Preface

The idea of writing this book is as much personal as professional. When I was a young teenager, the experience of the 1979 Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War (1980 – 1988) made such a deep impression on my soul that after years of living in exile, I am still haunted by the images of the war and ponder about the events of the Revolution. I will never forget the first references to the Revolution. My teachers at a school in the southern part of Tehran were involved with the Revolution. Our school was among the few Islamic schools in the Pahlavi period in which we were trained to memorise the Quran and had extra theological lessons and extracurricular activities such as calligraphy. During our theology lessons, our devout teacher furtively told us that he could bring us Ayatollah Khomeini's rare book Kashf al-asrār ("Unveiling of the Secrets," 1943). Fascinated by Khomeini's personality, I immediately ordered it. I can remember how enthusiastic I was when my teacher gave me the light green covered book a few weeks later. I took the book home and did not dare to share it with my pious grandfather, a learned man who remained distanced from politics. He was critical of Khomeini and the Revolution. My father being in Europe, we lived with my grandparents in one of those nostalgic old Southern Tehran houses with bīrūnī ("outside") and andarūnī ("inner parts") architecture. In the bīrūnī area, with a nice little garden and a small pool, and several rooms, my grandfather received visitors who came for advice, while the inner area was for us, with its large garden, old plane trees, a large pool, many rooms and a beautiful cool cellar where we used to spend the hot afternoons. I cannot remember that I ever understood the book in those days, especially because I was so immersed in all the events taking place around me.

The Revolution was developing very swiftly. The bazaaris went on strike, followed by the workers at oil refineries. Every day we witnessed larger groups demonstrating on the streets, chanting slogans such as "Death to the Shah," "Death to Tyranny," or "Independence, Freedom and Islamic Republic." Soon the presence of the army changed the peaceful streets I had known. As the demonstrations and destruction of public buildings such as banks and cinemas intensified, a curfew followed. We also heard that the government forces readily opened fire on demonstrations. Every morning, when I went to school or to play football in the street, I would see new slogans, and the image of a red hand with a stencil of Khomeini's face on the walls. The walls had become sign-boards, participating in the protests. The first time I saw the impression of a red hand on the wall a friend told me that it was a symbol of demonstrators who had been killed or wounded, some of whom put their blood-stained hands on a wall.

The Revolution was everywhere. The shootings were heard not only at night, but more and more during the day. The climax was the Black Friday massacre, just a few kilometres from my grandparents' house, when the Shah's police opened fire on hundreds of people.

From this moment, the Revolution was inevitable. People around me were repeating that the Shah's attempts to change the course of events were futile. I remember heated discussions in family circles. Some were hypnotised by the idea of freedom; others were enchanted by Ayatollah Khomeini, whom they considered to be mystically minded, or an Iranian Mahatma Gandhi. Others, such as my grandfather, were completely against the involvement of religion in politics. One day, our teacher brought a picture of Khomeini, sitting under an apple tree in Neauphle-le-Château in France, wearing a brown woollen mantle over a blue shirt. One could see his self-confident smile and picture his slow speech and gentle movements which had become a symbol for the fight against western imperialism. Soon we heard that the Shah had decided to leave the country and that preparations were being made to bring Khomeini back to Iran after 15 years of exile. It was a tense and emotional period. His arrival marked a short interval of openness and a period in which ministers, generals and advocates of the Pahlavi regime were executed by the Revolutionary Courts. I can still remember the front pages of the newspapers with disturbing pictures of the bloodsoaked bodies of those who had been pitilessly executed. My grandfather removed all such papers from my sight. My safe Tehran had changed: Iran was transformed into a theocracy in less than two years.

In the first months after the Revolution I thought a period of normalisation would soon appear, but this was not the case as, a few months later, Saddam Hussein's army invaded Iran, occupying the oil-rich city of Khorramshahr. I remember how newspapers, radio and TV were reporting Saddam's killing of hundreds of innocent people and the destruction of the city. With the outbreak of the war all the political activities of diverse parties and movements were banned. Many politically engaged Iranians, who had been among the core participants in the Revolution, had to flee the country. My father, who had returned to Iran just a few months earlier, fled the country as well. People were still hoping that the war would end and a more democratic system would come to power. While people kept hoping, the situation worsened when the students of "the line of Imam" occupied the American embassy and held the personnel hostage for 444 days.

The war was devastating. When we heard that Iraqi fighter jets could fly over Tehran, we felt especially unsafe. Shortly afterwards, several of my friends, who were just a few years older than I but had certainly not reached the age of conscription, went to the front. The news of their deaths, wrapped in the term mar-

tyrdom, soon reached us. Already, the names of most streets and alleys had been changed to the names of those killed during the Revolution and the war. Tehran's identity was changing.

A few years later, the war of the cities started. Missiles and bombing of the cities meant that we could be attacked every night. Having no shelters, we all came together on the streets, waiting to hear the sound of the bombs, which meant the destruction of a large area and death for many innocents. I witnessed how many of my generation went to the front and were killed, or came back disabled or shell-shocked, while a few of them fled the country. It was my destiny to join my parents in the Netherlands, but memories of my friends who were killed during the war, of the frightening moments we experienced during the Revolution and the war, are still with me.

This book is just a droplet of those memories, moulded into an academic form. During the whole of my career I have been engaged mainly with the notion of love, Persian romances, Persian mystical poetry and Islamic piety. Several friends have asked why I have been engaged in writing this book, which analyses the poetry of the Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, a poetry stained with blood, violence and death. For me, writing this book has been a way to understand how these two epoch-making events during my teenage years have been commented on, how they have changed many aspects of Persian culture, and how my generation is still stunned by the swift pace of so many developments. Moreover, I have been curious about the role of poetry, a lasting icon of Persian culture, in all these events.