The Shī‘ī Passion: *Ta‘ziyeh*, Tragedy and the Sublime

by
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ABSTRACT

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Title: The Shī'ī Passion: *Ta'ziyeh*, Tragedy and the Sublime

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This thesis is a study of *ta'ziyeh*, or the Shī'ī passion play commemorating the martyrdom of Ḥusayn b. 'Alī, the grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad. The goal of the work is to provide an aesthetic evaluation of the plays and their tragic and sublime aspects. It begins with a discussion of the historical development of *ta'ziyeh* and its most important theatrical features. This is followed by an interpretation of *ta'ziyeh* using Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* as a guide. Nietzsche's work on tragedy has not been chosen to equate the Persian plays with Greek theatre, but rather to show how *ta'ziyeh* embodies certain tragic ideals proposed by the German philosopher. In its final section, the thesis extrapolates from Nietzsche to highlight two important aesthetic aspects of the passion plays: the central role of Ḥusayn in the cosmological drama of Shī'ism, and the sublime nature of *ta'ziyeh*. Thus, this work tries to compare *ta'ziyeh* to certain Western conceptions of art, while maintaining that the Persian passion plays are representative of Shī'ism's vital aesthetic dimension.

RÉSUMÉ

Auteur: Heather Empey

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Département: Institut des Études Islamiques, Université McGill

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Ce mémoire entreprend une étude de *ta'ziyeh*, ou le drame religieux chiite dédié à la commémoration du martyre de Ḥusayn b. 'Alī, le petit-fils du Prophète Muḥammad. L'objectif de l'ouvrage est de fournir une exposition esthétique des drames et de leurs éléments tragiques et sublimes. La première étape comprend un résumé du développement historique de *ta'ziyeh*, ainsi que des plus importantes de ses caractéristiques dramatiques. Ceci est suivi d'une interprétation de *ta'ziyeh* à partir de *La Naissance de la tragédie* de Friedrich Nietzsche. Cet ouvrage de Nietzsche n'a pas été choisi afin d'assimiler le théâtre *ta'ziyeh* au théâtre grec, sinon afin de démontrer que le théâtre *ta'ziyeh* réuni certains des idéals de la tragédie, établis par le philosophe allemand. En dernier lieu, cette thèse transpose de Nietzsche afin de souligner deux aspects esthétiques importants de ces drames religieux : le rôle clé joué par Ḥusayn dans le drame cosmologique du chiisme, et le caractère sublime de *ta'ziyeh*. Ainsi, cet ouvrage tâche de comparer le théâtre *ta'ziyeh* à certaines conceptions occidentales de l'art, tout en soutenant que les drames religieux persans sont des emblèmes représentatifs d'une dimension esthétique essentielle au chiisme.

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If the whole of history is in one man, it is all to be explained from individual experience. There is a relation between the hours of our life and the centuries of time.

(Ralph Waldo Emerson, *History*)

All the artistic movements formed by artists, either with supernatural feelings or by ones without them, have tried to make art not so much a means to picture and describe reality or to define man, as his clear, existing model, but to use and recognize it as an inevitable challenge, a divine, creative becoming, the evolving of feelings and of the essential truth of man's being.

(Ali Shariati, *Art Awaiting the Saviour*)

Introduction

It was in *The Birth of Tragedy*, that Friedrich Nietzsche infamously observed, "it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*."[1] Although this may have been a comforting thought for the young philosopher, like all Nietzschean pronouncements, its potential uses and abuses are numerous. Thus spurred on, one receptive reader might pursue a course of uncovering truth and beauty in previously uncharted realms of existence. Conversely, an idle or unfeeling mind might just as easily slip into a dilettantish use of the world's joys and sufferings as cursory inspirations for pen or canvas. Regardless of what we might think about the philosopher's statement, we know that the aesthetic was to preoccupy Nietzsche throughout his life.

Contemporary studies of religious ritual and practice are in little danger of being either over-idealized or oversimplified by aesthetic sensibilities. The study of ritual today is more likely to be dominated by historical, anthropological or psychological considerations. The historian may seek to isolate the genesis of a certain practice, or to follow its development through eras of social and political change. Social scientists try to uncover the origins of ritual through its practitioners, and the material and social circumstances which govern their actions. Current trends are certainly reflected in the work which has been done on *ta'zīyeh*[2] or the Persian "passion plays" in honour of the martyrdom of

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[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy Or: Hellenism and Pessimism (New Edition With an Attempt at a Self-Criticism)*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, The Modern Library, 1967/2000), 52. I have used the Kaufman translation throughout. It is also important to note that Nietzsche repeats his observation in the penultimate chapter of his work stating, "existence and the world seem justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon," 141.

[2] Throughout this study, I have used the term *ta'zīyeh* as I have seen it transliterated from the Persian to specifically designate the Persian dramas. Thus, one can easily see where I am specifically discussing the plays. *Ta'ziyah* can refer to the ensemble of mourning practices for Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī, and originally meant to offer condolences. On the many uses of the term one can refer to P. Chelkowski, "*Ta'ziyah*," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, vol. x, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960--), 406-8.

Ḥusayn b. ʻAlī b. Abī Ṭalib which are to be the subject of this thesis.[3] Scholars from various academic backgrounds have done an admirable job in tracing not only the evolution of mourning rites for Ḥusayn, but also their ever-changing relationship to state power.[4] In this light, *taʻzīyeh* is more than just a subject for artistic appreciation; it is a political force in its own right, and one with the ability to bring about change in the societies in which it is practiced.

Not surprisingly, the theatrical characteristics of *taʻzīyeh* have also been dealt with at length by scholars, who have evaluated their poetic value, looked at their place in the wider body of Persian literature, and compared and contrasted them to various genres of Western theatre.[5] Peter J. Chelkowski, one of the best-known experts on *taʻzīyeh*, gives a definition of the dramas which stresses their uniqueness and importance: "TAʻZĪYEH-KHĀNĪ, or *shabih-khani*, popularly known as TAʻZIYEH, is the Shīʻi passion play performed mainly in Iran. The only indigenous and serious drama in the Islamic world, *taʻzīyeh* describes the death of Ḥusain and his followers on the plain of Karbalā'."[6] This description points to two fundamental aspects of *taʻzīyeh* which will be crucial to our discussion: first, that the martyrdom of Ḥusayn is the centerpiece of these dramas, and second, that among the diverse mourning rituals for Ḥusayn around the Islamic world, the Persian *taʻzīyeh* plays represent a distinct phenomenon.

The historical circumstances of Ḥusayn's martyrdom are generally known and can

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[3] For an overview of changes in late twentieth-century scholarship on the *taʻzīyeh*, one can refer to Inge Demant Mortensen, "New Approaches to the Study of the Shi'ite Ta'ziyeh Play," *Temenos* 26 (1991): 51-65.
[4] One such study is found in Gustav Thaiss, "Religious Symbolism and Social Change: The Drama of Husain." in *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie, (Berkley: University of California Press, 1972), where the author discusses how Iranian merchant guilds used Muḥarram rituals to express their political discontents.
[5] Two studies of note are Anayatullah Shahidi's "Literary and Musical Developments in Ta'ziyeh" and Parviz Mamnoun's "Ta'ziyeh from the Viewpoint of the Western Theatre," both found in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, Peter J. Chelkowski, ed. New York: New York University Press, 1979.
[6] Peter Chelkowski, "Popular Shīʻi Mourning Rituals," *Al-Serāt* XII/I (Spring, 1986): 217.

be described in brief.[7] Following the assassination of his father 'Alī in 661 CE and the death of his brother Ḥasan circa 670 or 678 CE, Ḥusayn was looked to by his father's partisans as a possible leader against the domination of the Umayyads. These had risen to power under Mu'āwiya b. Abī Sufyān, 'Alī's principal rival for the Caliphate. Mu'āwiya ultimately succeeded in consolidating power after 'Alī's assassination, and then thwarted Ḥasan's succession to the position. In contradiction to promises made to Ḥasan,[8] the new Caliph sought to have his own son Yazīd succeed him as ruler of the dynasty. This move, which outraged supporters of the 'Alids, as well as other Umayyad rivals, led to the mobilization of forces of resistance. Ḥusayn, who refused to swear the oath of allegiance (*bay'a*) to Yazīd after the death of Mu'āwiya in 680 CE, left his home in Medina for the safety of Mecca. There, he was persuaded that a group of his father's partisans in the Iraqi city of Kufa were prepared to help him lead a revolt against the Umayyads. Encouraged by the reports available to him, Ḥusayn left Mecca with his wives, children, and other family members and supporters, and made his way towards Iraq. His march was halted on the 2nd of the month of Muḥarram, on the plain of Karbalā' near Kufa. He and his small band then entered into a stand-off with a much larger force sent by the governor of Iraq, Ibn Ziyād. Cut off from any water supply and virtually abandoned by the Kufans, Ḥusayn and the men of his party were massacred by an Umayyad force led by 'Umar b. Sa'd on the 10th of Muḥarram. Ḥusayn is said to have been beheaded by Shimr b. Dhū al-Jawshan, one of the great villains of Shī'ī piety. The head of Ḥusayn, the women and young children of his

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[7] For this historical overview, I have drawn on Heinz Halm, *Shiism*, trans. Janet Watson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 8-16, and S. Husain M. Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam*, (London: Longman, 1979), 130-221.

[8] Most histories of the events leading up to Ḥusayn's martyrdom posit that Mu'āwiya promised that Ḥasan would be his successor to the Caliphate. Jafri, in his history, argues that Ḥasan asked that a *shūra* or election by council be held to determine Mu'āwiya's successor, as does Wilferd Madelung. See Jafri, *Origins*, 151-3, and Madelung, *The Succession to Muḥammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 322.

party and his only surviving son ʿAlī (Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn) were eventually taken to the Caliph Yazīd in Damascus, who agreed to send them back to Medina.

While this is only a simplified presentation of the death of Ḥusayn, the facts of his martyrdom and its spiritual significance has been greatly elaborated by the Shīʿa[9]. Indeed, for them, Ḥusayn is not simply a beloved fallen hero, rather he is the third in the chain of Twelve Imāms who are the true spiritual and temporal authorities of the Muslim community. However, of these Twelve, all of whom were martyred according to tradition, Ḥusayn holds a special place in the wider Shīʿī cosmology. As Mahmoud Ayoub says, "In a very direct and special way, Ḥusayn is connected with the history of creation and of mankind. He is also linked to the divine plan of the universe and through his martyrdom the destiny of men is determined. Human history revolves around him . . . ."[10] He further explains how the Shīʿī community has gone on to expand the narrative of the Imām's martyrdom in light of this cosmology:

> all things are integrated into the drama of martyrdom and endowed with feelings and personality not very different from human feelings and emotions. Here we see myth attaining its highest expression, where men and inanimate things play an active role in a universal drama which transcends all limitations of time, space and human imagination.[11]

While Ayoub's comments are primarily in reference to the works of the great Shīʿī traditionists, this is also exactly what *taʿzīyeh*, albeit on a popular level, seeks to do. The keepers and commentators of the Shīʿī tradition, working from the sayings of the Imāms, create a universal and transcendent drama in a metaphysical sense. *Taʿzīyeh*, which in many ways is conscious of its own artistic nature and imitative character, literalizes the ensemble of Shīʿī traditions and adds to tradition to achieve its own artistic purposes.[12]

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[9] Here and throughout this thesis I am referring exclusively to Twelver Shīʿism.
[10] Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islām: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of ʿĀshūrāʾ in Twelver Shīʿism*, (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978), 29.
[11] Ibid., 145.

This study will be an attempt to assess the aesthetic qualities of *ta'zīyeh*, or its artistic purpose. Nevertheless, this will not be a matter of evaluating the artistry or poetic qualities of the Persian passion plays. Rather, we must say that if *ta'zīyeh* has many material features that are ripe for artistic appreciation, so too it has a certain energy, and it is this aesthetic energy that will be our concern. Thus, to fully grasp the aesthetic import of *ta'zīyeh*, this study has called upon Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, because it is the authority on the agonistic, and yet, life-giving, properties of tragic ritual and of the arts in general.

It remains to be said that while art is usually measured with individual creative thinkers or poets in mind, the Persian passion plays are collective works rather than individual achievements. The dramas were the works of mostly anonymous authors, bolstered by additions from the great corpus of Persian poetry, and finally revised by *ta'zīyeh* directors, and indeed by actors themselves. If, like the Comte de Gobineau, we view the *ta'zīyeh*'s audience as one more actor with the ability to influence the flow of the performance[13], we have to admit that the plays are truly collective works and not the result of individual poetic genius, such as the poems of Rūmī or Shakespearean tragedy. Nevertheless, this thesis focuses on *ta'zīyeh* as an object for aesthetic consideration not only because, as we have seen Chelkowski state, it is a unique phenomenon in the Islamic world, but also because it constitutes an exemplary Shī'ī art form. *Ta'zīyeh* is important and worthy of interpretation in its own right, but it can also tell us something about the ever-present and yet under-studied aesthetics of Shī'ism in general.

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[12] Frédéric Maatouk, in his study of the Shī'ī passion play in Lebanon has gone so far as to say, "Le ta'ziya n'est, en definitive, qu'une «visualisation» de tous les articles de foi de la religion chi'ite." F. Maatouk, *La Représentation de la mort de l'Imâm Hussein à Nabatieh (Liban-Sud)*, (Beyrouth : Institut des Sciences Sociales, Université Libanaise, 1974), 75.

[13] J. A. Gobineau (comte de), *Les Religions et les philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale*, (Paris : Les Éditions G. Crès et Cia, 1928), 382.

However, before we go on, we should further justify how we will understand *ta'zīyeh* as theatre, and why it is a unique art form for more reasons than simply its rarity in the Islamic context. It is helpful to refer to the ideas of the contemporary scholar of aesthetics, Richard Shusterman, who speaks directly to the question of drama's place in art. Indeed, Shusterman is not interested in arguing about what constitutes true theatre, rather he takes the bold step of declaring, "the concept of drama embodies and unites two of the deepest, most important conditions of art and may therefore hold the key to a useful definition of art as a whole."[14] Shusterman is trying to reconcile two opposing views of art: that of the historicists, who argue that the value assigned to art is over-determined by socio-historic circumstances, and that of the naturalists, (of which Nietzsche is one), who see art as a universal, life-affirming aesthetic impulse.[15] For Shusterman, drama is that which can unite these two views because of the dual meaning carried by the verb "to dramatize" as "the putting of something into a frame, a particular context or stage," but also as the ability to make something have a "greater vividness of experience and action."[16] With regards to art's frame, Shusterman further says that this is what "focuses its object, action or feeling more clearly and thus sharpens, highlights, enlivens."[17] To this he adds, "conversely, the intensity of feeling or heightened sense of action that is framed reciprocally justifies the act of framing."[18] Therefore, art, which both frames an idea or a situation (through whatever medium, painting or prose, etc.), and then makes it seem more vivid and real, is essentially dramatic. Thus, when we think of *ta'zīyeh*, we see how the

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[14] Richard Shusterman, "Art as Dramatization," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 363-4. While I do not agree with all of Shusterman's conclusions, I feel that the points he makes in his article can help to define the approach that is used in this thesis.
[15] Ibid., 365-7.
[16] Ibid., 367-8.
[17] Ibid., 369.
[18] Ibid.

Persian passion plays frame and are framed by the deepest concerns of the Shī'a, while testifying to the greater aesthetic power of Shi'ism to renew itself on the symbolic level.

In keeping with Shusterman's observations about the dual approach to art, we have tried to say something about how *ta'zīyeh* is framed, as well as the contents and energy of what it contains. To this end, Chapter One will provide an historical overview of the evolution of the plays, as well as a description of their salient theatrical features.[19] The second chapter proposes a new interpretation of the ritualistic and artistic dimensions of *ta'zīyeh*, using Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche's work has not been chosen in order to uncover a real historical affinity between Greek tragedy and *ta'zīyeh*, nor to imply that *ta'zīyeh* is somehow a pagan rite. Rather, the virtue of using Nietzsche rests on his aesthetic evaluation of both tragedy and religious ritual. Nietzsche's Apollinian and Dionysian paradigms allow us to push beyond the Aristotelian categories of *mimesis* and *katharsis*, where many studies of *ta'zīyeh* (albeit with a great deal of justification) tend to remain. We hope to show that the Persian passion plays in many ways embody the ideals for tragedy suggested by Nietzsche. Chapter Three, with the help of certain Nietzschean criteria, goes on to discuss the symbolic qualities of Ḥusayn and the cosmological signify-cance of his martyrdom as seen in *ta'zīyeh*, but also as a general aesthetic force in Shi'ism. Finally we propose the category of the *sublime*, as a way of grasping both the tragic and ecstatic qualities of Shī'ī art.

If we begin to equate the aesthetics of *ta'zīyeh* with certain larger themes in Shī'ism, this is not to imply that the religion can be reduced to its rituals. We are aware that there can be no definitive view of Shī'ism, and that the passion plays are but one of its

[19] I must regretfully admit that as I have no knowledge of Persian, my study of *ta'zīyeh* has been limited to translations of the plays and criticism of them in European languages. Thus, I make no attempt to evaluate their linguistic and poetic features and confine myself to a discussion of their content only.

many facets. Rather, this thesis is seeking to uncover some part of that aesthetic energy which drives *ta'zīyeh* and other popular rituals. Some might also object to the use of "Western" terminology and thinkers to discuss an Islamic art form. The concepts of the tragic and the sublime are only the names given to phenomena that were perceived and felt by the Ancient and Hellenistic Greeks, and later elaborated upon and argued about by European and other Western thinkers. Where they are applied to *ta'zīyeh*, they are only intended as guides in deciding whether or not the aesthetic experiences of one group have also been felt by a second group. If we find that *ta'zīyeh* and the sublime share some affinity, then this thesis will have achieved one of its objectives.

Chapter One

Ta'zīyeh as Theatre

Shi'i mourning rituals for Ḥusayn, his family and companions are as diverse as the various ethnic communities in which they take place. While processions, self-mortification, and the recitation of eulogies and elegies are more or less universal Muḥarram practices, the form they take is necessarily influenced by the cultural milieu in question. As we shall see, the Persian passion plays have their roots both in the processions and recitations common to most Shi'i communities, as well as in the history of Iran in particular. At the same time, the plays represent a kind of exemplary Shi'i ritual, or one which manages to encompass all the concerns and themes of the community at large, while engendering a new and distinctive ritual art form.

