent to ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH. Unparalleled even among the works of an infinitely attuned verbal sensorium, the poem's linguistic precision approaches a point where language tips and becomes atomised into babble or onomatopoeia. It is a precision also that seems to be pointless, lost on its aim, utterly futile. Yet in its very futility – its anachronism and impertinence – language here *makes visible*, exposing as doomed the struggle to approach a reality that remains cruelly elusive. In other

1 Celan, 409.
2 Adorno 1991, 26-27 (translation modified).

words, through the anachronism of its cross-grained language ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH shows a reality that cannot be named.

However, not all of the poem's cadences are anachronistic, not all turns of phrase hail back to a time beyond living memory. Resonances of modern poetry and inflections of contemporary speech are woven into the poem's chorus of voices. Thus, the colloquialism of the question "lo, where is it?" repeated four times, gives the speaking "we" away as anchored in our time, not the lofty age of the heroes. The question is doubly – and *deliberately* – jarring, for its violation of both epic tone and poetic metre: Akhavān could easily have avoided the metrical defect.[1]

بر به کشتی‌های خشم بادبان از خون،
ما، برای فتح سوی پایتخت قرن می‌آییم.
تا که هیچستان نه توی فراخ این غبار آلود بی غم را
با چکاچاک مهیب تیغ‌هامان، تیز
غرّش زهره درانِ کوس‌هامان، سهم
پرّش خارا شکاف تیرهامان، تند؛
نیک بگشاییم.

on ships of wrath their sails from blood,
we are bound for the century's capital.
to vanquish
the vast nine-layered nowhere of these impassive badlands
with the fierce clang of our swords, sharp
the gut-wrenching roar of our drums, dread
the rock-splitting flight of our arrows, swift.

1 Qahramān, 57.

The position of "sharp," "dread" and "swift" at the end of these lines is a distinctly modern, Nimāic echo in the poem's many-voiced texture and creates an effect of floating indetermination. Neither quite adjective nor adverb, the words seem to radiate beyond the grammatical conjunction that ties attribute to noun. The displacement of words within the sentence exposes a certain arbitrariness of the syntactic mechanism and thereby draws attention to language itself as the raw substance of poetry. At the same time, the subtle interruptions of syntax create the sensuous immediacy – the unsettling, quasi corporeal presence – of a stark, syncopated juxtaposition of words that keeps recurring in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, more so even than in MIRĀS or the other epic narratives. A rugged contrariety of language here correlates to the excess of the heroic gesture itself. On the phonetic level, Akhavān's syncopations[1] lend a distinct grain to these poems: an effect of epic, as it were. However, the syntactic shifts also achieve something other than atmospheric condensation. Peter Szondi in his brilliant analysis of Hölderlin's poetics writes: "Similarly, the syntactic whole, its traditional hierarchy, is cracked open by 'disruptive connection' [and] the freedom of the single word as an individual entity is preserved." By extrapolating from syntax to world, "reflecting philosophical and philological aspects [...] in their enlacement," Szondi shows how the structural aspects of poetry carry meaning beyond the enclosure circumscribed by the text.[2] In ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, too, syntactic structures are semantically charged while individual words are entrusted with a signification that transcends that of the phrase: a transcendence like a damnation, as the weight of freedom bears down on each word.

قصه‌های آسمان پاک.

1 Shafi'i Kadkani (171) speaks of the "'pleasing' syncopations of the Khorāsāni style."
2 Szondi, 156.

نور جاری، آب.

سرد تاری، خاک.

tales of pure skies.
flowing light, water.
dusky cold, soil.

The full stop at the end of these verses is not a grammatical or syntactic sign but, quasi musical notation, marks a pause: it blurs rather than clarifies syntactic affiliations, unhinging parts of the sentence to create a state of abeyance. Meanwhile, the absence of any finite verb sidelines the scene from the narrative flow and, for the blink of an eye, stalls progression. The most epic of Akhavān's poems thus harbours a lyric moment that resounds with an air of CHUN SABU-YE TESHNEH. A play with time and perception, existence and nothingness also recalls the earlier work. In the syntactic order by which phenomena are presented, the *state* of a certain manner of being (flowing water, dusky cold) precedes the actual being or object (water, the earth) that is then named by the poem. In this way, humanity is already inscribed in what Akhavān brings to language, for only a human mind can perceive the elements not by their name but their essence: water as flowing light or the earthy soil as dark cold. At the same time – and by a subliminal phonetic gesture – language merges the abstract, incorporeal idea of history (*tārikh*) with the elements, bringing *tārikh* close to the earth itself (…*tāri, kh*…), close to something also that lies beneath, *beyond* even the threshold of consciousness. It is in the dusky cold, earth (*sard-e tāri, khāk*) – not in the proud fortresses of noughtland – that history abides for Akhavān. Elsewhere, in MIRĀS, the materiality of a tangible, owned, human history is embodied in the image of the old fur cloak, handed down to the generations in time: a *quiet* history that is absent from the chronicles of the powerful, pushed to the margins even of language itself.

