

T H E P A T T E R N O F
T H E W O R L D



R U S S E L L F R A S E R

I sing Iran, known to older generations as Persia. Most in America, if they think of it at all, turn thumbs down. There are reasons for doing that, and my music has its dissonant side. But the country's positives far outweigh its negatives, and if it isn't the jewel in the crown of my travels, it comes close. One of its illustrious men, Shah Abbas, known as the Great (1587–1629), called his capital city, Esfahan, the Pattern of the World. I hope to make you see why.

Assigning rank is mostly a bad idea, though I'm often guilty of it. Such as, Who was the best center fielder in New York in my time, Mantle, Mays, or Snider? But ranking cultures is certainly a mistake, not sometimes, always, and you won't find me assigning a number to Iran, above or below France or Italy. Enough to say that it's outside, dwarfing everything around it. Modern Iran is huge, bigger than France and Italy, seven times larger than the United Kingdom. But greater Iran, an intermediate area between the limits it reached in history and the present-day state, its territory fixed in 1907, is much larger. All of what is now Iraq used to be part of it. Casting avaricious eyes on its neighbors from its earliest beginnings under the Achaemenid kings, it wanted to replace

their psyche or soul with its own. That accounts for the ubiquity of what is called the Persian style.

Spreading through the Timurid Empire to Bukhara and Shakrisabz, the former among the storied cities of antiquity, it included in its sphere of influence what was once known as Khorezm, now Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Before it was done expanding, Iran boxed the compass. It absorbed Egypt to the southwest, north of it Arabia, on the east Transoxiana (“the other side of the Oxus”), even Afghanistan. Ferghana, high in the northern Pamirs and home to the Heavenly Horses, coveted by the emperor of China, was Persian. So was northern India before the coming of the Mughals.

The heralds of its empire were the architects and master builders who created Samarqand, most of them Persian and more than one hundred surviving by name. Among these heroes of art was Oavam ad-Din bin Zaynad-Din Shirazi, whose name says he came from Shiraz in Iran. In the first half of the fifteenth century, he played the different roles of designer, decorator, astronomer, and master mathematician, helping diffuse the Persian style far beyond his country’s borders. Between the years 1300 and 1500, this polymath and others like him labored in the service of beauty and truth. It doesn’t seem to me extravagant to liken their achievement to that of the Renaissance in Florence.

Six hundred years later, Shiraz still lifts the heart. City of Love, men call it, of Gardens, especially of Roses. Poets like Hafez sang the praises of the Shiraz grape. Unhappily, it no longer produces the wine that bears its name. The mullahs have seen to that. My first night out in town, I dine on traditional Shirazi food: rice and tomatoes followed by stewed eggplant. It tastes much better than it sounds. In lieu of wine, however, I am offered Coca-Cola. This gratifies the mullahs, who get their jollies from denying the rest of us the pleasure of an innocent glass. But of the celebrated trio of wine, women, and song, two are holding their own, the women nice to be with, and song, expressed as poetry, diverting both the senses and soul.

People in Shiraz carry on a love affair with living. Their calendar, descending from Zoroastrian times, tells you as much. Skipping over the dark days of winter, it begins on the first day of spring. This is when Iranians celebrate their feast of No Ruz, a

holiday that seems not to end. It is as if they turn back the clock at midnight on New Year's Eve, letting the revelry continue. Bonfires blaze in the streets and people jump over them, asserting their health in the new year. Poetry is part of the pervasive *joie de vivre*, not the inchoate kind – a conventional misunderstanding – but thought-provoking, speaking to the brain as well as the heart. Joy, unless merely factitious, needs a collected head to go with its green tail.

Both are the possession of two famous local poets, Sa'di and Hafez. The first, a real sojourner in Islam, “went out on the roads,” as the saying goes, spending much of his life far from his native city. Coming home near the end of life, he wrote his two books, died, and is buried in his garden. I don't presume to say that his was a life well spent, but there seems a certain symmetry in the way it ended.

Sa'di is a humble poet, of the earth, earthy, sometimes almost a writer of almanac verse shifting from poetry to didactic prose à la Poor Richard. An anecdote of his tells of a prodigious eater and a more sparing eater who are locked up for no good reason without any food. Their innocence is established two weeks later – too late for the well-fed man, but his skinny companion survives. Sa'di isn't surprised. “When a person is habitually temperate, and a hardship shall cross him, he will get over it; but if he has pampered his body and gets into straits, he must perish.”

Hafez is less inclined to point the moral. A contemporary of Petrarch, he tossed off his short lyrics, ghazals, without apparent effort. But make no mistake: his is considered poetry, as the French say, “written.” Petrarch is remembered by scholars, Hafez by the people. They throng to his tomb, a venerated shrine in the city. Like Graceland in the United States, it charges admission, but the resemblance stops there. The tomb sits under a tiled dome held up by stone columns and surrounded by cypress trees and pools of cooling water. At sunset the floodlights go up, and poetry set to music is piped over the public address system. People bring the poems with them – every home must have a copy: Hafez and the Qur'an, there is no third.