1.1 The Historical Development of *Ta'zīyeh*

The Persian passion plays are a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of Shi'i ritual. The emergence of *ta'zīyeh* in its distinctive theatrical form has only been dated to the end of the eighteenth century. While it is still performed today, it reached its heyday during the mid-nineteenth century and began to decline after Reza Khan, the first of the Pahlavi Shahs, imposed sanctions against it in 1932.[1]

Nevertheless, the mourning rituals for Ḥusayn from which *ta'zīyeh* springs, have a much longer history. It is not surprising that the first to mourn for Ḥusayn, as well as to relate his tragedy to others, were his own family members. Ḥusayn's sister Zaynab can be said to be her brother's first elegist because of the moving sermons she recited in his

[1] Halm, 143.

honour both in Kufa, and especially at the Caliph's court in Damascus.[2] Ḥusayn's only surviving son 'Alī, who went on to succeed him in the Imāmate, mourned the events of Karbalā' throughout his life, and gained a reputation for being an exemplary weeper.[3] Indeed, the very act of weeping for Ḥusayn became a meritorious act for the Shī'a. Several Imāms are reported as saying that the act of weeping for Ḥusayn and the sufferings of his family could insure a believer's place in Paradise. For example, it is recorded that the sixth Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq told his followers, "The sigh of the sorrowful for the wrong done us is an act of praise (*tasbīḥ*) [of God], his sorrow for us is an act of worship, and his keeping of our secret is a struggle (*jihād*) in the way of God."[4] A tradition thus began of holding gatherings to remember and mourn Ḥusayn in the homes of his descendants, in particular those who succeeded him in the Imāmate. These practices, which were adopted by the wider Shī'ī community, and came to be known as *ta'ziyah majālis*, were occasions for recalling the events of Karbalā', often in the form of poetry, and most especially for weeping and showing the depth of one's grief for the tragedy.[5] As one commentator has summarized, "The first and probably the original form of the *ta'ziyas* was the funeral sermon in honour of the martyrs of Karbalā. The contents of these sermons later inspired several works of poetry, really elegies (*marthiyyas*), of which the Shī'ites posses a great number."[6] Thus, the stage was set for the diversity of rituals and occasions to mourn that the Shī'a were to develop over the centuries.

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[2] See, Diane D'Souza, "The Figure of Zaynab in Shî'î Devotional Life," *The Bulletin of The Henry Martyn Institute for Islamic Studies* 17, no. 1 (January-June 1998): 45-7. It is also important to note that Zaynab's speeches became models for subsequent works.
[3] Ayoub, 143-4.
[4] This ḥadīth is found in Shaykh Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan, *Kitāb al-Amālī*, ed. Muḥammad Ṣādiq Baḥr al-'Ulūm, (Baghdad: al-Maktabah al-Ahliyyah, 1384/1964), 115, quoted in Ayoub, 142, n.4.
[5] Ayoub, 148-58.
[6] Jiri Cejpek, "Iranian Folk-Literature," in *History of Iranian Literature*, ed. Jan Rypka, (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1968), 684.

However, even very shortly after Ḥusayn's death, there were also rather public manifestations of grief and regret. In 684 CE, only four years after the tragedy of Karbalā', a group of Kufans, many of whom had been prominent partisans of Ḥusayn's father 'Alī and who had failed to go out and defend Ḥusayn during his time of need, organized a penitential march to Karbalā'. There they wept and grieved, and subsequently sought to expiate their guilt by engaging in battle with a contingent of Syrian troupes and becoming martyrs themselves.[7] This fusion of mourning and action, guilt and repentance, has even been called "the true beginning of Shi'i Islam"[8] and was also a definitive step in making Karbalā' a place of pilgrimage for the Shī'ī devout.

In subsequent centuries, the nature of the Shī'ī community was to undergo many changes. While certain groups achieved various degrees of success in the political arena, the chain of twelve Imāms that was to come to be recognized by the Twelver Shī'a, mostly stayed, or were kept, away from the centres of state power. While the commemoration of Ḥusayn and his family continued, the openness with which it could be practiced depended upon the place of the Shī'a in the state as a whole. The rise to power of the Buyid dynasty in Baghdad in 945 CE is universally acknowledged as a momentous occasion in the history of the development of Shī'ism. While it is commonly held that the Buyids were originally members of the Zaydī branch of Shī'ism, it is during their era (945-1055 CE) that Twelver doctrine became more elaborated and definitive.[9] At the same time, because of their various sympathies towards Twelver Shī'ism, it is during the Buyid period that mourning rituals for Ḥusayn attained unprecedented state recognition. By this time, the custom of

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[7] Heinz Halm, *Shi'a Islam: From Religion to Revolution*, trans. Allison Brown, (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997), 16-20, and 41-3.
[8] Halm, *Shi'a Islam*, 20.
[9] Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'I Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 75-82.

having professional raconteurs recite the details of Ḥusayn's tragedy, as well as that of holding remembrance ceremonies in special spaces, called *ḥusayniyyat*, had already been established.[10] However, in 963 CE, the Buyid Sultan Mu'izz al-Dawla called for the public commemoration of Ḥusayn in Baghdad on the 10th of Muḥarram. This occasion is significant, not only because it is the first time that such events are well-documented, but also because one can already discern those theatrical elements that were to bring about the emergence of the passion plays in later centuries. For example, it is often cited that mourners went about the city in a distressed and disheveled fashion, striking themselves as a sign of grief, and asking for a drink of water to remind others how Ḥusayn and his party were deprived of water at Karbalā'. At the same time, a group of black tents was erected outside the city to represent Ḥusayn's ill-fated encampment.[11] It is not surprising that such activities fueled tensions between the Shī'ī and Sunnī populations of the city, with the Sunnīs responding to the Shī'ī reenactments of Karbalā' with their own version of the Battle of the Camel, where Ḥusayn's father 'Alī had been challenged by some of his rivals to the Caliphate, as well as by the Prophet's widow 'Ā'isha.[12]

It is after this time that the history of mourning rituals for Ḥusayn enters into a kind of grey period until the establishment of the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722 CE) in Iran in the sixteenth century. As Chelkowski notes, "Between the 11th and 16th centuries there were no Shia rulers to sponsor huge Muḥarram displays."[13] However, this does not mean that the laudation of Ḥusayn in literary form did not continue, which it most certainly did, nor that the practice of holding processions during Muḥarram ceased. Rūmī himself witnessed

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[10] Yitzhak Nakash, "An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of 'Āshūrā'," *Die Welt des Islams* 33 (1993): 163-4.
[11] Halm, *Shi'a Islam*, 43-4.
[12] Peter Chelkowski, "Shia Muslim Processional Performance," *The Drama Review* 29, no. 3 (Fall 1985): 20.
[13] Ibid.

such an event in the thirteenth century.[14] In fact, Chelkowski tells us that there was "an increase in martyrologic literature, and, more importantly, the Shia religious jurists approved *tashabbuh*, a theory of imitation of Hussein and the other martyrs."[15] According to Jean Calmard, mourning rituals for Ḥusayn were not unknown in Iran before the coming of the Safavids, nor were they exclusively practiced by Shī'ī Muslims: "Early in Iraq and at least from the Seljuq period (eleventh-twelfth centuries) in Iran one can see Muslims of various creeds participating in these mourning rites (*a'zâ-dârî*) and in the reciting and writing of elegies (sing. *marthiya*) and, later, more specific 'books of murder' (*maqtal-nâma/maqâtil*)."[16] Thus, as we shall see, some of the seeds of the literary tradition which the Persian passion plays were to absorb had already been sown before the sixteenth century.

Nevertheless, for our purposes, those observances which definitively led to the emergence of *ta'zīyeh* as theatrical drama began to be ushered in by the Safavids after 1501 CE. The history of *ta'zīyeh* then begins to go hand in hand with that of the conver- sion of the Iranian populace to Twelver Shī'ism, which is itself a complex, and as yet uncompleted, saga. Furthermore, what has been discovered about the emergence of the passion plays has primarily been found in the travel narratives of visitors to Iran, and there is no authoritative history of their development. For this reason, we can at best seek to isolate certain trends and from them, determine how *ta'zīyeh* was born.

Recent scholarship[17] has comfortably asserted that *ta'zīyeh*, as theatre, is the result

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[14]Halm, *Shi'a Islam*,

[15] Chelkowski, "Shia Muslim Processional Performance," 20.

[16] Jean Calmard, "Muharram ceremonies and diplomacy (a preliminary study)," in *Qajar Iran: Political, Social and Cultural Change 1800-1925*, ed. Edmond Bosworth and Carole Hillenbrand (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 1992), 213. I regret that I did not have access to Calmard's dissertation, "Le culte de l'Imâm Husayn, Étude sur la commemoration du Drame de Karbalâ dans l'Iran pré-safavide," (Ph.D. diss., University of Paris III (Sorbonne), 1975).

[17] I am primarily relying on Chelkowski, but his conclusions seem to be part of a general consensus.

of the fusion of two practices that were inculcated during the Safavid period: processions (*dasta*), and the public recitation of the influential work on the martyrdom of Ḥusayn and its metahistorical significance, Ḥusayn (al-Wā'iẓ) Kāshifī's *Rawḍat al-shuhadā'* (*Garden of the Martyrs*). The first of these practices, the processions, became ever more developed over the Safavid period. While we have seen that public mourning at the time of the Buyids already incorporated many theatrical elements, Safavid rulers were able to sponsor much more elaborate and carnivalesque events to commemorate Ḥusayn and other prominent Shī'ī figures, such as his father 'Alī.[18] Notable Safavid innovations include extending the period of mourning/commemoration to the first ten days of Muḥarram (instead of simply the day of 'Āshūrā', the 10th of Muḥarram), the use of special lighting and fireworks, and various kinds of "scapegoat" rituals, such as camel sacrifice.[19] The most important of the scapegoat rituals was the cursing of the first three Caliph's recognized by Sunnī Muslims, and the burning of an effigy of the Caliph 'Umar, who had become fused to the image of 'Umar b. Sa'd, the leader of the forces amassed against Ḥusayn at Karbalā'. Both these practices were designed to strengthen public allegiance to Shī'ism, and to Safavid authority.[20]

However, the central public events were the procession carried out by the general populace. This might involve the parading of flagellants, the carrying of standards (*'alam*) and models of Ḥusayn's tomb (*nakht*), the use of funerary music to set the tone of the

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[18] A very detailed and comprehensive treatment of the evolution of Shī'ī rituals during the Safavid period can be found in Jean Calmard, "Shi'i Rituals and Power II. The Consolidation of Safavid Shi'ism: Folklore and Popular Religion," in *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, ed. Charles Melville (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1996), 141-44. In an earlier article, Calmard explores how the Sufi and ethnic origins, as well as political ambitions of the Safavids influenced their imposition of certain ritual practices. See Jean Calmard, "Les rituels shiites et le pouvoir. L'imposition du shiisme safavide: eulogies et malédictions canoniques," in *Études Safavides*, ed. Jean Calmard (Paris: Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, 1993). However, while worth noting, these questions are beyond the scope of the present work.
[19] Calmard, "Shi'i Rituals and Power II," 150, 148 and 151-54.
[20] Ibid., 161-3.

proceedings, the recitation of eulogies and even the distribution of food and drink. With time came the incorporation of scenes from Karbalā' into such parades. Participants wore costumes to represent certain figures and mimed their actions, and floats were built better to set the scene in which key events had taken place. Working from the narratives of foreign visitors to Iran, Chelkowski provides a good overview of what such a display might have looked like, as well as how it changed over the Safavid period:

> The number of parade participants costumed to represent various Kerbela episodes increased. Riders on camels and horses were followed eventually by floats of living tableaux on wheels. . . . Decorative items were added to the procession out of devotion: rugs, mirrors, plumes, lamps, brocades and silks added beauty. Some of these were attached to biers and coffins or hung on the standards. . . . Toward the end of the Safavid period in the early 18th century, the moving tableaux became more and more elaborate. An intricate display of the Kerbela massacre was constructed by spreading canvas over a flat float, covering it with sand and poking bloody heads, arms and legs through holes in the canvas to represent the dead and dismembered. At this time the tableaux were organized in chronological sequence. . . . the stations representing the passion of Hussein passed by the viewers.[21]

These tableaux or small scenes are perhaps the most important innovation leading to *ta'zīyeh* as a stationary (or sometimes ambulant) theatrical performance, with actors portraying the roles of the relevant players at Karbalā'.

While the processions helped to establish the form that *ta'zīyeh* was to take, or its pageantry, the subject matter of the plays was greatly influenced by Kāshifī's *Garden of the Martyrs*. While *ta'zīyeh* draws on many sources for its inspiration, the *Rawḍat al-shuhadā'* is no doubt one of the most influential, because, as Samuel Peterson says, "For the public and especially the illiterate who in the course of their lives heard its chapters read throughout the year, it was the definitive source on the Kerbela tragedy and also their source for what was to be represented in *ta'ziyah* processions and, later, for what was to be dramatized in the *ta'ziyah* theater."[22] It is important to remember that, while its author,

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[21]Chelkowski, *Shia Muslim Processional*, 21-2.
[22] Samuel Peterson, "Shi'ism and Late Iranian Arts," (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1981), 64.

Kāshifī, is sometimes described as holding Shī'ī beliefs[23], he was a Naqshbandī Sufi, and for all-intensive purposes, a Sunnī. A well-known writer and preacher at the Timurid court, he was commissioned by a nobleman to write the *Rawḍat al-shuhadā'*, which he completed in 1502 CE.[24] Judged by scholars to be the first of its kind written in Persian, the work is a mixture of prose, poetry and citations from the Qur'ān. While it is primarily about Ḥusayn, it is also a text whose "narrative structure is a chain of accounts of Prophets and *imāms* (beginning with Adam and ending with the vanished Twelfth Imām), all of whom had suffered injustice and oppression."[25] As we shall see, the cycle of Persian passion plays follow the rhythm of Kāshifī's work, both in terms of their content and their greater purpose, which is to provoke collective weeping. It has been said that Kāshifī:

> portrays Karbala as the central axis around which all of human history revolves, the repeated pattern of suffering of earlier Prophets being the prelude to Ḥusayn's movement. In this way, Ḥusayn's suffering and the cause of his movement represented are linked to the broader Prophetic mission that began with the first and culminated with the last Prophet (and the *imāms*).[26]

If we briefly return to Mahmoud Ayoub's work on redemptive suffering in Shī'ism, we see that this intertwining of Ḥusayn's martyrdom to the stories of the Prophets is an enduring Shī'ī theme. In fact, Ayoub stresses how Ḥusayn's successors to the Imāmate, as well as Shī'ī hagiographers tried to show that figures such as Abraham and Jesus were all conscious of Ḥusayn's fate and very moved by it.[27] Thanks in part to Kāshifī's work, this became one of the key subjects of *ta'ziyeh*, with many plays using Qur'ānic and/or Biblical

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[23] See, Gholam Hosein Yousofi, "Kāshifī," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, vol. iv, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960--), 704-5, who asserts that Kāshifī was an "Imami Shī'ī" based on his composition of the *Rawḍat al-shuhadā'*. Most other sources argue that Kāshifī was most likely a Sunnī and stress the great devotion to the Prophet's family, or *ahl al-bayt* on the part of the Sufi orders. See, for example Calmard, "Les rituels shiites et le pouvoir," 131.
[24] Yousofi, "Kāshifī," 704.
[25] Kamran Aghaie, "The Karbal Narrative: Shī'ī Political Discourse in Modern Iran in the 1960s and 1970s," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12, no. 2 (Ma 2001):154.
[26] Ibid., 155.
[27] See in particular, Ayoub, 27-36.

stories and figures as backgrounds for presenting the story of Ḥusayn.

Kāshifī's *Garden of the Martyrs* became immensely popular during the Safavid period, so much so that it engendered its own kind of ritual practice known as *rawḍa-khwānī*, or a "recition," "reading," or "chanting" from the *Rawḍat al-shuhadā'*.[28] Such recitations might take place in public places, out of doors or in the mosques, or in private homes. The reciter (*rawḍa-khwān*) or preacher (*va'iẓ*) might begin by telling the story of Karbalā' (using Kāshifī's work for inspiration), evoking strong emotional responses from the audience, and eventually leading them in the singing of dirges (*nawha*).[29] At the same time, narrators and preachers were not limited by the content of Kāshifī's work, for, as Chelkowski informs us, "After the readings in early times the *Rawžat al-Shuhada'* began to serve as a framework and as a springboard for professional narrators who improvised creatively upon the suffering and deeds of many Shī'i heroes."[30] Narrators could also draw on the wealth of works in Arabic and Persian devoted to Ḥusayn and the other Imāms, or on the very influential and popular cycle of poems in Persian, the *Davāzdah-band* (the Twelve Bands) by the Safavid poet Muḥtasham Kāshān (d. 1588 CE).[31] Thus, the *rawḍa-khwānī* allowed for the creative elaboration of the story of Ḥusayn, as well as for the audience's greater emotional involvement in his commemoration ceremonies, just as the passion plays would eventually succeed in doing.

While both the processions and the *rawḍa-khwānī* were, and continue to be, popular mourning rituals, it is the fusion of elements from both which led to the emergence of *ta'ziyeh* as a recognizably theatrical phenomenon sometime after the Safavid era. As there

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[28] Chelkowski, "Popular Shī'i Mourning Rituals," 214.
[29] Ibid., 215.
[30] Ibid.
[31] See Calmard, "Shi'i Rituals and Power II," 167, and Nakash, 170n32.

is no precise date for the appearance of *ta'zīyeh* as theatre, we must again rely on Chelkowski to tell us how the blending of processions and recitations took place:

> When in the mid-eighteenth century A.D. these two forms of the mourning commemoration, namely, processions . . . and rowzeh khani, merged, the result was a prototype of the new drama to be known as ta'zieh khani. In the beginning, the pageantry of the pantomimed processions became stationary on platforms or on ground space with a surrounding arena in which the dressed characters from the formerly mobile living tableaux and marching soldiers were given texts of rowzeh khani for monologues and dialogues. . . . In the beginning, when ta'zieh khani emerged from the Muharram ceremonies, it had not yet broken off from the processions and was staged at street intersections and squares. Soon, however, it was moved into the courtyards of caravan serays, bazaars, and private houses and eventually provided with specially built theaters called tekieh.[32]

What seems of primary importance here is the incorporation of scripts and thus, of the spoken word into the previously mimed scenes, and also the allocation of a special space in which scenes could be played out. From this point on, it was only a matter of developing what performers would say and how they would say it, as well as of decorating and embellishing their place of performance. The most definitive date that scholars have found for an obviously theatrical performance of *ta'zīyeh* has been gleaned from the travel narrative of William Francklin, a delegate of the East India Company. In 1787, in Shiraz, he witnessed a performance of several *ta'zīyeh* vignettes, such as the popular tale of the martyrdom of Ḥusayn's nephew al-Qāsim.[33] Francklin's observations, along with those of later travelers, have helped to situate the emergence of *ta'zīyeh* as theatre as a post-Safavid and yet pre-Qajar event.[34]

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[32] Peter J. Chelkowski, "Dramatic and Literary Aspects of Ta'ziyeh-Khani—Iranian Passion Play," *Review of National Literatures* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1971): 124.