ور زمین -گهواره فرسوده آفاق –
دست نرم سبزه‌هایش را به پیش آرد،
تا که سنگ از ما نهان دارد،
چهره‌اش را ژرف بشخاییم.

and if the earth – rickety cradle of the horizons –
extends the soft hand of her green
to keep the rock hidden from us
let us claw deep lines in her face.

Perhaps nowhere else can we find a more graphic refutation of the belief that Akhavān's poetry is at once underpinned and sapped by a yearning for the bygone days of national glory: a glory as fraudulent as the Shah's self-dramatisation that is lambasted in MARD-O MARKAB. No naïve idealism can be ascribed to a poet who renders his characters' delirium of grandeur in all its barbarity. The "we" that has set out to conquer the "grimace-faced century" has no regard for the earth either: modernity has already brought forth a profound and indelible contempt for the "rickety cradle of the horizons," protectively tending her hand. Yet, does the "we" of ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH betray a modern consciousness? The poem's itinerant pronoun cannot be moored in time: it appears to traverse the ages rather than belong to either past or present. Eluding bias, the verses are testimony to an awareness that innocence has long been lost, buried in time immemorial. A senseless will to cruelty exists on both sides of our *now*, indiscriminately.

[…]
قصه‌های دست گرم دوست در شب‌های سرد شهر.

tales of a friend's warm hand in the city's cold nights.

This is the only line in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH that does not speak *as*, does not carry within it a foreign cadence, is not doubled in time, as it were. Its quiet resignation also makes it the most poignant of the entire poem: the warm hand of a friend in the city's cold nights has entered the realm of stories and fiction. Also, bared of its epic trappings, the city here sounds in another, decidedly modern key: it no longer means an *elsewhere* that is exterior to our lives, an objectified space to be pacified by the erstwhile oppressed. Instead, the city is where the absence of a quiet humanity – a *possible*, non-utopian warmth – is most keenly felt. The very fact that neutral, quasi toneless words are embedded in a narrative that strains to uphold the epic gesture suggests a structural crack. In its simplicity and – imaginary, but all the more potent – *unliteralness* the phrase marks a moment of poised inaction: a breathturn between delusions of victory over an invincible, protean and placeless enemy and a shattering cognisance of reality in its immutable strangeness.

Perhaps also the words – tales and narratives – themselves are speaking in the "we" that migrates through the poem, as the infinite recursion of a helical structure whose twin strands are language and life?

ما

کاروان ساغر و چنگیم.

لولیان چنگ‌مان افسانه‌گوی زندگی‌مان، زندگی‌مان شعر و افسانه.

ساقیان مست مستانه.

we
are the procession of goblets and lyres.
gypsies, our lyres the fabulists of our lives, our lives yarn and myth.

drunken, rapt sakis.

At a point where the delirium of the speaking "we" has reached a deadlock of circular sameness, the poem tips and the lyre's tale is interrupted.

ای پریشانگوی مسکین! پرده دیگر کن.

پور دستان جان ز چاه نابرادر در نخواهد برد.

مرد، مرد، او مرد.

oh you wretched babbler! strike a different chord.
the son of Dastān will not rise again from the halfbrother's pit.
he's dead, dead, dead.[1]

As the narrative enters a different *modus* the hero's deathlessness is undermined and ultimately revoked by a verb that has no place in the epic. There is no other past tense, no other *past* even that occurs in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH. In defiance of its abnormal presence in a poem whose temporality is a *now* tending towards an impossible future – a future that is forever without reach – the statement of the hero's having died is repeated three times, as if repetition could make the reality of its impossible meaning undone. Rostam *cannot* die, precisely because he is an epic hero: he is condemned to live, to continue living, in the limbo space of legend, unable to touch reality. His fate is the cruel in-between, the interregnum of an existence in words, there for the duration of a song that keeps being sounded yet never takes root, never actually comes into being and lives: "The hero is born when the singer steps forward in the great hall. He is recounted. He *is* not, he is merely sung."[2]

1 The poem here refers to the death Rostam, the hero of the *Shāhnāmeh*. Rostam's halfbrother Shaghād threw the hero into a well laced with poisoned swords and thereby killed a warrior who had been invincible in combat.
2 Blanchot, 371 (emphasis added and translation modified).

