Published: January 1, 2000
Last Updated: October 26, 2012

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In the summer of 1963 I had to write a foreword to the new English prose translation of the *Shahnameh* by Reuben Levy, having just completed an exhaustive reading of the whole of Ferdowsi's epic not long after reading Latimore's translation of Homer's *Iliad*. Naturally the two poems were ringing in my mind like two vast chorales, sometime singing in a harmonic blend and sometime clashing in an antiphonal blare. In my introduction entitled "Ferdowsi and the Art of Tragic Epic", I tried to illuminate one poem in light of the other, and drew upon the formal similarities of the two in briefest terms. In the course of the next forty odd years I was never very far from the *Shahnameh*, reading virtually everything written about it by Shahrokh Meskoob, Shapour Shahbazi, Olga Davidson, and Dick Davis, and reveling in every volume of the new text edited by Jalal Khaleghi-Motlagh. Late in Autumn of 2005 I was enjoying the new English prose-verse *Shahnameh* translation of Dick Davis, when I also started reading Robert Fitzgerald's recent translation of the *Iliad*. Once again the antiphonal music filled my mind's ears and compelled me to write a sequel to the brief essay of forty-two years before. This time in light of new insights gained after a life-time of thinking about the *Shahnameh*. I was compelled not so much by the generic and formal similarities but by the profound substantive and teleological differences between the two epics. It was then suggested that I combine the old and the new essays into one as a critical reflection on re-reading of the *Shahnameh* and the *Iliad*. The result below is a critical essay that does not shy away from value judgments.

Lest the reader take issue with the comparison between a work versified in the 10th century of the C.E. and clearly based upon a prose written source of only decades earlier and a work composed nearly two millennia earlier, I should point out that the basic subject of the early mythological episodes of the *Shahnameh* belong roughly to the same pre-antiquity as the *Iliad*. They are rooted in the *Avesta* and are reflections of Mazdean and Zoroasterian creation myths. They constitute for the Iranian people the same attempt at self-recognition and identity as the *Iliad* constitutes for the Greeks. It is this mythological part of the *Shahnameh* with its moral dimension that evokes valid comparisons.

Ferdowsi's main objective is to preserve the 'history' of his fatherland, but the sum of the *Shahnameh's* artistic worth outweighs the inherent shortcomings of the poet's conscious scheme. Broadly conceived, it belongs to the epic genre. But it is not a formal epic as is the *Aeneid* or the *Lusiad*. Rather, while its spontaneity recalls the *Iliad* its episodic character reveals its kinship with the *chancons de geste*. More than any of its kindred poems, however, the *Shahnameh* is beset by paradoxes that are the protein of its art and the source of its tragic nobility. If there is a unifying theme in the *Shahnameh* it is no simple 'wrath of Achilles', but the malevolence of the universe itself.

Yet Ferdowsi is no passive fatalist. He has an abiding faith in a just Creator, he believes in the will of man, the need for his efforts, and the worth of his good deeds.

The prevailing paradox of human existence is refracted and made particular in episodes about its lives of mortals who, prism-like, reflect the light and shadow of character, the changes of mood and motive, and the many psychic levels of personality. In the strength, variety, and sometimes profundity of its characterization—often achieved with such economy of means—the *Shahnameh* is remarkable in the annals of classical literature. Very few of its many protagonists are archetypes. All too many of its noblest heroes are prey to the basest of human motives but even the vilest among them have moments of humanity. Although outwardly many characters defy natural bounds, the inner reality of none is exempt from the limits of human nature. The goodness of the best is possible and the evil of the worst is not impossible.

Nowhere is this rich characterization more evident that in the person of Rostam, the foremost of the Iranian heroes. He is essentially a man of the arena. Chivalrous, intensely loyal, pious, fearless, steel-willed and obdurate,

he is nevertheless subject to occasional moods of disenchantment and indifference accompanied by gargantuan gluttony. He has a mystic reverence for the crown of Iran, which inspires him to his most heroic feats. But he is quick to take offence and, at the slightest bruise to his ego or threat to his independent domain, wealth or power, he reacts with the full fury and resentment of a local dynast. For all his 'active' temperament he can be very wordy and didactic. When occasion demands, he is wise, temperate and resourceful. Of the more than three hundred years of his life, so lovingly recounted by Ferdowsi, only one night is spent in the amorous company of a woman, a most significant night which serves the purpose of siring the ill-fated Sohrab. For the rest, he is infinitely more devoted to his horse. Sometimes he is unable to rein in his pride, which results in the two monstrous deeds of his life—and shapes its final tragedy.

