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Marking Boundaries, Marking Time: The Iranian Past and the Construction of the Self by Qajar Thinkers

THE INTELLECTUAL MODEL OF EUROPEAN NATIONALISM HAD A POWERFUL impact in the second half the nineteenth century upon Qajar intellectuals and officials, many of whom lived abroad, were fluent in some European language, or were influenced by translations of European works. These thinkers, beginning in the 1850s, were the first to attempt to “imagine” an Iranian nation.¹ That they made this attempt is a result not only of the influence upon them of the modular nationalist experience, but also of their own encounter with the same forces of modernity that were hammering Europe itself—new media of communication, new forms of transportation, and processes of economic differentiation deriving from the rise of core industrial economies and vastly increased world trade—all of which afforded states and other institutions the resources for disciplinary technologies that reshaped the Self.² But faced with European military and economic precedence, intellectuals in the non-European world had, additionally, to contend with issues in self-respect, in the shame of defeat and of technological inferiority.³ The construction of Self arises from difference, from rejection of or imitation of Others, and two approaches to national identity have been common. One posits a simple binary opposition (or, at most, a very limited set of linked binary oppositions) between Self and Others, as a means of reifying the nation. Here, the Self is conceived as unitary, as possessed of an original authenticity that can be recovered. Since, however, Self is in fact produced by difference and by contrast, a search for an isolated and original Self is doomed to failure. This unitary approach is especially susceptible to the blandishments of racism and chauvinism, perhaps because it suppresses the Other as a key component of Self, attempting to erase the former and to subordinate it to the latter in a violent hierarchy, as Derrida has argued. He critiques the presentation of some particular exemplary notion of national identity as inevitably displacing a host of Others,

1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).

2. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Pantheon, 1977); cf. Darius M. Rejali, *Torture and Modernity in Iran: Self, Society and the State in Modern Iran* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994). Mostafa Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation: The Construction of National Identity* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), argues persuasively for the constructed character of modern Iranian nationalism, but, it seems to me, over-emphasizes the role of European scholars in this endeavor at the expense of Qajar and Pahlavi thinkers themselves.

3. Thomas Scheff, “A Theory of Ethnic Nationalism,” in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 284.

within the nation and without.⁴ The unitary conception of Self also tends to blame any weakness or inferiority within the Self on an Other. Hitler in his speeches often adopted the rhetorical strategy of imagining that other nations viewed Germany as weak and supine, evoking a shame state.⁵

The second approach incorporates a territorial patriotism into a more universalist view of humanity and recognizes multiple selves and multiple others. It allows mimesis or imitation of the good in any Other, avoiding the wholesale demonization of some identities. It also admits the internal plurality of any national identity, which after all subsumes two genders and, in most cases, many ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities. Unitary nationalism suppresses and tends to deny the salience of these internal differences. Pluralist approaches to identity require the opposites of shame and anger: self-respect and love. Social psychologists have posited the existence of a shame-anger loop, analogous to the way an embarrassed, blushing person becomes more embarrassed by the realization that he or she is blushing in front of others, and perhaps grows angry at the ever-increasing humiliation. There are, however, attitudes and habits of thought and affect that can counteract this phenomenon. "The more secure the social bonds between family members, the more accommodating their attitudes toward the outgroup . . . the fewer and shorter the shame-anger loops."⁶ The conflict between a narrow nativism and a more humanist, pluralist conception of Iranian identity has continued into the present.

Constructing a modern Self, grounded in nation, and simultaneously identifying Others ironically implicates the Self in imitation of the Other, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged. This paradox seems especially clear in extra-European intellectuals who adopted European models of nationalism. But European identities, as well, depended on such imitation. That mimesis is key to the construction of modern identity has been stressed by anthropologist Michael Taussig. Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin, Taussig observes: "Benjamin's fascination with mimesis flows from the confluence of three considerations: alterity, primitivism, and the resurgence of mimesis with modernity. Without hesitation Benjamin affirms that the mimetic faculty is the rudiment of a former compulsion of persons to 'become and behave like something else.' The ability to mime, and mime well, in other words, is the capacity to Other."⁷

Persian-speaking intellectuals, like Benjamin seventy years later, also experienced this triple confluence: of alterity, or the increased opportunity to contrast one's identity with a European or regional Other; of primitivism in the sense of an evaluation of the role of tribespeople such as Arabs and Turkmen in Iranian

4. Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); see for discussion Glenn Scott Allen, "Baptismal Eulogies: Reconstructing Deconstruction from the Ashes," *Postmodern Culture* 3, no. 2 (January 1993); and for a kindred analysis, Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Image and Power," in R. Corbey and J. Th. Leerssen, eds., *Alterity, Identity, Image: Selves and Others in Society and Scholarship* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991), 191–203.

5. Scheff, "Theory of Ethnic Nationalism," 287.

6. *Ibid.*, 294.

7. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (London: Routledge, 1993), 19.

history, and of mimesis or the urge to imitate either Europe or anti-modernist Arab or Turkic Islam.

The nineteenth-century figures who began constructing a conception of a modern nation, "Iran," were pioneering in rugged intellectual territory. The Qajar empire in the second half of the nineteenth century simply was not a nation-state. Probably no more than half of Qajar subjects spoke Persian (with vast regional variations in dialect—for example, Gilaki—so that even fewer peasants spoke a mutually comprehensible Persian). Although a majority were formally Shi'ite Muslims, many peasants practiced a magical folk religion far removed from the bookish world of the seminarian, and very large numbers of Qajar subjects had other religious identities, such as Christian, Jewish, Sunni, Zoroastrian, Isma'ili, Ahl-i Haqq, Babi and Baha'i. A third of the population was Turkic in language and heritage, and many other ethnicities, such as Lur, Arab, Kurdish and Baluchi, were encompassed by the Qajar state (even today, millions of women in particular among these linguistic minorities know little or no Persian). Literacy was almost certainly extremely low, something on the order of two or three percent, and a substantial portion of the population was pastoral nomads with no strong sense of territorial patriotism (nomads were perhaps fifty percent of Iranians in 1800, twenty-five percent in 1900). Iranian national identity was not an existent that needed to be symbolized, but an idea yet to be realized. This is not intended to deny that forms of ethnic identity existed on the premodern Iranian plateau, that Persian-speakers recited Firdawsi (and other poets) in village gatherings, or that these individuals conceived of Iran as a geographical notion or that some had a sentimental attachment to it. None of these phenomena, however, adds up to a nation in the modern sense, which is a creation of the state and of such peculiar modern processes as Benedict Anderson's print-capitalism, as Third Republic-style national schooling and violent disciplining of the population, as Ranajit Guha's peasantries coming to consciousness in the cauldron of agrarian capitalism, as Gellner's mobile industrial society, and more.⁸ No one of these might be crucial to the creation of any particular nationalism, but all were largely absent in 1850 from the Qajar empire.

A key question for reformers concerned with authentic Self as the core of the nation was where to locate authenticity. Among the first to broach these topics was Mirza Fath 'Ali Akhundzadah (d. 1878), the son of an Azeri merchant who was brought up in the tsarist Caucasus and took service as a translator for the Russian viceroy of Transcaucasia based in Tiflis.⁹ Despite being Turcophone as well as Persophone and a Russian subject, Akhundzadah identified strongly with

8. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983); idem., *Encounters with Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

9. Mehrdad Kia, "Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzade and the Call for Modernization in the Islamic World," *Middle Eastern Studies* 31 (July 1995): 422–48; Maryam Sanjabi, "Rereading the Enlightenment: Akhundzade and his Voltaire," *Iranian Studies* 28, nos. 1–2 (Winter/Spring 1995): 39–60.

what he saw as the Iranian heritage. In a letter to the editor of the national newspaper of Iran in 1866, Akhundzadah took issue with the iconography of national self-representation chosen by the newspaper:

First: the picture of a mosque which you have reproduced in your paper as a symbol of the Iranian nation seems, in my opinion, inappropriate, since if by the word "nation" you mean its accepted meaning; in other words, if you mean the people of Iran, the mosque is not peculiar to the people of Iran—in fact all the sects of Islam possess mosques. The symbols of the people of Iran before Islam are ancient Persian monuments, that is to say, Persepolis, the castle of Istakhr, and so on. After Islam, one of the most famous monuments is that of the Safavid kings, who spread the Twelver religion throughout Iran and ordered its sentiments through the united realm—they were responsible for the separate, independent kingdom of Iran. So it is imperative for you to find such a symbol to represent, on the one hand, the ancient kings of Iran and will recall, on the other, the Safavid rulers—such as the picture of the twelve-crested crown of the Qizilbash of red broadcloth.¹⁰

Akhundzadah begs the question by assuming that the newspaper's editor believes that there is such a thing as the Iranian nation, distinct from other nations. The contingency and createdness of the nation is denied by Akhundzadah's diction. He simply wishes, he says, to depict in an authentic manner what already exists. He then rejects the ordinary mosque as too universal a symbol to mark the boundaries between Iran and Other, to demarcate the authentic Self of Iran. He insists on a distinctive national iconography. This he finds in two historical periods of the Iranian plateau, the Achaemenid and the Safavid. As early as 1866, then, he signaled the two major and ultimately competing intellectual preoccupations of the later culture of Iranian national identity—ancient Zoroastrianism and Shi'ite Islam. In this passage, however, he did not see these two motifs as in competition with each other, and he accomplished the adoption of both of them by depicting both as layers of authentic Iranian history.

But note that in order to achieve his purpose, of identifying an exceptional history for the newly created Iranian nationalism, he must ignore a great deal. He must ignore the centuries during which the Iranian plateau was ruled by the Islamic 'Abbasid empire, by the Mongols, and by the Timurids, all of them non-Persian world-empires based outside of Iran but which incorporated the plateau into their realms. He must also ignore the huge numbers of non-Persian personnel staffing the Achaemenid empire, such as the even more autochthonous Elamites or the Mesopotamian scribes, and must ignore the Turkic origins of the Anatolian and Caucasian Turkmen who put the Safavids on the throne, origins that render these tribes no more Iranian than were the Ottomans. He must ignore the fact that the grammar of New Persian is greatly simplified from the near-Sanskrit of Old Persian and even from Pahlavi or Middle Persian. Moreover, over fifty percent of the vocabulary of modern Persian is Arabic in origin, so that it greatly differs, lexicographically, semantically and grammatically, from the languages spoken in Achaemenid times. All this is ignored in the quest for what is "peculiar" to Iran, what is genuine national history. Only those imperial

10. Akhundzadeh/Ruznamah-'i Millat-i Saniyah-'i Iran, 16 May 1866, translated in Iraj Parsinejad, *Mirza Fath 'Ali Akhundzadeh: A Literary Critic* (Piedmont, Calif.: Jahan Book Co., 1990), 19.

moments created by dynasties who located their capital in the Iranian plateau and who developed a culture not widely shared by those outside the plateau are suitable for adoption as icons for Self. Such an exclusionary gambit was common in the construction of extra-European nationalisms, as Chatterjee has noted for India, where Indian Muslims were defined by Hindu nationalists as “outsiders” because of their origins beyond the subcontinent, just as Akhundzadah defines the Arab Muslims of Khuzistan as “outsiders” in Iran.¹¹ Ironically, Akhundzadah offers this advice on the imagining of an Iranian nation as something of an outsider, as a Caucasian, who admits that his “brotherhood” with the “nation of Iran” derives mainly from a shared Shi‘ite heritage. He must suppress the obvious conclusion that Shi‘ite Islam and the Safavid tradition are hardly the sole property of Qajar Iran. He must, of course, also ignore the general lack of interest among most subjects of the Qajar crown in the pre-Islamic period, and their far more likely identification with the mosque that he dismissed than with the ruins of Persepolis.

The privileging of ancient Iran is even more apparent in Akhundzadah’s *Letters of Kamal al-Dawlah and Jalal al-Dawlah*, apparently written in 1864. The fictional persona Kamal al-Dawlah begins this work by lamenting that, after his world travels, he had ever gone to Iran. “Where,” he asks, “is that glory and prosperity you enjoyed in the age of Gayomart and Jamshid and Gushtasp and Anushirvan and Khusraw?”¹² Here he mixes together mythical figures such as the first man, Gayomart, and Jamshid, the Iranian equivalent of the ancient Vedic god of death, Yama, with kings of the historical dynasties. He is careful to admit that even such glory and prosperity as these past rulers achieved was trivial compared to that of contemporary Europe (the ancient authentic Self is impoverished in comparison with the contemporary progressive Other, but is nevertheless aligned with it on the scale of virtues). He insists that Iran’s people were once free (*āzād*) within the country and respected without, but that this past greatness can only be gleaned from Greek works, since the Iranians themselves had forgotten their past kings, books and laws. (This statement ignores Firdawsi’s *Shāhnāmāh*, the major repository of knowledge for most Persian-speakers about the pre-Islamic past, and which clearly influenced Akhundzadah’s list of rulers. But it is true that the *Shāhnāmāh* says little or nothing about Achaemenid administration or about Zoroastrian law, both key heritages for nation-imagining.)

Akhundzadah’s Kamal al-Dawlah describes what he sees as the just and efficient administrative and tax-collecting machinery of the Achaemenids, painting a golden age wherein no injustices were done to any subject. The peasants paid only one-twentieth of their production in taxes, and, he says, later on in the Sasanid period they voluntarily accepted its doubling to one-tenth. Governors were forbidden to execute anyone summarily. He says that the emperor maintained a system of hospitals, some for men, and others for women, where all the sick and disabled were treated, and in all the kingdom there was no beggar. The emperor is depicted as being surrounded by wise advisors, and even the chief Zoroastrian priest is described as having extensive knowledge of literature, history

11. Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, 76–115, esp. 110.

12. Mirza Fath ‘Ali Akhundzadah, *Maktūbāt*, ed. M. Subhdam (Germany: Intisharat-i Mard-i Imruz, 1985), 15–16

and law, which knowledge he employed to advise the monarch. The king set aside one day a week to hear the petitions of ordinary subjects, and had made an extensive corpus of just legislation. The empire stretched from Central Asia to Syria, and from the Bosphorus to the Punjab. Now all this splendor is gone, he laments.¹³ Although Akhundzadah intimates that he is depending upon Herodotus, an ancient Greek primary source, in fact his theme of justice derives from the *andarz* literature of advice for kings, a Sasanian tradition carried on in Muslim Iran, in which the Sasanian Anushirvan was romantically and inaccurately depicted as the epitome of justice.¹⁴ Akhundzadah appears to have simply projected back this image upon the Achaemenids, though he may have derived some knowledge of this earlier dynasty from a Russian translation of Herodotus. In short, his appeal to modern, scientific history cloaks a dependence upon an idealization worked out in medieval Muslim literature.

This golden age is brought to an end by the invasion of Arab Muslims, who destroy Iran and reduce its people to ignorance, cutting them off from world civilization and liberty, leaving them in the clutches of a despotic monarchy and a fanatical corps of ulama. All virtues are extinguished. He quotes, as well, Firdawsī on the destruction of the Sasanids by the Arabs. He maintains that the *Shāhnāmāh* criticizes the Prophet Muhammad for making religion a means of looting the people, though in fact Firdawsī appears to have been a committed Muslim who only criticized the Arabs, not Islam. Akhundzadah draws on Ibn Khaldun to buttress his antipathy toward the Prophet, quoting chapter headings from the *Muqaddimah* such as "The Arabs never acquire a state without a religious coloration," and "Whenever the Arabs conquer lands, they hasten their deterioration."¹⁵ Making Ibn Khaldun witness against his own in this way, however, depends upon a clever trick, since the North African sociologist meant by "Arabs" "Bedouins," and would have considered neither the Prophet Muhammad nor himself "Arabs" in that sense. Akhundzadah latches on to such medieval terms as "Arab" and "Iran," reifying them as ethnic identities continuous with contemporary peoples.

