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INTRODUCTION

Persian Parables

FORM AS PHILOSOPHY

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The Parable of His Light is as if there were a Niche and within it a Lamp: the Lamp enclosed in Glass: the glass as it were a brilliant star: Lit from a blessed Tree, an Olive, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it: Light upon Light! Allah doth guide whom He will to His Light: Allah doth set forth Parables for men: and Allah doth know all things.

—QUR'AN 24:35, YUSUF ALI TRANSLATION¹

YEKI BUD YEKI NABUD, gheyr az Khoda hich kas nabud! I have always been fascinated by this formal and proverbial phrase that starts Persian storytelling: the equivalent of “Once upon a time” in English, or “Il était une fois” in French, or “Kana Ya Makan” in Arabic. But in Persian we say: “There was One, there was no One. Except for God, there was No One!” What in the world could this strange and astonishing phrase mean? Is it a metaphysical conundrum or is it just a rhyming riddle to get the audience excited? There seems to be a profound theological mystery in it, and then again it might just be a tongue twister. I still remember my mother and grandmother repeating this phrase every time they told a story when I was a child, as did all other mothers and grandmothers and storytellers—orally or in print. It is a somewhat mysterious phrase. Unless of course we read it as a metaphor, and metonymically, standing for a larger frame of reference—of which we are not quite sure. It usually announces the beginning of a fictional story, something that did not happen in reality but happened in the time of the story. It is, in other words, a short *parable*, as it were—and it is what

it is—meaning: Oh yes, some people may have existed, others not yet, but the truth is only God exists anyway. The rest of us are just illusions. This would cast from the very outset a metaphysical, theological, mystical, existential shadow over whatever it is that storytellers are about to tell their audiences: both telling the story and yet immediately compromising the veracity of what is about to be said. Or else telling the audience, don't bother with the truth or fictionality of the story I am about to share, or whether it actually happened or not; just listen and be quiet, for no one exists anyway, except God. There is something of a nihilism in the phrase, I might add, the kind of tongue-in-cheekiness you might compare with the common phrases we read today at the beginning of some works of fiction: "The story you are about to read and all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this book are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, or products is intended or should be inferred." There is much more to that disclaimer than meets the eye—and all of that has to do with its *parabolic* character, its artful indirectness. But why is that so? What exactly is a "parable"—and how does it work?

Consider how a Persian storyteller ends a story: "Bala raftim dough bud ghesseh-ye ma dorough bud, Pa'in omadim mast bud ghesseh-ye ma rast bud." We went up, the line says, it was a yogurt drink, our story was all made up; we came down, it was yogurt, our story was perfectly true. On the surface, which is where parables usually work, this seems to be complete gibberish. But it rhymes! At the same time, this works through a paradox, though entirely playful and on the face of it a game: *dough* (yogurt drink) and *dorough* (untrue) rhyme, as do *mast* (yogurt) and *rast* (true). That is all! But is it? Against the dialectic constructed between truth and falsehood, the uncertainty of what we just heard is totally at work here: A tertiary space is crafted where stories, *qessehs*, as we would say in Persian, and therefore parables can be both true and false, real and unreal. These are simple phrases, conventional and formulaic, to start and end a story ritualistically. *Mast* and *dough*, yogurt and yogurt drink—with a flip of a coin, or turn of a phrase, as it were—become metonymic, for truth and falsehood. Precisely in their frivolity, they revert back to the Qur'anic phrase that the work of *mathal* (parable) is divinely sanctioned. Even God uses it!

What and Wherefore Is a Parable?

Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. When the sage says: "Go over," he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place, which we

could do anyhow if the labor were worth it; he means some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something too that he cannot designate more precisely, and therefore cannot help us here in the very least.

—FRANZ KAFKA (1883–1924), “ON PARABLES”²

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word “parable” as “a short story that teaches a moral or spiritual lesson, especially one of those told by Jesus as recorded in the Bible.”³ In its Christian context it has assumed an almost exclusive significance for the Biblical stories through which Jesus Christ is believed to have taught his immediate disciples and the world at large. The Bible indeed contains many such parables in the Gospels of the New Testament. Some scholars believe Christian parables may have been inspired by their Hebrew counterparts in Aggadah and Mashalim, which also contain many such parables. An example of Jesus’s parables would be the Parable of the Lamp (Matthew 5:14–16): “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”⁴ Similar parables can also be found in the Qur’an—a good example is Qur’an 2:261: “The parable of those who spend their substance in the way of Allah is that of a grain of corn: it groweth seven ears, and each ear hath a hundred grains. Allah giveth manifold increase to whom He pleaseth: And Allah careth for all and He knoweth all things.” These parables—Jewish, Christian, or Islamic—have all entered the proverbial parlance of nations, cultures, and literary idioms. In this study, first and foremost I wish to sever the parables we read from any moral lessons they may or may not entail, with which we may or may not morally concur. People may differ on what exactly those moral lessons might be, but they all dwell on the mesmerizing moment of the parabolic prose or poetry itself, on the allegorical form it usually assumes, which is of paramount significance for me here: the parabolic stories or proverbs themselves, not the presumed or even pronounced morals of those stories or anecdotes.

In Persian, which is the subject of my particular concern here, Sa’di’s *Golestan* (1258), for example, might be considered a book of wisdom delivered all in parable—such as its very first story, about a thief who is sentenced to death and begins cursing in his native tongue the king who issued the sentence. The king asks one of his viziers what the condemned thief is saying, to which the good-natured vizier says, “He says those who are in positions of power must be patient and forgiving.” Another, not so good-natured vizier says, “No, Your Majesty, he

is not telling you the truth. The thief is cursing you in his native tongue.” The wise king forgives the thief and says to his viziers, “A judicious lie is better than a troublesome truth.”⁵ Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) reportedly once tried to pass off a parable from Sa’di’s *Golestan* as a lost passage from the Bible.⁶ Examples of course abound. In Rumi’s *Masnavi* (1258–1273), we read the story of Moses and a shepherd who is conversing with God in very intimate and anthropomorphic terms. “Oh God,” he is whispering to himself, “where are you, I wish you were here. I could mend your clothes and comb your hair and massage your feet and get rid of your fleas,” and such. Hearing this, Moses severely admonishes the shepherd for such blasphemous and sacrilegious attributions of human qualities to the Absolute and Pure Almighty. The shepherd apologizes and goes his way. A glorious dialogue between God and Moses then follows in which God says to His chosen prophet that it is none of his business in what language His created beings choose to praise Him. It is between them and Him, and He forces Moses to run after the shepherd and apologize.⁷ Again, any number of theological “lessons” might be contingent on this story. My concern is not with those lessons, however, but with the prose and poetry of the stories themselves, independent of any morals they may contain. I believe we have been distracted for too long by these presumed and/or pronounced morals and have paid far less attention to the stories themselves, and what it is they are doing to the tonality and timbre of our thinking.