[33] Peterson, 71. However, because Francklin attended a rather sophisticated performance, Peterson suggests that *ta'zīyeh* "seems to have acquired at least the dimensions if not mature forms of proper theater a decade or son before 1787."

[34] A notable dissenter is Alessandro Bausani who argues that *ta'zīyeh* must have come into being during the Safavid period itself, given its content and language: "Contenutisticamente esse [*ta'zīyeh* plays] corrispondono così bene alla *pietas* safavide, e, di più, formalmente, chi legga delle opera popolari safavidi su 'Alî e Husain vi trova così numerosi i *cliché* e le espressioni stereotipate che corrono indentiche nelle *ta'zìè*, e gli elementi drammatici . . . nelle lamentazioni safavidi del *muharram* sono così evidenti che, a mio parere, la possibilità che le *ta'zìè* siano di origine safavide sussiste." A. Bausani, *Persia Religiosa: da Zaratustra a Bahâ'u'llâh*, (Milano: «Il Saggiatore», 1959): 436.

One of the hallmarks of the development of the passion plays during the Qajar era is the desire to make them into a national theatre, based on the European model. Furthermore, sponsorship of *ta'zīyeh* was an especially important endeavor for the Qajars, who were seeking to legitimize their right to rule, for, as Peterson says, it "gave them an inroad, otherwise not available to them, into the religious life of Iran and, to the advantage of their public relations, into its most popular form."[35] At the same time, it is worth noting that, while much stock is put in fixing a date for the definitive birth of the passion plays, definitions of what constitutes theatre tend to vary. Calmard points out that "Divergences of interpretation remain regarding the moment when ritual mourning observance became ritual drama . . . . But in my opinion, modern theatrical theories and experiences . . . are not really appropriate to analyse such dramatic manifestations as ta'ziya-khwani, in which there are, properly speaking, no 'actors' or 'spectators' but only a coherent community of Shi'i mourners."[36] This reminds us that even as we see *ta'zīyeh* become ever more theatrical over the Qajar period, it retains its function as a religious ritual in memory of Ḥusayn and never becomes a secular, disinterested drama. Also, as Chelkowski has stated, the "rapid growth" of the dramas "would not have been possible if it were not for the great interest in and love for the *ta'ziya* among the people."[37]

Thus, several important trends in the development of *ta'zīyeh* as theatre over the Qajar period must be discerned before moving on to the reign of Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh, which is universally acclaimed as the golden age of the Persian passion play and the time when it received the most state sponsorship. The first of these trends is the plays' increase in

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[35] Peterson, 98.
[36] Calmard, "Shi'i Rituals and Power II," 156.
[37] Peter J. Chelkowski, "Majlis-i Shâhinshâh-i Îrân Nâsir al-Dîn Shah," in *Qajar Iran: Political, Social, and Cultural Change 1800-1925*, ed. Edmond Bosworth and Carole Hillenbrand, (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 1992): 229.

popularity, which led to their being presented in a variety of locations, from public places to the courtyards of private homes, not to mention the building of *takīyehs*, or special theatres to house *ta'zīyeh* performances. Added to this is the fact that the presentation of the plays was no longer limited to the mourning period during the month of Muḥarram, but rather, would take place throughout the year, often sponsored by individuals to enhance important celebrations or milestones in their lives.[38] It has been argued that the establishment of Teheran as the new Iranian capital by the founder of the Qajar dynasty, Āghā Muḥammad Shāh, is one circumstance which helped the spread of *ta'zīyeh*. Later Qajar rulers would sponsor and encourage participation in Muḥarram rituals amongst the citizens of the new capital, and rivalries among the bazaar guilds of the city led to ever more elaborate reenactments of the Karbalā' drama.[39] This competition among the guilds might also have spurred the expansion of the repertoire of the passion plays.[40] The elaboration of the *ta'zīyeh's* repertoire also led to the publication of some plays in lithograph form, another testament to their growing popularity.[41] Along with the competition amongst the guilds, nobles and government officials, and even foreign embassies all contributed or competed to fund more theatres and more grandiose *ta'zīyeh* performances.[42]

Nevertheless, the greatest sponsor and innovator of *ta'zīyeh* was Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh, who reigned from 1848 to 1896 CE. His most famous endeavor was the construction of the Takiya Dawlat in Teheran, which he was inspired to build after a visit to Albert Hall in London in 1873. Not only were the dimensions of this building, which could hold up to four thousand spectators, impressive, so too were the productions which took place there.

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[38] Chelkowski, "Dramatic and Literary Aspects of Ta'zieh-Khani," 128.
[39] Jean Calmard, "Le mécénat des representations de *ta'ziye*," *Le Monde Iranien et l'Islam: Sociétés et Cultures* 2, (1974): 78-9.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid., 99.
[42] Ibid., passim, and Chelkowski, "Dramatic and Literary Aspects of Ta'zieh-Khani," 124-5.

The Takiya Dawlat came to be sumptuously decorated and extensively lighted, and performances there might include processions, music and reenactments of battle scenes using live horses and camels.[43] The era inspired by Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh also saw a great transformation in the literary and dramatic qualities of the passion plays. Even during the height of the Shah's sponsorship of *ta'zīyeh*, "the texts were still rather inadequate and written with little feeling for the nature of the dramatic form," because the playwrights' goal was "to lead the audience to the reception of a universal truth without consideration of exposition, challenge, and complication—the main elements of the dramatic form."[44] However, towards the end of the Shah's reign, "literary activity was on the increase, a greater feeling for the technique of the stage was shown, dialogues had more dramatic expression, and monologues were decreasing. Authors were becoming aware of the dramatic functions and forces of the play."[45] It is also unsurprising that the Shah's great love of and generosity towards the enterprise of *ta'zīyeh* led to a play being composed commemorating and lamenting his assassination.[46]

Besides the increase in *ta'zīyeh's* popularity, both with the public and the ruling class, the Qajar period also saw two new and unprecedented art forms spring from the passion plays. The first of these, which has already been discussed, is the development of theatre architecture and the building of more and more theatres to accommodate *ta'zīyeh*. Indeed, Peterson has said that the *takīyeh* "is the only purely Shi'ite architecture to evolve

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[43] On the Takiya Dawlat, one can refer to Peterson, 94-7. For a description of performances in the national theatre, one can refer to the travel narrative of an American, S.G.W. Benjamin who witnessed, in the course of one afternoon's entertainment, "a procession of nearly two hundred men," one of the Shah's "military bands... followed in steady procession by six other regimental bands," and "warriors . . . glittering in the chain-armor and gold-inlaid helmets of past ages," in addition to the actual performance of the passion play. S.G.W. Benjamin, *Persia and the Persians*, (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1887): 388-94.

[44] Chelkowski, "Dramatic and Literary Aspects of Ta'zieh-Khani," 126-7.

[45] Ibid., 128.

[46] For a translation of this play, see Chelkowski, "Majlis-i Shâhinshâh-i Îrân Nâsir al-Dîn Shah," 229-42.

in the Islamic world."[47] In addition to this kind of architectural innovation, *ta'zīyeh* also inspired momentous changes to the visual arts in Iran. It is well-known that the Islamic religion frowns upon the pictorial representation of human beings, and especially of holy personages. Nevertheless, this convention has often been circumvented by the Shī'a, who are fond of depicting their Imāms and other revered persons in paintings. Peterson has shown that during the Safavid period, this kind of artwork was limited to the court and other elites, but that in the Qajar period, *ta'zīyeh* inspired a new genre of popular painting.[48] That the subject matter for these works was directly influenced by *ta'zīyeh* performances, is proven by the fact that the paintings depict holy personages in the same kinds of costumes and postures that they took in the passion play. These *ta'zīyeh*-inspired scenes, depicting Ḥusayn and a multitude of *ta'zīyeh* vignettes, might be done on the walls of the *ḥusayniyyāt*, in coffee houses or on large, transportable pieces of canvas. The coffee house and canvas paintings served as props for preachers and narrators who used them to make their orations more dramatic while they recounted the story of Karbalā'.[49] Thus, we see that *ta'zīyeh* was so popular during the Qajar era that it succeeded in transforming Shī'ī art in general, and has prompted Peterson to argue that "*ta'ziyah* theater . . . marks the beginning of Shi'ism being fully expressed as a source for the arts in Iran."[50] Furthermore, beyond Iran, Shī'ī communities in countries such as Iraq and Lebanon developed their own kinds of passion plays based on the Persian model. The South Asian Shī'a may have eschewed *ta'zīyeh* as theatre in favour of their own variants on the processions and *rawḍa-khwānī*, but these too had been exported by the influential Iranian Shī'a to the

[47] Peterson, 110.
[48] Ibid., 37-8.
[49] Ibid., 110-27.
[50] Ibid., xii.

rest of the Shī'a world.[51]

After the death of Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh, Iranian rulers became progressively less interested in funding the passion plays, a development which led to the dramas being presented more often in rural areas than in urban ones.[52] As was noted at the beginning of this historical overview, it was the first of the Pahlavi Shahs who virtually put an end to *ta'zīyeh*, and this as part of his agenda of Westernization and modernization. It can be said that *ta'zīyeh* suffered from a decline in popularity over the twentieth century, one notable exception being the *ta'zīyeh* festivals held at the Shiraz Arts Festival in the 1960s and 1970s,[53] and another being the presentation of *ta'zīyeh* plays in the United States and Europe in more recent years.

One subject, which as yet has not been discussed, is that of the reaction of the Shī'i *'ulamā'* to the passion plays and to mourning rituals for Ḥusayn in general. Most observers have pointed out the general dislike and distaste that the majority of clerics feel for rituals which seem to take a great deal of artistic license in their portrayal of sacred people and events.[54] However, the *'ulamā'* have not been universally negative, and we see that during the Safavid period, many of them adopted an "attitude towards religious devotion . . . essentially dictated by pragmatism,"[55] in light of their mission to convert the Iranian populace to Shī'ism. Likewise, during the heyday of *ta'zīyeh* in the Qajar era, many clerics issued publications in defense of a practice so beloved by the ruling class.[56] However, it was with the approach of the Iranian revolution that *ta'zīyeh* underwent one

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[51] Chelkowski, "Popular Shī'i Mourning Rituals," 219-26, and Nakash, 173-4.
[52] Chelkowski, "Dramatic and Literary Aspects of Ta'zieh-Khani," 129.
[53] Ibid.
[54] See, for example Halm, *Shi'a Islam*, 78.
[55] Calmard, "Shi'i Rituals and Power II," 166.
[56] Mayel Baktash, "Ta'ziyeh and its Philosophy," in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski, (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 107-12.

further change in the hearts and minds of the clerics and the people alike. The fervour of the revolution ushered in new uses for, and approaches to, Muḥarram rituals, as well as a revised view of the martyrdom of Ḥusayn. Muḥarram processions became vehicles for denouncing unjust authority, for allying oneself to Ḥusayn's quest for justice, and even emulating him as a martyr.[57] Revolutionary iconography emulated and was aesthetically influenced by those Qajar-style paintings which had originally emulated the passion plays.[58] Such developments were influenced by works on Ḥusayn and the meaning of his martyrdom written by such intellectual architects of the revolution as 'Alī Sḥarī'atī and Murtaẓa Muṭahharī.[59] Although one scholar has complained that, "Hoseyn, who in the books of the tenth century is presented as an audacious and self-assured person, is transformed from the sixteenth century and particularly in the ta'zie into a man who accepts his destiny, but woefully,"[60] the luminaries of the revolution sought to "restore" Ḥusayn to his former glory. Rather than weep for Ḥusayn, who was now depicted as a determined revolutionary and not merely a passive tragic hero, those who participated in Muḥarram rituals were urged to follow him in "active rebellion against corrupt rulers."[61] Ḥusayn's cosmic drama, which, in the passion plays, had infiltrated the stories of past Prophets, was more than ever a potent force in the most contemporary of events.

Finally, while this general history has concentrated on those trends which directly led to the emergence of *ta'zīyeh*, it is also worthwhile to briefly address the question of a "prehistory" for the passion plays, one that several scholars have endeavored to formulate.

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[57] Peter J. Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, (New York: New York University Press, 1999): 70-85. I am very grateful to Valerie Pocock for bringing my attention to this source.
[58] Ibid., 46-65.
[59] Aghaie, 165-70, and 172-4.
[60] Farrokh Gaffary, "Evolution of Rituals and Theater in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 17, no. 4 (Autumn 1984): 368.
[61] Aghaie, 173.

The first, most-relevant point is that before the 10th of Muḥarram became the most important date in the Shī'ī calendar, the Prophet Muḥammad had already designated 'Āshūrā' as a day of atonement in recognition of the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, and some have pointed out the similarity between the idea of atonement and that of redeeming oneself for one's sins by weeping for Ḥusayn on 'Āshūrā'.[62] Another popular trend has been to try and associate commemoration rituals for Ḥusayn with those of ancient heroes or gods of Mesopotamia, Egypt or Persia. One option is to relate Muḥarram rituals to those for resurrected fertility gods such as Adonis, Tammuz and Osiris.[63] The other possibility is to equate Ḥusayn with Siyavush, a Zoroastrian hero who was wrongfully killed and whose cult survived in Transoxiana well into the Islamic period.[64] In either case, while these parallels certainly help us to see how the tragedy of Ḥusayn could fit into an archetypal pattern of hero worship across time, it is difficult to prove to what extent these pre-Islamic rituals directly influenced *ta'ziyeh*. To this, we can add the even more speculative suggestion that *ta'ziyeh* is a direct descendant of the Medieval European passion play[65], and other theories which would try to find the origins of the dramas in Greece, India or China.[66] Attempts have also often been made to assess the impact of Iranian nationalism on *ta'ziyeh*,[67] and to see Shī'ism in Iran as a Persian revolt against

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[62] See, Ayoub, 151, and Frank J. Korom, *Hosay Trinidad: Muharram Performances in an Indo-Caribbean Diaspora*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 22.
[63] See, for example, Chelkowski, "Ta'ziya," EI, and Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart, (New York: Continuum, 1981), 143-5.
[64] Ehsan, Yarshater, "Ta'ziyeh and Pre-Islamic Mourning Rites in Iran," in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski, (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 90-3.
[65] Muhammad Ja'far Mahjub, "The Effect of European Theatre and the Influence of its Theatrical Methods Upon Ta'ziyeh," in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski, (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 137-53.
[66] An overview and, for the most part, refutation of these theories can be found in Enrico Cerulli, "Le theater persan," in *Le Shî'isme Imâmite: Colloque de Strasbourg, 6-9 mai 1968 (Travaux du Centre d'Études Supérieurs specialize d'Histoire des Religions de Strasbourg)*, ed. Toufic Fahd (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970), 291-3.
[67] A notorious example is Gobineau, see in particular 296-9, but his impressions have been repeated in many other works.

Arab conquest, but this neglects the perhaps subtler influences of Sufis, peoples of the Caucasus,[68] or even of Arabs themselves on *ta'zīyeh*. In the end, we must return to that fusion of the pageantry of the Muḥarram processions and the evocative power of the *rawḍa-khwani* to best understand the birth of *ta'zīyeh* as theatre.

1.2 Important Theatrical Characteristics of Ta'zīyeh

Through our historical overview, we have seen how the Persian passion plays emerged as a unique form of Shī'ī ritual, but also one which drew on long-standing practices commemorating Ḥusayn. However, the originality of *ta'zīyeh* also rests on its actual theatrical qualities. While the plays have been compared to many different genres of Western drama, they truly have their own separate identity and conventions. Thus, we can explore the nature of *ta'zīyeh* as theatre by looking at those aspects which are different from traditional Western theatre and therefore excite the most attention: the form and content of its scripts, the goals of its actors and its audience, and its use of symbolism through its props, sets and costumes.

However, before we can begin our analysis, it would be useful to get a general idea of what a *ta'zīyeh* performance is like, although we cannot say that the passion plays follow any one universal scheme. We will draw on S.G.W. Benjamin's account of a performance he witnessed in the 1880s at the Takiya Dawlat, to provide an overview of the salient features of the plays. There is no doubt that what he was privileged enough to see represents the grandest kind of *ta'zīyeh*, thanks to the sponsorship of Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh. Nevertheless, Benjamin's account highlights all of the key elements of any *ta'zīyeh* production. On the 5th of Muḥaram, after entering into the splendidly decorated and lighted Takiya Dawlat, packed with spectators, Benjamin first saw such preliminaries as

[68] Cerulli, 293.

the distribution of refreshments, rhythmic chanting and breast beating, the parading of military bands playing music, and a chorus of costumed children welcoming the *ta'zīyeh* actors with a collective lament.[69] Benjamin tells us that the action took place on "a circular stage of masonry, raised three feet and approached by two stairways," and that this was in the centre of the theatre, with the audience sitting surrounding it.[70] He further relates:

> There was no scenery on the stage . . . . Hosseïn was represented by an actor named Mollâh Hosseïn, who was draped in massive robes of green and cashmere inwrought with gold; his head was covered with a large Arabian turban . . . . After Hosseïn, Abbasss, and Shemr, the most prominent character of the drama was Zeinêb. . . played by an actor named Mollâh Hosseïn Zeinêb Khan. He spoke falsetto; of course all the female characters were represented by men or boys . . . . The children of the various families gathered in the camp were also grouped on the sand for the most part, representing a feature of the tragedy analogous to the chorus of the Greek plays. The entire performance was directed by a prompter, who walked unconcernedly on the stage, and gave hints to the players or placed the younger actors in their position. At the proper moment also, by a motion of the hand, he gave orders for the music to strike up or stop. . . .[71]

Right away, Benjamin speaks to some of the most important features of a *ta'zīyeh* production: the sparseness of set decorations, the green colour of the costumes of the protagonists (green being the colour for the Prophet's family, and red for their enemies), the fact that female roles are played by men, the presence of a chorus, and the importance of music to enhance the mood. However, the key figure in this description is the "prompter" or director of the play, variously known as "Moin l'Buka . . . Ostad, Mirza, or Ta'zieh Gierdan."[72] As Chelkowski tells us, this single individual "is responsible not only for the play's production, music, and *mise en scène*, but also for all props, arrangements

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[69] Benjamin, 382-90. The play itself is also often preceded by a speech by a preacher, as we see from Gobineau's firsthand account, where one such enjoins the audience, "Quant à être parmi les gens de bien . . . . il ne sufit pas de venir pleurer aux tazyèhs . . . il faut encore que vos bonnes oeuvres . . . vous les exécutiez au nom et pour l'amour de Housseïn. C'est Housseïn, musulmans, qui est la porte du Paradis; c'est Housseïn, musulmans, qui soutient le monde . . . ." 329.