The tense generally regarded as constitutive of the narrative genre is absent from ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH: what Käte Hamburger calls the *epic preterite*, a tense that in French would correspond to the *passé simple* and in Persian to the simple past in its perfective (rather than immediate or perfect) aspect.[1] Quarantined behind an unnegotiable border, the epic preterite creates an abeyance in (time-)space, consigning whatever is narrated to the vague sprawl of a past whose relation to the present remains undetermined. While no past is enacted in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH, an *implied preterite* may be said to subtend the lyre's daydream of foregone splendour: a preterite that is never voiced but merely suggested in the participles of the lyre's vision (participles of a past, a present, a future?); a preterite also that implies not finality but repetition, for whatever comes to pass in the poem tells not of a unique instant but happens, invariably, "one time of many" (ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR).

Time throughout the poem is left afloat: no verb relegates the narrative to an imaginary past. What is stated is either the observation of a continuous present (the lyre sees and sings; the anonymous "they" batter and lay to waste) or an exhortation ("tell the watchmen lest sleep beguile them!"). Only the statement of the hero's death shatters the epic fiction – or fiction of epic – by forging a concrete and vital connection to the *now* of the enunciation: Rostam has died, died not in his tale but in relation to us and our time. With his death, the epic cycle is brought to a halt and the narrative itself becomes porous: the fact of Rostam's death means a breach of the fourth wall, in the same way as the irruption of an "I" from outside the space of the poem in MARD-O MARKAB or NĀGAH GHORUB-E KODĀMIN SETĀREH and the death of a knight in the chess game of ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR all point to a reality beyond fiction. The force of narrative as a genre lies here: in its power to set up what Lacoue-Labarthe calls a "true semblance"

1 "In the sentence, in speech it is the verb that determines the 'existential modality' of persons and things, indicating their place within time and thus within reality, and thereby making a statement regarding their being and non-being, their still-, no-longer- and not-yet-being" (Hamburger, 59).

before exposing the fictional construct as sham. In lyric poetry, by contrast, there is no "fiction of fiction," no dialectics to be enacted between figment and reality, no lies and deceptions to be laid bare.

Whose voice is it that speaks in the final two stanzas? Is it the voice of Rostam, whose lament rises from the bottom of the pit where he keeps dying a cruel death without ever passing beyond the threshold of life? Yet, *can* Ferdowsi's hero speak outside his tale to acknowledge defeat and the pointlessness of all labours, all aspirations? Can the hero's blades become rusty, can the fletch of his arrow be torn and can the war drums fall silent forever? For this to happen, the epic existences would have to step out of their tale and, entering human time, become mortal.

As the end of the poem approaches, we become witness to a paradoxical imbrication of epic and human – historical – time, in which the forgotten tales can be told once again, as stories of absence. The idyllic tableau of a luminous and just age has faded from memory and nothing endures but a vague sense of the foregone, an experience of unnameable pain. However, the toneless voice, faltering, on the verge of silence is more eloquent than any bragging intimidation of a shadowy foe. Only this silence has the power to enter history, as a consciousness of loss and exile.

ما

فاتحان شهرهای رفته بر بادیم.

با صدایی ناتوان‌تر زانکه بیرون آید از سینه،

راویان قصه‌های رفته از یادیم.

we
are the conquerors of lost cities
with a voice too weak to emerge from the chest,
we are the tellers of forgotten tales.

Gradually the (im)possibility of telling the tale of the *other*, historical Rostam is revealed: not of Rostam the epic hero but of Rostam Farrokhzād, the Sassanian general, who had sought to halt the incursion of Arab troops in Iran. The name of Rostam here serves as a pivot allowing legend and history to be confounded in a single abysmal voice. Both Rostams were killed innocently, iniquitously even, both were battling forces that could not be vanquished, in a struggle that was doomed from the outset. However, there is a decisive difference between the death, iterable *ad infinitum*, of the epic hero in his tale – "this death without trace" (Blanchot) – and the singularity of the instance of death in life. The hero is extinguished into his tale only to be resurrected again later, same but other, at the will of the rhapsode. His deeds leave a sense of wonder but fail to transcend the fictional frame. Blanchot speaks of "a marvellous act that inscribes itself in legend but not in history."[1] The mechanism that renders the epic hero inoperative to the outside also underlies our dreams: oneiric time and the mythical time of epic obey the same laws. Just as the dreaming "I" of ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR is locked into a bell jar of nightmarish visions, so, too, the "we" of ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH has no power to intercept the reality it perceives.