It is partly this depth of characterization that enhances and ennobles the tragic episodes of the *Shahnameh*. Jamshid the priest-king, world-orderer, and the giver of knowledge and skills, is the victim of his own hubris. The tragedy of Sohrab is not merely couched in the horror of filicide but in the fear and vanity of Rostam himself and the repulsed tender premonitions of the tender-hearted Sohrab. The tragedies of Iraj and Siyavash evoke the cosmic anguish and inconsolable pity of the guileless and the pure, ravaged by the wicked. Forud and Bahram symbolize the promise of sweet and valorous youth cut down by senseless war and Esfandiyar is rent by the conflict between his formal loyalties, his piety and good sense. But it is his vanity and ambition that send him to his doom. Nor is this moving sense of the tragic reserved for the Iranians alone. Piran, the hoary Turanian noble, shows compassion to captive Iranians and risks his own life to protect them only to lose it in the end for remaining loyal to his sovereign. Even the villainous Afrasiyab—a prisoner of his evil nature—is pitiable and tragic in the helpless moments of his self-awareness.

Ferdowsi has no set formulae for tragedy, yet in the early and mythical part of the *Shahnameh* an inexorable divine justice seems to end in balance of most the scales. Iraj and Siyavash are restored and triumphant in Manuchehr and Key Khosrow, Rostam is reconciled to his fate as the price for slaying of Sohrab and Esfandiyar, and Afrasiyab cannot escape his share of despair. But tragic impact of the *Shahnameh* cannot simply be measured by the sum of its episodes. It pervades the whole work, and its sources are to be found in the conscious as well as unconscious paradoxes that form the personality, the

emotional tenor and intellectual outlook of Ferdowsi.

The overriding tragic fact of the poet's life is that the glory of which he sings is no more. But this not to say that the *Shahnameh* is a defiant lament. The intellectual horizon of Ferdowsi is that of a rational and devout Muslim. Mohammad and Zoroaster are venerated as if from of the same root, but Ferdowsi's pride in Iran is his constant muse. His concept of history is thoroughly Islamic, but there is no Augustinian righteous indignation in him. The cumulative emotional tensions of his 'history' are unresolved. Even in his stark treatment of the final reigns of the Sasanian empire, when the succession of evil, tyranny, rapacity, treachery and chaos is unrelieved by any sign of grace, he cannot quite bring himself to condemn the Iranian Empire. The only possible catharsis is in the contemplation of the ideal of justice, ideal in Islam, yet already far removed from the realities of his time. Nor is the holocaust as distant as the fall of the Sasanians. Ferdowsi was undoubtedly inspired by the renascent Iranism of the Samanid epoch and may have even conceived of his masterwork as an offering to that illustrious house, only to witness its demise in the hands of the Turkic Ghaznavids. The bitterness of the mythical Iranian-Turanian epic struggle that permeates the *Shahnameh* and gives it its dramatic tension is the pressing phenomenon of the poet's own time. He has himself experienced a re-enactment of the final tragedy of his poem. The necessity of dedicating the *Shahnameh* to the very Turkic destroyer of the Iranian Samanids must have been a bitter and demeaning fact. Much of the traditional denunciatory epilogue addressed to Mahmud of Ghazna may be accretions of later times, but the tone is true.

The tensions and contradictions in the experience of the poet that are reflected in the tragic paradoxes of the *Shahnameh* and are a source of its validity, profundity, and universality are not all conscious or external. The interactions of the poet's innate character, his inculcated traits, his social position, his changing environment, and the nature of his creative genius, all fail to achieve a synthesis. Instead, they reflect a personality marred by unresolved intellectual conflicts and spiritual anguish.