[70] Benjamin, 385.

[71] Ibid., 390-2.

[72] Chelkowski, "Dramatic and Literary Aspects of Ta'zieh Khani," 134. It is worth noting that "Moin l'Buka" has the literal meaning of "the one who helps bring tears," Gaffary, 370.

with the local authorities, and financial returns."[73] However, unlike in Western theatre, this director is not hidden from view during the production, rather "he is always on hand during the performance . . . like a traffic policeman, regulating the movement of actors, musicians, and audience. He remains constantly on stage, gives the actors their cues, helps children and inexperienced actors to take up their positions, holds the stirrup for the horseman, and helps to dress a would-be martyr in his winding sheet."[74] The intrusive presence of the director did not come about from a want of artistry, but rather, was there to remind the audience that what was being seen was not real. Parviz Mamnoun tells us that due to religious considerations, namely the prohibition against the reproduction of the human form, "the tragedy of Kerbela was so important to the Ta'ziyeh performer, . . . that it would have been impossible to show it realistically within the means and possibilities of performance, which are at best only a vehicle by which it is possible to show this tragedy but not to reproduce it." [75] In this way, to see the director helping the performers along, shattered the illusion that the spectacle was a just representation of reality: he was there to prove that spectators were not watching Ḥusayn and his family on stage, but actors portraying them.

Returning to Benjamin's narrative, the play for that afternoon was about the martyrdom of Ḥusayn's eldest son, 'Alī Akbar and was a long and elaborate one:

> The act for this particular day began with a scene between Zeinêb and Hosseïn. In an impassioned colloquy they lamented their fate, and encouraged each other to the exercise of mutual endurance and fortitude. As the scene closed she sank to the dust, and throwing ashes on her head lapsed into an attitude of impressive silence. . . . Alee Acbâr . . . heroically resolved to go forth and fight his way to the river, and bring water for the sufferers in the camp[76] . . . . Magnificent were the pathetic tones in which he sang as it were his own

[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid., 135.
[75] Mamnoun, 157.
[76] It is usually Ḥusayn's half brother al-Abbās who is said to have been martyred while trying to fetch water from the Euphrates. See Halm, *Shi'a Islam*, 62. Also, Benjamin erroneously refers to 'Alī Akbar as Ḥusayn's brother Ḥasan's son.

> requiem; the words rang forth like a trumpet to the farthest nook of the vast building, and the response came in united wailings from the thousands gathered there. . . . A milk-white Arabian steed from the royal stables, superbly caparisoned, was now led into the arena, and after receiving the moving farewell of Hosseïn and Zeinêb and the godspeed of the chorus, Alee Acbâr mounted and started forth on his perilous errand. Instantly from several quarters appeared a troop of the enemy on horseback and on foot. . . .It was wildly exciting to see this mad race around the arena . . . .[77]

The death of ʻAlī Akbar was followed, among other things, by an interesting interlude where Ḥusayn's parents, ʻAlī and Fāṭima, greatly distressed by the situation of their family, "bewail[ed] their fate together," but did this "shrouded in the cerements of the tomb conversing in sepulchral accents on the stage."[78] The performance ended with a reenactment of a battle scene between Ḥusayn's camp and that of his enemies, but one resulting in the martyrdom of his half-brother ʻAbbās.

Once again, Benjamin here draws our attention to several important conventions of *taʻzīyeh*. One such is the image of Zaynab covering herself with dust as a sign of grief. In the passion plays, straw was usually used to represent the sand of the Iraqi desert, and actors often covered themselves with it in moments of distress.[79] More important still is Benjamin's reference to the powerful effect that the voice of the actor playing ʻAlī Akbar had on the audience. It is one of the hallmarks of *taʻzīyeh* that protagonists sing their roles, whereas villains only recite theirs. Thus, if a character goes over to Ḥusayn's side during a play, as al-Ḥurr al-Tamīmī does when he abandons the Umayyads and is martyred in the way of the Imām, the actor in question begins to sing his role once he has made the switch from evil to good.[80] Conversely, evil characters do more than simply speak their lines, they often recite them "with violent shrieking voices."[81] Naturally, the use of music

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[77] Benjamin, 393-4.
[78] Ibid., 395.
[79] Mehdi Forough, *A Comparative Study of Abraham's Sacrifice in Persian Passion Plays and Western Mystery Plays*, ([Teheran]: Ministry of Culture and Arts Press, [1970]): 27.
[80] Chelkowski, "Dramatic and Literary Aspects of Ta'zieh-Khani," 131.
[81] Ibid.

generally served to draw the audience into the performance. In this light, we must also consider how, in the above narrative, the pursuit of 'Alī Akbar takes place not on stage, but around the theatre itself. While we have said that *ta'zīyeh* was not meant to be realistic, at the same time, its primary function was to get its audience so involved in the spectacle that it would weep. Therefore, we encounter a kind of tension between the desire not to cross certain religious tabus, and that to completely draw the audience into the action. In order to make spectators feel as though they are part of the production, "There is no curtain, and scenes are changed by rotation to the stage. . . . The action extends from the main stage into the arena . . . and even beyond the spectators. This gives the fantastic impression of the audience being part of the play."[82] In order to show movement from one location to another "actors jump off the stage and circumambulate it once or twice,"[83] while another strategy might be to always keep Ḥusayn and his family on stage to show how they have been "surrounded by the enemy and cut off from water in the brutal heat of the desert."[84] Again, we must say that *ta'zīyeh* appears to be both illusory and unreal, and yet strives to completely envelop the audience in what is being represented. As shall be argued later, the result is that the line between actor and audience becomes blurred, so that spectators are also participants, and actors often take on the characteristics of spectators.[85]

If we now proceed to our more in-depth analysis of the plays, we can begin by taking note of a feature which Benjamin did not notice, or perhaps which was not present at the performance he witnessed, namely, the scripts of the plays.[86] In general, these

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[82] Ibid., 130.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid., 131.
[85] Gaffary, 370.
[86] I shall not be providing an overview of all the various editions of *ta'zīyeh* to appear in print and in translation. Rather, I refer the reader to the "Bibliographical Spectrum," in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, 255-68, where it is noted that Enrico Cerulli, a dimplomat, assembled perhaps the largest collection of manuscripts ever (1055 of them) which he donated to the Vatican Library, 262 (also, see note 88 below). I

scripts were held by the actors in their hands, while they were performing. This was not because they were unwilling to memorize their lines, but rather was meant to reinforce the fact that actors were not the actual holy personages that they were portraying.[87] Just as we learned with regard to the intrusive presence of the *ta'zīyeh* director, it was a religious necessity to stress that what was being seen was fake: the production was not meant to be faithful to reality. It is also important to note that scripts were sometimes drafted like Western plays, as an interplay between speakers and with one character responding to the others on the page (librettos), but that more often, each role was written out separately.[88] This, in part, has contributed to the difficulty of studying *ta'zīyeh* manuscripts, and determining their authorship and originality.[89]

Furthermore, the question of the style and content of these *ta'zīyeh* scripts also requires attention. We have already tried to specify one of the texts which most influenced the plays and determined their scope, namely, Kāshifī's *Rawḍat al-shuhadā'*. If we were to stop and consider how many precursors Kāshifī himself might have had, we see that *ta'zīyeh* is drawing on an immense amount of literature about the Karbalā' tragedy, so that one scholar has called the plays "versed paraphrases of Islamic traditions."[90] Neither can we say that the passion plays are meant to be original works. Rather, the mostly anonymous writers[91] who composed *ta'zīyeh* scripts knowingly borrowed from a variety of

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myself have depended on Sir Lewis Pelly's collection, *The Miracle Play of Hasan and Husain, Collected from Oral Tradition*, 2 vols, (London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1879; reprint, Westmead, England: Gregg International Publishers, 1970) as it provides a good selection of all the different types of plays. I shall sometimes refer to individual translations of plays not appearing in Pelly's collection, which will be cited as the need arises.

[87] Mamnoun, 159.

[88] Alessio Bombaci, "Introduzione," in *Elenco di drammi religiosi persiani (Fondo MSS. Vaticani Cerulli)*, ed. Ettore Rossi and Alessio Bombaci, (Città de Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1961), xxix-xxx.

[89] Ibid., xvi-xvii.

[90] Cejpek, 682.

[91] The names of some of the better-known *ta'zīyeh* authors can be found in Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia (Volume IV: Modern Times 1500-1924)*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953),

older sources, as well as from each other. Consequently, there is a great deal of mixing of styles and genres, as well as overlap, in *ta'zīyeh*:

> Of course the texts of all these scenes [i.e. the plays themselves] should be seen as paraphrases of earlier versions, and so it is not surprising that the folk-poets quote Koran verses and poems and even entire passages from the early poets, when it seems appropriate to include them in the story. Curses, prayers and complete sermons that later appear in the *ta'ziyas* already existed in the earliest literature of the Shī'tes. Many of the songs are also of considerable age. . . .[92]

We further learn that while the best of what had been written in Persian, from epics to poems, could be transposed into the passion plays, they were also written in a colloquial language so that the audience could better understand and identify with the characters.[93] At the same time, actors often used their scripts as guides, and were allowed to improvise lines as they saw fit.[94] As for how the passion plays have been judged in aesthetic terms, opinions vary. Some Iranian intellectuals disliked *ta'zīyeh* precisely because of its seemingly haphazard and unpolished style,[95] while others have praised it for this exact reason. However, what seems to sustain *ta'zīyeh* as an aesthetic achievement is the ensemble of its elements or, as has been argued, "the popularity of these passion plays was in great measure due to their production, rather than their literary merit."[96] Mamnoun too has expanded upon this sentiment by claiming, "We should not criticize the poverty of Ta'ziyeh, because the poverty of Ta'ziyeh is the nobility of its method."[97] This is a very pragmatic way of viewing the plays for, "the *ta'ziyeh* style of writing is anti-literary as *ta'ziyeh* scripts are almost never intended for reading but for performing."[98] Thus, since

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194. Baktash mentions that at "Mirza Muhammad Taqi, an influential religious authority" also composed some plays, 112.
[92] Ibid., 684.
[93] Shahidi, 45 and 55.
[94] Ibid., 57.
[95] Ibid., 45.
[96] Forough, 49.
[97] Mamnoun, 158.
[98] Iraj Anvar and Peter J. Chelkowski, "If you are merciful, o bounteous one, full of compassion, why make hell, punishment, and the need to account for each action?" in *Gott ist schön und er liebt die Schönheit/God*

the actual style and poetic qualities of the plays may not be their main attraction, we must try to evaluate them by looking at their elements as a whole.

While style is one consideration, it is the content and themes of the passion plays which are of primary importance. We already know that the martyrdom of Ḥusayn and the suffering of his family at Karbalā' are at the core of the *ta'ziyeh* repertoire. As we briefly indicated in our historical overview, the plays go beyond the events leading to the Imām's martyrdom and seek to incorporate his story into tales about the Hebrew Prophets. However, other *ta'ziyeh* plays deal with the lives of a variety of famous personages, some religious and some purely legendary, and certain plays are set in the future, on the Day of Judgment. As one scholar observes, "Since a number of figures from the beginning of time have participated in the cosmic drama of Husayn's passion, it is not surprising that dramas written in their honor should have emerged over time to complement Husayn's turmoil."[99] This is made possible on stage by the fact that "in ta'ziyeh units of time and space are not simply ignored but abolished, and the play has no strict division into the dimensions of the earthly and heavenly worlds. Reality, dreams, and prophesying scenes are interwoven."[100] Like the Shī'ī traditions, *ta'ziyeh's* greatest goal is to showcase the implications of Ḥusayn's martyrdom; to demonstrate how Ḥusayn and his fate are at the centre of all human history, and can be successfully extrapolated to make a commentary on any situation or experience.

The central plays in the *ta'ziyeh* repertoire, those focused on Karbalā', are normally presented during the first ten days of Muḥarram, and naturally culminate in Ḥusayn's

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is Beautiful and He Loves Beauty, ed. Alma Giese and J. Christopher Bürgel, (Bern: Peter Lang, 1994), 128-9.

[99] Korom, 38.

[100] Chelkowski, "Dramatic and Literary Aspects of Ta'ziyeh-Khani," 127. I am compelled to note Chelkowski's further comment that there is a proverb in Persian coming from *ta'ziyeh*, "'You strike again at the plain of Kerbela,'" which means "returning, after a digression, to the main theme of conversation," 127.

martyrdom on the day of 'Āshūrā'. While variations in scheduling may exist, we can say that the first three days of Muḥarram are for preliminary events at Karbalā', the fourth for the martyrdom of al-Ḥurr al-Tamīmi, the fifth for the martyrdom of Zaynab's sons, the sixth for the martyrdom of 'Alī Akbar, the seventh for the wedding and martyrdom of Ḥasan's son al-Qāsim, the eighth for the martyrdom of 'Abbās, and the ninth and tenth for the denouement and martyrdom of Ḥusayn.[101]

Perhaps the most celebrated of these, besides the martyrdom of Ḥusayn, is that of the wedding of al-Qāsim, because this is the play which most exploits the mixture of joy and suffering that is often found in the plays. Here, Ḥusayn's nephew al-Qāsim wishes to die in defense of his uncle. Before he allows this, the Imām feels that he must his promise to have his brother Ḥasan's son married to his own daughter Fāṭima. Before their marriage can be consummated, the groom rides off to meet his fate, and before dying, declares, "Tell the bride to come out to meet the bridegroom, that she may observe how her beloved is deluged in blood."[102] Roy Mottahedeh has said that when the play is performed, after the wedding sequence "cookies are passed among the audience while festive music is played."[103] However, after the death of al-Qāsim, "The whole audience rises to its feet and weeps, as at a real funeral procession . . . .The body is laid on the stage, and funeral music is played while the exuberant wedding music is resumed. The audience finds itself both laughing and weeping as the conflicting scenes continue on stage."[104] While this is one of the most popular of the core plays, there are several other plays which are still related to the Karbalā' cycle. These may involve events anticipating the tragedy, such as the

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[101] I have followed Halm's chronology, *Shi'a Islam*, 62.
[102] Pelly, vol. 2, 16.
[103] Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 177.
[104] Ibid., 178.

martyrdom of Muslim b. 'Aqīl, Ḥusayn's emissary to Kufa, or events following the tragedy, such as the struggles of the surviving women and children. The most popular of these plays are the ones about the conversion to Shī'ī Islam of non-Muslims, who are shocked and moved by the death of the Imām and thus show that they are morally superior to the "Sunnī" murderers of Ḥusayn.[105]

Besides those plays directly pertaining to Ḥusayn's tragedy, there are many other cycles of *ta'zīyeh* plays which can be placed into a variety of thematic categories: those dealing with purely Islamic subjects, such as the Prophet Muḥammad or the childhood of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn; those about the other Imāms and pilgrimages to their shrines; plays centered on the Twelfth Imām, the Mahdī, who will avenge Ḥusayn at the end of time; stories from the Qur'ān and/or the Bible, such as the tale of Joseph and his brothers; and those inspired by famous epics and legendary tales, for example, episodes from Firdawsī's *Shāhnāma*.[106] These plays constitute a "digression," (*guriz*) from the main Karbalā' narrative, but represent an important stylistic and intellectual development in *ta'zīyeh*, and one which Chelkowski has called "probably the most remarkable achievement of this drama."[107] One ingenious device of the *guriz* is to have the characters in the digression plays learn about Ḥusayn's fate by literally peeping through the fingers of a heavenly emissary (i.e. Moses or the Angel Gabriel), and thus watch the events of Karbalā' through this unique portal.[108]

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[105] See, for example, Calmard, "Muharram ceremonies and diplomacy." The convert in question may be, among others, a Christian monk, a young Christian girl, or a foreign ambassador at Yazīd's court in Damascus.

[106] I have adapted these categories from Hildegard Müller, "Studien zum persischen Passionsspiel" (Ph.D. diss., Albert-Ludwigs-Universität zu Freiburg im Breisgau, 1966), 56-61. She in turn takes her categories from Bombaci, xlviii-xlix, who adds that while most plays at least make reference to Karbalā', there are also some *ta'zīyeh* plays which do not mention Ḥusayn's tragedy at all.

[107] Chelkowski, "Dramatic and Literary Aspects of Ta'zieh-Khani," 127.

[108] Anvar and Chelkowski, 126.