In the final lines of the poem, the orders of fiction and historical fact are subverted: while Rostam, the epic hero, has died an impossible, counternatural death, the historical figure of Decius, the Roman emperor, has revealed himself deathless. There is no redemption, only a dream turned inside out. The nightmare engulfing the Seven Sleepers has no limit or end.

گاهگه بیدار می‌خواهیم شد زین خواب جادوئی

at times we want to awake from this bewitched dream

1 Blanchot, 377 (translation modified).

Reality is but an ill-fated dream to which the "we" awakes after centuries. Yet, who are the sleepers of a sleep that was unable to dispel history? Moving across time, on a trajectory that recalls the metamorphoses of *Orlando*, the itinerant pronoun of ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH is the locus of an errancy. An array of characters speaks without ever merging or taking root in the "we": the voices of Rostam son of Dastān, the epic hero, and of Rostam Farrokhzād, the quixotic general; the voice of the Seven Sleepers; that of the lyre, also, as the *persona* through which the "we" sounds; perhaps even the voice of the bard, absent and distant; Akhavān's voice and, obliquely, ours. To the flux of speakers corresponds an instability of ontological spaces. As in ĀNGĀH PAS AZ TONDAR, where oneiric visions trespass beyond the dream to enter life, so in ĀKHAR-E SHĀHNĀMEH too the orders are profoundly unsettled while the mind is trapped in a state of lucid inoperativeness, capable only of language. The absence of an unequivocal voice compounds the sense of discomfort and contingency. However, the poem's "we" may ultimately correspond to a source: it is our own double. *We* are the Seven Sleepers and, as such, have entered a space of myth that bears an uncanny resemblance to life. Unable to change the lyre's tale yet at the same time aware of its every turn, we are doomed to keep listening, doomed also to keep waking up and grasp what the lyre shows us – the mirror image of our own distorted perception – in the crude light of reason. We cannot hope ever to touch or even affect reality, for the categories of existence and origin have been perverted. The monstrous truth of our dreams has become a simulacrum of history, inescapable and sempiternal:

[…]
چشم می‌مالیم و می‌گوئیم: آنک، طرفه قصر زرنگار صبح شیرینکار.
لیک بی‌مرگ است دقیانوس.
وای، وای، افسوس . »

[...]
we rub our eyes and say: there it is, the wonder of a miraculous dawn's
gilded castle.
yet Decius is immortal.
woe, woe, alas. »

Orcid

Marie Huber https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4041-0803

References

Adorno, Theodor W. 1991-1992. *Notes to Literature.* Trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen. 2 vols. New York: Columbia University Press.

Blanchot, Maurice. 1993. *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Celan, Paul. 2001. *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*. Trans. John Felstiner. New York: W.W. Norton.

Hamburger, Käte. 1968. *Die Logik der Dichtung.* 2nd ed. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.

Kahler, Erich. 1989. *The Tower and the Abyss. An Inquiry into the Transformation of the Individual.* New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Kākhi, Mortezā, ed. 1999. *Bāgh-e bi-Bargi. Yādnāmeh-ye Mehdi Akhavān Sāles*. 2nd ed. Tehran: Zemestān.

Qahramān, Mohammad. 2005. *Bā Yād-hāye 'Aziz-e Gozashteh. Dah Nāmeh az Mehdi Akhavān Sāles be Mohammad Qahramān*. Tehran: Zemestān.

Qāsemzādeh, Mohammad, ed. 1991. *Nāgah Ghorub-e Kodāmin Setāreh: Yādnāmeh-ye Mehdi Akhavān Sāles*. Tehran: Ahmadi.

Shafi'i Kadkani, Mohammad Rezā. 2011. *Hālāt va Maqāmāt-e M. Omid*. Tehran: Sokhan.

Szondi, Peter. 1970. *Hölderlin-Studien. Mit einem Traktat über philologische Erkenntnis.* Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.