In this book I wish to dwell on these parables and argue that their preponderant presence in Persian prose and poetry is not limited to the masterpieces of Sa’di, Rumi, Attar, Sana’i, or a whole spectrum of other classical and contemporary examples but that in fact parabolic thinking and “reasoning” (if we were to call it that) have a much wider domain of operation and therefore significance. By Persian parables, I mean those historically sustained moments in the long and winding trajectories of Persian language and literature when and where Persian diction has suspended itself from any logical or reasonable normalcy and congruence with lived experiences and become poetically self-referential, or even self-indulgent. This is what I consider a parabolic turn in Persian prose and poetry—when language becomes linguistically autochthonous. Language on these occasions has ceased to correspond to lived realities in the outside world and reverted back onto itself, its internal linguistic dynamics, and the imaginal world it creates for its own amusement, entertainment, elocution, meditation; this self-referentiality is the most potent, robust, and above all poetic verve of the language. The parabolic language turns to storytelling as if these stories were the whole point of the language—nay, of existence itself. Language has become

existential, as it were, the simulacrum of being itself. In other words, in Persian parables I detect a moment when life is absorbed into the formal fabric of stories and thus the borderline between fact and fantasy, history and story, the living and the dead, the real and the unreal, is erased and life itself, as we live it, becomes a strange and captivating story—one among many other possible lives, stories, parables. If there are morals to the stories that the parabolic language tells or entails, those morals are entirely tangential to the parabolic language itself—a punchline, perhaps, a hint, and a purgatorial passageway to bring the outside world into the veritable and sinuous domains of stories that have successfully suspended not just normativity and normalcy but have in fact held life itself suspended from the thin red line of the story. The parabolic language may become fabular—bringing (as Rumi often does) the animal, the vegetal, and inanimate objects closer to humanity and even to an angelology—and vice versa. But even there, the vegetal and the animal have come closer to the human and the angelic and assumed otherworldly dimensions as the world they create remains more than anything else self-referential. That self-referentiality, that “fabulous yonder,” is the defining moment of the parabolic prose and poetry that concerns me in this study. Where and what and wherefore is that “fabulous yonder”? What does it do to our thinking? That primacy of form as philosophical prose and poetry is what I wish to address here.

What Would Be the Word for “Parable” in Persian?

Once when I was a child, I was playing on a street corner, as children often do. I saw a group of children walking toward me. They appeared so strange to me. I went forward and asked them where they were going. They said they were going to school to gain knowledge. I asked, what is knowledge? They said they had no idea. “You should ask our teacher.” They said this and went on their way.

—SHIHAB AL-DIN YAHYA SUHRAWARDI (1154–1191), *Risalah fi Halat al-Tofuliyyah* (TREATISE ON THE CONDITION OF CHILDHOOD)⁸

Variations on the words *mathal*, *mithal*, and the verbal noun *tamthil* are the corresponding concepts for the reading of “parable” I have in mind here. *Tamthil* in particular is a crucial word in this regard for it comes from *mathal*, a solid Qur’anic term meaning “simile,” “similitude,” “likeness,” “verisimilitude”—and it has also been consistently translated as “parable.” Recall, for example, the verse I just cited (2:261): “The parable of those who spend their substance in the way

of Allah is that of a grain of corn.” *Mathal* has also been rendered as “example,” “like,” “compared.” But the most common translation is “parable,” and rightly so. Tamthil is the act, the literary device, of giving a mathal—of writing, thinking, speculating with mathal. Another excellent example is Qur’an 2:26, which begins: “In Allaha la yastahiyyi an yadrib mathalan . . .” The common translation is “Indeed, Allah does not feel shy in citing any parable, be it that of a gnat or of something above it (in meanness). Now, as for those who believe, they know it is the truth from their Lord; while those who disbelieve say, ‘What could Allah have meant by this parable?’ By this He lets many go astray, and by this He makes many find guidance. But He does not let anyone go astray thereby except those who are sinful.” In all such cases, the point is an example or similitude meant to clarify or illustrate but in effect becomes the point by drawing attention to itself. Tamthil is therefore a deeply rooted Qur’anic concept that has become a literary device in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu by which we tell one story, or seek to make a point, via another story. In Persian we have an abundance of such uses of “parable,” especially in Sa’di’s *Golestan* and Rumi’s *Masnawi*. But again, based on these citations, I wish to explore an expanded conception of “Persian parable” in this book.

We might also consider the word *qesseh* as “parable.” *Qesseh*, in its Persian pronunciation, is equally rooted in the Qur’an and usually understood as a story told about prophets and their exemplary deeds or authoritative sayings. Mathal is usually shorter in its Qur’anic references than qesseh, which is a longer narrative. But they are both parabolic—meaning, exemplars of something to which they point and allude yet do not come out and explicitly say. Mathal or mithal can therefore be regarded as the unitary trope of qesseh, and qesseh an extended take on mathal. Mathal is a more basic unit of which qesseh is composed—or, qesseh is an extended, more elaborate mathal. We are thus at a more elemental forcefield when we consider mathal or mithal as parable. The same is true with the Persian words *dastan* (long *a*) or *dastan* (short *a*), which can stand for qesseh; mathal or mithal is definitive to them both. Mathal, mithal, tamthil, qesseh, dastan: all have their own peculiar claims to reality and truth, for they do not mimic or represent either. Parables are not mimetic—though they have been read as such. They are first and foremost mnemonic—and they remain mnemonic, even if they have been forced to behave mimetically. They draw attention to themselves as where we should stay and not rush to their “meaning” and “significance.”

Let us look at the etymological roots of the word “parable,” which comes from the Greek παραβολή (*parabolē*), literally “throwing” (*bolē*) “alongside” (*para-*), by extension meaning “comparison, illustration, analogy.” It was, as such, the