Opening the book at random, readers find their future disclosed. Much emotion goes with this popular ritual, the *faal-e Hafez*. Obviously it depends on the reader's or diviner's interpreta-

tion of the passage he or she hits on. If love poetry, is it carnal and do I glimpse my beloved in it? or, lowering the temperature, does it make God the object of arousal? That Hafez's poems are open to different readings limits their scope. Readers who aren't into poetry think the scope is widened. But cerebration isn't this poet's game, and without it we don't have a finite range of meanings – the fruitful ambiguity poetry at its highest pitch depends on – we have a smorgasbord of meanings. When this poet speaks truth, it is an unsupported *ipse dixit*, declared, not deduced. If he raises questions they are generally rhetorical, like this, to the breeze in the tulips: “Who were the martyrs these bloody winding sheets wrap?” He can't take the question further since, as he tells us, the universe is a riddle his reason is helpless to untie.

I am turning down the volume of praise that's generally accorded Hafez, but I don't dispute his power, only his range. Limited in scope, it is like a Fauvist painter's or like Crashaw's or Hopkins's. The world he apprehends is a maze of swirling shapes and colors, assaulting his sensibility, sometimes bowling him over. Trouble, he says, is forever catching at the skirts of the time, and there is little we can do to fend against it. Adam walked warily, the Koran tells us, but lost Paradise even so, all for eating a kernel of corn. How is Hafez to help himself, dazzled as he is by “these hundred stooks [sheaves] of fantasy”? To be that susceptible to the world leaves him open to trouble, and inevitably sadness follows. There is no chance that the heart, his or ours, will find its way on the roads of old age. Life's foundations are rooted in wind, the house we live in is jerry-built. Hence the injunction to seize the day: “Bring wine,” and so on, less a jolly toper's than that of a man at wits' end.

The mingling in Hafez and his city of exhilaration and encroaching darkness is an instance of Islam's two faces. Shiraz's major theme (to make a stab at it) is grace-in-living, but its obligato tugs toward abstention, fatalism, and prayer like a chant of woe. You can say of the daily prayer call that it orders men's lives, surely a good. But chaos is in the voice of the muezzin.

The city's best bazaar, the Vakil, evokes that kind of mixed response in the things it sells and the building that displays them. *Vakil* is “regent,” the modest title chosen by Karim Khan, the first and best ruler of the short-lived Zand dynasty (1750–95). His

building is a thing of beauty, its wide vaulted passages keeping us cool in the heat of the day. Shoppers crowd the main avenue and the alleys opening off it, but the elegant brick walls solace the eye and seem to true up the people. Architecture as moral suasion.

If you are selective, you can do good for yourself in the Vakil. I carry away a kilim, nomad work. Flat to the eye and fingertips, it bears a stylized design that shows an image of the Tree of Life and a Grandma Moses–like *badgir* (wind tower) in the background. The jewelry box, meant as a present for my daughter, is lacquered wood overpainted with transparent varnish. It has for its motif the nightingale and the rose, much loved by Iranians. I don't need the tablecloth, but "reason not the need." Washed in the river to fasten its palette of colors, it almost glows when you hold it out by two corners.

But the tide turned when no one was looking, and the architectural masterpiece is awash with creepy knick-knacks slickened over with synthetic dyes. The paintings for sale hope to hang on my wall, but I hurry past them, embarrassed for the painter. The glass bottles and bric-a-brac cluttering the shelves advertise their chief function, dust collecting. Dead white statuettes, approximating a malelike female body, are the kind they give you when you hit the bull's-eye. In a recurring nightmare, I see a vast swell of this rubbishy stuff flooding west from China, its ancestral home. What has happened to the infallible taste that goes to weave their carpets and build their classical temples?

However, it's only half the story, I tell myself, snuffing up the smell of the East. Cumin, barberry, coriander, malabar pepper, it pours from barrels and open sacks, leaning against store fronts. I point to what I want, inhaling the pungent smells, and the vendor weighs and bags it up for me. Farther on the ice cream man is scooping gobs of creamy chocolate from a vat between his knees. Other vats lined up beside him ask my attention. I buy vanilla suffused with rosewater, the consistency of taffy. Orange trees are growing and bearing in front of his shop. They go back to pre-Seljuk times, he informs me. How can I not be happy?

Just outside the bazaar are bits and pieces of a seventeenth-century theological college, tumbled by earthquake. But the entrance portal and the stalactites (*muqarnas*) within the arch still remain to delight me, and I am made a cubit taller by the redness,

almost pulsing, of the mosaic tiling. Suddenly I am looking at the Atigh Mosque, Shiraz's oldest. Begun in the ninth century, it kept adding to itself like old clapboard houses in New England. This building is a living thing. Hafez used it as a workplace, and its turreted House of God (*khodakhaneh*) bears an inscription in raised stone, as if attesting to his presence. The calligraphy is *thulth*, uninflected by any meaning I can put in words, so close to pure form. "The noblest script in Islam," my guidebook calls it.

If the mullahs would go away, I could stay on here. But they don't: they remain, a physical presence you can't ignore, tyrannizing the people through their vigilante groups called *komitehs*, smashing recordings of Western music, vetoing any law passed by the Majlis that doesn't accord with sharia, expropriating the land of those who supported the old regime (and as often as not, hanging on to it themselves), punishing apostasy and adultery with death, thieving with the amputation of a hand, illicit sex or drinking alcohol with lashes, as many as a hundred. I am indignant that the people should put up with those bullies in turbans. But a disturbing thought crosses my mind. Is it possible that their way of thinking stands for something in the soul of Islam?