He belongs to the class of *dehqans*, or landed gentry, and has an inherited sense of expectation of privilege, which is embittered by gradual impoverishment. He is not yet free of the impulses of generosity and noble detachment that sometimes flourish in the serene and self-assured middle plateau of wealth and power of a social class, but is already afflicted with the material obsessions, if not greed and avarice, that characterize the periodic

rise and fall of those classes. Thus he seeks, and needs, the patronage and the emoluments of the Ghaznavid court, yet he is too proud, too detached and too dedicated to his 'uncommercial' art to secure that patronage according to the accepted mode of the day. He is contemptuous of the servility and parasitic existence of court poets, of the artificiality of their panegyric verse, of the ignobleness of their self-seeking and mutual enmity, yet he is not without the artist's vanity, envy and acrimony and, occasionally, succumbs to the temptation of proving himself according to their standards.

Ferdowsi's genuine compassion for the poor and the wronged, his remarkable and persistent sense of social justice, his courageous and vocal condemnation of the irresponsibility of rulers, his altruism and idealism—in short, his profound humanity—account for some of the most moving and ennobling passages in the Shahnameh and endow it with a consistent integrity. At the same time he himself reflects the conservative impulses of the *dehqan*. His yearning for legitimacy, his outrage at disregard of position, his abhorrence of anarchy, his fear of heresy, and his dread of unruly mobs provide the narrative with moments of eerie drama and Jeremiah-like visions and nightmares of the apocalypse.

However much may be said of the formal and philosophical diffuseness of the *Shahnameh*, it is transcendentally successful in the true epic sense. And it is in this sense only that a comparison with the *Iliad* can be meaningful and instructive. In their origin, nature and functions as well as in their form and content, there are arresting similarities between the two poems. This is not to say that the likenesses outnumber the differences. The *Shahnameh* is, of course, the product of a much later and more self-conscious age, and it draws from a vast fund of literary conventions and clichés of 'Near Eastern' cultures. But the *Shahnameh* and the *Iliad* partake of the fundamental mysteries of the epic art. They both represent the instantaneous and eternally triumphant attempts of conscious art to immortalize the glory and the identity of a people. It does not matter that Homer and Ferdowsi were neither of them the first in their cultures to attempt such a task. The fact is that they accomplished the miracle by the supreme elixir of their art They ennobled the natural epic without losing its spontaneity. Furthermore, they did so at a time when the cement of past associations was crumbling and the common identity of their peoples was in danger of effacement—the Hellenes by separation from their homeland by widespread migrations across the Mediterranean and the Black Seas and and the Iranians by danger of drowning in another sea, that of

Arabism. Thus Homer and Ferdowsi succeeded in immortalizing the past and bequeathing the future to the language and life of their nation at a single stroke.

Western readers of the *Shahnameh* may learn much—and gain in enjoyment—by comparing and contrasting it to the *Iliad*. Although Ferdowsi works with a number of written and even 'literate' sources, at least in the first half of the *Shahnameh*, as in the *Iliad*, the roots of oral tradition are close to the surface. Both poems employ a simple and facile meter suited to the long narrative and its memorization. The heroes in both epics are affixed with appropriate epithets and are easily recognizable even without mention of their names. Both poems make use of a certain amount of repetition to assist recapitulation. Episodes of battle and heroism are modulated by sequences of chase, ostentatious banquets and idyllic revels, by ceremonious councils and parleys. Semi-independent sub-episodes are interspersed to vary the mood and relieve the tedium of the narrative. Of these, several romances in the *Shahnameh*, particularly those of Zal and Rudabeh and of Bizhan and Manizheh have no peers in the *Iliad* in their exquisite lyricism, their poignant intimacy and their self-contained perfection. Both poets lavish masterful attention upon the details of the martial life. The inevitable formulaic repetitions, the detailed and personalized descriptions of weapons and armor, the crucial role of the heroes' horses, the attachment and loyalty of younger acolytes to their older masters, the superb poetic descriptions of sunrise, and the imaginative similes drawn from the world of nature to depict the dying of heroes, are some of the uncanny affinities between the *Shahnameh* and the *Iliad*, affinities that point to the remote origins of both in oral epics. Both poems abound in little warm human touches that evoke pathos and enhance the evolving drama.