In Akhundzadah's telling, a long string of dreary, tyrannical dynasties followed the Arab conquest. The Arabs not only visited these unfortunate results upon Iran, but were themselves caught in the same trap. Arab Islam, then, isolates Iran from world civilization. It is for four hundred years deprived of the printing press, the engine of European scientific and literary advancement, and more recently of the railroad, and numerous other inventions that followed upon Europe's advancement.¹⁶ When Iranians do begin printing, they favor the inferior system of lithographing and they concentrate on works of Islamic ritual, he laments. He sees Muslim polemics against Europeans as simply another manifestation of fanaticism. In other writings, Akhundzadah was quite zealous in defending European culture from insults, attacking the poet Surush for dismissing non-Muslims as "insects," and quoting approvingly a European who protested, "Is it right that . . . Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Dumas, Humboldt . . . and the

13. *Ibid.*, 16–20.

14. Kia, "Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzade," 434.

15. Akhundzadah, *Maktūbāt*, 24, n.

16. *Ibid.*, 33.

rest should be classed as creeping creatures, but someone called Surush of Isfahan, a useless person, and his like be classed as men?"¹⁷

Akhundzadah holds that within Islamic history Shi'ites are particularly unfortunate, since they internalize their early defeat at the hands of the Umayyads and the 'Abbasids, transforming their disappointment into a bigoted adherence to the Imams that finds expression in the Muharram ceremonies.¹⁸ Indeed, he says, if Iranians had any sense, they would mourn the downfall of the Sasanids and the tragedy that thus befell their own fatherland (*vaṭan*), rather than expending their tears and disgracing themselves for the sake of the calamities of a people (*qawm*) with whom they share neither a fatherland nor a language, neither race (*jins*) nor philosophy (*mashrab*), who are in every way strangers (*biḡānah*) to them.¹⁹ In this latter passage, Akhundzadah invokes all the markers of separate identity treasured by nineteenth-century Romantic nationalists, of territory, language, race and religion. By insisting that Qajar subjects are authentically Zoroastrian, he manages to demarcate them from their Arab neighbors along all those scales, though given the Shi'ite majority in Iraq, the religious difference is largely a matter of Akhundzadah's sleight of hand. The degree of Akhundzadah's identification with ancient Iran is apparent in his letters to the Parsee agent in Tehran, Manakji Sahib. He wrote to the latter, commiserating with the Zoroastrians' plight in modern Iran, complaining that the failure of Sasanian subjects to unify had caused them to "surrender our heaven-like (*minū-mithāl*) fatherland (*vaṭan*)" to the Arabs. Akhundzadah speaks of "our" fatherland, claiming the Sasanid Empire as part of his own identity, and sharing vividly in the Sasanid defeat at the hands of the Muslims at Ctesiphon.²⁰

One problem with analyzing such texts as Akhundzadah's in terms of Self and Other is that, as formulated in Husserlian phenomenology, these terms tend to form binary oppositions, and so to miss the multiplicity and ambiguity of human relationships. In Akhundzadah, after all, we have not one Other, but a number. The European Other is exalted and admired, is seen as mentor, model, benefactor. Any denigration of the European is resisted as fanaticism.²¹ And somehow Akhundzadah is able to forgive, even to erase, the history of European colonialism with regard to Muslims. This oblivion may be a symptom of his own repressed guilt, since as an officer in the Russian army and translator for the Caucasian viceroy he abetted a virtually genocidal reduction of Chechnya and the Circassians that was brutal, bloody and protracted. Only by coding all things European as "progressive" and by coding Islam as essentially "reactionary" could he have justified this holocaust. If the European is the good Other, the Arab Muslims are the bad Other, never to be forgiven for displacing Iran from its national authenticity, for extirpating the wise Zoroastrian *mobeds* and the just

17. Akhundzadeh/Ruznamih-'i Millat-i Saniyih-'i Iran, 16 May 1866, in Parsinejad, *Literary Critic*, 34.

18. Akhundzadah, *Maktūbāt*, 158–61.

19. *Ibid.*, 162, n.

20. Fath 'Ali Akhundzadah, *Alifbā-yi jadīd va maktūbāt*, ed. Hamid Muhammadzadah and Hamid Arasali (Baku: Nashriyyat-i Farhangistan-i 'Ulum-i Azarbaijan SSR, 1963), 336.

21. Cf. Kia, "Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzade," 444.

Mazdean shahs, reducing Iran from august world-empire to the backward province of a savage and zealous tribal theocracy. All that is bad in Iran, he implies, is to be laid at the doorstep of Arab Islam. In the *Letters of Kamal al-Dawlah and Jalal al-Dawlah*, in contrast to the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper, he omits any mention of the distinctiveness and authenticity of Safavid culture, depicting Shi'ite Islam as an especially wounded and lugubrious form of the religion. Akhundzadah's special anxiety about the Arab Muslim Other appears to derive in part from the manner in which it has become Self, substituting what he sees as an alien ethnicity with false claims to universality for the genuineness of local, rooted singularity. He says Sa'd b. Waqqas imposed Islam "on us."²² The reactionary Other is thus absorbed into Self, debilitating it and rendering it ersatz. Yet another image of the Other is the Turkmen tribesmen who raid innocent women and children in Khurasan, raping and pillaging, and so, it is implied, soil irrevocably Iranian national honor. The country has in his view been so debilitated by its Arab Muslim heritage that it has been weakened to the point where it cannot defend its own women against mere nomads. Attention already has been drawn to this inscription of Iranian nationalist identity on the bodies of Qajar women.²³

Self, too, is here seen as able to take on an authentic or inauthentic form, and these forms correlate with the sort of Other he considers at any one time. The reactionary Self is the pious Qajar Muslim, who has acquiesced in an inauthentic and imposed identity and been thereby rendered irremediably backward. The progressive Self is "liberal," free-thinking, open to modern science, philosophy, literature and technology, eager to recover knowledge about the Achae-menids. And, of course, this progressive Self correlates with the good Other of the European. Whereas the adoption of Islam and Arab high culture by inhabitants of the plateau is seen as a self-betrayal, contemporary Qajar openness to Western ideas is seen as a recovery of authenticity. The metaphor for this process is the manner in which a European source such as Herodotus is touted as having the ability to restore Zoroastrian memories to the amnesiac Muslim Qajar empire, which had misplaced them. Of course, Firdawsi as a Muslim chronicler of Zoroastrian heroes defies this model and perhaps for this reason he is read when quoted as a secret Zoroastrian with a hatred of even the Prophet Muhammad (although in point of fact Firdawsi gives every evidence of being a pious Muslim). Akhundzadah will not admit of the possibility of an individual such as Firdawsi, who appears to have felt comfortable with both his Persian and his Muslim heritages and was knowledgeable about both. Rather, he insists on putting Islam under the sign of erasure and inauthenticity. For Akhundzadah, progressive Self is authentic, and it is therefore legitimate to borrow from the progressive Other, whereas reactionary Self is inauthentic, the result of the suppression of authenticity by a conquering reactionary Other.

Why should mimesis be good with regard to Europe but bad with regard to Arab Islam? Taussig writes, "The important point about what I call the magic of mimesis is the same—namely that 'in some way or other' the making and exist-

22. Akhundzadah, *Maktūbāt*, 31.

23. See Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Zanhā-yi millat: Women, or Wives of the Nation," *Iranian Studies* 26, nos. 1-4 (Winter/Spring 1993): 51-71

tence of the artifact that portrays something gives one power over that which is portrayed.”²⁴ The Europeans are powerful, and therefore imitating them acts in a talismanic manner to transfer some of their power to Iranians, whereas the contemporary Arabic-speaking lands were from Akhundzadah’s point of view weak and backward, so that continued mimesis of them doomed Iranians to enervation.