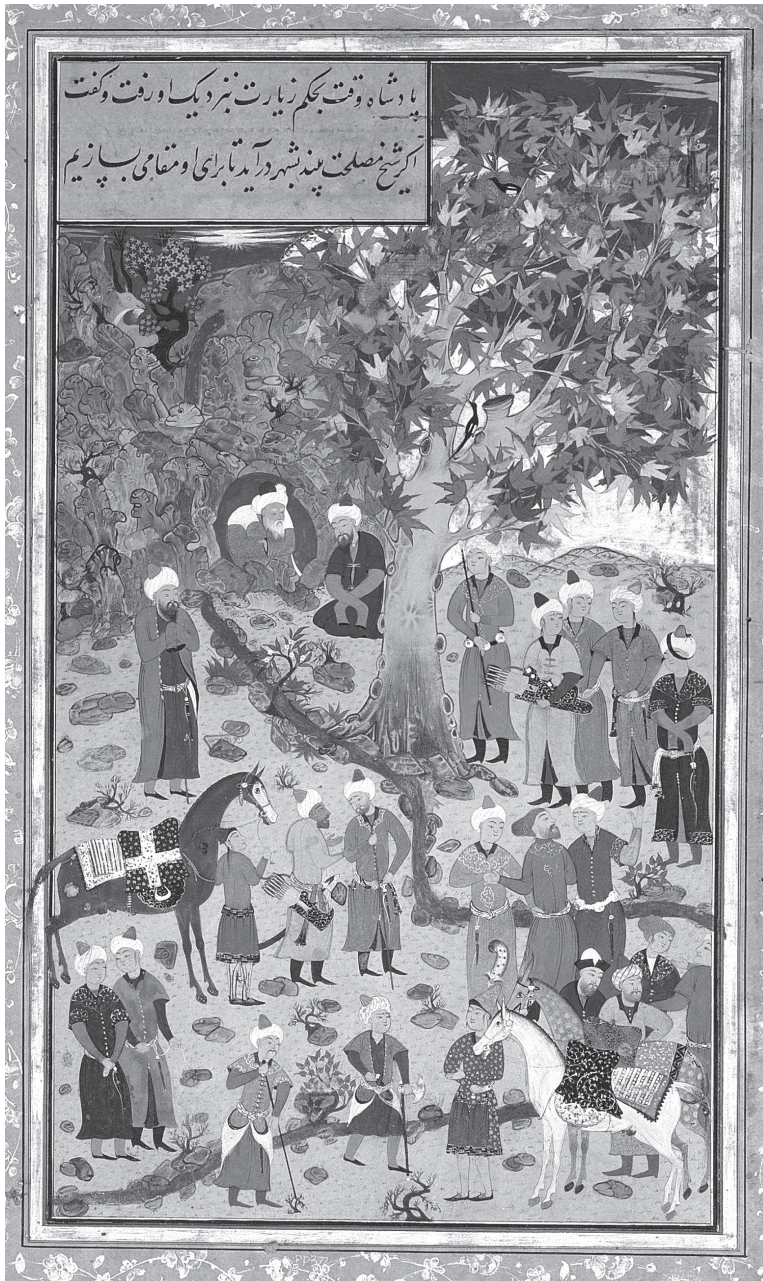


FIGURE 1. *Visit to a Dervish* by Mahmud Muzahhib, dated AH 968 (1560–61 CE). Manuscript illustration of Sādi's *Golestan* (1258 CE).

name given by the Greeks to an illustration “in the form of a brief fictional narrative.” So, there is a strong similarity between the word “parable” in English, or “parabole” in French, or “parabola” in Italian, and the word “mathal” in Arabic and Persian. The German word for parable, “Gleichnis,” is defined as “kurze bildhafte Erzählung, die einen abstrakten Gedanken oder Vorgang durch Vergleich mit einer anschaulichen, konkreten Handlung [mit belehrender Absicht] verständlich machen will” (short illustrative narrative that aims to make an abstract thought or process understandable by comparing it with a clear, concrete action [with instructive intention])—which is, again, precisely the way we understand mathal in Persian and Arabic, as anecdotes, stories, small asides, and so on. For me in this study, all “parables” that are meant to clarify an abstract point stand on their own—not just as stories but as stories that have their own autonomy to become illustrative. In other words, being parabolic is not simply to be illustrative. It entails a particular kind of thinking. That thinking requires closer scrutiny.

In Persian, words like *mathal* (illustration), *matal* (anecdote), *matalak* (taunt or snide remark, particularly with a sexual allusion), *mazzeh* (wisecrack), *loghoz* (quip), *zarb al-mathal* (proverb), and *kenayeh* (indirection)⁹ are all related and fall into the category of “Beh dar begu, Divar to beshno” (Tell it to the Door so that the Wall can hear). In this vast and variegated field, the publication of Ali Akbar Dehkhoda’s magnum opus, *Amthal-o-Hikam* (Parables and Wisdoms), in 1931 is a landmark in the detailed documentation of such parabolic phrases and pithy asides in Persian prose and poetry.¹⁰ As the title of Dehkhoda’s book suggests, he collected tens of thousands of such *amthal* and *hikam*, all of them deeply rooted in Persian literary and occasionally folkloric sources. The title of Dehkhoda’s book is usually translated as “Proverbs and Sayings,” which is not entirely inaccurate. But here I am reserving the word “proverb” for *zarb al-mathal* and using “parable” for *mathal*. Widespread attention to these parables has not been limited to Dehkhoda. Other literary and linguistic scholars including Dehkhoda’s contemporary Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh, then Sadegh Hedayat, and more recently Ali Bolookbashi, Mohammad Jafari Qanawati, and Ahmad Vakilian have been deeply preoccupied with these parables—what they mean and how they work in Persian proverbial phrasings. Dehkhoda’s focus was mostly directed toward written, documented, and literary sources, paying scant attention to oral and folkloric material, which others, such as Seyyed Abolqasem Anjavi Shirazi and Ahmad Shamlou, explored more thoroughly.¹¹ Dehkhoda had used other sources available to him, such as the classic text of *Majma’ al-Amthal* of Abi al-Fazl Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Nishaburi, known as al-Midani (d. 1124), which

was entirely devoted to Arabic parables. Dehkhoda also explored Persian sources on such parables published in India. He used tens of thousands of lines of poetry from major poets as evidence of these *amthal* and *hikam*—including from the poetry of Ferdowsi, Saʿdi, Nezami, Asadi Tusi, and Rumi. He therefore thoroughly documented the interface between idiomatic, proverbial, or what here I call *parabolic* phrases and their deeply rooted evidence in Persian prose and poetry.

Substantiation for the way I use *mathal* as “parabolic” comes from Dehkhoda’s other monumental work, his encyclopedic dictionary, *Loghat-nameh*, where under “*mathal*” (plural “*amthal*”) he writes, among other things, that “*Mathal* is a story or an anecdote cited in order to illustrate a point.”¹² Citing authoritative classical sources, he specifies that “the function of *mathal* in conversations is like the use of argumentations in rational discourses.” The word *mathal* literally means something that has been said or done or observed before and has assumed an exemplary status. It is the widespread circulation, reception, repetition, and frequency of uses that makes such allusions exemplary and authoritative. The word *mathal* has been understood as “simile” and used to clarify a secondary occasion by reference to a primary occasion. It therefore works as an analogy. After a thorough examination of various sources, Dehkhoda concludes: “*Mathal* is a brief phrase that consists of similes or wise content that because of its lucid phrasing, clarity of meaning, and elegance of composition has become widely popular, and everyone uses it identically or with very minor alterations.”¹³ Citing European (including ancient Greek) sources, Dehkhoda writes that some believe *mathal* to be the relic of distant philosophies from which we have received only fragments. Dehkhoda’s detailed explanations under this entry clearly authorize us to use *mathal* as “parable.” They further allow us to explore such parables in a philosophical domain of their own and in and of themselves, not merely as “illustrations” at the service of abstract arguments. Those abstract arguments, whatever they might be, have unduly ruled over these parables and put them to (shall we say) forced labor for their own benefits. My purpose in this book is to liberate these parables from such unseemly subservience and restore to them their own pride of place and authorial significance as philosophical forms.