Transcending these more or less formal similarities are the fundamental parallels of human behavior under similar relationships and social conditions, and the recognizable range of human types in the *Iliad* and the *Shahnameh*. The affinities between the indispensable hero Rostam and Achilles; of the capricious, covetous, apprehensive and envious monarch Key Kavus and Agamemnon; of the wily and wise Piran and Odysseus; of the dutiful and sacrificial Gudarz and Hector; of the impetuous and handsome Bizhan and Paris; of the impulsive, sensuous and beautiful Sudabeh and Helen; of the youthful, loyal and pathetic Bahram and Patroklos; of the adoring, meek and resigned Farangis and Hecuba; these are only a few of the evocative

suggestions of the artistic kinship between the two epics.

In the fragile social order depicted in the *Iliad* and in the first part of the *Shahnameh,* tension and strife are never far from the surface. But Ferdowsi has endowed his cosmos with a higher morality and the lapses of his heroes are more grave and awful.

In addition to mortals, both epics are peopled by several supernatural orders of goodly spirits, demons and magical creatures who intervene in the affairs of men and profoundly affect their fate. But the God of *Shahnameh* is the unknowable God of Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians and Muslims. Unlike the deities of the *Iliad* he is not implicated in the struggles of human beings though he is constantly evoked and beseeched. Only twice does an angel intervene to alter the course of battle. At other times there is only indirect confirmation of the righteous and chastisement of the wayward. On the other hand prophetic dreams count for more in the *Shahnameh*. Fate is the unconquerable tyrant of both poems, but in the *Shahnameh* it is sometimes unraveled by the stars, robbing the drama of its mystery.

The *Shahnameh* is inordinately longer than the *Iliad*. Essentially it consists of two segments: the mythical and the historical. The psychological and artistic seam cannot be concealed. The fundamental affinities with the *Iliad* are primarily true of the first half. But even there the unity of theme, the limitation of action and time, the rapid devolution of the 'plot' are absent. Ferdowsi's 'historical' mission undoubtedly scatters the artistic impact of the *Shahnameh* and diffuses the focus of its aesthetic power. But the 'wrath of Achilles', after all, is not the sole catalyst in Homer's art. The validity and viability of the *Iliad* rests in its general relevance to the human situation. In this sense the artistic 'flaw' of the *Shahnameh* is more than made up by, and perhaps makes for, its greater universality. Thus in the *Shahnameh* we come across characters who have no counterparts in the *Iliad*. One must cull the whole of Greek mythology, mystery and drama for parallels to Jamshid, the primal priest-king, the divinely inspired creator of civilization, the bringer of world order, whose hubris causes his fall and plunges mankind into evil and darkness: to Zahhak, the grotesque tyrant, the personification of irrational and demonic forces who grip the world in a thousand year reign of terror: to Kaveh, the rebellious *vox populii* triumphant in a just cause: to Fereydun, the ideal and wise king, compassionate pastor of his people: to Siyavash, the tragic guileless youth, maligned, helpless and martyred: to Key Khosrow, the messiah-king, avenger and restorer. Every one of them is a focal realization of

a master figure in the history of man's existence and aspiration.

It is this universality together with its faithful and unresolved reflection of the human paradox that is the essence of *Shahnameh's* art and the cause of its timelessness; for it permits every generation to seek and find resolution in it.

Underlying the narrative of *Shahnameh* is a cosmic scheme that reflects a paradigm shift in man's ability to cope with the enormity and the ubiquity of evil in the universe, in the distinction between good and evil, and in the moral responsibility of making a choice between the two. The same ethical concerns underlie the kindred Indian epics of *Mahabarata* and *Ramayana* in roughly the same time frame. This is the same shift that, in the form of divine law, had come to the children of Israel about a thousand years earlier and, through subsequent centuries of metaphysical refractions by philosophers like Espinoza and Montaigne had ended with the crisp rational formulation of Kant's moral imperative.