Every hotel in Shiraz offers a tour of Persepolis, a little to the north and west. Its neighbors, on familiar terms, clip it short when they pronounce it, saying "Perse-plis." Built by Iran's first rulers, the Achaemenids, this wondrous city comes down to us today as bare bones. But even the devastation wrought by humans, far worse than time's, hasn't obscured its grandeur. It breathes the spirit of high civilization, among the cultures of the ancient world ranking with Egypt, India, and China. People often call it the soul of Iran.

Soul is a comprehensive term, and the mullahs' reading is circumscribed by the Islamic faith, a moat defensive. When they venture to speak their mind, they put Persepolis much lower. Mostly they keep mum on their slighting opinion, aware that the people are loyal to their history. To the mullahs, whatever precedes Islam is irrelevant, even immoral, as it depicts the natural world. It does this lovingly, another count against it. We remember that Muhammad put all that under ban.

The Achaemenids saw another world than the one he did. It

wasn't "fallen" and they didn't idealize it. But being closer to the earth in that earlier time, they were closer to heaven, a paradox I needn't labor. When Xerxes was king, the skin of the satyr Marsyas was still displayed in Asia Minor. Apollo had flayed him alive for challenging the god to a musical competition. Earth and its creatures are never far distant in the world of the Achaemenids. Their drinking vessels (rhytons) often take the shape of a beast, half mammal, half bird. Their sculpture favors the bull, almost Cretan in its hugeness, huge but not gross. Stone images, winged and crowned with a man's head, stand before the entrances of the royal Throne Hall. You must pass these gigantic guardians (*lamassu*) to enter Xerxes' Gate of All Nations. Despite their fearsome appearance, they are warding off evil, something like the hair of the dog.

As visitors ascended the grand entrance stairway to bow before the king, they saw the heraldic symbol of Persepolis, the lion tearing the hindquarters of a rearing bull. This image comes close to being erotic, the lion embracing the bull's flanks as it sinks its teeth into the skin. The bull's head, turned back to look, isn't agitated: on the contrary, its beautiful face is composed. Yet what is happening is violent. This, said A. T. Olmstead, the distinguished historian of the Persian Empire, "contrasts strangely with Zoroaster's admonition of loving care for the sacred kine." But that seems beside the point. The bull isn't being devoured but propelled forward to a better season, and the savage scene intimates the coming of spring. To familiarize yourself with the violence of spring, you have only to open Hafez.

Though Persia's sculpture, in sheer size and weight, evokes comparison to Egypt's, it doesn't strike me as monumental, a pejorative. My word for it is humane. We aren't oppressed by titanic figures bearing down on us, who are only ciphers. Achaemenid sculpture looks accommodating, as if Iran, before Muhammad, lived easily with the physical world. That didn't guarantee the empire a long life, and perhaps its relative equability cut the life short. Though the greatest in history up to its time, it lasted only 230 years (559–330 B.C.). America, with the greatest empire in today's world, has reached an identical lifespan. Let readers make of that what they will.

At its zenith the empire of the Achaemenids stretched from the Nile to the Oxus, and from the Aegean Sea to the Ganges. A

succession of impressive rulers bore a part in creating it, none of the stature of its founding father, Cyrus, surnamed the Great. The Old Testament records his conquest of Babylon, the preeminent power before him. But the way he wielded power was different. Babylon's previous ruler, the Assyrian king Assurbanipal, whose likeness is on my study wall at home, makes this clear. Having aggression in myself, I find it useful to keep his ferocious visage before me. He wrote: "I decapitated six hundred enemy soldiers and burned alive three thousand. . . . I carved up the (city's) governor with my own hands. . . . I grilled others on fire; I cut off their hands, fingers, eyes, and noses, ripped thousands of eyes from their sockets and tongues from their mouths. . . . I razed their temples and suppressed their gods. . . . I sowed salt and thorns." Assurbanipal makes a good antiseptic.

Cyrus, though a sufficient soldier, promised (on the word of Herodotus) to "respect the traditions, customs, and religions of the nations of my empire," vowing to impose monarchy on none. "Each is free to accept it, and if any one of them rejects it, I resolve never to reign through war." Even after the lapse of two and a half millennia, he casts a huge shadow, moral even more than physical. He freed the Jews from their Babylonian Captivity in 539 B.C., sent them back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, and gave them the money to do it. In his empire, almost two dozen different peoples lived peaceably under the central government at Pasargadae. The Cyrus Cylinder, now in the British Museum, inscribes in cuneiform writing on its clay surface the world's oldest charter of human rights. (Magna Carta was still nearly two thousand years in the future.) This document and the men who produced it reflect back the light of a cosmopolitan society in a largely barbarous age.

The reign of Cyrus the Great brought order and stability to Persia, both alive, not sclerotic, also magnificence, worth having. The king, ethically sophisticated and politically sagacious, made life viable for his subjects. He created a network of imperial roads, paved with stone or brick, and in subsequent times with bitumen. Relay horses carried the mail, delivered to the farthest corner of the empire within fifteen days. Nothing traveled faster than the king's royal couriers, said Herodotus, and nothing stopped them from traversing their allotted stage, "neither snow, rain, heat, nor darkness." (We see where the modern postal carrier comes from.)