If we again call upon the travel narrative of Benjamin, we see that he himself witnessed one such play about King Solomon. While Benjamin comments that the relationship between Solomon and Ḥusayn "may appear to the general reader somewhat nebulous and remote," he further adds that this was justified by the fact that the Biblical King "was so versed in prevision or second sight, that it is claimed that he was master not only of the past but also of the future." [109] The play which Benjamin saw was not exclusively about the famous king, but rather served as a prelude to the presentation of the wedding of al-Qāsim. As part of his wedding celebration to the Queen of Sheba, Solomon "made an exhibition of his necromantic skill by summoning before the audience a scene which represented the marriage of Khassîm."[110] Benjamin's audience then reacted to this event, much as they did in the description provided by Mottahedeh. Fortunately, Alessandro Bausani has translated several variants of this prelude, found in the collection of *ta'zīyeh* manuscripts assembled by Enrico Cerulli. In all of these, Solomon, greatly laments the fate of the Prophet's family and eventually happens to trespass on the future ground of Karbalā' with his bride.[111] In one instance, the Angel Gabriel comes to interrupt the King's happy wedding feast by comparing its plenty to the misery of Ḥusayn's daughter's wedding. [112] Upon hearing the story of Karbalā' for the first time, Solomon declares, "My soul is becoming troubled,/my fortune is changed, my throne is fallen!"[113] thereby showing that Ḥusayn's fate alters his own. Furthermore, like many characters in *ta'zīyeh*, Solomon goes on to pledge himself as a sacrifice in the way of Ḥusayn, and even

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[109] Benjamin, 401.
[110] Ibid., 403.
[111] Alessandro Bausani, "Drammi popolari inediti persiani sulla leggenda di Salomone e della regina di Saba," in *Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi Etiopici (Roma 2-4 aprile 1959)*, ed. Enrico Cerulli (Roma: Academia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1960), 167-70.
[112] Gabriel says, "La sposa di quel Salomone è piena di gioia . . . / . . . son stati sacrificati tori ed agnelli;/ma per Fāṭemè, disgraziata e piangente,/son stati sacrificati i giovani figli di Ḥosein!" Bausani, 188-9.
[113] My translation. Bausani's version reads, "L'anima mi si stravolge,/la mia fortuna è mutata, il mio trono è caduto!" Ibid., 189.

says that the tears he sheds will help him to Paradise.[114] Here, we see this prelude reiterating the *ta'ziyeh's* central theme that Ḥusayn's tragedy is a force in the history of mankind/religion, and stressing the greater Shī'ī concept that one must weep for his fate for one's own salvation. Such plays, which go beyond Karbalā', are in many ways more skilled at underlining its significance.

In light of this emphasis on weeping and fully absorbing the meaning of Ḥusayn's fate, we can turn to the role of those actors whose job it was to present these issues to the Shī'ī public. We have already mentioned how *ta'zīyeh* actors strove, not to give realistic performances, but to prove that they were not the personages they were portraying. Indeed, this was inevitable, given their own religious beliefs, for they set just as much store in the redemptive act of *ta'zīyeh* as their public did. We have also noted that actors were allowed to improvise on stage, and this, if nothing else, to try and improve upon the scripts that they had been given. However, unlike modern actors, the goal of the *ta'zīyeh* performer is not "to become one" with the personage (good or evil) that they are portraying, but rather only to "allude to their personalities, to recall their existence."[115] In this way, perhaps these performers are not "actors," as we have come to consider them, but rather, "role-carriers," who can keep their "own identity intact."[116] Nevertheless, *ta'zīyeh* actors themselves become deeply attached to the events they are portraying, and there are many reports stating how those who had the roles of villainous characters broke down and

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[114] Solomon cries, "O Ḥosein, ti possa esser sacrificata l'anima mia!/L'anima mia sia data in olocausto pei tuoi figli!/In questo deserto pieno di dolore e di pena/in questo istante inizio il tuo rito di lutto!", Ibid., 189-90.

[115] Mamnoun, 158.

[116] Andrzej Wirth, "Semeiological Aspects of the Ta'ziyeh," in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 34 and 38.

wept at their "own" infamy.[117] In a description by Gobineau, we see what happens to the actor on stage when he fully incorporates himself into the drama:

> Mais il arrive souvent aussi que, sous la conviction immédiate du caractère qu'ils ont revêtu, les acteurs s'identifient à vue d'oeil avec leurs personnages, et quand la situation les emporte on ne peut pas dire qu'ils jouent, ils sont ce qu'ils figurent avec une telle vérité, un emportement si complet, un oubli si entier d'eux-mêmes, qu'ils arrivent à une réalité tantôt sublime, tantôt effrayante, et développent dans l'âme des auditeurs, déjà si impressionnée, ces passions qu'il m'a paru souverainement ridicule de chercher dans les pièces en papier de nos auteurs tragiques . . . .[118]

What we might take from Gobineau is not that the actors in question are violating certain religious tabus, but rather that they have become caught up in their own spectatorship of the events on stage. It is worth repeating Calmard's observation that in *ta'zīyeh*, there are "no 'actors' or 'spectators' but only a coherent community of Shī'i mourners."[119] In fact, Calmard goes on to say that the "only 'spectators' are foreign observers or onlookers."[120] If the actor becomes a spectator in *ta'zīyeh*, then perhaps the spectator also takes on some of the characteristics of the ones who put on the show, in the sense that "anything that might be lacking in the play itself" is "made up for by the audience."[121] One scholar has gone so far as to say that the "true narrator of the story is the spectator-believer who knows the story beforehand."[122] However we regard the interplay and function of actor and audience in a *ta'zīyeh* performance, no one could deny that it is this key relationship which makes for a successful representation of the events of Karbalā'.[123]

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[117] See, for example, Gobineau, 322.
[118] Ibid., 323.
[119] Calmard, "Shi'i Rituals and Power II," 156.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Forough, 26.
[122] Wirth, 34. While Wirth probably intends his observation to carry some actual scientific or linguistic weight, I think that his statement is best understood in a metaphorical sense.
[123] Forough seems to reiterate a general consensus when he says, "the Persian dramatists put into practice the much-discussed modern idea of making the audience as well as the actors take part in the play, unseperated from each other by any kind of barrier," 26. See also Mottahedeh who states that "the actors and the audience share in a joy and a horror that such events took place; in fact, some actors describe themselves as transformed by the emotion of the audience," 178.

In addition to the actors and their audience, the other powerful force on the *ta'zīyeh* stage is the use of symbols, most notably through props and set dressings. We have learned that these were often minimal, but at the same time, carried a great deal of meaning. One outstanding example of this can be found in a travel narrative from the beginning of the nineteenth century. At the performance in question, "a person of more strength, and more nakedness, a water carrier, walked forwards, bearing an immense leather sack filled with water slung over his back, on which by way of bravado four boys were piled one over the other. This personage, we were told, was emblematical of the great thirst which Hossein suffered in the desert."[124] Other examples of symbols might be a bowl of water on stage to represent the Euphrates, or "the branch of a tree" for "a palm grove."[125] As we see, props and symbols in *ta'zīyeh* need not be realistic, only poetically or metaphorically just to that which they are meant to represent. Conversely, scenes portraying the grotesque can be very life-like, as was the case in the processions.[126] As for decorating the theatre itself, this too demonstrates the essential community spirit of *ta'zīyeh*, given that people from all social backgrounds lent their most precious possessions for the beautification of the *ta'kīyeh*.[127] It is also true that anachronisms are rarely avoided, and almost encouraged in *ta'zīyeh*.[128] Thus, we see how the general atmosphere of the plays links them to the greater purpose of defying realism, as well as showing the timelessness of Ḥusayn's tragedy.

Now that we have tried to account for the theatrical elements of the passion plays,

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[124] James Morier, *A second journey through Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor to Constantinople, between the years 1810 and 1816*, (London, 1818), 176-184; quoted in Halm, *Shi'a Islam*, 67, n.29.
[125] Chelkowski, "Dramatic and Literary Aspects of Ta'zieh-Khani," 130.
[126] Ibid., 133.
[127] Ibid.,125.
[128] The usual examples of this are the fact that "warriors wear British officer's jackets instead of coats of mail" and that "bad characters often wear sunglasses, learned people wear normal glasses," Ibid., 132.

we can return to a concern that tends to hover over *ta'zīyeh*, namely, whether or not it is true theatre, and to what extent it is still a religious ritual. We know that due to the sanctions imposed upon it during the twentieth century, *ta'zīyeh* never evolved into a purely secular theatre.[129] The fact that what is considered true theatre, nevertheless has its roots in the religious rituals of ancient civilizations, can add another dimension to the disussion. We can perhaps adopt the views of the anthropologist William O. Beeman when he says, with regards to *ta'zīyeh*, "Because the performance takes place during a formal period of religious mourning, it takes on the character of religious ritual."[130] However, he also notes that "[a]s a dramatic tradition it [*ta'zīyeh*] is one of the most powerful in the world," and that it has "become far more than a religious ceremonial observance."[131] As we have seen thus far, *ta'zīyeh* has many key elements of a theatrical performance, and has a conscious desire to make itself ever more interesting and appealing to its audience. At the same time, without the religious motivations of both actor and audience, the full impact of the passion plays would not be felt: it is this which allows a performance to achieve a kind of "sublime" (as both Benjamin and Gobineau have judged), despite any technical flaws.

How then are we to formulate an aesthetic evaluation of a phenomenon which is both consciously artistic, and thus illusionary, but which also yearns to represent the greatest of truths about the meaning of life? We could submit that a host of religious celebrations, from Roman Catholic communion to Hindu wedding celebrations, share *ta'zīyeh's* fusion of religious sentiment and pageantry. Shall we lump these practices

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[129] Ibid., 128-9.
[130] William O. Beeman, "A Full Arena: The Development and Meaning of Popular Performance Tradition in Iran," in *Continuity and Change in Modern Iran*, ed. Michael E. Bonine and Nikki R. Keddie, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 287.
[131] Ibid., 286 and 289.

together as the offspring of our primal urge to recreate the divine in human life, or can we differentiate between them on aesthetic grounds, saying that some rituals are more sublime than others? As we shall see in the next chapter, one solution is to apply Nietzsche's aesthetic conception of tragic art and ritual to the case of *ta'ziyeh*.

Chapter 2

Ta'zīyeh and *The Birth of Tragedy*

In our first chapter, we frequently made reference to the "tragedy of Ḥusayn" and also designated the passion plays in his honour as "tragedies." This seems an accurate and obvious choice for describing the events of Karbalā', and yet warring definitions of the tragic abound. In this chapter, we shall propose some of Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844-1900) theories about the tragic from his *The Birth of Tragedy* in the hopes of showing that *ta'zīyeh* embodies those tragic ideals which Nietzsche so prized. However, we begin with a summary of how some scholars have interpreted *ta'zīyeh* and its artistic points of interest. Next, comes an overview and analysis of Nietzsche's first true philosophical work, to be followed by a description of how the Persian passion plays fit Nietzsche's concept of the tragic.

2.1 Some Previous Criticism of *Ta'zīyeh*

Before we proceed to apply certain Nietzschean principles to *ta'zīyeh*, we must first take a look at some earlier interpretations of the Persian dramas. In the literature available to us in European languages, there is relatively little that can be termed as literary criticism of the plays. Nevertheless, many insightful comments have been made about this art form, its motivations and style.

To begin, a possible relationship between Greek tragedy and the Persian passion plays has not been overlooked by scholars. At the forefront of this group is Gobineau, who more than happily made comparisons between Greek theatre and what he had seen in Iran. However, we must hesitate when we study his observations, because we know that they are

tainted with a certain Aryanism.[1] If we would like to relate one small comment from Gobineau, we can point to his association of the *ta'zīyeh* chorus to the Athenian chorus. Nietzsche will tell us that drama evolved when an "actor" representing Dionysus stepped into the chorus of the god's worshippers. So too, Gobineau observes that *ta'zīyeh* began with "les cantiques recités dans les dix premiers jours du Moharrem," but then changed to a more dramatic form "à l'apparition de l'un ou l'autre de ces personnages sacrés qui venaient pleurer leurs malheurs et leurs souffrances."[2] Gobineau further adds that *ta'zīyeh* represents "l'esprit de l'antiquité, c'est esprit de l'humanité" to show his appreciation of the Persian dramas.[3]

Although we have said in the Introduction that we do not intend to draw actual historical parallels between Greek tragedy and *ta'zīyeh*, we can still look at an article on this subject by the well-known Turkish theatre critic, Metin And; an untainted source unlike Gobineau's work. In his study, And enumerates a number of similarities between the Greek and Iranian dramas, and focuses in on their common ritual aspects. As he himself says, "Like Greek tragedy, Taziye was an affirmation of solidarity by the deep sense of ritual, a recognized need in the life of the community."[4] Of the commonalities between the two forms of drama, he is most concerned with how both fit certain mythical archetypes: the slaying of the king or hero and his miraculous childhood, the presence of spirits from the beyond, the idealization of female characters, and the role played by fate or

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[1] A thorough critique of Gobineau can be found in Jean Calmard, "Le mécénat des representations de ta'ziyè II. Les débuts du règne de Nâseroddin Châh," *Le Monde Iranien et l'Islam: Sociétés et Cultures* 4 (1976-1977): 135-8. Calmard notes that Gobineau enthusiastically made comparisons between the Greeks and the Persians out of his sense of Aryan superiority, thus ignoring the possible parallels that could be made between *ta'zīyeh* and the Medieval passion plays of Europe.
[2] Gobineau, 298-9.
[3] Ibid., 299.
[4] Metin And, "Taziye, Tragedy in Islam," *International Theatre Yearbook* 1, (1979): 30.

destiny.[5] And also notes that both traditions incorporate music and poetry. His most interesting observation is that both "favour irony as being more dignified and more tragic," referring to the fact that in both types of drama, the audiences know the outcome of the story.[6] Given that *ta'zīyeh*, in particular, is still in many ways a religious ritual, this is a necessary device, and one which allows the audience to better identify with what is happening on stage. As Mottahedeh tells us, the climactic moment in *ta'zīyeh* occurs when Ḥusayn puts on his martyr's shroud, and not when he is actually killed.[7] And also singles out the fact that in Greek drama, the hero's fall comes about because of his own failings and weaknesses, thus adding a vital psychological dimension to Athenian tragedy. In *ta'zīyeh*, characters tend to be either idealized or vilified, and any detection of a flaw in Ḥusayn would impede the spectators from fully identifying with the Imām's tragedy, and also contradict Shī'ī theology. Interestingly, it has also been argued that in *ta'zīyeh*, "it is the audience, rather than the hero, who learns from the experience [of the tragedy],"[8] in reference to the fact that in the European theatre, it is the fallen hero who must learn from his own drama. Nevertheless, as And relates, the passion plays do showcase some characters who undergo psychological change, for example al-Ḥurr, who goes over to Ḥusayn, as well as the non-Muslim converts to Shī'sm.[9]

In the end, perhaps nothing concrete can be said about the relationship between Greek tragedy and *ta'zīyeh*. In terms of actual theatrical features, they are similar, but not identical, and the question of the Persian passion plays having emerged from some kind of

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[5] Ibid., 32-4.
[6] Ibid., 35-6.
[7] Mottahedeh, 178.
[8] Mahmood Karimpour Moghaddam, "The Evolution of the Hero Concept in Iranian Epic and Dramatic Literature" (Ph.D. diss., The Florida State University, College of Arts and Sciences, 1982), 85.
[9] And, 36.

Greek influence has never been proven.[10] At the same time, a scholar like Cerulli has offered-up a tentative "semi-parallel" between the two traditions. Dissatisfied with other theories on the ancient Mesopotamian or Persian origins of the passion plays, he asks whether or not we can simply believe in a "spontaneous" birth for these dramas. As a possible proof thereof, he suggests a comparison with the emergence of Greek drama from religious ritual.[11] While the study of the relationship between ritual and theatre in world culture has been well-developed by anthropologists, Cerulli still seems to perceive a special affinity between the Greek and Persian theatres.

While the search for parallels between Greek drama and *ta'zīyeh* has been one trend in criticism, another comparative impulse has been to associate the Persian religious dramas to Medieval European passion plays. This was perhaps popularized by the nineteenth century English poet and essayist, Matthew Arnold, in his "A Persian Passion Play." While Arnold relies on Gobineau for his information about *ta'zīyeh*, he does not agree with the comparison to Greek theatre. The English man of letters had recently seen the famous Bavarian passion play at Oberammergau, and thus felt that the religious suffering witnessed in *ta'zīyeh* could be better related to Christian themes than Greek ones.[12] However, we must also express scruples about Arnold's motives in making this comparison, as he seems to imply that *ta'zīyeh* makes up for a lack of Christian feeling in Islam in general.

Nevertheless, this does not negate that much good scholarship has been done comparing Christian and Shī'ī passion plays,[13] and it is obvious that this is a favorite

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[10] Cerulli, 292.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Matthew Arnold, *A Persian Passion Play*, in *The Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. 3, (New York: AMS Preess, 1970), 255 and 283-7.
[13] See, for example, Forough.

parallel on the part of *ta'zīyeh* scholars in general. What unites these two traditions is their common reliance on Biblical themes, and naturally, the fact that both highlight the themes of sacrifice and redemption. Also, unlike Greek tragedy, which was the work of individual and professional playwrights, both Christian and Shī'ī passion plays are more popular expressions of piety.[14] At the same time, as has been accurately remarked, "There is no Easter after the Shi'i Good Friday."[15] However we may compare the redemptive qualities of the Shī'ī passion, or the cosmological significance of Ḥusayn's martyrdom with Christ's death and resurrection, the Christian celebration is a much less tragic one.

Such are the two most popular trends in comparing *ta'zīyeh* with other kinds of theatre. However, when most scholars look at the plays in themselves, they are most likely to view them with the help of Aristotle's *Poetics*, and his notions of *mimesis* and *katharsis*.[16] This is not a vain enterprise, given that *ta'zīyeh* reflects both qualities. Aristotle tells us that imitation is both pleasurable and instructive for human beings,[17] and we see this in the passion plays' imitation of holy personages to bring about a more vivid understanding of their fate. At the same time, the plays certainly arouse "pity and fear,"[18] which in turn causes the audience to weep, and thus generates a cathartic effect. Indeed, we might venture that much of the criticism coming from social science disciplines tends to emphasize the cathartic qualities of the passion plays, although the meaning of this term has been considerably expanded since Aristotle's time. For example, it has been said of *ta'zīyeh* and *ru-hauzi*,(the comic Iranian folk drama): "The common dynamic in both

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[14] Calmard, "Le mécénat des représentations de ta'ziyè II.," 137.
[15] James A. Bill and John Alden Williams, *Roman Catholics and Shi'I Muslims: Prayer, Passion and Politics*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 73.
[16] For a good summary of the Aristotelian view of *ta'zīyeh*, see Moghaddam, 77-90.
[17] Aristotle, *De Poetica (Poetics)*, in *Introduction to Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, trans. Ingram Bywater, (New York: Random House, The Modern Library, 1947), 627.
[18] Ibid., 631.

reactions [to these types of theatre, i.e. tears or laughter] is the factor of emotional release."[19] Even the author's subsequent stress on the dramas' didactic value for society can be traced back to their imitation of good and bad.[20] However, this only provides the psychological impact of the plays, but not quite their aesthetic meaning. When we turn to Nietzsche, we will see that his Dionysian and Apollinian categories have much in common with Aristotle's *mimesis* and *katharsis*, and yet he so exaggerates their possible aesthetic interpretations, that we would rather see them as metaphors, than as factual descriptions of human emotions.