In his *Risālah-yi Majdiyyah* Majd al-Mulk makes a different use of Fir-dawsi’s legends about the Iranian past. He quotes an article by an Iranian critic that he says appeared in the Baghdad newspaper *Mashriqī*, which likened Iran’s state to that of ancient Iran under the fabulous tyrant Dahak or Zahhak, a non-Iranian ruler who was said to have snakes growing from his shoulders that needed to eat the brains of young Iranian men every day. Zahhak is a typical Indo-European “non-Aryan” conqueror, unclean and associated with a polluted animal such as a snake, and he can be seen as an anthropomorphic form of the Vrta, the great cosmic serpent whom Indra fought and defeated in Indian mythology. The writer quoted by Majd al-Mulk complains that whereas Zahhak’s despotism was bounded because everything was ruled by one single law, Qajar tyranny lacked any rule of law at all, and was therefore characterized by an unrestricted, entirely arbitrary form of oppression. The undisciplined and brutal actions of his nobles, in fact, go so far as to deprive the shah of some of his power and leave Iranians with no security of life or property.²⁵

Majd al-Mulk quotes this account from a newspaper in part in order to include the information without becoming wholly responsible for it. The author of this piece goes Akhundzadah one better, employing irony and hyperbole where the other had appealed to a sort of naive Romanticism. That is, he does not cite ancient Iran as a paragon of justice, but rather refers to the notorious reign of the tyrant Zahhak. Qajar Iran is contrasted with this legendary dark age and found worse, since it had substituted for Zahhak’s reliable absolutism a sort of segmentary arbitrariness, a mosaic of despotisms. Even pre-Zoroastrian Iran’s horrific, mythical nadir is thus represented as superior in some ways to the Qajar state!

‘Abd al-Baha ‘Abbas (1844–1921) was the son of the Baha’i prophet, Baha’ Allah. While under house arrest by the Ottoman authorities in the town of Acre (‘Akka), Palestine, he wrote a book entitled *al-Asrār al-ghaybiyyah li asbāb al-madaniyyah* (Hidden Secrets of the Causes of Civilization), which he completed in 1875. The work was published in Bombay in 1882, and was only the second of the major reformist books written in Persian in the late 1860s and the 1870s to see publication and widespread (though surreptitious) circulation in Iran in the nineteenth century. This treatise was written explicitly in response to the period of cabinet and other reforms in Iran, 1871–73, which he characterized as designed to “set that fine fervor which characterized the first great epochs of Persia to flowing again through the veins of her people.”²⁶ The author recalls for his readers the Achaemenid and Sasanian eras, when Iran was “the heart of the world,”

24. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 13.

25. Majd al-Mulk, *Risālah-yi Majdiyyah*, repr. in ‘Ali Amini, *Bist sāl ba’d az Amīr-i Kabīr* (Tehran: n.p., 1985), 92.

26. ‘Abd al-Baha, *Risālah-yi madaniyyah* (Hofheim-Langenhain: Baha’i-Verlag, 1984), 7; trans. Marzieh Gail as *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1970), 5.

when its learning spread to the East and the West, and when it was capable of humbling Greece and Rome. Iran's political system, he says, became extremely influential, and it was renowned as a center of sciences and the arts. He cites the Hebrew Bible (Chronicles 36:22–23; Ezra 1:2; Esther 1:1, 8:9; Isaiah 45:1, 14; 49:12) to the effect that at the time of Cyrus the Great, the three hundred and sixty divisions of the Iranian empire extended from China and India in the east to Yemen in the west. He further references Greek accounts for the glorious reign of Cyrus. The author then delves into the even more ancient past, citing the legend reported by Abu al-Fida that Faridun divided the whole known world among his three sons. He makes the reason for these references to ancient imperial might and civilizational prowess on the Iranian plateau abundantly clear when he says that "it should not be imagined that the people of Persia are inherently deficient in intelligence, or that . . . they are inferior to others." Specifically, it is modern Europe to which the author implicitly compares Iran, and he finds his homeland wanting, not in native intelligence or national resources, but in resolve, training, and effort. The author observes that Europe's own progress toward civilization began as late as the fifteenth century, in the wake of a prolonged Dark Ages during which Europeans were little more than barbarians. The contrast of modern Europe with the Europe of the Dark Ages is a mirror image of the contrast between Achaemenid and Qajar Iran, and all four historical periods are instanced as a means of relativizing Europe's current superiority, of detaching it from any timeless "essence" and rendering it the result of changing and mutable social psychologies.²⁷

Although 'Abd al-Baha, like Akhundzadah, appeals to the Zoroastrian and Indo-Iranian pasts in order to inspire nineteenth-century Qajar subjects with pride, and urges the adoption of European modernity, his underlying assumptions are anti-essentialist, whereas Akhundzadah labored under a naive Romantic essentialism. 'Abd al-Baha celebrates the advent of Islam as an impetus to civilization that benefited the inhabitants of the Iranian plateau just as it did many others. Nor does he accept an easy dichotomy between Zoroastrian Iran and Arab Islam. Even Arab Islam, he points out, borrowed military and other technology from non-Arab civilizations such as the Sasanian. Precisely because Iranians do not have a single authentic self or culture, but rather have formed part of and benefited from a number of civilizations, they are authorized to borrow elements of European modernity such as superior technology, purely on pragmatic grounds.²⁸ 'Abd al-Baha's treatment of religion differs completely from that of Akhundzadah, in being both positive and universalist. This historical universalism leads him to make one of his points by telling the story of a tyrannical pre-Islamic Arab king who was reformed by being converted to Christianity!²⁹ Yet he also invokes Sasanian themes by praising Anushirvan for his justice.³⁰ Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam are all represented as common heritages of not only Iranians but the world, and the achievements of Arab Islam are seen as contributing to Iran's civilizational advance. Arab Islam itself learned from Zoroastrian

27. *Risālah*, 9–13; trans. *Secret*, 7–10.

28. *Risālah*, 33–38; trans. *Secret*, 25–32.

29. *Risālah*, 55–63; trans. *Secret*, 46–51.

30. *Risālah*, 80–81; trans. *Secret*, 68.

Iran. And even European civilization has a strong Islamic component, gained through medieval exchanges in Toledo and Seville, in Sicily and Crusader Jerusalem.³¹

In his 1888 *A Traveller's Narrative*, 'Abd al-Baha, arguing for freedom of conscience and state toleration toward all religions, again invokes ancient Iran. There, he says that a major reason for the success of the Achaemenid empire was its policy of religious impartiality. "In the time when the mighty government of Persia did not interfere with [men's] consciences, diverse sects entered in and abode beneath the banner of the great king . . . the extent of the empire increased from day to day."³² He contrasts this policy of toleration by the ancient rulers of the Iranian plateau with the late-Safavid practice of persecuting non-Shi'ites. "For the cause of the Afghan independency and the revolt of the Turcoman tribes was in truth this thing, else were they at no time or period separate from Persia."³³ Shi'ite pressure on the Sunni Afghans and Turkmen, then, provoked tribal revolts that brought down the Safavids and deprived Iran of its eastern Khurasanian provinces, including what is now northern Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. He underlines that any policy of persecuting all those not considered orthodox by Shi'ite clergymen would result in the imprisonment or slaughter of very large numbers of Iranians, such as the Babis and Baha'is, Shaykhis, Sufis and Ahl-i Haqq. Given Iran's religious diversity, then, he argues along Lockean and Jeffersonian lines that the state should declare itself neutral with regard to religious belief.³⁴

'Abd al-Baha assiduously deconstructs any notion of a strictly bounded Self and Other, in contrast to Akhundzadah. In his view, European civilization itself hardly consists in some timeless essence, but rather arose only in the early modern period, after centuries of medieval torpor, and in vigorous interaction with Islamic learning. The European Other is thus revealed as both bounded in time and multiple as well, with its Andalusian and Crusader/Near Eastern genealogies. As for Islam, he sees it neither as alien nor as a monolithic identity. Even the Prophet Muhammad, after all, borrowed the idea of digging a defensive ditch against Meccan cavalry from Sasanian Iran, and Muslim philosophers owed much to the Greeks. Although he accepts the value of Landespatriotismus, or regional patriotism, he sees not an Iranian self but rather multiple selves inhabiting the space of Persophone civilization on the Iranian plateau, which properly includes the Zoroastrian, Christian, Islamic and Babi-Baha'i heritages, and yet which contains many other religious and sectarian movements as well (and which might well still extend to Sunni Afghanistan and Turkic Central Asia if the strict Shi'ite clergy of the Safavid period had not attempted to oppress these peoples). The Babi-Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation, which sees all the major religions of the Middle East and South Asia as part of a continuous sacred history, underpins 'Abd al-Baha's vision as much as a sort of humanist univer-

31. *Risālah*, 104–108; trans. *Secret*, 87–91.