Here it is perhaps important to note that in contemporary Arabic the word *tamthil* is now used for “acting,” or “performance,” or “play”—all of course related to acts of “representation.” In Persian sources, Suhrawardi’s allegorical, or what I call parabolic, stories are also referred to as *dastan-ha-ye tamthili*, which is then translated as “symbolic stories,” a cliché if not inaccurate reading of both *tamthil* and “symbolic.” If we stick to Qur’anic origins and the precise and recurrent translations of *mathal* and *tamthil* as “parable,” we are on solid, reliable,

historically and textually rooted, and accurate grounds. Navigating the difficulties pertaining to translations of “parable” across languages and cultural traditions leads perforce to issues of translatability, or untranslatability, of words that have been the crux of critical concept work by scholars like Barbara Cassin, Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, Baidik Bhattacharya, Aria Fani, Ayman A. El-Desouky, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Dilip Menon, Tze-Yin Teo, Akshya Saxena, and Adhira Mangalagiri. My own focus will be on the idiomaticity of Persian lexemes for “parable” and their role in defining notions of philosophical form within the Persian language. Sticking close to the textual evidence and conceptual variations of parabolic prose or poetries, we have fully entered the domain of *tamthil*, the allegorical atmosphere, the world of verisimilitude, the *alam al-mithal*, the *mundus imaginalis*, where very similar to truth has a truth of its own. So there and then, as I have argued in detail elsewhere,¹⁴ we read not speculative truth but evident verisimilitude, not fixated names but meandering metonyms, not any jargon of authenticity among Eurocentric philosophers but factual evidence from the liberating world of stories, where frivolous facts have become playful with truth to enable and empower the (hitherto unbeknownst to itself) unknowing subject.

The World of Parables, *Alam al-Mithal*, *Mundus Imaginalis*

Art is thinking in images.

—VIKTOR SHKLOVSKY, “ART, AS DEVICE” (1917)¹⁵

Now I need to make a crucial turn—and move from the Persian word for parable to the philosophical underworld of parables. The cumulative result of these parables spread across Persian prose and poetry crafts an *alam al-mithal*, a parabolic world, a world of parables, similes, or similitude, verisimilitudes, or figurative images. By proposing the term *alam al-mithal* for “world of parables,” I am trespassing into very sensitive and deeply cultivated philosophical ground, perhaps even doing something of an epistemic violence to it. I do so, however, as a stepping stone toward where I am headed. The expression *alam al-mithal* has assumed profoundly philosophical abstractions in a robust thrust of Islamic philosophy, particularly by the ingenious Iranian philosopher Shihab al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi, who was the first serious thinker to have detailed its epistemological particularities. Although I dwell briefly on this philosophical moment, it is not my final destination. I plan to take the word “parable” and carry its philosophical tonality to a literary destination, recasting the propositions of

“philosophy” and “literature” as we have received them so far on a Persian parabolic premise. But first we need to come to terms with “alam al-mithal” as we have received it. What Suhrawardi called “alam al-mithal,” and scholars of Islamic philosophy usually translate as “world of images,” the eminent French scholar Henry Corbin (1903–1978) opted to call “mundus imaginális”—an ontological domain he had identified in Suhrawardi’s metaphysics. This is how Corbin explains his choice:

My intention in proposing the two Latin words *mundus imaginális* as a title for this paper was to circumscribe a very precise order of reality, which corresponds to a precise mode of perception. Latin terminology has the advantage of providing us with a fixed and technical point of reference against which we can compare and measure the various, more or less vague equivalents suggested by modern Western languages. To begin with, I shall make a confession. The choice of the two words had begun to become inevitable for me some time ago, because I found it impossible to content myself with the word *imaginary* for what I had to translate or to describe. This is by no means intended as a criticism of those whom language usage compels to have recourse to this word, since all of us are trying merely to revalue it in the positive sense. However, despite all our efforts, we cannot prevent that, in current and non-premeditated usage, the term *imaginary* is equated with the unreal, with something that is outside the framework of being and existing, in brief, with something Utopian. The reason why I absolutely had to find another expression was that, for a good many years, my calling and my profession required me to interpret Arabic and Persian texts, whose meaning I would undoubtedly have betrayed had I simply contented myself—even by taking all due precaution—with the term *imaginary*. I had to find a new expression to avoid misleading the Western reader, who, on the contrary, has to be roused from his old engrained way of thinking in order to awaken him to another order of things.¹⁶

Corbin’s commitment and sense of responsibility toward the philosophical idiomatilities of the world he had discovered in Arabic and Persian and detailed for his French and other European readers give us today a fresh reason to share his awe and wonder and detect in this “alam al-mithal” something that remains full of even more theoretical and philosophical possibilities—possibilities he was not ready or perhaps even willing to entertain. There have been suggestions that Suhrawardi’s “alam al-mithal” be read as similar or akin to or at least rooted in Plato’s idea of forms, but scholars of Islamic philosophy have raised serious

questions with that proposition and argued for the philosophical autonomy of Suhrawardi's specific terminology. Almost concurrent with Corbin, or perhaps even before him, but entirely independent of him, the eminent Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988) in a pioneering essay, "Dream, Imagination and 'Alam al-Mithal'" (1964), insisted that Plato's and Suhrawardi's ideas differ for the simple reason that Muslim philosophers like Suhrawardi were concerned with the nature and function of prophetic revelations—and Plato was obviously not. The term "alam al-mithal," Rahman believed, "takes its rise partly from philosophical Prophetology, i.e. the Muslim philosophers' attempt to establish a morphological structure of the Prophetic Revelation, and partly from a desire to explain certain religious eschatological doctrines."¹⁷ Rahman equally accurately pinpoints that from this premise eventually emerged the proposition that "images have an ontological existence" specific to themselves. Rahman begins his careful reading of the term in the work of Avicenna, moves on to al-Ghazali, and then comes to Suhrawardi as the key figure in the recognition and theorization of this domain: "Although [al-Ghazali] does not say that these objects exist in a world of their own—the Universe of Images or symbols—perceived through a spiritual imagination. That step . . . was a perfectly logical one to take by his successors. This step was actually taken by Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi (d. 1191) who, so far as we know, was the first to announce formally the existence of a new Realm between the spiritual and the physical."¹⁸ Rahman identifies the alam al-mithal with the realm of "suspended images" (*al-muthul al-mu'allaqah*), or of "pure figures" (*al-ashbah al-mujarradah*), based on which premises he then calls alam al-mithal "the realm of figures." He then proceeds to trace the idea from Suhrawardi to Ibn Arabi in the thirteenth century and Mulla Sadra in the sixteenth.¹⁹

My turn to two eminent scholars of the idea of alam al-mithal, Corbin and Rahman, is preparatory for a critical turn in my real purpose, which is rooted in my prolonged interests in the works of the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky, especially his seminal essay "Art, as Device." In a famous passage in that essay, Shklovsky writes:

And so this thing we call art exists in order to restore the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make a stone stony. The goal of art is to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things; the device of art is the "estrangement" of things and the complication of the form, which increases the duration and complexity of perception, as the process of perception is, in art, an end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is the means

to live through the making of a thing; what has been made does not matter in art.²⁰

I believe this is what Persian parables do, and what happens in the alam al-mithal they form. They “restore the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make a stone stony.” In this book, I therefore borrow Corbin’s apt reading of alam al-mithal as mundus imaginalis, corroborated and detailed independently by Rahman’s equally rooted reading of the term, both of them among the earliest attention paid to a potent philosophical concept, to move toward Shklovsky’s idea of “ostranenie” (defamiliarization) in order to read Persian parables in terms of the “deautomatization” effect or what Bertolt Brecht called the “Verfremdungseffekt,” either independent of Shklovsky or influenced by him. The concept then works through their robust visual effects in the constitution of form as philosophy.²¹

A curious but perfectly understandable place that alam al-mithal, taken as the world of similitudes, shows up is in Frank Herbert’s sci-fi novel *Dune* (1965). Given the publication date of *Dune*, it is quite probable that Herbert picked up the concept from his readings of Corbin or Rahman. We read:

Still, there was about him a feeling of abandonment. He wondered if it might be possible that his ruh-spirit had slipped over somehow into the world where the Fremmen believed he had his true existence—into the alam al-mithal, the world of similitudes, that metaphysical realm where all physical limitations were removed. And he knew fear at the thought of such a place, because removal of all limitations meant removal of all points of reference. In the landscape of a myth he could not orient himself and say: “I am I because I am here.”²²

This early entry of the idea of alam al-mithal into a vastly popular piece of American sci-fi is a precursor for the way the rich and rooted philosophical rendition of the term has remained potent and fruitful in its aesthetic, literary, fictional, and ultimately philosophical prowess.