One road led from Mesopotamia all the way to Bactria (modern Afghanistan), thence to India, and on to Central Asia and the Far East. Later this became known as the Silk Road.

Cyrus was a Zoroastrian, worshiping Ahura Mazda, a god of light. He saw life as a struggle between the Worst and the Righteous, or you could say between the *civitas Diaboli* and the *civitas Dei*. He, or his prophet, whose sayings are set forth in writings called the Avesta, sometimes sound to my ear like St. Augustine. He lived in an age when men mutilated other men and tortured them to death, and on one side he is a child of the age. But thinking about him, and about other dynastic rulers who are like him in ability, some moral, some not, I am tempted to recite the proverb “Best government, good tsar; worst government, bad tsar” – except that even worse is when we are rudderless and, like Scotland in the time of Macbeth, “float upon a wild and violent sea.”

Cyrus made his first capital at Pasargadae, northeast of Persepolis, on the same ground, says tradition, where he had defeated the army of the Medes, led by his grandfather Astyages. With this battle, the Achaemenid Empire got its start. Historians call the place the Camp of the Persians, who are still a nomad people when they appear in history. A park encloses the palaces they built, murmurous with running water and an early example of the *chahar bagh* (cruciform design). At Pasargadae, Cyrus is buried, his white limestone tomb a ziggurat ascending in six stages, getting smaller as they go up. The tomb is still there, though the inscription, reported by the geographer Strabo, is gone. “Passerby,” it read, “I am Cyrus, who gave the Persians an empire.” The Arabs, when they conquered Persia, were about to destroy the tomb but were told by disingenuous locals that it held the remains of King Solomon’s mother. Dissuaded, they spared it, but gave it a new inscription from the Qur’an.

Darius, third of the Achaemenids and also known as the Great, wanted a new capital, not trailing other men’s baggage. Persepolis is largely his work. He began the Apadana, or Audience Hall, where the Supreme King received his vassals. The exterior measured 250 feet by 250 feet, with a central room 50 feet or so smaller. Arthur Upham Pope, among the premier authorities on the subject, calls the central room “an unearthly vision of the sacred groves of heaven” (*Persian Architecture*). The immensity of

this creation is suggested by Herodotus in his account of the royal birthday banquets, when the king entertained fifteen thousand guests at a sitting.

On the surface of the hall stood six rows of six columns, each sixty feet tall and topped with capitals in the shape of a bull, lion, or griffin. The two monumental staircases climbing up on the north and east sides are adorned with bas-reliefs commemorating the annual festivities, when subjects came to pay tribute. During No Ruz, the festive time, people trooped off to friends' houses, ate their food, gave them presents. On the thirteenth day they picnicked with their extended families and threw on the ground the germinating seeds that had been kept in the house since New Year's Day. This guaranteed early marriage and fertility for their daughters.

A look at the sculptures on the Apadana staircase is worth the pains, for ancient Persia has nothing better to show. Detail is lavished everywhere, on the way the men talk together or hold hands in friendship, the different hats and clothes they wear, the Persians in long robes, the dress of the Medes cut shorter. Indians lead a donkey, Cappadocians a horse, Bactrians a camel — the double-humped variety Marco Polo rode. We see the elite of the imperial soldiery, including the One Thousand, distinguished from the Immortals by the golden pomegranates they carry.

The city was planned as a whole, built on a level platform cut from the side of a mountain. On the limestone platform, according to Pope, 900 feet by 1,500 feet, rose the colossal buildings. One, the *tachara* (palace) of Darius, was notable for the polished stone of its walls, earning it the title Hall of Mirrors. Of the forest of marble columns facing the buildings, fifteen are still standing. But the gold plating on the walls was stripped long ago; the tiles and paintings have vanished, like the color from the marble capitals; the sumptuous wall hangings have rotted; and of the elegant wood carving only a scattering of charred beams remains. And yet enough has escaped time's tooth to leave the traveler in awe.

Before Darius died he chose his tomb site on the same plain as Persepolis, the nearby rock face of Naqsh-i-Rustam, named for Persia's greatest soldier of "Sohrab and Rustam" fame. Three of his successors, one of them Xerxes, had their graves dug from this rock. Its outer surface is shaped like a cross, with an opening in the

center giving on the funerary chamber. On the upper part of the surface, a king is represented beside a fire altar held up by vassal nations. An inscription on the central tomb identifies the king as Darius (521–485 B.C.). Nothing commemorated the man he was except his bones, picked clean by vultures.

Like his predecessor Cyrus, he had imperial yearnings, pushing one way to India, another to the Danube. He decided to conquer Greece, a mistake paid home at Marathon in 490. We, who always sympathize with the Greeks – sentimentally, as if they reflect our image in a looking glass – are no longer like them. The day of the town-hall meeting and participatory democracy, when perhaps we were like them, is over. What we have become has little in common with Athens before its Syracusan adventure. Paradoxically, our powerful and ever-expansive state is closer in spirit to the Persia of Darius and Xerxes.