Finally, to round out our discussion, there are two essays of note, both of which deal with the philosophical and artistic values of the plays, and found in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*. The first of these is Mayel Baktash's "Ta'ziyeh and its Philosophy." Here, the author proposes that the impact of certain Mu'tazilite doctrines on Shī'ism had repercussions on *ta'zīyeh*. As he himself argues,

> It can be said that mourning ceremonies of Ashura came into being in response to a profound spiritual and social need. They had a sort of philosophical bent which, though implicitly nurtured in the Shi'a movements with tendencies similar to those of the Mutazilite philosophical sect, was derived from one basic principle. In the culture of which Ta'ziyeh was a part, the principles of life, "free will," and *tashabbuh* (imitation, appearing to be the same as something else), had a definitive role in the development and form of Ta'ziyeh.[21]

Baktash shows how Mu'tazilite influences at the Buyid court promoted the writing of elegies for Ḥusayn, as well as encouraged the development of mourning rituals. He further says that at this time, the principle of "*[t]ashabbuh* . . . 'making a resemblance'. . . carried a meaning of quest and aspiration . . .[for] making one's self resemble the good on the one hand, and for keeping one's distance from evil and emulation of enemies of religion on the

[19] Beeman, 304.
[20] Ibid., 304-5.
[21] Baktash, 98.

other." [22] This then was used to "justify" mourning rituals for Ḥusayn. Baktash also claims that because individuals were encouraged to imitate Ḥusayn in other kinds of rituals, it paved the way for the theatrical imitation of the events of Karbalā' in later years.[23] The principle of *tashabbuh* was then used by clerics during the Qajar era to defend the religious validity of *ta'zīyeh*. In addition to this, the Mu'tazilite emphasis on free will also found parallels in Ḥusayn's story as presented in *ta'zīyeh*, because all those who participated in it, virtuous or villainous, were seen as having the power to choose how they would act.[24] As we can see, Baktash's observations in many ways reflect the mimetic qualities of the passion plays, and yet he has been able to tie these to greater trends in Shī'i theology. His study is very useful, especially where it reveals how and why *ta'zīyeh*, a practice which seemingly contradicts many Islamic conventions, was able to mature.

The second enlightening essay is Parviz Mamnoun's "Ta'ziyeh from the Viewpoint of the Western Theatre," where he compares the plays to trends in modernist, twentieth century theatre. Mamnoun is most interested in the question of *ta'zīyeh's* realism, or lack thereof, and seeks to compare it to the German playwright Bertold Brecht's idea that, "the only reality in the theatre is that it is not real."[25] Mamnoun strives to show that *ta'zīyeh* not only anticipates this Brechtian ideal, but better embodies it than Brecht himself was able to do.[26] The author concentrates on the roles that *ta'zīyeh* actors play in keeping performances from becoming realistic or naturalistic, stressing that they are not there to portray real men and women but rather, "symbols, manifestations, tokens."[27] In this way, the passion plays become a kind of "naïve" theatre or one that is "simple, without

[22] Ibid., 101.
[23] Ibid., 104-5.
[24] Ibid., 109-118.
[25] Mamnoun, 156.
[26] Ibid., 157.
[27] Ibid., 161.

artifice."[28] However, most significantly, Mamnoun demonstrates that this lack of realism in *ta'zīyeh* has the virtue of strengthening its symbolic message, for "when it is farthest from realism, the symbolic theatre of Ta'ziyeh approaches the border of reality."[29] Thus, the metahistorical or cosmological message of Ḥusayn's tragedy is best depicted in an artless, fanciful way. Given what Mamnoun says in his article, it is therefore not surprising that certain Western theatre directors have turned to *ta'zīyeh* as a source of inspiration for making their productions more innovative and perhaps even more modern.[30]

While we have only looked at a handful of commentators on *ta'zīyeh*, we have tried to single-out those who have most tried to give some sense of the passion plays' aesthetic meaning and influences. This will provide us with some background, when we turn to our interpretation of *ta'zīyeh* using Nietzsche's work on tragedy.

2.2 Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*

It almost goes without saying that not only *The Birth of Tragedy*,[31] but the ensemble of Nietzsche's oeuvre has been so scrutinized by scholars, as to make a definitive assessment of his works almost impossible. Added to this is Nietzsche's own proclivity for refuting or even denouncing his own views throughout his career. Nevertheless, even if we are not seeking an all-encompassing understanding of *The Birth*, we can still make great use of it to discuss *ta'zīyeh*. At the forefront of this understanding must be the realization that, "*The Birth of Tragedy* is not a work of classical scholarship,"[32] but rather a philosophical or metaphysical work. However, even those who have more accurately grasped the historical origins of Greek tragedy, the supposed subject of Nietzsche's work, will admit

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[28] Ibid., 162.
[29] Ibid., 163.
[30] Chelkowski and Dabashi, 80. The authors give the example of Peter Brook who is perhaps best know for his avant-garde production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
[31] Henceforth to be referred to simply as *The Birth*.
[32] M.S. Silk and J.P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 132.

that *The Birth* is one of the most-influential works on tragedy ever written. They have stressed, "The spiritual importance of the work vastly transcends its occasion and its evidence."[33] Indeed, it is in this vein that we must continue if we are to make effective use of the book.

The background of the book and its composition can be briefly described before moving on to its purpose and content. It is well known that Nietzsche viewed *The Birth* as his official transition from classical philologist to full-fledged philosopher.[34] Nietzsche wrote his work on tragedy between 1869 and 1871, in lieu of his doctoral dissertation, and it was finally published in 1872. In the interim, he struggled with the various influences of the Franco-Prussian War, those of his philosophical precursor Arthur Schopenhauer, and those of his sometime mentor Richard Wagner.[35] With regards to these, we can simply say that the impact of the war was much less than Nietzsche made it out to be, that *The Birth* overcomes Schopenhauer's "Buddhistic negation of the will" with the life-affirming power of the Dionysian, and that Wagner's influence on the work is not as important as generally assumed.[36] Upon its appearance, the book met with some scathing reviews, particularly from his fellow philologists, as well as some attempts to defend it by friends. Nietzsche himself was to revisit and criticize this early work when it was reissued in 1886, the fruit of which is the book's polemical new preface entitled, "Attempt at a Self-Criticism." Nietzsche takes up the issue of *The Birth* again in *Ecce Homo* (written in 1888/published in 1908), his overview of his works and accomplishments, written just before he was institu-

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[33] I am referring to Gerald F. Else, and his highly praised *The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 9-10. Else dismisses the Dionysian origins of tragedy, thereby thwarting any claim to historical certainty that Nietzsche might have had. Once again, we must follow Else's own advice to view *The Birth of Tragedy*, "spiritually" or perhaps philosophically, if we are gain anything from the book and not succumb to a bad kind of historicizing of the origins of Greek tragedy and *ta'ziyeh*.
[34] See, M.S. Silk and J.P. Stern, 15-30.
[35] Ibid., 31-61.
[36] Ibid., 31-61 and 220.

tionalized for madness.[37] We further know that the German philosopher's views on this early work went through many revisions in the course of his lifetime, and thus we should take note of some of them in our evaluation of *The Birth*.[38]

We are now in a better position to ask ourselves what Nietzsche's greater purpose was in writing this difficult, and yet innovative book. We repeat that while Nietzsche does try to prove his theories historically, pointing out how this or that trend or figure changed the evolution of tragedy, all of his assessments are perhaps best understood metaphorically. Even if we say that his ideas are not historically accurate, they are aesthetically accurate, or at the very least, shed some light on tragedy as a transcendent phenomenon. Perhaps our best strategy is simply to take the book as a work of literary or aesthetic criticism. This stance is somewhat justified by the argument that "*The Birth of Tragedy* represents Nietzsche's most sustained attempt at a theory of art . . . . it is his only book in which art occupies a central place, even though musical and literary criticism and aesthetic speculations abound in all his writings."[39]

Indeed, one of the principal goals of the book is to contradict previous opinions on Greek aesthetics, formulated by some of the greatest German thinkers in artistic matters. Nietzsche was mostly trying to thwart the conventional belief that Greek culture was perfectly harmonious and rational. This view had been propounded by the eighteenth-century art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who used Greek sculpture as a model

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[37] Walter Kaufmann, "Translator's Introduction (The Birth of Tragedy)," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Random House, The Modern Library, 1967/2000), 3-13.

[38] Although it is part of my edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*, I will nevertheless make special reference to the "Attempt at a Self-Criticism" in the notes, to distinguish between the earlier and later Nietzsche.

[39] Silk and Stern, 225. Although I will be focusing on *The Birth* for my discussion of tragedy in *ta'zīyeh*, I feel compelled to relate Silk and Stern's further comment, "In opposition to the thesis put forward in *BT*, the later Nietzsche will espouse the ideals of classicism . . . he will express hostility to the theatre; he will be able to see convention as 'the condition of great art, not an obstacle to it' and art itself as 'the cult of the untrue,' 225, also Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* and *The Gay Science*, quoted in Silk and Stern, 225, n.1 (p. 417). In this regard, I am truly doing an evaluation of *ta'zīyeh* based on *The Birth* and not in relation to Nietzsche's thought as a whole.

for all the classical arts, and thus felt that Greek art in general embodied an essential beauty and harmony.[40] The same idea was later refuted in part by the German playwright and man of letters Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who argued that all Greek arts should not be judged equally, and took note of some of the less pleasing aspects of Greek culture. Nevertheless, unlike Nietzsche, Lessing still saw the reinforcement of beauty and harmony as the ultimate didactic goal of the arts.[41] As Nietzsche himself defines his own position, "The Greek knew and felt the terror and horror of existence."[42] Much of Nietzsche's subsequent polemics in *The Birth* were then directed against these popularized notions of Greek civilization.

While this reevaluation of the Greeks was one great objective of his work, we can also identify a second important motivator for *The Birth*: Nietzsche wanted to use what he had discovered about the tragic spirit in Greece to reinvigorate German art and culture.[43] This is particularly true when we consider Nietzsche's great faith in his friend Wagner's ability to bring about a cultural renewal through his new style of music.[44] Therefore, *The Birth* is not simply meant to be informative, but also instructive. Furthermore, it has also been said of Nietzsche, "Any thought he had about Greek art was a thought about art *per se*: a Greek instance was not, for pragmatic purposes, *an* instance but *the* instance."[45] Thus, we might go so far as to argue that even if Nietzsche's opinions are not accurate on

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[40] Dennis Sweet, "The Birth of *The Birth of Tragedy*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 2 (1999): 347. See also, Silk and Stern, 1-14.
[41] Sweet, 348-50.
[42] Nietzsche, *The Birth*, 42. In his later introduction to his early work, Nietzsche seems to be making reference to the old harmony theory when he asks, "Greeks and the art form of pessimism? The best turned out, most beautiful, most envied type of humanity to date, those most apt to seduce us to life, the Greeks—how now?" from "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," 3. See also, Silk and Stern, 34.
[43] See, Silk and Stern, 22, where they show that Nietzsche, like many Germans of his time, turned to Greece as a model for what German society should be.
[44] Nietzsche originally felt a pull to Wagner, because, among other reasons "Wagnerian music drama claimed a relationship with Greek tragedy." Silk and Stern, 33.
[45] Ibid., 34.

the subject of Greek tragedy, they nevertheless project his ideals for tragedy: as for the birth of Athenian drama, Nietzsche may or may not be talking about phenomena that actually existed; as for the tragedies of the future, it is clear that they should embody Nietzsche's rules about art. Just as we have seen Qajar rulers trying to institute *ta'ziyeh* as a national theatre, so too does Nietzsche have a certain nationalistic purpose in his writings on tragedy. In both cases, a great deal of hope for the future was invested in an art form.

With some of Nietzsche's objectives in writing *The Birth* in mind, we can now turn to a discussion of the work itself. The following, which takes "the true originality of Nietzsche's theory of tragedy"[46] into consideration, provides a useful summary of the book's arguments:

> Instead of regarding the dark and sinister side of Greek art as an underdeveloped or aberrant aspect of the Greek world-view which leads to a higher, truer, more rational and optimistic attitude, Nietzsche insists that this rational and optimistic character was actually nothing more than a relatively late and thoroughly artificial representation of a more basic, instinctive, and fundamentally aesthetic view of human existence. It is only when both of these seemingly mutually exclusive attitudes are brought together that we can achieve a complete and 'whole' picture of the ancient Greek world-view.[47]

If, in the above quotation, we were to substitute "ideal form of tragedy" for "'whole' picture of the ancient Greek world-view" we would also have a fair description of how Nietzsche was to describe the tragic. So as not to err, we must also point out that, while it is the contesting Dionysian and Apollinian[48] spirits which must come together to make tragedy, the negative portrayal of "artificial" optimism and rationalism above is primarily directed against Socrates and his influence on Athenian tragedy. In other words, the themes to keep in mind while examining *The Birth* are the aesthetic potential of the Dionysian and the Apollinian, their role in the creation of tragedy, and the harmful effect

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[46] Sweet, 353.
[47] Ibid., 353-4.
[48] I follow Kaufmann in my use of "Apollinian" rather than "Apollonian." See, Kaufmann, 9, n9.

of Socratic reason on Greek drama.[49]

Before we can move on to Nietzsche's interpretation of Apollo and Dionysus, we must remind ourselves that we have said that we shall view the categories of the Apollinian and the Dionysian in a purely metaphorical light. This will be useful when we come to apply them to *ta'zīyeh*, as we in no way wish to imply that the Persian passion plays have any relation to these pagan gods.[50] While in Greek mythology, Apollo is the "lawgiver and god of light," and Dionysus "a god of life and yet a sinister, 'dark', force,"[51] Nietzsche expands their aesthetic possibilities to such a degree that "the names denote not merely this pair of very different Greek deities, but two large, supra-historical, and diametrically opposite aspects of art and existence in general."[52] Indeed, Nietzsche's own metaphorical substitutes for these impulses are "dreams" for the Apollinian, and "intoxication" for the Dionysian.[53] It is also relevant that Nietzsche was not the first to exploit these paradigms, some of his notable precursors being Plutarch and Heraclitus, as well as the German poet Hölderlin.[54] Another possible precursor is the American man of letters Ralph Waldo Emerson. George J. Stack, who has prepared a study on Emerson's influence on the young German philosopher, has said that in Emerson's essay "Fate," (1860), the American "admits the millionfold negative facts, accepts them as part of the necessity of actuality, and then affirms the value of life in face of them."[55] Stack then sees this as a forerunner to

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[49]Nietzsche's view of Socrates and his negative influence on Euripides is singled-out as one of Nietzsche's greatest errors in *The Birth*. See, Silk and Stern, 37.

[50] Just as we do not say that Mamnoun is doing a Marxist analysis of *ta'zīyeh*, when he compares it to Bertold Brecht's dramatic theories, in his "Ta'ziyeh from the Viewpoint of Western Theater."

[51] Silk and Stern, 38.

[52] Ibid. Silk and Stern later expand this sentiment by arguing, "If he had been concerned only to apply these hybrids to the modern world, or to art or life as a whole, but *not* to the Greek world in particular, his antithesis would have been at once less problematic and less engaging," 185.

[53] Nietzsche, *The Birth*, 33.

[54] Silk and Stern, 209-11.

[55] George J. Stack, *Nietzsche and Emerson: An Elective Affinity*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1992), 225. Stack presents compelling arguments for the little discussed Emersonian influence on Nietzsche.

Nietzsche's "'Dionysian pessimism'" and further argues that it is through Emerson that Nietzsche began considering the redemptive powers of art.[56] Therefore, even if we were to reduce Nietzsche's antithesis to a revision of Schopenhauer's comparison of the world as will and idea,[57] which itself has roots in Plato's oppositions of "reality and illusion, unity and individuation,"[58] we still see that Nietzsche imbues his Dionysian and Apollinian categories with an uncommon aesthetic power and importance.

Let us begin with Nietzsche's understanding of the Apollinian impulse in art, as it is the one which he addresses first in *The Birth* and also the one at the origin of the "myth" of Greek harmony. With reference to the fact that the Apollinian is that which encompasses dreams and representations, as well as provides artistic form, he explains:

> This joyous necessity of the dream experience has been embodied by the Greeks in their Apollo: Apollo the god of all plastic energies, is at the same time the soothsaying god . . . the deity of light, is also ruler over the beautiful illusion of the inner world of fantasy. The higher truth, the perfection of these states in contrast to the incompletely intelligible everyday world, this deep consciousness of nature, healing and helping in sleep and dreams, is at the same time the symbolical analogue to the soothsaying faculty of the arts generally, which make life possible and worth living.[59]

We can see how the Apollinian might be applied to the poetic and/or artistic impulse in man when Nietzsche says, "we might call Apollo himself the glorious divine image of the *principium individuationis*, through whose gestures and eyes all the joy and wisdom of 'illusion,' together with its beauty, speak to us."[60] Once again, the emphasis is on artistry and illusion; that which is beautiful and pleasing, yet unreal.

At the same time, Emerson is not as blunt and reckless a polemicist, and thus helps to tone down some of Nietzsche's ideas. We shall return to the subject of Emerson in Chapter 3.

[56] Ibid., 222-3.

[57] Kaufmann, 9.

[58] Silk and Stern, 210.

[59] Nietzsche, *The Birth*, 35.

[60] Ibid., 36. It is worth noting that Nietzsche does make explicit reference to Schopenhauer's work in this section.

In contrast to this description of beauty and harmony, and even of self-confidence, the Dionysian is the "terror" or uncertainty of human life when it is added to "the blissful ecstasy that wells from the innermost depths of man, indeed of nature, at this collapse of the *principium individuationis*."[61] Thus, the Dionysian is like "intoxication" because, for the human being in a Dionysian state, "everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness." [62] Furthermore, where the Apollinian impulse represented the triumph of the individual and his understanding of this world, "Under the charm of the Dionysian not only is the union between man and man reaffirmed, but nature which has become alienated, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her lost son, man."[63] The highest gift of the Dionysian is that man becomes "no longer an artist" but rather "a work of art in himself"; he is a reflection of the "primordial unity" of being.[64] Under the rubric of the Dionysian, man has lost his power and control over his world (he can no longer sit back and contemplate it with pleasure as the Apollinian artist does), and yet he is able to harness a greater kind of artistic power from nature.