In the *Iliad* this moral dimension is totally absent. When it arises in Greek thought with Socrates and Plato some three hundred years after the *Iliad* – suddenly and without precedent – it has a brilliant but brief life. Although Socrates, Plato and Aristotle left a deep impact on philosophy and ethics of classical Islamic East (IX to XIII centuries, C.E.) and on Medieval and Renaissance periods of the Christian West, their notions of justice, duty, citizenship, responsibility and ethics were trumped by the deeply ingrained Homeric traits in Greek public behavior and personal relations. Socrates was deemed a subversive and corrupting influence and was put to death. Every one of the dramatists of the Attic golden age tried to shock the Athenian citizens into realization of their self-destructive behavior, with no success. The bitter sarcasm of Aristophanes is the best exposition of the failure of ethics in Greek polity and the *Peloponnesian Wars* of Thucidides is a historical re-enactment of the *Iliad's* myths.

The gamut of motivations depicted in the *Iliad* is a catalog of human depravity. Anger, vanity, greed, revenge, violence, arrogance, aggression, deceit, perfidy, treachery, lust and thievery are unrelieved by any trace of compassion, mercy or forgiveness. Except for two brief instances of human sensitivity displayed by the Trojan women, Hecuba and Andromache, the rest is an interminable tale of testosterone-driven mayhem and strife. Honor is talked about but strictly in the context of sexual possessiveness, the same notion of honor that survives in primitive patriarchal societies and is the basis

for the justification of murdering women.

The actions arising from these base motives are recounted without any compunction. The tediously long muster call of the Achaean fleet and identities of the invading coalition under the command of Agamemnon not only tells of the number of ships in each flotilla, with the number of men in each ship and the land of their origin, but also identifies their leaders with a list of their priors. Sheep stealing, cattle rustling, horse thieving, barn burning, kidnapping, rape, murder and usurpation are remembered and glorified as the distinguished legacy of the past.

If the mortal heroes of the *Iliad* try to emulate the heroic ideals and actions of their gods, they find nothing but magnified examples of their own foibles. The Olympian family strongly resembles the structure and dynamics of a mafia clan. Godfather Zeus is acrimoniously obeyed but resented by his younger brother Poseidon. His wife Hera, ever resentful of her husband's philandering, seeks every opportunity to undermine his will. His favorite daughter Athena has been the cause of a splitting headache for him since her birth. She is by far the most treacherous and vengeful of the gods who secretly disobeys Zeus and advances her own agenda. Yet on the surface none of the gods dares to openly oppose Zeus, perhaps because he knows when to relent or look elsewhere before things come to an open revolt.

It is in interaction between gods and mortals that the *Iliad* removes all need for human beings to shoulder responsibility for their actions. At every crucial moment of the struggle, when the mortal hero acts to resolve the battle by dint of his own valor, the capricious gods interfere to reduce him to a mere pawn. By pulling of the not-so-invisible strings, the gods reduce their epic struggle to a mere puppet show. No wonder then that no one in the *Iliad* is willing to admit to a mistake or to accept responsibility for it. At the moment of reconciliation between Agamemnon and Achilles when admission of the wrongful first act that led to the shedding of so much blood is required of Agamemnon, he says flatly, "It wasn't my fault, Zeus made me do it."

With the exception of Hector, the counter hero of the *Iliad*, who arouses the reader's sympathy, the rest of these epic characters are not appealing figures. Achilles, the prime hero, is a singularly unlikable person. Only in the dragged-out, anticlimactic funeral games for Patroklos does he show some signs of mellowing and magnanimity. And Hector who has displayed all the signs of manliness throughout the war, is humiliated in the end by running scared of

Achilles four times around the walls of Troy before he makes a fatal stand. Of Chrisseis, the captive girl, whose possession is the heart of *Iliad's* plot, hardly a word is said.

By contrast to this chaotic and capricious order of things in the *Iliad*, there is a grand governing principle in the cosmic struggle between good and evil in the *Shahnameh*. The battle lines between the forces of light and darkness, good and evil, *Ahuramazda* and *Ahriman* are sharp and unmistakable. It is a human war — with Iranians as the standard-bearers for the species — against demons (*divs*), i.e. the multiple gods (*devas*) of Indo-Iranian myths, who were demoted and demonized by Zoroaster. But the demons do not remain the sole possessors of evil. In an elegant pattern of tri-generational tragic martyrdom, triumphant revenge and restoration, the gradual internalization of evil is demonstrated: in the tales of Kayumars, Siyamak and Hushang; in that of Fereydun, Iraj and Manuchehr; of Kay Kavus, Siyavash and Kay Khosrow; and of Goshtasp, Esfandiyar and Bahman.