Xerxes, wishing no doubt to make good his father's failure, had another try at Greece, but the gradual decline of the Persian Empire dates from his defeat at Salamis in 480 B.C. Still, he was a great builder, completing the magnificent structures Darius had left unfinished on the terrace at Persepolis. I thank Herodotus for a poignant glimpse of the king, unfaded after much of my lifetime. Preparing to crush the Greeks once and for all, he assembled his invading force at the Isthmus of Corinth. The entire navy was with him, and three of his six army corps, each sixty thousand strong. Seated on a white stone throne near Abydos on the Hellespont, he reviewed his troops. The amorous Leander, famous in story, swam the Hellespont nightly, from Abydos to Sestus, keeping his tryst with Hero. Cursed by heaven, the two of them died, but Xerxes thought he knew better how to propitiate the gods. He burned incense and prayed with his face to the rising sun. At dawn he poured libations from a golden cup, honoring the spirits of those who died for Troy. He was the champion of the East against the West, and the outcome of the war about to begin represents one of history's great hinges.

For seven days and nights the army, 180,000 men, struggled across the bridge, urged on by the lash. In a short time, all were dead. Xerxes, who understood why the lovers celebrated by the poet Musaeus had perished – it had naught to do with what they did, only with what they were – would have understood that his

soldiers were fated too. He himself had all the accouterments of godhead but felt the breath of mortality as he awaited the clash of arms. He was the descendant of Cyrus the Great, whose tomb bears the words "All that is left of me is dust." The tragic sensibility was the possession of men in his age. Oddly, *hubris*, the Greek word, is more appropriate to our time than theirs.

The Achaemenid dynasty lived on, but its hour had struck. Arrogance grew on its rulers, in proportion as their authority lessened. A prince of what might be called the Decadence executed two members of the royal house because they came before him with their hands not hidden in their sleeves. This was a breach of protocol. The bureaucracy hurried on the process of decline. It imposed increasingly heavy taxes and involved business in an ever-more tangled web of regulation. The small farmer went to the wall, swallowed up by huge combines, the government verged on bankruptcy, a lawless proletariat crowded the cities. I am or try to be a student of today's political scene, and whatever else am skeptical in my reading of it. Looking over the plain at Persepolis, I mutter the line from Shakespeare, almost involuntarily: "What's past is prologue."

Art participated in the general falling off. Darius III, last of the Achaemenids, continued work at Persepolis; but his reliefs are recycled from elsewhere, and the sculptured tomb he began but didn't finish is rough and coarse compared to earlier carving. The Age of Darius III shows how much has been lost. A suitable comparison is that of the Age of Constantine to the Age of Augustus. It remained for Alexander the Great to deliver the coup de grace.

His attack on Persia was of the nature of a holy war, or, given its brutality, more like a Sicilian vendetta. Persepolis he described as the most hateful of all the cities of Asia. Xerxes had burned the Acropolis in Athens, and in requital Alexander gave the Persian capital over to his soldiers. One detail will suffice for what they did. A marble statue of a seated woman, carved just before the Parthenon sculptures, its only peer, stood in the museum hall of the Persepolis treasury. Breaking in on the treasury, Alexander's soldiers knocked off and smashed the head of the statue, threw the decapitated torso into a corridor, and where it had stood left a mutilated hand. "Alexander could not have shown more plainly how thin was his veneer of Greek culture," noted Olmstead.

Coming out of Macedonia in northern Greece, before him and his father, Philip, a semi-barbarous backwater, Alexander led a tightly disciplined and brilliantly generated army against numerically superior Persian forces in a trio of great battles, culminating at Gaugamela in 331 B.C. Festal games celebrated his victories, and the story is that as the drinking grew far advanced, an Attic courtesan, Thais, told the king it would be his most memorable triumph to burn the topless towers of the city and extinguish its glory forever. So it was done. To the sound of flutes and pipes, the king, torch in hand, headed up a drunken procession, and in moments all was aflame. But much of Persepolis escaped the holocaust, the fire baking and preserving its magnificent reliefs. For many centuries, the reliefs and other survivals were lost to the world but saved for posterity, covered over by dust and sand. But in the 1930s the vanished city emerged from its long "occultation," like the Mahdi of time. Those who come to pay homage will hardly credit their eyes, for at sunset the palaces of Darius and Xerxes appear to knit themselves together as they tower above the plain, and in the half light regain their first grandeur.

On a sunny day in Esfahan, I am drinking black tea and nibbling nougats in the garden of the Hotel Abbasi. A renovated caravanserai, the hotel is hushed in the heat of mid-afternoon, the hour of siesta, and most of my fellow guests are snug in their beds. Other than the splashing of water, falling back on itself in the fountains scattered about the lawn, the only sound is the twittering of birds in the big trees that stand, sentinel-like, above them. Roses are blooming fore and aft of me, and closing my eyes I inhale blissfully, a sybarite with nothing better to do. In the seventeenth century an English traveler to Esfahan said that no city in Asia could outvie its gardens for grandeur and fragrance. He called them another paradise.

Sanitation was nil in the medieval city, and they say its smell hung in the air a mile off. But the silence was palpable, and inside its cocoon a man could hear himself think. On my post-Luddite side, I crave the return of silence. The great concavity of the hotel, two stories of arcades, rises about me like a Zoroastrian Tower of Silence, where the dead were laid on platforms for the vultures to eat. I don't crave to be dead – just not invaded by sound. Letting

my mind idle, I imagine the identity of the traveler who stayed in my room four hundred years ago. Ezra Pound has a poem spoken by a river merchant's wife, left alone in China while her lord journeys far afield. We don't get to meet him, but I guess at what he was like: a businessman avid for money and keen in its pursuit, but with a soft spot for a good-looking woman. Staring at himself in the glass above the dresser as he makes ready to go back on the road, he sees the crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes, and wonders if age has begun to claw him.