32. 'Abd al-Baha, *A Traveller's Narrative Written to Illustrate the Episode of the Bab (Maqālah-yi shakhsī sayyāh)*, trans. and ed. E. G. Browne, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891), 1:197–98; 2:160–61.

33. *Ibid.*, 1:199; 2:161.

34. *Ibid.*, 1:199–200; 2:161–62.

salism that exalts reason alongside revelation. While Akhundzadah had seized upon the Safavid period as a moment of authentic differentiation of the Iranian Self from its Sunni neighbors (despite his distaste for Islam and Shi'ism generally), 'Abd al-Baha actually laments the late Safavid period as a betrayal of Persian traditions of universalism and justice toward all peoples. While he does blame the Shi'ite clergy for this costly bigotry, he does not see it as the inevitable outcome of Islam. Rather, he stresses that Islam itself may not be seen as essentially closed-minded, insofar as it produced a glorious civilization in the medieval period. It is precisely the authentic and praiseworthy multiplicity of Iranian selves that allows him to argue so forcefully for the incorporation into Qajar Iran of certain aspects of European modernity.

Iranian history is put to work in the formation of a new identity in another book, *Khalsah* or *Kh"ābnāmah* (Seizure or Dreambook), written in the 1890s by Muhammad Hasan Khan I'timad al-Saltanah (1840–96), who was, in contrast to the figures discussed so far, an arch-conservative and one of Iran's foremost censors in the late nineteenth century. Unlike Akhundzadah, 'Abd al-Baha and Majd al-Mulk, I'timad al-Saltanah used Iranian history for conservative purposes, disparaging the so-called reformers as ineffectual braggarts, condemning what he called free-thinkers, and upholding the royal absolutism of the Qajar empire as the best possible form of government for Iran. He even views the top-down bureaucratic reforms of the *Tanzimat* in the Ottoman empire as traitorous, insofar as they detracted from the absolute power of the monarch.

I'timad al-Saltanah came of a highly conservative, royalist family. His father, 'Ali Khan Hajib al-Dawlah of Maraghah, served in the government of Muhammad Mirza in that town. When Muhammad Mirza became Muhammad Shah in 1834, he appointed Hajib al-Dawlah supervisor and majordomo at court, and the latter also looked after the expenditures of one of the shah's wives, Khadijah Khanum. Around 1845, Khadijah Khanum accused him of embezzling her funds, and the shah dismissed and mulcted him. He was first imprisoned in the Divan in chains, then allowed to go to the shrine cities of Iraq. After Muhammad Shah's death in 1848, Nasir al-Din Shah's mother, Mahd-i 'Ulya, had him appointed to the governorship of Gilan. Then Amir Kabir, on becoming prime minister, made Hajib al-Dawlah chamberlain of the court. Mahd-i 'Ulya and Aqa Khan Nuri were at that time maneuvering behind the scenes against Amir Kabir, who was attempting to centralize political power and administration in his own hands, and they desired to rid themselves of the reformer. They went to Hajib al-Dawlah, who agreed to kill Amir Kabir. Thereafter the former's career was tied to that of Aqa Khan Nuri, the new prime minister. When Nuri fell from power in 1858, Hajib al-Dawlah lost his court position as well. Mahd-i 'Ulya arranged a post for him in Khuzistan. Around 1860, he came back to Tehran as Nasir al-Din Shah's minister of justice, and in 1865 became minister of pious endowments. In 1867 he died.

Muhammad Hasan Khan, who rose to become I'timad al-Saltanah, was the second son of 'Ali Khan Hajib al-Dawlah. Ironically, he benefited from Amir Kabir's reforms, since he studied at the Dar al-Funun or polytechnic college the latter had set up in Tehran to teach Western languages and sciences. In 1863 he went to Europe as a member of the Paris embassy, and there is said to have pursued further studies. He returned to Iran in 1867 to become court translator and to edit the official gazette. He became minister of the press in 1883. He accompa-

nied Nasir al-Din Shah on his trips to Europe, and in 1886 he was given the court title I'timad al-Saltanah. He hated Mirza Husayn Khan Sipahsalar, a reformer who served as prime minister 1871–73, and who sought to institute cabinet government in Iran, as well as to attract foreign investment on a large scale. He also got on poorly with Amin al-Sultan (d. 1907), who served as prime minister from 1885 and into the reign of Muzaffar al-Din Shah, but who was ten years younger than I'timad al-Saltanah.³⁵

I'timad al-Saltanah is something of a puzzle. He had had a wide-ranging French education and knew Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau well. Indeed, he says of Prime Minister Mirza Abu al-Qasim Qa'im-Maqam Farahani (d. 1835) that he did for Persian literature “what Chateaubriand, Fénelon and Rousseau did for French, what Shakespeare did for English, what Schiller and Goethe did for German, and what Tolstoy did for Russian.”³⁶ His terms of reference, in short, are those of a Westernized intellectual. His copious diary entries make it clear that he entertained the gravest doubts about Iran's political and economic health in the late nineteenth century. Too often, however, a Western education and discontents with the political system among nineteenth-century Iranian intellectuals are “read off” by historians as implying a yearning for more liberty. A literary critic so perceptive as Bozorg Alavi describes the Dreambook by saying that it “unmasks the miserable conditions at the court of Nasir al-Din Shah.”³⁷ This statement is true, but any implication that in so doing he was placing the primary blame for conditions on the shah, or that he might like to see the shah's autocracy curbed, would be entirely unwarranted. On the contrary, he appears to have thought the solution to these problems lay in a more vigorous absolutism. In his Dreambook he often adopts the rhetoric of “Let Nasir al-Din Shah be Nasir al-Din Shah!” As Iran's chief censor, he had only contempt for the printed works of intellectuals, and, indeed, employs the words “publisher” (*ustād-i kārkhānah*) and “printer” (*chāpji*) as synonyms for “liar.”³⁸

On the other hand, I'timad al-Saltanah employed as his personal secretary Mirza Muhammad Husayn Furughi, a man rather further to the left. In 1891 Furughi was found by the government to have collaborated in writing a critical article that he intended to send for publication in *Qānūn*, a dissident newspaper advocating constitutional monarchy published in England. Furughi may well be the actual author of much of *Sadr al-tavārikh*, consisting of biographies of Iran's prime ministers in the nineteenth century, the authorship of which is sometimes wrongly attributed to I'timad al-Saltanah. For in *Khalsah*, which is certainly from his pen, I'timad al-Saltanah depicts some of the prime ministers much dif-

35. Muhammad Hasan Khan I'timad al-Saltanah, *Khalsah mashhūr bih kh" ābnāmah*, ed. Mahmud Katira'i (Tehran: Tahuri, 1970), editor's Introduction, v–vii; and Shaul Bakhash, *Iran: Monarchy, Bureaucracy and Reform under the Qajars, 1858–1896* (London: Ithaca Press, 1978), 378, 405–414, and passim.

36. I'timad al-Saltanah, *Khalsah*, 27

37. Bozorg Alavi, “Critical Writings on the Renewal of Iran,” in Edmund Bosworth and Carole Hillenbrand, eds., *Qajar Iran* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983), 246.

38. I'timad al-Saltanah, *Khalsah*, 24.

ferently from how they are portrayed in the former work.³⁹ He, therefore, had around him persons of liberal views, but was himself much further to the right.