In the first cycle encompassing Kayumars, Siyamak and Hushang, the evil is represented by Ahriman and his demons directly—an entirely external embodiment not even belonging to the human species. Kayumars' elysian happiness is dashed by the slaying of his brave but unarmed son, Siyamak, at the hands of the Black Demon. It is left to his grandson, Hushang, to war against the Demon and to avenge the blood of Siyamak. The utter polarity of the struggle between absolute good and unalloyed evil is even graphically depicted in the color contrast of the naked fair-bodied Siyamak and the pitch black Demon. There is no room here for contemplating shades of gray.

In the second cycle, spanning the generations of Fereydun, Iraj and Manuchehr, where we witness the horrendous crime of fratricide and the origin of the bad blood that runs between Iran and Turan through much of the epic, already much has happened that has left the door open for the penetration of evil into human nature. Jamshid, the bringer of world order and the giver of civilization, the conqueror of earth and sky, has fallen victim to his own hubris and exposed the world to Zahhak's thousand year reign of terror. Fereydun himself is still in full possession of his purity and goodness, having been protected from the terror of Zahhak by the intervention of *Sorush* (an angelic being), nursed by the wondrous cow Pormayeh, covered by *farrah* (the divine aura of kingly protection,) and beloved by his people. But his three sons are born of Jamshid's sisters, once polluted by Zahhak, and have been taught the evil arts, although ritually cleansed and made chaste by Fereydun

before bearing him his sons. The demons, who were corporeal and distinguished by their warts and hideous appearance before, are now abstracted into Greed and Envy (*az* and *rashk*) and enter into the nature of Fereydun's two older sons, Salm and Tur. The pitiful innocence of Iraj, the younger brother, his childlike goodness, is no match for the evil of his brothers who murder him in cold blood. Fereydun has to wait another generation for Manuchehr, born of Iraj' daughter, to grow to manhood, to avenge his slain grandfather and to bring solace to his great grandfather by killing his own great uncle. We see that murder and revenge, shedding of blood that demands shedding of more blood, have become a family affair. What could be a more graphic demonstration of the process of internalization of evil? Reflecting the realities of his own time, Ferdowsi identifies the Turanians as Turks, but in fact it is the feud of cousins, Iranians all and the descendents Fereydun, that constitutes the heart of the epic.

In the third cycle involving Kay Kavus, Siyavash and Kay Khosrow, the rot is deeper and more complex. Kay Kavus, the first link of the chain is the weakest. Notwithstanding the culpability of his beautiful wife, Sudabeh, and the dastardly treachery of Garsivaz, a brother of the Turanian king Afrasiyab, Kay Kavus cannot be exonerated for the death of his son by an earlier wife, who was after all the crown prince of Iran. It is his capricious and suspicious nature and his weak-willed mollification of guilty Sudabeh that drives Siyavash into exile and death. Siyavash, the victim and middle link in this chain, is still a guileless and pure youth, but the moral boundaries of Iran and Turan, of good and evil, are hopelessly blurred. Kay Khosrow, the avenger son of Siyavash, is born of union with Farangis, the daughter of the arch-enemy Afrasiyab. If he wants to right the scales of good and evil it is his own grandfather that he must kill.

In the next cycle of Goshtasp, Esfandiyar and Bahman the moral choices are irreconcilably at a standoff. The enormity of the paradox is overwhelming. Firstly, none of the three links is blameless. Even the middle link—heretofore innocent and therefore pathetic—now in the person of Esfandiyar, is unable to evoke out total sympathy. On the level of discourse he is pious, dutiful and self-righteous, but in his soul he is burning with resentment against his father and ambition for the throne. He is made unattractive by an overbearing royal hauteur. Goshtasp, the father, is more than indirectly implicated in the death of his son. Knowingly and intentionally he sends Esfandiyar on a mission that can only end in his death. And the revenge of Bahman is empty of all

righteous satisfaction. It is a mere display of destructive fury against the innocent kith and kin of Rostam, the principal hero of the *Shahnameh*, already dead by the treachery of his own half-brother. And what are we to make of the role of Rostam in this tragedy as the doer of the evil deed? For more than three hundred years he lived in the *Shahnameh* as the might sword of the righteous in the cosmic battle against evil, only to come to this horrible fork at the end of the road, both avenues of which lead to perdition.