Cities like this one used to be recognized by a sign of the Zodiac. Esfahan's was Sagittarius the Archer, and a version of him appears on the main portal of the Royal Bazaar. Half man, half tiger, he is shooting his bow and arrow behind him, aiming for the dragon's head growing out of his tail. The dragon, in the nature of such, is emitting hideous noises, and the archer has had as much as he can stand. Right on, archer! Silencing his raucous side is necessary, if his better side is to survive.

Shah Abbas I, who knew what he was doing, selected the sign of Sagittarius as his city's emblem. By far the most able ruler of the Safavid dynasty, he straddled the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a late contemporary of Shakespeare's. The coincidence is fitting. Abbas the Great understood that humans cut an ambiguous figure, and repressing their discontents was the condition of a civilized life. This holdover of the ancient Zoroastrian duality, good and evil in one lump, makes a persuasive psychology, reflected in the creating of Iran's most beautiful city.

But Esfahan is not only a feast for the eye. Its center, the enormous square now called Imam Square, had a more implicative name when it was first conceived. *Naghsh-e-Jahan*, as it was, gives us a phrase for the city in its essence. By intention, it is the pattern or design of the world. Obviously the world wasn't like it, not yet. But Shah Abbas meant his new city for a pattern – the word chosen deliberately – and hoped that others would follow its lead.

The main street of the city, *Chahar Bagh* or Four Gardens, runs south in a straight cut along the west side of the square and down to the river. *Zayandeh Rood* is the river, literally life-giving, and of its eleven bridges at least three are worth an afternoon's excursion. They serve for transit, of course, also to dam the water and irrigate the palace gardens flowering along the banks. One of the palaces,

Chehel Sotun, or “forty pillars,” is still mirrored in its long pool. In fact there are only twenty pillars, but their reflected image doubles the number. Built in the columnar porch style – *talar* is the word – the palace remembers the Achaemenids: think Persepolis and its Palace of a Thousand Columns.

Murals on the walls depict battle scenes and entertainments. Nader Shah defeats Mahmoud of Ghazni, he on a white elephant. When the Mughal prince Humayun, deposed from his throne, shows up seeking sanctuary, Shah Abbas II lays on a lavish banquet, complete with musicians and dancing girls. The frescoes of Vank Cathedral, the big Armenian church dating from the early seventeenth century, are similar in feeling but even more physical. I get the sense that Christian and Muslim in these years are concluding a concordat, not inevitably a good thing.

I cross over the river on the Si-o-Seh, or Allahverdi Bridge, the work of a favorite general of Shah Abbas I. Later, I nod to his portrait in the Chehel Sotun Palace. Women are doing the wash in the shallows, and I think of clean clothes laid away in cedar chests for the winter. Lording it over the women, a phalanx of Persian arches, thirty-three in all, marches across the bridge, each feeling for its perfect point as if it were Platonically there. When the light turns golden at close of day, they show me their special character, color plus form. Zoroastrians believed that the saved entered heaven via thirty-three gates. But the number glances also at the life of Jesus, ending with his crucifixion at age thirty-three. Allahverdi Khan, the builder, was a Christian.

Teahouses at either end of his bridge offered refreshment, until the mullahs, alarmed at the propinquity of young men and women drinking tea and assessing one another, shut them down. The bridge gives access to the Armenian Quarter on the south bank, where life is less straitened. Reserving it for another day, I walk west toward the Khajou Bridge, notable for its two levels of terraced arcades, the upper for walking quick step, the lower for recreating the soul. An unearned gratuity, it is like the grace of heaven. Picking my way with care over the slippery surface, I sit on what is left of the stone seats reserved for Shah Abbas II and friends while they enjoyed the view. Wherries, a flotilla’s worth, are plying the river. I might be looking at London’s Thames in the first years of the seventeenth century. Civilization needs running water.

Shahrestan, the oldest of Esfahan's bridges, dates from the twelfth century, though the pillars reach back to Sassanian times (224–692). None of these is your generic bridge; they satisfy aesthetically, and in their particularity deserve the name of architecture. This is true of the caravanserai where we spend the night, true of the lowly pigeon towers still standing beside the river near the tumbled ruin of an ancient fire temple. Once each of them accommodated fourteen thousand guano-producing birds. Alas for the pigeons, chemical fertilizers have made them de trop.

But Esfahan, the pattern of the world, is waiting, and I mustn't tarry too long on incidentals, however delightful. Imam Square is its beating heart, a huge rectangle over fifteen hundred yards long and almost five hundred wide, bigger than St. Mark's, Venice, and Moscow's Red Square, second only to Tiananmen Square in Beijing. We want it big but not infinite, and it is good that Beijing gets the palm. Tiananmen Square is an enormity, proclaiming the insignificance of humans. Imam Square is all about the realizing of the individual, and though establishing this is a task of magnitude, the size involved has limits.

Shah Abbas began to construct Imam Square in 1602, approximately the year of *Hamlet*. He meant it as a venue for public theater and meetings of the citizenry, parades and fireworks, all the needs of a modern capital of nearly half a million souls. Polo matches were held in the square, and the stone goalposts are still in place. Executions were held there too, a cautionary event. On the periphery the shah planted trees and dug an open canal lined with stones to hold the running water.