I'timad al-Saltanah combined a Western education and orientation with a firm belief in enlightened despotism. We should remember that the France he knew best was not the Republic but the Empire. Perhaps he was frustrated by Nasir al-Din Shah's incapacity to play Napoleon III. As Shaul Bakhsh has shown, I'timad al-Saltanah confided his despair to his diary. In the early 1880s he complained that the government had been reorganized 360 times in 36 years, and that "since he has ordered and tidied up the work of the government, His Majesty is thinking of studying German. He has been studying French for forty years. He still employs the past tense instead of the present and the imperative instead of the negative."⁴⁰ In 1890 he complained about the shah's fondness for giving high ranks to his young children or grandchildren, so that court officials were twelve and colonels and generals were eight: "Our government has not only grown young; it has become a child and a mere infant." The poor management of state finances, and the neglect of administration by ministers and princes in favor of drinking bouts and dalliances, brought the Qajar court in the early 1890s to the pass where he could no longer even get a meal at the palace, and the shah, despite his huge expenditures, had "no stables, no workshops, no page boys, no mule house, no kitchens, no pantry, nothing."⁴¹

Bakhsh pointed to, and translated, a key piece of *fin de siècle* ennui: "On the one hand, I look at my own situation and I am completely happy. . . . We servants, possessing every privilege and extravagant incomes, are carefree and at ease, and it is a time to graze and laze about. . . . On the other hand, when I look into the state of the kingdom, the manner of conducting government and the condition of the subjects, my eyes and heart weep and my nature cries out. But what is it to us? More particularly, what is it to me? Now we are happy. After us, the deluge."⁴²

In the Dreambook, I'timad al-Saltanah's tone is less one of despair than of irony and bitterness about the missed opportunities of the nineteenth century. One suspects that he felt that if only he, rather than the effete and bibulous Amin al-Sultan, had become prime minister, he might have been able to accomplish something. Relegated to the backwater of the publications department, convinced of the need for a Frederick the Great, he instead watched the court regress into infantilism. His almost Straussian mask, worn because the intellectual needed to strike an ultra-conservative pose for the benefit of the unenlightened masses, despite his knowledge of the inadequacies of the reigning political order, only slipped once. His translation of a French tale about a master who cruelly overburdens a donkey was interpreted by his enemies as an attack on Nasir al-Din Shah, and I'timad al-Saltanah only escaped punishment by willing his estate to the shah.⁴³

39. Bakhsh, *Iran*, 316–17, 410.

40. I'timad al-Saltanah, *Rūznāmah-yi khāfirāt*, quoted in *ibid.*, 185.

41. *Ibid.*, 262, 267.

42. *Ibid.*

43. Alavi, "Critical Writings," 248.

The Dreambook begins with a framing story that alludes with powerful symbols to issues of identity, authenticity, and history. I'timad al-Saltanah depicts himself accompanying Nasir al-Din Shah to the shrine cities of Iraq in 1893. On his return the entourage stopped at the village of Savah near Hamadan, where he went off by himself and saw an old, ruined mosque built by the Safavid ruler Shah Tahmasp. There he finds, while suffering from the 40-degree heat, a delightfully refreshing spring. In the midst of the ruins, he meditates on all the public works performed by the Safavids. Sleep overcomes him, and he lies down right there to take a nap. He knows the town has gone out to see the shah's camp, and thinks he will be left alone to rest. This frame is carefully constructed to suggest a journey into liminality. The pilgrimage to the shrines of the Imams itself interrupts ordinary political life and suggests to the mind of a pious Shi'ite the possibility of miracles and visions. The solitary excursion to the remains of the old mosque is, again, a flight from ordinary sociability. Yet within this screen the author offers a rather obvious clue to his intent. The state of the edifice is an implicit condemnation of the Iranian government, which contrasts poorly with its Safavid predecessor. The image implies that whereas Shah Tahmasp built up Iran, the Qajars had not accomplished nearly as much, and in the late nineteenth century the Qajars had allowed even what the Safavids had built to fall into disrepair.⁴⁴ Here we find an interesting convergence between the radical Akhundzadah and the conservative I'timad al-Saltanah, insofar as both point to the Safavid period as an era of Iranian glory against whose background the Qajar empire appears decadent. But for I'timad al-Saltanah, unlike the anti-clerical Akhundzadah, what symbolizes this descent from authenticity is a mosque that has fallen into ruins, found during the return journey from the Shi'ite shrine cities, repositories of Shi'ite identity and genuineness. He reports that, in a state between waking and sleeping, he hears a murmuring of voices. The psychological state he describes is at the margins of consciousness, in the same way that the ruined mosque is at the margins of physical reality. The cracked dome of the mosque splits, and a multitude of angels descends, who immediately set to cleaning up the site, laying down fine carpets, and setting up golden and iron chairs. The final scene, he says, rather reminded him of a European courtroom. Bewildered, he watches as dignified, regal figures take their places on the golden chairs, including past rulers of Iran such as Cyrus the Great, Darius I, Artaxerxes, Anushirvan, Shah Isma'il Safavi, Nadir Shah, and Aqa Muhammad Khan Qajar. His depiction of this assemblage, which is clearly intended to encompass the diverse dynasties that presided over Iranian greatness, clearly has nationalist overtones. The angels sing in Pahlavi, or Middle Persian, as the ancient kings arrive, that is, in the language of Zoroastrian Iran. This statement is remarkable, since among Muslims Arabic was widely believed to be the tongue of the angels. Even an arch-conservative thinker such as I'timad al-Saltanah had been infected by the notion that Iran's Zoroastrian, Pahlavi heritage was a site of national, spiritual authenticity. Racial overtones are also present in the account. He believed that the Turanians, or Central Asian tribes mentioned in early Iranian sources, were Turks, and that some of the Achaemenids had intermarried with them. He says that Kay Khusraw, however, had a light complexion

44. I'timad al-Saltanah, *Khalsah*, 1.

because his mother was a pure Persian. He depicts Shah Isma‘il as darker in his coloring because he had a Turkic, Aq-Quyunlu princess for a mother. Only rulers who had a strong territorial base on the Iranian plateau are named, and such pan-Islamic dynasties as the ‘Abbasids are ignored, another clue to nationalist sentiment.⁴⁵ Here is another indication that both the left and the right among those with a Western education had begun conceiving a “national” history in similar terms.

Now the eleven men who served as prime minister of Iran during the nineteenth century arrive and seat themselves on the iron chairs, as, in the background, a sound like the buzzing of bees reverberates. The officials include Amir Kabir, Mushir al-Dawlah, Amin al-Sultan, and other, less renowned figures. He compares what happens next to the way film, while being developed, first turns black, then white, or the way lights gradually come up in a playhouse, so that one can make out the set. Like the earlier invocation of geographical and psychological marginality, this “special effect” marks the narrative as somehow unreal, just as a developing photograph or a just-beginning play are outside ordinary categories of reality. Both are representations of something else, but are especially vulnerable to being unmasked as representations during the preparatory processes to which the author refers.

As a result of the lights coming up, the persons making the buzzing sound suddenly materialize, consisting of a large crowd of some 2,000 prominent persons who lived under Nasir al-Din Shah’s rule, which began in 1848. Some of these persons are dead, others still alive, but their spirits have come to the mosque. They include Sayyid Jamal al-Din “al-Afghani,” Malkum Khan, and ‘Ali Muhammad Shirazi, the “Bab,” among other “foolish persons who demanded liberty (*āzādī*).” Two more moderate characters, Shaykh Muhammad Janab and Mulla Ibrahim ‘Aynaki, carry on a background conversation on the nature of religion and political power. Janab argues that the Hobbesian war of all against all makes a strong monarch necessary to social order. He adds, “Many do not know these things, or disagree. Some say that the monarch should not be independent. They ignore the fact that subjects are ignorant and full of imperfections, and that autocracy and absolutism (*istibdād va istiqlāl*) are the things best calculated to correct their errors.”⁴⁶ In this scene the author has condemned Sayyid Jamal al-Din, Malkum Khan, and the Bab, while arguing for monarchical absolutism.

Aqa Muhammad Khan Qajar now calls the assembly to order, giving it the mandate of inquiring as to how the power of the monarchy was weakened. Mulla Ibrahim expresses his surprise that the dead among the audience look like themselves, and are wearing their quotidian clothing and their habitual mien. He concludes that this everyday appearance of the dead is for the purpose of convincing the living attendees at the session that they are not witnessing a dream, fantasy, or implausible parlor trick, but that rather they are seeing something real.⁴⁷ Like an image reflected successively in several mirrors, I‘timad al-Saltanah’s ironic play with representation and reality here serves to confuse the difference between

45. *Ibid.*, 2–8.