Such popular renditions, however, should not detract from the larger philosophical frame of references where the very site of mundus imaginalis alludes to a larger spectrum of ideas from which alternative worlds embracing what we have known and lived reveal themselves. Mundus imaginalis is a hidden but palpable universe, from which I propose that a sea of parabolic allusions surfaces and emerges. But these parables are not the only things that those worlds have in store and have implicated for us to read and reclaim. An entire philosophical, moral,

and literary universe is contingent on and embedded in that world—which requires a different prospectus for revealing them in place. This book is just one among a whole spectrum of visions where that mundus imaginalis has revealed itself. I intend to expose it for all to see.

Persian Parables: Performance as Form

The true is not the object of a noetic comprehension evidence . . . the true does not have a metaphysical or logical nature but a rhetorical one.

—GIANNI VATTIMO, “DIALECTIC, DIFFERENCE,
WEAK THOUGHT” (2012)²³

Let me now gently pivot toward my main purpose. Next to Arabic, Persian has been a singularly important language in the intellectual history of the Muslim world. Along with Turkish and Urdu, Persian has had a major role in expanding its moral and literary imagination. The Qur’an is in Arabic, but there have been prominent Muslims who believed Rumi’s *Masnawi* is the Qur’an in Persian. Prophetic Hadiths (all obviously in Arabic) are central to Muslim sacred imagination but so are their renditions into Persian. Islamic theology, philosophy, mysticism, and jurisprudence have all found a vast and variegated land in Arabic, but Persian has offered these fields equally fertile grounds. Arabic prose and poetry and historiography are the pride of the Islamic civilization, and rightly so, but so are their Persian counterparts. If Arabic has been the lingua franca of the Muslim world to its west, to its east Persian has played a no less significant role. The vast continental expansions from India to Central Asia to the Caucasus, Iran and the Eastern Mediterranean domains—what is now rightly considered “the Persian cosmopolis”—have been the realm of Persian language and cultures.²⁴ This is all known and true in the long and varied history of Islamic civilization—to the point that when we say “next to Arabic” we do not mean *after* but *adjacent* to Arabic, as are Turkish and Urdu. These are not “vernacular” languages—as in homey and domestic. They have their own linguistic, moral, and imaginative universes.

My contention is that in the long history of Iranian (pre-Islamic) and Islamic literary, poetic, artistic, and intellectual productions, Persian prose and poetry have constituted a reality unto themselves. Writing in Persian has brought together an array of literary prose and poetry, learned treaties on philosophy and mysticism, theology and jurisprudence, science and technology, all gathering into a singular confluence that I identify as *parabolic*. There is a performative platform

on which this parabolic propensity of the language stages itself—a staging that has manifested itself in a variety of discourses and has given the result a unique literary disposition that allows us to think through and contemplate the specificity of *form* having, regardless of what is being communicated, a philosophical character of its own. In choosing a Persian word for the term “parable,” I have offered *qesseh* or *mathal*, both of which are Qur’anic in origin but have entered Persian literary provenance and assumed a veritable set of idiomatic sensibilities. While *qesseh* can stand alone, *mathal* usually refers to an allegorical story to illustrate a point. But *mathal* as a genre, as a mode of thinking, can extend to a full short story too. In either case, this parabolic disposition of the language has given it a privileged position as a philosophical form, evident in the language itself but in serious need of theorization. This parabolic disposition of Persian does not mean there is no philosophical discourse on the Aristotelian-Avicennan (peripatetic) model in the language, or even scientific prose, or theological and mystical treatises, all in highly complicated and theoretical prose. We have plenty of such cases. My attention to Persian parables in particular does not mean that Arabic, or Urdu, or Turkish, or any other adjacent languages are less capable of such parabolic propensities. But in this study, I wish to bring closer attention to the parabolic disposition of the Persian language and the myriad ways in which it has manifested itself. This detailed emphasis will enable me to push forward the theoretical proposition I have in mind and wish to share.

When we read Rumi’s *Masnavi* and come across the story of the deaf man who visits a sick friend and has memorized a set of cliché responses to the man’s hypothetical questions and then gets them all wrong; or the story of the shepherd who offends the prophet Moses with his anthropomorphism of God; or the story of the Roman and Chinese painters; or the story of the deer caught in the stable of asses; or any of countless other stories, they do two things simultaneously: (1) They illustrate a point about an abstract theological or mystical or philosophical issue Rumi is addressing, and (2) they come together to posit a formal character of their own in moral imagination and discursive philosophy, independent of whatever instrumental use to which they are put in the text. While the first function of these stories has been identified and closely read, the second has scarcely even been noted as worthy of critical attention. Muslim philosophers like Avicenna, Suhrawardi, al-Tusi, and Mulla Sadra thoroughly theorized the idea of philosophical thinking, while Ferdowsi, Rumi, Sa’di, Nezami, Jami, Amir Khosrow Dehlavi, and countless other poets have enacted and practiced it. By the time we get to later poets and prose writers like Nima Yushij, Sadegh Hedayat, Mehdi Akhavan-e Sales, Forough Farrokhzad, and many others, parabolic prose

and poetry have been formally consolidated. When we reach filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami, Bahram Beiza'i, and Amir Naderi, that prolonged legacy of prose and poetry has been extended cinematically—where Persian parabolic prose and poetry have assumed a decidedly aesthetic force.²⁵ As in my other works, I am not satisfied by merely identifying a feature of Persian poetics or prosody and leaving it at that. I wish to see what happens when these make their traumatic purgatorial passage through postcolonial gestations. I contend that the rise of contemporary Persian film, fiction, and new poetry is rooted in this parabolic disposition rather than a cliché and blindfolded adaptation of European models. This is not to deny or dismiss the overwhelming power of colonized imagination, or to compromise the transnational public sphere in which it happens, but rather to complicate the hidden layers of a creative imagination at work in a literary, poetic, or cinematic text. The point here is that when a story asks to illustrate a philosophical or moral proposition, that illustration, that parable, is actually the point, and the presumably substantive issue the excuse. In other words, I wish to reverse the order of the point being made and the example being provided to illustrate that point, and give primacy to the parabolic example rather than the point it is presumably illustrating. I have always said about Rumi that his stories are more important than the moralizing prose and purpose that comes before or after them—that the parabolic poetic of the moment is the form of the philosophy they entail.²⁶