Like Tamerlane before him he culled the best in each kind for this labor of his life, assembling a team of architects, calligraphers, and painters, headed by the engineer Ostad (Master) Ali Akbar Esfahani. The square was to be bounded on its four sides by two stories of arcades, as it is today, though the upper level, there largely for symmetry's sake, is empty. Building went on nonstop for the next fifty years. European travelers, awed by Esfahan's repleteness, called it "half the world." In 1666, Chardin, a French visitor, counted 162 mosques, 48 madrassas, 182 caravanserais, 173 *hamams*. Some are work for the ages.

Its handling of light and color is unlike that of any other civilized venue I know. Emphasis falls on cream and vermilion, light

blue and median blue, as in the blue-tiled designs of the Masjid-i Iman Mosque. The walls of smaller porches in the mosque's inner courtyard favor deep blue and yellow for their painted tiles (*hafti rangi*), in which the design is painted directly onto the tile. Each *iwan* leads to a vaulted sanctuary, two of which, the east and west, have floral motifs on a blue ground. Sometimes the Esfahan Style goes in heavily for white, too heavily, Westerners think, an effect of busyness. The white calligraphy above the entrance portal is perhaps a case in point, and it must be agreed that Persians love showiness – as in the domes of half the mosques you point to – until, as the light changes, the white softens to cream, and the red to rosy brown.

Four major monuments interrupt the double arcades: on the south the Royal Mosque, Esfahan's religious center; on the west the Mosque of Shaykh Lutfollah, honoring the shah's father-in-law, a distinguished theologian; on the east the Ali Qapu Palace, conflating Arabic "Ali" (high) and Turkish "Qapu" (gate), that is, the Sublime Portal, the city's administrative center; and finally, on the north, the Qeisarieh Portal, opening on the Great Bazaar (*Bazare-e-Borzorg*). This arched passageway links Imam Square to the Friday Mosque, or Masjid-Jameh, a survival of the Seljuk era and a popular choice, including mine, for Esfahan's noblest building.

The Jameh Mosque is outsize, Iran's largest. It is old, replacing a mosque of the eighth century on the same site, and it is unusually complex in design. Professor Pope, a great panjandrum of scholars, says it is made up of twenty distinct structures. I single out the big dome in front of the main *mihrab*, built by the famous vizier and patron of architecture Nizam-al Molk (late eleventh century), and at the northern end a second dome, the Gonbed-e Khaki. This jewel of great price, dating from the same period, is the work of Taj-al Molk, Nizam's principal rival. Both had an eye for uncluttered form, resembling in their enmity and complementarity those masters of Roman baroque Bernini and Borromini. I think the smaller dome is near perfect, not least in its plainness, no tile work, brick alone.

The mosque in its entirety represents, says my professor, a thousand years of mosque building in Persia. It is modest, despite its preeminence, not opening itself all at once. As I prepare to leave,

my eye falls on a mihrab, wrought all over with floral decoration and delicate calligraphy, not a fraction of its stuccoed surface left untended. The guide book says this mihrab is the work of the last Ilkhanid king, Ojeitu, a fourteenth-century Mongol who converted to Islam. I liken it instinctively to medieval Christian carvings in ivory, possibly a Jesse Tree thick with the ancestors of Jesus. It belongs, in its perfection, in a special place in the south of France, and I see it in my mind's eye, Moissac, among the great treasuries of art. The coincidence of this church with the Jameh Mosque attests, at the highest level, to the kinship of Christianity and Islam.

At the other end of the square, the entrance to the Royal Mosque (Jameh-Abbasi or Masjid-e Imam) is meant to counterpoint the huge *pistaq* arch of the bazaar, flanked by turquoise minarets. I note the inscription on its portal, signed by a peerless calligrapher, Ali Reza Abbasi. Next to his name is the date of his work, 1616. This year Shakespeare died, and it seems harmless to imagine the calligrapher saluting a kindred spirit from afar. The gateway to the mosque, a vast honeycomb, is alive with stalactites (*maqarnas*). Turquoise tile spills over the surface of the portal, and peacocks, three pairs of them, strut on the panels. This intrusion of the natural world violates Muhammad's interdict against mingling art and nature, but the exception to the rule suggests to me a wholesale rejecting of the rule. The seventeenth century in Esfahan merges art and nature cheerfully, letting the interdict go its own way.

In from the entrance an ablutions fountain cools the main courtyard, surrounded by the familiar four-iwan pattern. A double-decker porch varies the pattern, and bids us notice its *hafti-rangi* (prefabricated) blue and yellow tiles. Flowers like none in nature grow on the doors, walls, domes, and minarets, and after four centuries their verdure hasn't staled. When the Qeisarieh Portal was finished, the shah topped it with a clock and belfry, symbols of his triumph over the Portuguese in Hormuz. He had one eye trained on earth, the other on heaven.