46. *Ibid.*, 9, 16.

47. *Ibid.*, 17–18.

them, despite the overt argument in favor of literal “reality” (*ḥaqīqat*). Aqa Muhammad Khan Qajar now is asked by a thundering voice issuing from behind the *mīhrāb* to state his business. The founder of the Qajar dynasty praises Nadir Shah (r. 1736–47), who, for all the trouble he caused Aqa Muhammad Khan and the Qajars, had restored prosperity and order to Iran, governed well, and repulsed the Russians and the Ottomans. Aqa Muhammad Khan describes his sufferings at the hands of the Zands, and says his goal was to return Iran to its natural borders: the Caucasus mountains and the Oxus, or rather Punjab. He wants to know how his successors had spent his legacy, and blames the mismanagement of incapable prime ministers for taking the ship of state on the wrong course.⁴⁸

The first few ministers, such as Ibrahim Khan Shirazi, Mirza Shafi‘ Mazandarani and Muhammad Husayn Khan Isfahani, are depicted as simple, truthful and loyal servants of the first two Qajar monarchs. Of the last-named, the author says, with apparent approval, that “he was innocent of that which today we call politics (*pulitik*).”⁴⁹ All are given ceremonial celestial crowns. Even the first of the reforming ministers, Qa‘im-Maqam, is praised for his contributions to Persian literature and for helping reorganize the Azarbaijani army, and exonerated of charges that he plotted against Muhammad Shah (r. 1834–48)—charges upon which he was deposed and executed.⁵⁰ Shah Isma‘il next interrogates Haji Mirza Aqasi, the mystical, Rasputin-like genius of Muhammad Shah. The author here plays on correspondences, since both figures were mystical Shi‘ites and Turkic-speaking. The minister claims to have extended agriculture and blames the turmoil late in his tenure upon the machinations of rivals like Asaf al-Dawlah and Manuchihr Khan Mu‘tamad al-Dawlah, governor of Isfahan, who, he says, stirred up trouble in Khurasan and gave aid to the uprising of the Bab in order to embarrass him. He admits his inability to prevent turmoil was a fault, and says he never studied politics or public administration, and so might not really have been qualified to be prime minister. Shah Isma‘il, however, bestows on him the golden crown of approval.⁵¹ It becomes clear that for I‘timad al-Saltanah, sincere service to the monarch and devotion to keeping him strong counts more than a technocratic education.

Nadir Shah now interrogates Amir Kabir, in another ironic correspondence. In I‘timad al-Saltanah’s view, both of these figures were usurpers and both had flamboyant plans for the expansion of Iran’s territory. (Nadir Shah came to power in the wake of the Afghan overthrow of the Safavids and immediately launched a series of conquests.) Amir Kabir is depicted as a Russian puppet who bought his office with donated rubles. On becoming the young Nasir al-Din Shah’s prime minister, he dealt firmly with the Khurasan revolt of Muhammad Hasan Khan Salar and with the Babis. He is made to say that he hoped to annex Afghanistan, and, through the Russian alliance, perhaps even to extend Iran’s sway to Delhi. At this point he remembers he is talking to Nadir Shah (who actually did conquer Delhi) and blushes, admitting that Iran was too weak in the early 1850s to support such grandiose schemes. He is then made to confess that

48. *Ibid.*, 19–21.

49. *Ibid.*, 25.

50. *Ibid.*, 27–28.

51. *Ibid.*, 30–31.

he intended to send the shah's mother to Qumm and then to depose the young Nasir al-Din Shah in favor of a more pliant brother. Nadir passes judgment on Amir Kabir by saying that he misjudged the historical moment, that whereas Tahmasp II, the last Safavid, was an idiot, Nasir al-Din was intelligent and wise and moreover possessed a clever mother in Mahd-i 'Ulya, which the Safavid lacked. Nadir admits Amir Kabir to heaven, because he was an able leader dedicated to Iran's advancement, but deprives him of a crown of glory.⁵² I'timad al-Saltanah thus upholds his own family's version of Amir Kabir as a traitor deserving death, though he does not mention Hajib al-Dawlah's execution of him. He is caricatured as a man with Nadir's ambitions but lacking his ruthlessness and resources.

Ardashir Babagan, the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, interrogates Aqa Khan Nuri, and finds him self-interested, incompetent and given to extreme nepotism. He is blamed for the disastrous Anglo-Persian war of 1857, and for losing the opportunity for Iranian expansion into Afghanistan, and is neither rewarded with a crown nor admitted to paradise, being sent to purgatory (*barzakh*) instead. His immediate successor, Muhammad Khan, was defeated in Fars by the British despite the numerical superiority of his troops, which led to his deposition. He is given a crown of glory and admitted to heaven, presumably for trying hard.⁵³

Yet another ironic correspondence is set up when Anushirvan, a figure proverbial for his wisdom and justice, is made to interview Mirza Husayn Khan Mushir al-Dawlah. The author says that Orientalists had proven that Anushirvan's reputation for justice was not deserved, and avers that neither was Mirza Husayn Khan's reputation for competence. He is depicted as spending his career in the Iranian foreign service in Bombay, the Caucasus and Istanbul in mulcting expatriate merchants, hoarding, and speculating, making himself wealthy at the expense of the persons he was supposed to be serving. He is made to admit himself a disciple of Ottoman Tanzimat reformers Ali Pasha and Fuat Pasha, themselves, he says, traitorous ministers. Before he became prime minister in 1871, he is made to say, Iran was like a virgin who had never felt the hand of the foreigner. He admits that all his reforms had the opposite effect of the one desired, that he surrounded himself with charlatans like Malkum Khan, and that his plan to deliver Iran's resources into the hands of Baron von Reuter was a disaster. In the end, "Nasir al-Din Shah restored the inviolable sovereignty of the monarchy."⁵⁴ Even after his demotion in 1873 to foreign minister, he gave too many concessions to the British and the Russians. Mirza Husayn Khan is consigned to the flames of hell. There follows I'timad al-Saltanah's extensive indictment of Amin al-Sultan, who is depicted as a compulsive liar and perpetual schemer who plays the shah off against the foreign ambassadors.⁵⁵

I'timad al-Saltanah formulated a modern Iranian identity centered upon royal absolutism. For this reason, he attempts to appropriate Cyrus the Great and the

52. *Ibid.*, 32–36.

53. *Ibid.*, 38–41.

54. *Ibid.*, 45–48, quote on p. 48.

55. This interpretation of the latter part of the book is informed by the discussion of Alavi, "Critical Writings," 247.

Achaemenids, along with the ancient Persian language, as predecessors of the Qajars (who then share in their reflected glory). That the ploy of appealing to ancient Persia as a source of modern Iranian identity was as available to the Iranian Right as to the progressives was demonstrated both before and after I'timad al-Saltanah, by Fath 'Ali Shah and by Muhammad Riza Pahlavi. I'timad al-Saltanah's absolutism causes him to read recent Iranian history in the opposite manner from the progressives we discussed above. He bestows unqualified praise on mediocre prime ministers such as Ibrahim Khan Shirazi, but vigorous ministers that threatened to reduce the powers of the shah, like Amir Kabir and Mirza Husayn Khan, are excoriated as both overly ambitious and incompetent. Very probably, he cast his attack on the tradition of ministerial reformism in nineteenth century Iran in the form of a dream or vision precisely because it contained such personal assaults on major figures. The descendants and admirers of several of these ministers continued to hold important government posts or to be powerful in Iranian society. Moreover, Nasir al-Din Shah had himself been responsible for appointing Mirza Husayn Khan and Amin al-Sultan, and presumably concurred, as a child-ruler, with the installation of Amir Kabir. An open, frontal, polemical attack on these individuals held the potential of casting doubt on the sagacity of the shah.