I therefore intend to extend the idea of parable into the world of images it entails from its philosophical origins to its literary domains in both classical and contemporary gestations—thereby overriding two interrelated ideas of European “colonial modernity” and the institution of “literature,” divided into medieval and modern stages, both of which I wish to suspend and overcome. What we call “fiction” in imitation of European “modern literature” is in fact parabolic prose or more philosophically rooted in the realm of what Suhrawardi termed “*alam al-mithal*” and Corbin translated as “*mundus imaginalis*.” This way of thinking gives an entirely different archaeology and genealogy of so-called modern Persian fiction, connects it to its classical precedents in a more cogent and meaningful way, and as a result decouples it from the innately alienating colonial modernity that has laid a false and totalizing claim on it. The same is true for the discourse of history and its literary and poetic prose, as well as in the realm of contemporary art, with the potent Saqqa-khaneh movement as a prime example. Once carefully theorized and articulated, based on solid philosophical and literary evidence, the ideas of Persian parables, and form as philosophy, will have a long projection for how to recast and reread a whole civilizational spectrum of its operation.

In seeking to make my case resonate more deeply, I draw from larger theoretical frames of reference. Shklovsky's "Art, as Device" is foremost in my mind as I begin this study. Adorno is also present, in his pioneering arguments in *Against Epistemology* (1956), as is Susan Sontag in her case *Against Interpretation* (1966). Gianni Vattimo's idea of "il pensiero debole" (weak thought) as first articulated in *La fine della modernità* (The End of Modernity, 1985) is here too. My particular interest in this study is with specifically parabolic prose of the sort we see in Avicenna, Suhrawardi, and then widely extended in the works of such literary masters as Sādi and Rumi, and staged in *Kelileh and Demneh*, and other iconic texts, both classical and contemporary. I have therefore a larger frame of reference in the context of Persian prose and poetry in general where this parabolic proclivity has cast a longer shadow over the manner the trope posits and asserts itself. Historically, next to the imperial framing and liturgical sanctity of Arabic, Persian becomes a decidedly subversive and perforce parabolic language, made to look "vernacular" (a false and decidedly Christian designation) compared to Arabic, imperial in its own pre-Islamic imagination and subsequently cosmopolis—meaning no matter what the substance or content of the prose, its very literary linguisticity has always already assumed a proverbially defiant significance. Persian parabolic proclivity in prose and poetry is the result of two congruent factors: the shadow empire of the past received in Pahlavi sources and translated into Arabic and New Persian, and the militant empire of the present performed in Arabic. I intend to read the causes and consequences of this parabolic proclivity within these two adjacent provenances and the context they entail.

That parabolic proclivity has always staged a potent performative aspect in the genre of *hekatyat* (anecdotes) such as those of the wise fool Bohlul-e Aql in what in Arabic and Persian sources we call *oqala al-majanin* or *aqelan-e divaneh* (wise fools). In this genre, *hekatyat* assume particularly parabolic twists in decidedly sarcastic, satirical, suggestive, and subversive ways. An example is *Oqala al-Majanin wa al-Muwaswasin* (The Wise Fools and the Possessed) by Abu Muhammad al-Hassan bin Isma'il al-Darrab (926–1001). Another similar, slightly later text is Abu al-Qasem al-Hassan bin Muhammad bin Habib al-Nisaburi's (d. ca. 1016) *Oqala al-Majanin*.²⁷ The chief characters of Bohlul, Joha, Molla Nasr al-Din, and others are placed in varied contexts where they utter witty and wise sayings always with a pointed narrative twist. They live on the peripheries of cities, in ruins, and in graveyards, and venture into society briefly before retreating to their own worlds. Bohlul has assumed proverbial significance in this genre, both rooted in a historical figure, Abu Sahib Bohlul bin Amal al-Sirafi al-Kofi

(fl. 8th c.), and yet widely mythologized. Legend has it that the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid (d. 809) wanted a fatwa against Imam Musa al-Kazem, which many learned ulama offered, except Bohlul, who pretended to be a fool.²⁸ Similar to Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* (1511) and the genre it represents, this body of work in both Arabic and Persian is also known as "Jonun-e Elahi" (Divine Madness). Ibn Arabi, in his *Futuhat al-Makiyyeh* (Meccan Revelations) (1203–1240), refers to the stories, plural, as Bahalil. In Persian specifically, the towering poet Attar (ca. 1145–1221) in his *Mosibat-nameh* (Book of Tragedy) pays extensive attention to these oqala al-majanin.²⁹ It is particularly in this genre that the rhetorical, performative, and parabolic potency of truth claims, as Vattimo would say, becomes widely evident and openly opposes and overrides any and all meta-physical or logical claim to truth.

Parable Assumes Philosophical Form

At a time when I had just exited the women's quarters and been liberated from the limitations of childhood . . . I was awakened from the onslaught of sleep. Because of the deep darkness about me, I held a lit candle in my hand, headed toward the men's quarters, and spent the night there contemplating.

—SUHRAWARDI, "AVAZ-E PAR-E JIBRIL" (THE ECHOES
OF GABRIEL'S WINGS)³⁰

Reading Suhrawardi's "alam al-mithal" through a parabolic proclivity of the language he had theorized and practiced dismantles and overcomes the two colonially mandated domains of "modernity" and "literature"—neither of which has an autonomous validity *sui generis* outside the colonial condition of their crafting and superimposition on non-European cultures, which it has cannibalized, anthropologized, and digested as fodder for its own categorical superiority. In pursuing this project, we have two complementary tasks: (1) to examine the philosophical proposition of mundus imaginalis as detailed by Suhrawardi, and then (2) to follow the parabolic prose and poetry that offer access to that world beyond its philosophical domains. Suhrawardi himself offers the best specimen of that prose in his Persian treatises as well as the very grammar of what we now consider literary prose or fiction. There has been a whole misbegotten project of "literary modernity" to trace Nima Yushij's poetry and Sadegh Hedayat's fiction, for example, to cultural encounters with European colonialism—thus, in effect, as manifestations of the self-alienating project of colonial modernity finding local agencies and as indications of colonized imagination. The project also

introduces a seismic fissure between classical and contemporary (falsely dubbed modern) literatures. The same with the bifurcation between fact and fiction, or history and story. We need to dismantle this enduring colonial project and rescue the organic coherence of a whole philosophical project, restore moral imagination and authorial agency rooted in the *mundus imaginalis* and delivered in varied parabolic prose and poetry, or in a combination of both as poetic prose.

In this study I intend to go through a succession of what today we consider historical or literary, poetic or philosophical, filmic or artistic evidence, teasing out their common parabolic disposition as texts performed on a hermeneutic, semiotic, and allegorical platform far more rooted, organic, and coherent than before they were cannibalized on the flawed stage of colonial modernity. The task at hand is restoring the internal dynamic and thematic consistency of a literary and philosophical heritage otherwise distorted on the platform of “Tradition and Modernity.” I wish to overcome that false and falsifying binary—via a force integral to the prolonged literary and philosophical traditions of a culture. The point of the argument here is not to question or underestimate the destructive and distortive forces of European and Eurocentric historiography, conceptual hegemony, or disfiguring power as performed by colonizing and colonized minds but to begin to alter the discourse, resist and overcome the epistemological violence that the whole project of colonial modernity has systematically and consistently perpetrated on the moral and intellectual heritage of colonized cultures.