Peacocks or their trailing tails surface again in the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, framing a vase on the portal. Shah Abbas meant the mosque to serve as a private chapel for the women of the harem, but though smaller than the Imam Mosque, it needn't "veil its crest." Mosaics on the portal and on the walls and ceiling of the sanctuary

or prayer room leave the competition well to the rear. But color is its chief distinction. Blue and yellow flow together on the stalactites above the portal, cream brightens the tiles of the dome, changing to pink around sunset. Intertwined flowers and complex geometric designs flourish on the exterior portal. But then a startling change: in the passage, the brightness of day yields to semi-darkness. There is propriety in this. "To see God clearly, we go out of sight," wrote John Donne as the century was beginning.

Color is qualified by shadow, the sunlight, filtering through the high lattice windows, being mitigated or strained. So we have a third state, neither light nor shadow but partaking of both. Robert Byron (in *The Road to Oxiana*) describes the Lotfollah Mosque as blending color and abstract form. The inside of the mosque he calls Augustan, referring at a guess to the eighteenth century in England, the Augustan Age or Age of Reason. Whatever he meant, that is the term we want. It connotes urbanity, light that is clear but not dazzling, a mundane state of mind, even though the eye is fixed on the hereafter, elegance, reason's unlikely carapace, last, a preoccupation with form.

The Great Bazaar, a warren of arched passageways topped with small domes like skylights, first surfaces in the annals a thousand years ago. Its shops cluster together by trades: tinkers, artists, carpet makers, the various groups known as *timeheh*, each under its own arcade. A high dome, Chahar Sough, or "four bazaars," rises where passageways cross, spilling daylight from the roof. The bazaar has a pool in its midst, caravanserais, madrassas, even bath-houses. A sound body must support a sound mind, and to go with it an "upright heart and pure." (The desideratum is Milton's.) But this version of Augustanism accommodates the world of Hogarth's paintings as well as the architecture of Bath, and in frescoes on both sides of the Qeisarieh Portal men sitting around a table are carousing and getting drunk.

Shah Abbas must strike us as a breed apart among public men, even among those of his stature. His hero was the son-in-law of Muhammad, and the Ali Qapu Palace bears his name. That isn't what you'd predicate of a maker and shaker. Maybe one of the Scottish Covenanters, fierce soldiers and fanatic for their faith, was like him. Maybe this melding of contraries comments on the psyche of Iran.

The best of the Ali Qapu Palace is its elevated terrace, supported on eighteen slender columns. The ceiling above it is crinkly with an intricate design, nonrepresentational, like that on an older carpet. Braziers stand about in the palace's smaller rooms, taking the chill off the air. Many rooms have fireplaces that open at the back of the hearth to the outside, another illustration of the Persian fondness for bringing the out-of-doors within doors. Today, my last in Iran, I make the terrace my theater box, no better view in the city.

From this privileged point of vantage where the shah watched polo and his parading soldiers, I look down at twilight, murmuring my good-byes. Stick figures below me are buttonholing friends, like actors in a silent movie. Local families, spreading a cloth on the grass, are opening picnic baskets and getting ready for supper. Horse-drawn buggies, their drivers' eyes peeled for tourists, are going lickety-split around the periphery. The square, a vast living room, is the model of a public place. My heart fills with happiness.

Without warning, a fight breaks out in the near foreground. Young men, as many as a dozen, have been chaffing one another mindlessly, throwing water from the fountains in their cupped hands. As I watch, they up the ante from teenage imbecility to violence. A punch is thrown, I see the arm flash out and a youth crumple on the grass. Those standing over him begin to kick him in the head. I scream at them to stop it, though at this distance they can't possibly hear me. Then, as suddenly as it began, it is over.

What has happened to the idyllic scene that was Imam Square only a moment before? Why have these unfledged adolescents turned savage, as if to give Paradise the lie? Evidently there is trouble in the Garden of Eden, but where does it come from? Donne has an answer: "And that this may truly Paradise be thought, I have the serpent brought." But he, a peccant man, didn't need a serpent, bringing the evil with him. Am I to locate it in these young good-for-nothings? Are they victims of their "sociology"? Is there a crack in the bowl? Too many questions.

However you derive the evil, it has tarnished the perfect place. More accurately, it has cleared my imperfect seeing, the perfection being a myth I concocted myself. Against the idyllic scene, I must set the bigoted rule of the mullahs and their cat's-paw Ahmedina-

jad, the confining of women, symbolized by the chador, the insistence that we give up our glass, the innocent pleasure of polite men and women. All this does a number on my estimate of Iranian people, those good friends.

I ask myself how the rigorous faith they profess works into their behavior. Perhaps they honor it more in the breach than the observance. In the time of Abbas the Great, everyone in the city, smaller than today's but still substantial, went to Friday mosque. Now, in a population of three million, only ten thousand attend. So I am told, and if true, the decline is spectacular, paralleling the decline of organized religion in the West. Europe is no longer church going – I generalize in the interest of brevity – and in America my sophisticated colleagues have turned Laodicean, equating things major with minor and unwilling to make a fuss about either. Though evangelicalism is surging, its emotional brand of faith isn't one I'd have recognized in my youth. "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

That makes a good resonant conclusion. But like the epigram as a kind, its clinching tone is in excess of the facts. True, Iranian people are damaged by their ideology, and I mustn't discount original sin. But their country, though skirting disaster, hasn't foundered, and clear-sighted men and women are doing what they can to keep the ship off the rocks. The job is hard, even painful; nonetheless they haven't lost their *joie de vivre*. Its strong sense is what I take with me as I shuffle offstage, tipping my straw hat with my walking stick to salute them.