I'timad al-Saltanah attempted to reduce the hazards of his enterprise by the use of screens, cues, and ambiguity. He employed such tools despite his closeness to and support for the shah, because Iranian print culture in the 1890s was still characterized by intolerance of straightforward criticism of government officials. Here, the screens include the remote geographical setting, the miraculously-restored Safavid mosque, the references to a state between waking and dreaming, the analogies to photography and stage plays, and the invocation of Islamic conventions about the Resurrection and the Judgment Day. The playful correspondences between king-judge and minister-defendant also help to naturalize the criticisms leveled at the latter. The pairing of those Turkic dervishes, Shah Isma'il and Haji Mirza Aqasi, the comic dismissal by the ferocious Nadir Shah of Amir Kabir's unfulfilled territorial ambitions, the likening of Anushirvan to Mirza Husayn Khan in that they both possessed inflated reputations, all this playfulness distracts the reader's mind from the very serious, revisionist polemical charges I'timad al-Saltanah is filing against the reformers. Having the ministers tell their own stories in the first person and, often, implicate themselves further deflects attention from the actual role of the author in framing the accusations and in passing judgment.

Arguably, it is these literary techniques that give the Dreambook its power and have, successfully, drawn attention away from how reactionary its message is. That unwary commentators sometimes compare it to the radical tract *Ru'yā-yi ṣādiqah* (True Vision), co-authored by Malik al-Mutakallimin and Sayyid Jamal al-Din Isfahani a decade later, shows how strong was the hold of functional ambiguity. These scholars have assumed that, just as True Vision employs the frame of a dream to criticize the government, so I'timad al-Saltanah's book takes the side of reform. The two books are extremely different in tone and message, despite the similarity in their screens. If I'timad al-Saltanah had a reformist message, it was that of Napoleon III, not of Voltaire.

The inventors of modern Iranian nationalism differed significantly with regard to whether they had a unitary or pluralist conception of the national self.

Akhundzadah attempted to create a unitary Persian, Iranian Self, rooted not in religion but in language, Zoroastrian cultural heritage, and the imperial history of dynasties such as the Achaemenids and the Safavids. Given the Qajar empire's obvious military weakness and underdeveloped technologies, and the defeats it suffered in the Russo-Iranian wars of the early nineteenth century, Akhundzadah clearly felt both pride and shame in his identification with "Iranians." He was driven to explain their relative backwardness by scapegoating Arabs and Muslims, thus ironically limning a national history for Iran that excluded most Qajar subjects. Majd al-Mulk, 'Abd al-Baha and several other thinkers, on the other hand, do not single out an ethnic Other for blame, rather attributing these problems to Qajar absolutism, the lack of a rule of law, and unwillingness to engage in a healthy mimesis of salutary practices, whatever their origin. They also seem willing to honor a number of sources of Iranian identity, including both the Zoroastrian and the Muslim. I'timad al-Saltanah turns Akhundzadah and the others on their heads in many ways. He accepts the construction of an "Iranian" identity that is made to stretch back to the Achaemenids, but locates its source of strength over the centuries in royal absolutism, a tradition that he believes the Shi'ite Safavids honored. His vision of Zoroastrian angels singing in Pahlavi in a rundown Safavid mosque that they restore neatly brings together two powerful symbols of the Iranian nationality he was attempting to construct. Its heroes through history are indigenous, powerful monarchs—Cyrus, Nadir Shah, Aqa Muhammad Khan Qajar, and those ministers who stressed autonomy and independence for Iran. Unlike the case in Akhundzadah, I'timad al-Saltanah does not see Shi'ite Islam and Islam generally as foreign, debilitating impositions on Iran. Whereas Akhundzadah makes scapegoats of the Arab, Muslim Other, I'timad al-Saltanah faults the Europeans and their imitators (with dire implications, never clearly spelled out, for Westernizing internal minorities such as the Christians and Baha'is).

Each of these thinkers had biographical and social reasons for locating alterity or the Other where they did. Akhundzadah, as a colonel in the Russian army, clearly felt acute shame over what he saw as the fanaticism and backwardness of the Muslims of the Caucasus and of Iran, which resulted in a great deal of anger. He almost certainly also suffered from a degree of suppressed guilt concerning his own service with a Christian, European power engaged in virtual genocide against local Muslims. He displaced that anger and shame onto the Arabs and Islam, desperately attempting to discover an Iranian identity not dependent on them. Majd al-Mulk and 'Abd al-Baha were both members of the Iranian class of high notables (*nawkar*), who saw a role for themselves as reformers but found themselves blocked by the shah's autocracy. Both were religiously heterodox, with the former being a Freemason and the latter a Baha'i leader. The shame they felt before the power of the European Other was displaced onto Qajar absolutism and the hidebound ulama, rather than onto a particular ethnicity. 'Abd al-Baha praises some aspects of European civilization while condemning others, and has a positive view of Iran's Muslim heritage despite his contempt for clerical xenophobia. In a bid to relativize the shame quotient historically, he points out that Europe long labored under its own Dark Ages. For both Majd al-Mulk and 'Abd al-Baha, Self and Other are plural, and it is the dictatorial disciplining practices of the absolutist state and the Shi'ite clergy that stand in the way of progress. I'timad al-Saltanah, as a cabinet minister with a vested interest in the power of

the state, invests European liberalism with alterity, without explicitly tying it to questions of ethnicity.

Primitivism plays a different role for these thinkers than it did for a European such as Walter Benjamin. Akhundzadah located it in the barbarity of the Arab conquerors of medieval Iran and in the depredations of Turkmen tribespeople in Khurasan. For Majd al-Mulk, the primitive, unitary absolutism of the mythical nomad, Zahhak, is contrasted with the mutable and fickle despotism of Nasir al-Din Shah. 'Abd al-Baha sees the world religions, Christianity and Islam, as educators and transformers of Middle Eastern tribespeople, enabling them to found great civilizations.

The reemergence of mimesis with modernity preoccupies, in one form or another, all four of the thinkers we have examined. For Akhundzadah, mimesis of the European Other is depicted as enabling the recovery of the authentic Iranian self, insofar as its techniques of knowledge allow an excavation and restoration to memory of the ancient Iranian past, and insofar as its technology and forms of social organization can, like a fetish, bestow renewed practical power upon any who imitate them. Mimesis of the Arab Muslim is decried as the result of a brutal military conquest, which led to the displacement of Iranian authenticity and to contemporary Iranian weakness. In the *Dreambook*, I'timad al-Saltanah excoriates Europeanized intellectuals who have demanded liberties that would only enervate the state, and who have, in his view, collaborated almost traitorously with those he sees as European carpetbaggers such as Baron von Reuter or Major Talbot (grantee of the Tobacco Concession). He appears to reject mimesis of the European, or at least of the liberal European. 'Abd al-Baha, in pragmatist fashion, extols mimesis as a practical necessity. He points out that the Zoroastrian practice of digging trenches against cavalry charges was adopted by the Prophet Muhammad at Salman Ruz-Bih's urging, that Islam incorporated pre-Islamic rituals into its own practice, that Europeans engaged in mimesis of Muslims in the medieval period. He insists that Qajar subjects would be foolish to avoid mimesis of contemporary European innovations such as civil rights, the rule of law, religious liberty, and parliamentary democracy—in short of civil society—out of mere xenophobia, if that avoidance would lead to their continued military weakness and social backwardness. Like Akhundzadah, he admires European achievements and wishes to appropriate them. Like I'timad al-Saltanah, however, he is aware of the dark side of European modernity, its savage militarism, its colonial ambitions, and the turmoil of its revolutions, so that he wishes only a selective appropriation of its key innovations. His conception of Iranian identity is so rooted in a sense of security, self-respect, and universal benevolence that it is not threatened by Others nor by its own internal multiplicity, and avoids the shame-anger loop that fosters ethnic conflict. Indeed, the Self he attempts to invent appears to admit of no genuine Other, insofar as nothing human is alien to it. And his conception of Iranian identity as a tapestry of Zoroastrian, Christian, Islamic, minority-ethnic and European elements avoids “the

singularity of the idea of a national history” that ironically and inevitably “divides” compatriots from one another.⁵⁶

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56. Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, 115; see also Derrida, *The Heading of the Other*.