The existing literature on *alam al-mithal* obviously takes flight from Corbin’s and to a lesser degree Rahman’s influential readings of Suhrawardi—and rightly so. But this critical literature habitually oscillates between the Illuminationist philosophy of Suhrawardi and the mystical treatises of Ibn Arabi, with solid bases in the variegated literature of both. My proposal and direction, however, is here more on the borderline between philosophy on one side and literature (Persian prose and poetry of a more creative nature) on the other. I also intend to break the chronological border between past and present and argue and demonstrate the literary and philosophical continuum collapsing into the parabolic prose and poetry domain in Persian that allows us to have a more sustained understanding of the fictive power of this parabolic spectrum. My initial evidence for that proposal is the parabolic (allegorical) prose in Suhrawardi’s own Persian oeuvre. From Suhrawardi, I go back to his primary inspiration, Avicenna, and after Avicenna, to Ibn Tufail. Predicated on that premise, I then intend to expand the idea into multiple other eras and genres, deliberately overriding chronological barriers, to see and consider classical and contemporary textual evidence on the same continuum and in the same light.

Rumi, Ferdowsi, Sa'di, Awfi, Attar, and of course the whole world of *Kelileh and Demneh*—they all tell stories: qesseh, hekayat, and others. On the surface, it may seem that there are always a purpose and a moral to these stories—and there usually are. But ultimately they are entirely tangential and even prosaic to the actual stories themselves, which have been screaming for critical attention as to what they are and what they do. Those morals are embedded in the stories themselves, but the stories are richer and more potent, with more narrative energy, than whatever the author may use to bring them to a punchline. This has to do with the dramatic and the dramaturgic power of the stories or the parabolic prose and poetry that is never exhausted in any particular (sometime prosaic) morals that might be concluded from them. My point is to read those morals as the liaisons between the inner world of the stories and the outer world of their audiences and thus dwell on the stories themselves and the *narrative normative* and the *narrative imperative* momentum that drives them. In other words, dwell on their exciting and sometimes even mysterious parabolic forms rather than on their moral and material byproducts. “Poetry,” as Shklovsky observed, “is a particular method of thinking, namely, thinking in images; this method creates a certain economy of intellectual energy, ‘the sensation of relatively easy processing,’ with the aesthetic sense being a reflex of this economy.”³¹ I wish to read that insight into the wider spectrum of Persian prose and poetry, their thinking in images, their abode of *alam al-amthal*, their *mundus imaginalis*, or what elsewhere I have called “worlds of pure verisimilitude.” The reason, as will become increasingly evident, is to locate the contemporary post-colonial persons and personae on the platform of an otherwise unknowing subject who has already overcome their colonial desubjection even to write these words.

In this vein, there is also a parabolic way of reading *karamat*, stories of divine gifts of grace, in masterpieces of Sufi literature that is never violated with the assault of rationalism and reality, and honors their vibrant, poetic, aesthetic, allegorical and perforce parabolic rootedness in *alam al-mithal*. Consider the text of *Asrar al-Towhid fi Maqamat Abu Sa'id* (Signs of Divine Unity: On the Character of Abu Sa'id), the twelfth-century masterpiece about the Sufi master Abu Sa'id Abi al-Khayr, written by Muhammad ibn Monavvar, one of his grandsons, some 130 years after his passing. It is widely considered a sublime example of Persian prose perhaps particularly because of its parabolic anecdotes about the Sufi master it celebrates. Reading this extraordinary body of literature as parables, rather than rushing to approximate them, for example, to “magic realism” as some scholars have recently sought to do, would cast them in terms entirely

compatible with their inner logic.³² Karamat usually refer to supernatural acts of wonders performed by Muslim saints. The key question in reading them is to see how the parabolic prose of their delivery requires a different mode of reading. Karamat, as parabolic par excellence, to cite Shklovsky once more, “restore the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make a stone stony.” It is in the same vein as the karamat that we might read Suhrawardi’s philosophical allegories such as “Aql-e Sorkh” (The Red Intellect) where the prose has assumed idyllic and imaginal (parabolic) potency. Philosophy, in short, here has assumed entirely parabolic form.

Form as Philosophy: “Oriental Philosophy” Delivered

A reciter of the Qur’an was reading from the Book:

“Say, ‘Have you considered: if your water was to become sunken
[into the earth],
[then who could bring you flowing water?]
I conceal water in ditches—
Dry the springs and turn them barren!

Who will bring the water back to springs
Except for Me, Mighty, Matchless, and Able?”
An arrogant philosopher and logician
Was coming back from the school that very moment—
When he heard that verse
He said: “I can bring the water back with a hatchet:
With the help of a shovel and a hatchet
We’ll bring the water from the depth to the surface!”
The philosopher went to sleep that night
And dreamt of a powerful man hitting him
With a pistol and blinding both his eyes—
And he said: “Now use your hatchet and bring back your sight
You buffoon, if you can!”
He woke up the following day and noticed he was blinded in both
his eyes
The light had just departed from his two eyes
Alas he knew not how to repent
The joy of repentance is not the sweet of just any drunk. . . .

—RUMI, MASNAVI, BOOK 2³³

Avicenna and Suhrawardi were renowned philosophers whose bodies of work are in solid and established philosophical traditions—one mostly peripatetic, the other Illuminist—yet both wrote parabolic prose entirely inimical to reading them backward into their respective philosophies. These tracts have baffled their subsequent interpreters, who have tried to assimilate them to their authors' more conventional philosophical prose—or else read them as “mystical,” meaning barred from close and critical encounters. It is the form of these parabolic writings, however, that has to be taken seriously and at face value. I propose that we read this constellation of provocative prose performed in a decidedly dramaturgical mode not as allegorical or symbolic interludes in the sense of being secret allusions to something else. These are parables and, as such, point to a particular form of creative and critical thinking impossible and unattainable in the conventional philosophical prose of which Avicenna and Suhrawardi were masters. The authors opted for these parabolic alternatives, and instead of violently assimilating the works backward to the philosophers' conventional treatises, we must leave them be in peace and allow them to perform their power as parables.

The question is, what happens to the sustained traces of a parabolic prose performed in philosophical, poetic, mythic, or even (or particularly) in political terms? They may be romancing an adventure here or do moral edification there, and they may resurface as the verisimilitude of colonial modernity in yet a different age, as they may also show up in visual and performing arts—all the while revealing the visions of the otherwise invisible in palpably parabolic terms. The central idea of *form* I offer here is in purposeful juxtaposition and opposition to the abiding urge toward *content* and therefore a forced *symbolism* in Persian literary and philosophical prose—that everything must mean something, and the power of the formal surface is so anxiety-provoking that it must by all means be denied, disregarded. In these veritable traditions, there is an uncontrollable opposition to letting X be just X, for X must be Y, and X is therefore made forcefully and violently to stand for Y. I am decidedly against such unwarranted urges. There is no inherent, integral, logical, either obvious or hidden indication that X stands for anything other than X itself. X is X. The mystery, if we must look for one, is indeed on the *surface* and in the *form*, in the *word*. This almost pathological urge to find hidden meaning in things has at once falsely enriched and yet paradoxically impoverished our reading of Persian literary and philosophical forms. In this study, I therefore wish to restore an originary attention to that *form* and excavate the architectonics of its poetic and aesthetic formalism. This study purposefully pulls away from the temptation of hidden meanings, opts for the

hermeneutics of the surface of things, and pivots toward the sensual excitedness of the literary, the poetic, and the aesthetic. It is the fear of the naked sensuality of the prose that has bothered and cast the history of Persian philosophical hermeneutics and literary criticism alike toward a conspiratorial theory of hidden meanings. Yes, there are all sorts of allusions in philosophical discourses and literary masterpieces. But those allusions, too, are integral to the form of the allegorical prose of parables that these stories assume.