Nietzsche then goes on to show how he felt these two impulses had manifested themselves in Greek culture through the competing cults of Apollo and Dionysus, and in Greek poetry. However, it is also worth our notice that he says that that which was Apollinian represented the surface culture of the Greeks, and was a false harmony, masking the sufferings of life with art.[65] Indeed, they practiced a certain "redemption through illusion."[66] However, very significantly, Nietzsche also feels "impelled to the metaphysical assumption that the truly existent primal unity, eternally suffering and contradictory, also

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[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid., 37.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., 41-4.
[66] Ibid., 45.

needs a rapturous vision, the pleasurable illusion, for its continuous redemption." [67] Art then becomes necessary for counteracting the suffering in life: suffering (the Dionysian) provides and impetus for art, and art (the Apollinian) redeems and heals that suffering through its powers. Both Apollinian and Dionysian impulses are necessary for the production of sublime art, and an almost mystical fusion between artist and the Dionysian unity of being must take place to reach the "eternal essence of art."[68]

While Nietzsche also makes certain points about Greek poetry and song, we can proceed to his description of what constitutes good tragedy. Of the many things that could be singled-out in his explanation, we shall have to limit ourselves to those points which will be relevant to our discussion of *ta'zīyeh*. One of the most important of these elements of the tragic form is the chorus (the chorus of satyrs that would come together to worship Dionysus). Nietzsche debates former opinions about the function of this group, denying that they acted as spectators, and arguing that they came together in a kind of primal unity. Here again, he reiterates the healing or redemptive power of tragedy:

> The metaphysical comfort—with which, I am suggesting even now, every true tragedy leaves us—that life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable—this comfort appears in incarnate clarity in the chorus of satyrs, a chorus of natural beings who live ineradicably, as it were, behind all civilization and remain eternally the same, despite the changes of generalizations and of the history of nations.[69]

Nietzsche's next comment is perhaps even more telling:

> With the chorus the profound Hellene, uniquely susceptible to the tenderest and deepest suffering, comforts himself, having looked boldly right into the terrible destructiveness of so-called world history as well as the cruelty of nature, and being in danger of longing for a Buddhistic negation of the will. Art saves him, and through art—life.[70]

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[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid., 52, It is here that Nietzsche begins to talk about the justification of the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. If we were brave we might pause to consider certain parallels with Sufism.
[69] Ibid., 59.
[70] Ibid.

What we should lay emphasis on here, is the idea that part of the metaphysical comfort afforded by art is that it gives one the sense that some things are unchanging. Man, aware of the terrors of life and time, can reach a kind of redemption by participating in a ritual which will allow him to reaffirm life. The greatest danger is to allow oneself to fall into a deep, life-denying pessimism because of the "terrible destructiveness" of the world. Neither should one deny the unhappiness and suffering of life; this kind of recognition is the principal virtue of the Dionysian spirit. Rather, one must use art to overcome the burden of suffering, something which can be accomplished through tragedy as art form. Tragedy is that which exposes all the sufferings of the world, and then redeems them by seeing them through the beautiful illusion of art. In a sense, art is able to accomplish this because it allows for action. For Nietzsche, the "knowledge" of the horrors of existence "kills action" because "action requires the veils of illusion" provided by art. Art turns this frightening knowledge into "notions with which one can live," which in turn results in "the *sublime* as the taming of the horrible." [71]

Nietzsche will end up saying that the function of the chorus in all of this is to put up "a living wall against the assaults of reality."[72] The chorus, through its ecstatic state, is more connected to the true reality of being, rather than simply the world of appearances that constitutes civilization.[73] However, in order for tragedy to be successful, the Dionysian chorus must make use of Apollinian art to express what it knows of life, or as Nietzsche states, tragedy is "the Dionysian chorus which ever anew discharges itself in an Apollinian world of images."[74] Thus, the Dionysian chorus is endowed with the wisdom of

[71] Ibid., 60.
[72] Ibid., 61.
[73] Silk and Stern, 70.
[74] Nietzsche, *The Birth*, 65.

suffering, or the wisdom to redeem suffering through art.[75] If we ask ourselves how drama came into being, we find out that it was through the practice of representing the god Dionysus amongst the satyrs.[76] They then became a chorus which "had the task of moving the spectators to see, not an actor, but the visionary figure that the actor stood for."[77]

Nietzsche sums up his account of tragedy by emphasizing the important role that myth must play in the entire process. He has already said that the sufferings (for example, being torn apart by the Titans) of Dionysus were due to his own "individual will" or his "individuation," which we can perhaps understand as his defiance of the other gods, and his head-strong tendency to do as he pleased. Nietzsche therefore incorporates the evils of individuation into his theory of tragedy.[78] Thus his plan for the "*mystery doctrine of tragedy*" then becomes, "the fundamental knowledge of the oneness of everything existent, the conception of individuation as the primal cause of evil, and of art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken in augury of the restored oneness."[79] Tragedy also sustains myth, a necessary act because myth is the aesthetic expression of the deepest Dionysian truths, and therefore the greatest truths about existence. Myth dies when it is taken over by "orthodox dogmatism" which systemizes and historicizes it, thus denying it "natural vitality and growth."[80] However, with the help of tragedy, "myth attains its most profound content, its most expressive form."[81] In order to overcome suffering through art, both tragedy and myth are necessary.

If this then is the birth of tragedy, this fusion of the consciousness of the suffering

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[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid., 62-6.
[77] Silk and Stern, 70.
[78] Nietzsche, *The Birth*, 73. Tragedy then also fits into the archetypal death and rebirth of the god.
[79] Ibid., 74.
[80] Ibid., 75.
[81] Ibid.

in life with its artistic redemption, Nietzsche also informs us about tragedy's death. This comes about because of Euripides, who portrayed his characters like men, not gods. This playwright made his divine characters so realistic that his audience identified with them personally, which in turn stripped away their beautiful Apollinian veneer, making the reaffirmation of life through tragedy impossible. As Nietzsche says, "Through him [Euripides] the everyday man forced his way from the spectators' seats onto the stage; the mirror in which formerly grand and bold traits were represented now showed the painful fidelity that conscientiously reproduces even the botched outlines of nature."[82] In essence, Euripides chose to favour Apollo and abandon Dionysus and so "murdered" tragedy. He had been under the negative influence of Socrates, who promoted reason over myth.[83] Socrates, in Nietzsche's view, then went on to instill Greek culture and all its imitators with an optimism whose ultimate result was the triumph of science, and the need for a cultural renewal.

The rest of *The Birth* is then dedicated to describing how tragedy can be born again in the modern world. For our purposes, this can be looked at in brief. Now, Nietzsche puts his faith in this rebirth of the tragic Dionysian spirit in music. He has already argued that it is music, that strange metaphysical art form, "copy of the will itself," and blend of the Dionysian with the Apollinian, that helped tragedy come into being in the first place.[84] As he later proposes, "The joy aroused by the tragic myth has the same origin as the joyous sensation of dissonance in music."[85] While Nietzsche says that it is music which will once more give birth to myth,[86] and thus save culture from purely Apollinian science, we should

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[82] Ibid. 77.
[83] Ibid., 82-93.
[84] Ibid., 49 and 100.
[85] Ibid., 141.
[86] Ibid., 103.

be more interested in what he has to say about the aesthetic importance of myth. In fact, he says that it is myth "as a concentrated image of the world" which leads to creativity:

> without myth every culture loses the healthy natural power of its creativity: only a horizon defined by myths completes and unifies a whole cultural movement. Myth alone saves all the powers of the imagination and the of the Apollinian dream from their aimless wanderings. The images of myth have to be the unnoticed omnipresent demonic guardians, under whose care the young soul grows to maturity and whose signs help man to interpret his life and struggles.[87]

It is myth which fuels the imagination, but also helps one to better understand life and its problems. Finally, Nietzsche ends his work with an argument in favour of the pleasures of dissonance and a wish for a new fusion of Apollo and Dionysus.[88]

Most of *The Birth* is filled with difficult concepts and metaphors, and it is instructive to see how Nietzsche revisits some of these in his "Attempt at a Self-Criticism" as well as in *Ecce Homo*. In these works, Nietzsche paraphrases some of his earlier ideas, making them more intelligible. In his preface to the second addition of *The Birth*, Nietzsche calls his fusion of the Apollinian and the Dionysian a "pessimism of *strength*."[89] In *Ecce Homo*, he is more interested in disparaging his former views on music and former hopes in Wagner. However, he also reiterates his famous statement that the Dionysian spirit really means "a Yes-saying without reservation, even to suffering, even to guilt, even to everything that is questionable and strange in existence."[90] At this point, Nietzsche's views had changed a great deal and he had mostly given up Apollo in favour of Dionysus. However, in *The Birth* itself he expresses a similar sentiment when he says:

> Thus the Dionysian is seen to be, compared to the Apollinian, the original artistic power that first calls the whole world of phenomena into existence . . . . If we could imagine dissonance in man—and what else is man?—this dissonance, to be able to live, would need a splendid illusion that would cover dissonance with a veil of beauty. This is the true artistic

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[87] Ibid., 135.
[88] Ibid., 143.
[89] Nietzsche, "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," 3.
[90] Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Random House, The Modern Library, 1967/2000), 728.

> aim of Apollo in whose name we comprehend all those countless illusions of the beauty of mere appearance that at every moment make life worth living at all and prompt the desire to live on in order to experience the next moment.[91]

This joy of tragedy then becomes one of the enduring insights of Nietzsche's enterprise.

Now that we have some picture of what Nietzsche was trying to express in *The Birth*, we can better decide which of his observations will be incorporated into the rest of this study. Firstly, we shall be interested in his Apollinian and Dionysian categories and their fusion to make sublime art, secondly, we will make use of some of his points about drama, and thirdly, we will consider his valuation of the creative power of myth.[92] All of the above will be used as aesthetic categories to fuel our discussion of *ta'zīyeh*. However, we must also say that most of what Nietzsche says is either an idealization of classic theatre, or perhaps a projection of what he would like perfect tragedy to be. By denouncing Euripides, and to a lesser extent Sophocles, Nietzsche is disregarding the core of the Athenian dramatic canon. In this way, he is telling us what he would have liked tragedy to have been and what he thinks it should be in the future. Thus, when we compare his vision of the tragic to *ta'zīyeh*, we will always be looking for the ways in which it fulfills certain of his ideals for art. Nevertheless, we maintain that what is most important about Nietzsche is that his aesthetic categories are not static; they represent a certain will or creative impulse which makes art come into being. When they are correctly deployed, they result in aesthetic strength, and as we have seen, for Nietzsche, aesthetic strength is synonymous with life.

2.3 *Ta'zīyeh* and Nietzsche's Tragic Ideal

In the preceding section, we tried to show that Nietzsche's is essentially an aesthetic evaluation of the tragic form, rather than a historical one. By aesthetic, we also

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[91] Nietzsche, *The Birth*, 143.
[92] This discussion will mostly be confined to Chapter 3.

mean one which is metaphorical, philosophical or even hypothetical, and which is concerned with strength and value. Furthermore, we have thus far avoided calling upon any of the various anthropological or psychological theories of tragedy, and of *ta'ziyeh* in particular. This is not because these views are without interest or value, but merely because they are not concerned with the question of aesthetics, which we have also called artistic energy. To illustrate the difference between Nietzsche and this other group which is also interested in myth and its function, we can quote a passage that has been used to summarize the function of myth in *ta'ziyeh* and in its child, the coffeehouse painting. The authors are here relying on the work of the late philosopher of myth Hans Blumenberg, and their argument is as follows:

> Blumenberg postulates the problematic of what he calls 'the absolutism of reality,' to which homo sapiens is forced to provide an answer. 'The absolutism of reality,' the unbearable vastness of man's vertical observation of the horizontal universe, leads the historical person to the creation of 'rational' myths of natural forces, by way of bringing them under a degree of control. Without the attempted control, the historical person is frightened by the unbearable angst facing an infinite world. Myth is man's way of coming to terms with the vast uncertainties of his universe. But while Blumenberg has postulated this theory of myth for an unspecified primordial time in man's historical self-consciousness, we can well extend this to any other period of deep and pervasive anxiety when uncertainties of life and this world create a new need for convincing mythologies to give a renewed measure of significance to things. . . . From a Zoroastrian to a Manichaean cosmology, from Islamic theology to Persian miniature to coffeehouse painting, there is a relentless engagement with bringing the vast universe of shapeless and endless possibilities to metaphysical or aesthetic order. Only within that order, metaphysical or aesthetic, is understanding—and through understanding the historical person's self-positioning in the world—made possible.[93]

We might venture that the above reads like a mild paraphrase of Nietzsche. In many ways the "historical person" presented here, who feels an "unbearable angst" with regards to the "the absolutism of reality" is Nietzsche's Dionysian reveler who looks into all the terrors of existence, and then redeems them through art. What is lacking in this more detached consideration of myth, is the stress on the necessity of Apollo (who in the above might be

[93] Chelkowski and Dabashi, 64-65. I believe that the authors are making use of Blumenberg's *Work on Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985) to which they make reference earlier in the book and on page 43 in particular, a work where Blumenberg proposes a philosophical anthropology.

the "'rational myth'") to come and compliment Dionysus. While, in the above quotation, myth is depicted as a passive force, almost a benign friend who comes to sort out life's difficulties for us, Nietzsche has told us that myth "saves all the powers of the imagination and of the Apollinian dream from their aimless wanderings."[94] In his conception, myth is a redeemer who guarantees the salvation of culture, which must agonistically go forward in order to live. The beautiful and sublime which result from this contest are not merely a storehouse for man's doubts and anxieties, but something new and valuable, and something which must struggle to go on. Nietzsche wants more than for man to come to a better "understanding" of the world and his place in it, he wants him to feel the truth of being, to create and thus to live. Therefore, it is not without reason that, as we have seen, *The Birth* has been called a "spiritual" work,[95] and that we can now say that the Nitzschean difference in the study of tragedy is the value he assigns it. Once again, he prizes the tragic as the most valuable means of putting the world into "metaphysical or aesthetic order."

To this end, we will say that Nietzsche's vision compliments *ta'zīyeh* because of the very seriousness, or lack of detachment with which he takes the whole enterprise. Naturally, no participant in the passion plays would like to equate his or herself with his chorus of satyrs, and we shall not follow Nietzsche into the realm of a new Dionysian religion. However, the difference that comes from Nietzsche, although his theories might be offensive from a religious perspective, is that he privileges ritual and the art of ritual in ways not found in more judicious or objective theorists.

Thus, we have already established some of Nietzsche's key ideas and how they will be interpreted for the purposes of this study. We can now systematically compare *ta'zīyeh*,

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[94] Nietzsche, *The Birth*, 135. See note 85 above.
[95] Else, 10. See note 33 above.

to the prescriptions in Nietzsche's work.[96] The debate over whether or not *ta'zīyeh* also manifests signs of Nietzsche's theory of tragic joy will be left for the end of this section.

We know that it is the fusion of the Apollinian and Dionysian facets of art, dreams and intoxication, which leads to the production of good tragedy. Nietzsche began with the Apollinian and we too shall ask ourselves where this is found in the Persian passion plays. Indeed, the first thing that strikes us is the fact that the plays are plays. We have tried to trace how *ta'zīyeh* evolved from religious ritual, eventually settling on the conclusion that even in its theatrical form, it still encompassed many ritual elements. We see that this is true even of Nietzsche's ideal tragedy, where tragedy begins as a religious impulse. However, there is still a difference between the passion plays and other rituals, in that they are conscious of their own artistic nature. They strive to be better and more interesting for their audience and a great deal of effort is put in to making the plays as visually and musically pleasurable an experience as possible. Nietzsche equates the Apollinian with illusion and fantasy, and so too have we seen these principles manifest themselves in *ta'zīyeh*. For example, Forough tells us, "To make up for the shortness of the scripts, the plays are full of surprises: apparitions, visions, prophecies, conversions, resurrections, and

[96] I have not found any reference to Nietzsche and his work in the sources available to me. The only exception being a cursory reference from the highly controversial Shabbir Akhtar in his work, *A Faith for All Seasons: Islam and Western Modernity.* He argues, "Muhammad's biographers, Muslim and non-Muslim, are unanimous that he was not a man cut out for tragedy. Therefore, he succeeded. . . . Certainly, Islam has always been, from its very inception, a faith that is clear, unambiguous, positive, assertive, dogmatic, defined, self-assured—in fine, lacking in all the accompaniments of tragedy. Apart from the heretical minority *Shi'a* verdict, Islam has no truck with the kinds of messianic hopes of deliverance so characteristic of Christianity. . . . Christianity has, however, famously seen the religious outlook as being a supremely tragic one . . . . to turn to another fateful vision, humanism, particularly in its Nietzschean variety, is not free of a tinge of tragedy." Shabbir Akhtar, *A Faith for All Seasons: Islam and Western Modernity,* (London: Bellew Publishing, 1990), 159-60. The last sentence in the quotation refers us to note 31 of the chapter, which states, "'The world is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon' is possibly the most tragic remark in the entire Nietzschean corpus." Ibid., n.31 (of Chapter 8), page 236. In this way, Akhtar more or less unites Shī'ism, tragedy and Nietzsche, albeit in an unfortunate way. This is not the place to elaborate upon the Apollinian dimensions of Akhtar description of Islam.

miracles."[97] In the production about the martyrdom of 'Alī Akbar witnessed by Benjamin, there is the scene between 'Alī and Fatima from beyond the grave. Even the very anachronistic nature of the passion plays supports the proposition that they come together in a splendid Apollinian vision of how life should be. In the same vein, we should also remember the many times that *ta'zīyeh* has been referred to as unreal, as lacking in what we consider to be theatrical realism. The actors, the director, the set decorations and costumes all stress that what is being seen is only an illusion. The audience member perhaps feels that he is in a dream state as he watches the strange, fantastical and yet symbolically vivid spectacle. Mamnoun has even argued that Western theatre has made itself unreal by striving for realism, whereas *ta'zīyeh*, whose characterizations "do not correspond to real life,"[98] is consciously unreal and thus somehow more like what a theatrical performance should be. One final proof of the plays' Apollinian intensity is that they have been able to spawn more art forms, namely theatre architecture and coffeehouse painting.

However, we have slightly more difficulty identifying the Apollinian *principium individuationis* from within *ta'zīyeh*. We have often repeated that the plays are collective rather than individual works. Each actor, director and script writer no doubt strives to do his best, but in the end it is their group achievement which stands out. We need to seek individual artistic achievement from the preachers and narrators of the *Rawḍat al-shuhadā'* who are one half of the inspiration for the passion plays. The leap from their use of their individual oratory talents, and their improvisational skills to a theatrical form uniting actor and audience is perhaps our first emblem of the Dionysian.