The episodic outer dimension of the *Shahnameh* has often masked its vast underlying structure from the careless reader. Reduced to its essence, that structure is built upon a moral view of man in the world and the gradual penetration of evil into his nature. In the mythical early episodes, reflecting Zoroastrian ethics, man is free to choose sides in the cosmic battle of good and evil and to suffer the consequences of the wrong choice. Through the paramount Zoroastrian sins of envy and greed, further compounded by hubris, overreaching ambition, pride and fear, youths are slain in all their innocence and guilelessness, kings are disgraced, heroes compromised, leaving the reader no doubt that the grand struggle against evil has shifted from an outer battlefield into the breast of men.

In the *Iliad* there is nothing as profound or as ethically compelling as the moral design of the *Shahnameh.* The closest thing in the *Iliad,* which imparts some sense of reaching out for a meaning of the universe and searching within for our place in it, is when Thetis, the mother of Achilles, using her Olympian connections, asks Haiphestos to hurriedly make a shield for Achilles. The cosmic panorama depicted on that shield is meant to help Achilles overcome his anger and realize the wider dimensions of his predicament. But Achilles shows little aptitude for grasping the lesson.

There are many kings in the *Shahnameh* like Jamshid, Kay Kavus and Goshtasp who are as infected by folly, greed and pride as is Agamemnon. Their folly, however, results in the loss of their divine aura of sovereignty, and provokes horrendous tragedies and long periods of darkness and cruelty. By contrast there are no righteous and blessed kings like Fereydun and Kay Khosrow in the *Iliad.* Nor are there such tragic, lovable and piteous heroes such as Iraj, Siyavash and Sohrab, whose tragic deaths crush the reader with that inconsolable grief which comes from the triumph of evil over good and leave one devastated by one of the most painful and unresolved paradoxes of human existence: the suffering of the innocent.

These reflections and comparisons between the *Iliad* and the *Shahnameh* can throw a disturbing new light on our historical assumptions. I am reminded for example, of the pervasive message of the early nineteenth century European Romantic philhellenism, born out of the Greek struggle for independence from the decaying Ottoman Empire, but engendered and propagated by the ideals of European Enlightenment, by the French Revolution's cries for liberty and by Romantic and rebellious antiauthoritarianism. These are what gave birth to an idealized and illusionary recreation of a democratic Ancient Greece.

The servile oriental despotism represented by Persia naturally provided a necessary foil for this idealized Greek democracy. The contrast between the free upstanding Greek individual looking down on the prostrate Persian hordes before the great King of Kings was salutary and fundamental. So oft-repeated and widely propagated has this comparison been in the last two hundred years, and so few have been the attempts to expose the exaggerations and draw attention to the untruths of this illusion, that it is hardly surprising to find that such a juxtaposition is invariably accepted as proof of the distinction and superiority of Western civilization. Western civilization has achieved a number of superior distinctions in the past four hundred years, but if the truth were to be told, none of these can properly be attributed to the Romantic image of ancient Greece.

The ideals of Greek democracy and individual freedom are crystallized in the oration of Pericles–intended to contrast the Athenian *polis* not with despotic Persia but with the oligarchic and militarist Sparta. It is helpful to remember that if the Athenian state had arrived at a fragile and ephemeral quasi-democratic stage by the mid-fifth century B.C.E. it was not due to an enlightened or systematic progress toward democratic goals. There were no cries heard in the Athenian marketplace for equality of rights of all citizens nor respect shown for freedoms of fellow-citizens, nor any willingness to abide by the will of the majority, leave alone to accord full protection of the rights of the minority or show tolerance toward civil opposition. The democracy of those days was, rather, an unsettled and acrimonious state of coexistence among competing persons and factions. For an Athenian citizen of the "golden age" the idea of equality can best be stated as, 'if I cannot be superior to you, then I may reconcile myself to equality.' The oration of Pericles, with all its glowing praise of Athenian virtues, can also be interpreted as a psychological device to urge on the Athenian citizens towards an ideal

that was precisely the opposite of the reality, and what they critically lacked, and to shame them into abandoning their self-destructive political behavior.