My main project here is to propose parabolic form as a mode of philosophical meditation performed in Persian, though there are plenty of examples, including those by Avicenna and Suhrawardi, initially done in Arabic. What Avicenna promised as *al-hikmah al-mashriqiyah* (Oriental philosophy) and performed in his three main parabolic pieces (*Risalah al-Tayr* [Epistle of the Birds], *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, and *Salaman and Absal*) and Suhrawardi theorized as *hikmah al-ishraq* (Illuminationist philosophy) and staged in his Persian recitals (such as “Aql-e Sorkh” and “Avaz-e Par-e Jibril”) is precisely this philosophical form staged as parables—so that the form of these parables becomes the *modus operandi* of that Oriental philosophy. The preponderance of parables in multiple genres has given Persian prose and poetry a particularly parabolic character, which has in turn become the imperceptible form of its philosophical meditations. Beginning with the Persian translations of Avicenna’s *Risalah al-Tayr* and continuing with Suhrawardi’s Persian recitals and allegorical parables, all the way to Abd al-Rahman Jami’s rendition of *Salaman and Absal* in Persian poetry, this mode of allegorical meditation has been thoroughly theorized. From Avicenna to al-Ghazali to Suhrawardi to Mulla Sadra, the idea was theorized in Arabic, but practiced and performed in Persian, particularly in poetic prose and poetry. This study I now undertake may itself be considered a project in theorizing that event in Persian, performed in English.

The parabolic language of philosophy in Persian is neither Greek (Western) nor Islamic (Arabic) in its epistemological disposition, neither Aristotelian peripatetic, nor Greek (or Syriac) Neoplatonic—though it has no anxiety of origin to partake in them both for its own parabolic reasons. It is rooted in a linguistic event in philosophy—not a philosophical event in a language. It is therefore not Islamic philosophy performed in Persian. It is Persian philosophy as a philosophical event in and of itself. It is a linguistic turn *to*, not *in*, philosophy. It has been falsely assimilated backward into Islamic philosophy that is basically performed in Arabic—though Arabic language itself can lay an equally legitimate linguistic claim on Islamic philosophy. For Persian, though, that would be a false assimilation into Arabic or Islamic. The landscape of Persian prose and prosody has

determined what is done and what is possible in philosophy when performed in parabolic Persian. Taking the parabolic mode of thinking seriously would in and of itself liberate those philosophers who have actively used it from being pigeonholed into the forced mold of “Islamic philosophy,” itself an Orientalist proposition initiated by enthusiastic Orientalists like Henry Corbin, in order to be understood. Corbin was after crafting a philosophical tradition, which he called “Islamic” or even “Prophetic,” to stand up to “Western philosophy,” for which he had ideologically lost hope. We need not share that anxiety—or cast any philosophical event in Persian or Arabic in its false shadow. That liberation of the Persian event is a key concern in this book, where I both argue and perform that act of liberation from an Islamist (at home) and Orientalist (abroad) appropriation of the text inside trapped metaphors. This act of liberation does not in and of itself discredit the current category of “Islamic philosophy,” but it does give epistemic primacy to the metaphoric language of a particularly Persian event.

As a philosophical form, the Persian parable works allegorically rather than categorically; it argues aesthetically rather than epistemically; it thrives poetically, even when performed in prose; and it affects through its indirections and *Verfremdungseffekt* or *ostranenie* effect rather than analytic persuasions. It is a kind of “*pensiero debole*” before Gianni Vattimo coined the phrase. It is not through metaphysical certainties that it works but via aesthetic intonations, indirections, and allusions. Philosophical reasoning (à la Greek or Islamic) is too blunt, too clumsy, too wooden. In fact, at one point in his *Masnavi*, Rumi says,

*Pa-ye estedlalian chubin bovad—
Pa-ye Chubin bi tamkin bovad...*

The feet of the rationalists are wooden.
Wooden feet are unstable.³⁴

This mode of philosophical prose is parabolic, not symbolic, for it thrives in itself, not pointing to something else. While historians of Islamic philosophy have heated debates about the nature and disposition of this Oriental philosophy, whether it was real and sustained or merely suggestive and inconsequential, my concern is with its potent domain in the rich fields of Persian prose and poetry where it has left a vast tapestry of traces as to how it works. My contention: As a philosophical form, Persian parables renew the sensation of life and of living—as Shklovsky would say.³⁵

What I am suggesting about the cumulative effects of Persian parables staging a particular literary form as a philosophical trope is not anything unusual or

unprecedented. From Plato's allegory of the cave to John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, to a wide array of parables in Kierkegaard's oeuvre, and beyond that as exemplified in Kafka's literary proclivity toward parabolic prose, we have ample evidence of parabolic thinking in philosophical and literary imagination. As exemplified in Nahum N. Glazer's edited volume *Franz Kafka: Parables and Paradoxes* (1961) and Thomas C. Oden's edited volume *Parables of Kierkegaard* (1978), scholars have long noticed and paid specific attention to parables as philosophical or literary tropes. Much of the scholarship in the field of parable studies is obviously about and rooted in the parables of Jesus in the Bible. James Champion's "Parable as an Ancient and a Modern Form" (1989) is an excellent example of the way the literary form has become emblematic of a larger frame of reference than just the Biblical versions of it. John Dominic Crossan's impressive body of work, from *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (1973) to *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (1975), to his exquisite study *Power of Parable: How Fiction "by Jesus" Became Fiction "about Jesus"* (2012), has cast a significant light on the centrality of parables on the borderlines between theology and literature. More recently, R. Zimmermann's "How to Understand the Parables of Jesus: A Paradigm Shift in Parable Exegesis" (2009) seriously recast the way the parables of Jesus were read by the earlier generation of Adolf Jülicher (1857–1938).

My book, however, benefits from this vast body of Biblical scholarship only tangentially while it goes in a decidedly different direction as it explores the untapped repertoire of Persian parables as a philosophical (not theological or Christological) form. The potential and intended readership of my book therefore crosses multiple disciplines, with what I intend to identify as Persian parables as a unique mode of critical and creative thinking widely performed in the Persian language. My project requires rethinking a vast philosophical and literary legacy with the dual objective of scrutinizing the particular penchant of Persian prose and poetry toward parables and considering their constitution of a particular formal trope as a philosophical project—a task virtually untouched by literary scholars and students of Islamic philosophy alike.

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