Moreover, in the thousands of college and high school text books which for the last two centuries have implanted this ideal image of Athenian democracy in the minds of students, there is hardly ever a word spoken about slavery in Athens. Students have not been made aware that a *polis* of ten thousand free citizens lived on the labor of twenty thousand slaves. And very few scholars except in places like ante-bellum Athens, Georgia who used it as justification for slavery in the cotton plantations of the South, spent any time researching the subject.

That fragile and precarious moment of Athenian democracy, lasting hardly three decades, was ultimately destroyed not by Spartan force of arms but by the Athenians' own tyrannical exploitation of their allies. It was destroyed, above all, by a display of all the Homeric vices chronicled in the *Iliad*. In the end their political behavior resulted in the loss of their cherished *elutheria* (liberty.)

It is perhaps time for us in the West to re-examine the Romantic dream of Greek democracy and Persian despotism. I can think of no better way than to invite the Western reader to embark upon a thoughtful reading of the *Shahnameh*. Along with the breathtaking beauty of its overall design and structure, the compelling profundity of its ethical message, and the heart-breaking fate of its guileless heroes, the *Shahnameh* informs the code of Persian kingship. The alert reader will soon discover that the legitimacy of authority and rulership is conditional. The king must rule with justice. If he does not, he loses his right to rule. It is an honest assessment of the human condition and a cause for sorrowful reflection that there are so many kings in the *Shahnameh* who lose their *farrah* (divine aura of rightful kingship) and so few who reach a happy end.

That the model of behavior of Homer's heroes in the *Iliad* could not but have dire consequences for the men of Hellas cannot be disputed. The question that arises– especially for the Persian reader—is why, with the elegant pattern of ethical behavior and tragic consequences of departing from good thoughts, good deeds and good words that are enshrined in the *Shahnameh*, there are so few episodes of good rule and justice in the two and half millennia of Persian political history? It would be foolish of me to pretend to know the whole answer. But, in so far as the *Shahnameh* and its impact is concerned, I can

venture only a few observations. Perhaps nothing is more revealing than the self-mocking popular Persian saying: "*Shahnameh akharesh khoshe*" (The sweet part of *Shahnameh* is its end,.) The sad truth is that the end of the epic is the tragic demise of all that glory and the triumph of the desert Arabs over the Sasanian Empire. On a superficial level this may be like the throwing up of one's hands at the operation of inscrutable fate and the admission of human impotence on this plain of existence. But a deeper examination makes it clear that, indeed, the final parts of the *Shahnameh* are a far cry from the early mythic parts.

The sunny cosmos of Mazdean and Zoroastrian ethical order and responsibility, where humans had the choice of fighting on the side of Ahuramazda against Ahriman, gives way to a gloomy and debilitating pessimistic Zurvan (a school of late priest caste dominated Zoroastrianism) world view where a tyrannical Time dooms everything to a tragic fate. Is this not the fountainhead of the deep divide that exists in the mentality, the sense of identity, and ultimately the experience of being a Persian? Does it not reflect those irreconcilable opposites that vex the mind forever and rob it of resolute action. This is a culture that can produce a Sa'di whose humane view of the interdependence of the human family, whose courageous condemnation of tyranny and misrule of kings who, sits side by side with the approval of expedient lies, with the of pandering of king lest one lose one's head, and with killing of non-Muslim without hesitation and compunction.

For a Persian today the choice is either to give in to the same fatalistic outlook and to allow the contradictions in his historical experience to condemn him to recurrent failure, or to look for a healing, whole-making remedy which is certainly not lacking in the best of his inherent values.

This essay appeared in the volume *The Necklace of the Pleiades. Studies in Persian Literature Presented to Heshmat Moayyad on his 80th Birthday* (Amsterdam and West Lafayette, Ind.: Rozenberg Publishers and Purdue University Press, 2007), pp. 63-68.