The Dionysian in *ta'zīyeh*, can be understood through both of Nietzsche's

[97] Forough, 30.
[98] Ibid.

synonyms of "terror" and "intoxication". Indeed, we hardly need ask ourselves which of the horrors and uncertainties of life the passion plays envelope with the veil of art. The massacre of Ḥusayn and his supporters, the mistreatment of his women and children, the very brutality with which the tragedy occurred, are enough in themselves to show the negative aspects of human existence. At the same time, there is a further dimension to this glance into the "ugly and disharmonic,"[99] which is that the tragedy of Ḥusayn is, as Ayoub says, at the centre of Shī'ī piety. As Benjamin has shown us, this event is able to bring the great King Solomon to tears, thus diffusing a sense of despair across time. Nietzsche's figurative intoxication comes into play when the *ta'zīyeh's* audience and actors join together in their "self-abnegating" grief for Ḥusayn. This surely is not the joy of revelers, strictly forbidden by piety,[100] but it is the union of the faithful through their collective realization of the gravity of the events they are witnessing. In a metaphorical sense, they also come together as a "work of art in [themselves],"[101] as the distinctions between spectator and performer become blurred, or as the audience moves the actor to tears, and all participants make the spectacle come alive.

If we begin to say that as the "Apollinian" and "Dionysian" elements of *ta'zīyeh* fuse in a "redemption through illusion,"[102] this is not to say that the religious redemption the participants are promised is false or unimportant, but only that we now begin to see the artistic redemption of the Karbalā' tragedy. Collective suffering has called on art to make its emotions more intense, to see and feel as much as it can. When we revisit the fusion of Muḥarram processions and *rawḍa-khwānī*, we now see how the first was perhaps more

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[99] Nietzsche, *The Birth*, 140.
[100] Ayoub, 149-51. Ayoub stresses that the "*imāms* strongly insisted that the day of *'Āshūrā'* should not be taken as a day of joy and festivity," 150.
[101] Nietzsche, *The Birth*, 37, see page 55, note 62 above.
[102] Ibid., 45.

prone to excess, more in danger of uncontrollable outburst of passion, while the second allowed for a certain amount of reserve and detachment.[103] As each incorporated some aspects of the other, they were able to meld into the true tragic form (according to Nietzsche), with the proper balance of artistry and illusion and transcendent understanding and emotion, as well as the excess of emotion and suffering being tempered by the healing power of art.

We can now consider certain minor points, such as the role played by the chorus, which is central in Nietzsche's view of the tragic, but problematic when we try to associate it to the passion plays. We have already seen how Gobineau has identified the *ta'zīyeh's* chorus and its function in the creation of the dramatic art form to that of the Greeks' tragic chorus. Bringing in Nietzsche's emphasis on the importance of the chorus, and more specifically, his view that music blended with poetry provides the basis of the tragic form, we can discern a similarity with *ta'zīyeh*. Added to this is the fact that in *ta'zīyeh*, the protagonists sing their roles, while the villains only recite theirs, perhaps suggesting that the villains are the ugly and evil in life artistically defeated by the beautiful song of the good and virtuous. Also, we might reiterate that just as Nietzsche's ideal chorus blocks out the harsh realities of the world, so that it can take part in the beautiful world of illusions of the play, and thus embody "the wisdom to redeem suffering through art,"[104] so too is this the action of the *ta'zīyeh* spectators and actors together. In this sense, while Nietzsche notes the separation between chorus and true spectator with the leap from religious ritual to dramatic form, the ensemble of audience and performer, as one coherent body of

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[103] While we know that audience members could become very agitated during *ta'zīyeh* performances, we still see that violence was more prone to erupt during the processions (not necessarily amongst the flagellants). At the same time, recitations of Ḥusayn,s martyrdom narrative often took place in private homes, away from volatile mobs of people. See, for example, Nakash, 169-72.
[104] Nietzsche, *The Birth*, 65. See page 57, note 73 above.

participants, retains the original function of the chorus in his schema.

Another, more substantial observation is that we know that the two of the great names of Athenian tragedy, Euripides and Sophocles did not live up to Nietzsche's tragic criteria. In Euripides especially, he disliked how the playwright created psychologically sophisticated characters. He preferred tragedy when it was most like religious ritual, when characters were superhuman, special and not like the rest of humanity, and thus when they were there to completely cloak the misery of life in a beautiful ideal, such as in the dramas of Aeschylus. Here, we might consider Mamnoun's observation that *ta'zīyeh* is "naïve" theatre, and one "whose characters play with all their cards showing."[105] He goes on to say that characters were depicted without much sophistication, embodying either virtue or vice. This in turn allows for the presentation of ideals: despite the situation in which Ḥusayn and his family find themselves, they make it spiritually beautiful through their endurance. The villains are unrelentingly evil, and thus do not shatter the ideal presented by the heroes. Also, we might argue that no Socrates brings about the death of *ta'zīyeh*, unless he is in the form of the populace which comes to think of itself as above such spectacles, or in the guise of other, more naturalistic theories about drama. Here we capture the sense of what Mamnoun means when he cautions, "the day when Ta'ziyeh becomes realistic, will witness its death."[106] As with Nietzsche's ideal, a certain amount of artifice and illusion is needed to bring about healing effects of tragedy.

Finally, if we believe Nietzsche and say that the image of the Greeks suffered from the over-idealization of harmony, reason and cheerfulness in that culture, we might also venture that Shī'ism, and perhaps Iranian culture in particular, suffer from the opposite kind of stereotype. An often-quoted observation based on *ta'zīyeh* goes as follows: "No

[105] Mamnoun, 162. The author is adapting Brecht's understanding of the naïve.
[106] Ibid., 159.

faith has ever laid greater emphasis on lament. It is the highest religious duty, and many times more meritorious than any other good work. There is ample justification for speaking here of a religion of lament."[107] We know that the Shī'a themselves would not deny the religious importance of weeping and suffering. Nevertheless, does *ta'zīyeh* in essence only reflect the artistic aspirations of a "religion of lament"? Or is there an element of tragic joy?

We might be tempted to quote from those who have witnessed the passion plays to see if they themselves have perceived a tinge of tragic joy along with inevitable grief that must accompany *ta'zīyeh*. This is hardly a scientific way of proceeding, but we are only looking for hints, to see if Nietzsche's theory that the triumphant tragic is superior to the merely beautiful and harmonious. We also know that mixed in with Nietzsche's aesthetic theories is his own brand of psychology. Therefore, we shall use these observations simply to flavour the discussion of the aesthetic joys of tragedy in the next chapter.

To this end, Mottahedeh has already given us of the example of the mix of happiness and pain in spectators participating in the wedding of al-Qāsim. As he relates, "The audience finds itself both laughing and weeping as the conflicting scenes continue onstage."[108] This is only logical given the tension between the wedding and funeral scenes presented in that particular play, and does not as yet tell us something about the actual effect of *ta'zīyeh* in general.

However, another commentator posits the identification of the audience with the holy figures as the ultimate joyous element in *ta'zīyeh*, and he feels that "identifying with the positive hope and aspiration of Hossein [is] a desire to bring about a change in the world of the play and make a difference in it . . . . the underlying drive in this drama is a

[107] Canetti, 153.
[108] Mottahedeh, 178.

positive tragic energy that thrusts it way through inevitable suffering so that a positive heroic vision may materialize."[109] Here, we must return to Nietzsche's observation that it is art which saves one from pessimism, and thus engenders action rather than passivity. Furthermore, the same *ta'zīyeh* commentator says that there is "a joy which is far more important than the visible sorrow,"[110] and he is not being impious. His premise is that the audience is gratified by the protagonists' ability to be virtuous and noble in the face of misery, as well as in the knowledge that good shall triumph over evil in the end.[111] In many ways his description parallels what Nietzsche says, although he never mentions the German philosopher's work:[112]

> The plot of the play and the performance of the characters recreate a world in the mind of the audience as they would like it to be. The desire of living in such an imagined world reaches its peak as the plot advances towards its climax. . . .Several activities combine to enhance and reinforce the sense of joy and pleasure which is experienced . . . . The ritualistic dance, the active hypnosis, the song and music . . . and a conscious association of the participant with the hero providing an ultimate example of freedom . . . .All these ingredients combine in an ecstasy of transcendence, the consequence of which is joy, pleasure, and freedom in the realm of the imagination.[113]

Most importantly, he tell us, "The secret of the survival and development of this tradition is, therefore, an underlying joy, rather than suffering, which in itself is to stop one step too early in [sic] understanding of Ta'ziyeh drama."[114] This will be what we will call the sublime in *ta'zīyeh*, while his contention that the "underlying experience" of the plays represents "joy and pleasure achieved from a tragic energy thrusting its way through impossible obstacles," will be the artistic agon of the dramas. Nevertheless, we leave the question of *ta'zīyeh's* ultimate aesthetic importance for our next chapter, and it is there

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[109] Moghaddam, 62-3.
[110] Ibid., 63.
[111] Ibid., 63-4.
[112] This is the same individual who was displeased with the Aristotelian evaluation of *ta'zīyeh*. See, page 46, note 16 above.
[113] Ibid., 64.
[114] Ibid., 63.

that we shall further consider the subject of myth in *ta'zīyeh*, as well as the "transcend-dence" and "freedom in the realm of the imagination" described above.

Chapter 3

Ta'zīyeh and the Quest for the Sublime

It has been argued that "Ta'ziyeh stands on its own merits as tragedy of the highest order, not because it fits perfectly into any particular current definition of that term, but, rather, on the basis of its own unique contribution to tragedy as a literary genre."[1] However we see *ta'zīyeh* as tragedy, we are obliged to fully look at its uniqueness, as its own conception of the tragic and the results thereof. To this end, in this final chapter, we propose to look at the general aesthetic position of the passion plays. We must also note that we will no longer be exclusively following Nietzsche, but that his emphasis on the joys of tragedy, on its creative and life giving powers, will motivate this discussion.

At the same time, it is necessary to better define how this chapter will understand the meaning of the aesthetic, which is at best an elusive term, and so we propose a two-part definition of how we will judge the aesthetic motivations of *ta'zīyeh*. The first part is taken from Aziz Esmail's work, *The Poetics of Religious Experience: The Islamic Context*, where the author describes the act of *ta'wīl*, or esoteric reading of the Qur'ān on the part of the Imāms, as the need to "make the text come to life through the historical, life-enhancing act of interpretation."[2] Esmail has already said that,

> what is really important is to interpret the drive to interpret; to note the spirit of the very idea of seeking the spirit beneath the letter. By doing this, we keep the metaphorical domain alive; whereas when the symbol is definitively translated into a concept, the metaphor dies. . . .With these considerations we arrive at the very heart of what is meant by the poetics of religious experience. Etymologically, the term 'poetics' implies a making, a creativity. In the context of religious experience, as we have seen, the creativity is in the symbolic process.[3]

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[1] Moghaddam, 87.
[2] Aziz Esmail, *The Poetics of Religious Experience: The Islamic Context*, The Institute of Ismaili Studies Occasional Papers—1, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 55.
[3] Ibid., 52-3.

When we will discuss the aesthetic nature of *ta'zīyeh*, we will therefore be talking about its drive to interpret, the way in which it keeps metaphor and symbolism alive and even its function as a life-enhancing interpretation of the martyrdom of Ḥusayn. However, added to this, will be the thoughts of American literary critic Harold Bloom, who sees this very drive to interpret and to sustain the life of metaphor as a process whereby strong writers must "clear imaginative space for themselves."[4] Bloom's central tenet is that a strong poem on the part of one poet is essentially a misreading or creative reinterpretation and overcoming of a poem by another poet. To use Bloom's terminology, the writer must "swerve" away from his precursors' work in order to create a strong text of his own. In this context, poems, texts or conceptions which are merely imitations of previous work are aesthetically weak, whereas those which succeed in invigorating and renewing imaginative space are aesthetically strong. While we will agree with Esmail when he argues, "What is of enduring importance in the symbolic mode is a continual *creation* of meaning,"[5] we will add Bloom's idea that along with creation comes a kind of cognitive competitiveness, or a spirit of creativity which "portrays itself as agonistic, as contesting for supremacy, with other spirits, with anteriority, and finally with an earlier version of itself."[6] With these criteria in mind, we will try to show that *ta'zīyeh's* aesthetic strengths rest on its ability to continually create meaning, as well as in its reflection of a spirit of overcoming that is essential to the Shī'ī aesthetic as a whole.

This being said, two areas suggest themselves as subjects for our aesthetic interpretation of *ta'zīyeh*: the first of these, is an analysis of the meaning of the drama of Ḥusayn and its contest with time, and the second is to propose the category of the

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[4] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973/1997), 5.
[5] Esmail, 52.
[6] Harold Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), viii.

sublime, as a way of describing the ultimate effect of the plays.

If we return to the roots of tragic theory and follow Aristotle, we see that *ta'zīyeh* is incontrovertibly a manifestation of the dramatic form because it is "the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself."[7] Thus, the Persian passion plays are a collection of events and actions, each complete in themselves, which come together to form a repertoire of separate plays. Aristotle also feels that, in comparison to the epic, an art form such as tragedy is "vulgar" in the sense that it has to cater to a wide public and use many little extras, such as music and action, to sustain interest and bring about understanding.[8]

However, as we have seen, each of the separate, popular, works of *ta'zīyeh* fit into the larger cosmological narrative of Ḥusayn's martyrdom, which is not confined to the first ten days of Muḥarram, but rather is played out at all times and in all places. Perhaps, we are then entitled to speak about the *epic* of Ḥusayn, for, as Aristotle tells us, epic "has been said to agree with Tragedy to this extent, that of being an imitation of serious subjects in a grand kind of verse. It differs from it however, (1) in that it is one kind of verse and in narrative form; and (2) in its length—which is due to its action having no fixed limit of time . . . ."[9] *Ta'zīyeh*, then beomes the epic of Ḥusayn, which we know has roots in the greater body of Shī'ī traditions about his martyrdom and its meaning, subsequently broken down into manageable tragic pieces for the benefit of the public. However, Aristotle also discusses certain points about the success or failure of a tragedy, and says that there are several kinds of tragic plots that must be avoided. Chief among these is that "A good man

[7] Aristotle, 631.
[8] Ibid., 666.
[9] Ibid., 630.

must not be seen passing from happiness to misery."[10] In this way, *ta'zīyeh* violates one of the core Aristotelian principles of good drama, and yet somehow serves its own purpose by making its audience feel the tragedy of Ḥusayn. We will argue that it manages to do so, through its agonistic contest with time. For, if unlike Greek tragedy, we do not have a man, who through his own fall, comes to see the error of his ways, we have a universe, which through the fall of one man, comes to see itself as being in error.

As an experiment, we might compare a Shī'ī passion play about Adam and Eve, to perhaps the greatest epic in the English language, John Milton's *Paradise Lost.* In the *ta'zīyeh* play, the first man and woman are still enjoying the pleasures of Paradise when the Angel Gabriel comes to tell them the about fate of Ḥusayn. First, he shows them a beautiful scene of the Prophet's family in their pre-earthly state (Muḥammad, 'Alī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn—"the people of the cloak"), whom he calls the "five sublime ones."[11] At the sight of this amazing vision, Adam immediately offers himself as a sacrifice for them. Gabriel then begins to tell him of all the calamities that are to befall these personages, now very dear to Adam, at which point the first prophet becomes inconsolable. The Angel even has to admonish him, "But this is Paradise, do not become so overcast with sadness."[12] Once Adam has witnessed the entire scene of Karbalā', he asks how God could have allowed such events to have taken place, and is told that it is for the redemption of the Shī'a who will weep for Ḥusayn. Adam then declares:

> O Lord on high, in honour of Ḥusayn
> forgive the sins of the friends of Ḥusayn.
> The hand of those of us who mention his name, o God,
> never pull it away from the hem of Ḥusayn's garments .

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[10] Ibid., 639.

[11] The play is taken from the Appendix of Bausani's *Persia Religiosa*, 438-53. In the Italian translation, Bausani calls them "I Cinque Sublimi." Like the preludes about King Solomon, the manuscript of the play comes from the Cerulli collection.

[12] My translation. The Italian reads, "Ma questo è il Paradiso, non diventare così torbido di tristezza," Bausani, *Persia Religiosa*, 447.

> And for him who has brought together this assembly to mourn for Ḥusayn.
> answer his prayers in this world and the next.[13]

As we see, and as Bausani notes, it is a typical device of *ta'zīyeh* to include such prayers for the redemption of the faithful at the end of a play.[14] However, it is evident that this redemption is dependant upon the willingness of the spectators to be as moved by Ḥusayn's story, as Adam is, once he has understood the gravity of Ḥusayn's fall (so much so, that he can no longer enjoy Paradise).

If we now turn to the Miltonic passage, we see Adam and Eve after their fall, as they are being cast out of the Garden of Eden. God sends the Angel Michael to them, so that he will show Adam a vision of all the most important events in human religious history, and all the consequences of his great error. Finally, the Angel shows him Christ and his crucifixion and resurrection to redeem man's first sin. After all has been revealed to him and he must finally leave Paradise, Adam says:

> Greatly instructed I shall hence depart,
> Greatly in peace of thought, and have my fill
> Of knowledge, what this vessel can contain;
> Beyond which was my folly to aspire.
> Henceforth I learn that to obey is best,
> And love with fear the only God, to walk
> As in his presence, ever to observe
> His providence, and on him sole depend. . . .
> . . . . that suffering for Truth's sake
> Is fortitude to highest victory,
> And to the faithful death the gate of life—
> Taught this by his example whom I now
> Acknowledge my Redeemer ever blest.[15]

Milton adds that as Adam and Eve stepped out of Eden, "Some tears they dropped, but wiped them soon; The world was all before them . . . ."[16]

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[13] My translation. Bausani's version reads, "O Signore grande, per l'onore di Husain/perdona il peccato degli amici di Husain./La mano di noi che menzioniamo il suo nome, o Dio,/mai non staccarla del lembo della veste di Husain./E chi ha impiantato questa reunione di lutto per Husain./la sua preghiera esaudisce in questo mondo e nell'altro," *Persia Religiosa*, 453.
[14] Ibid., 455, n.43.
[15] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *The Works of John Milton*, (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, Ltd., 1994), 383.

Immediately, we notice some of the similarities and differences between the Shī'ī and Christian conceptions of redemption, at least as they are presented in non-canonical sources. In both, there is a redeemer, but the reactions to redemption are slightly different. Even given that true redemption in Shī'ism will not occur until the Mahdī's emergence from occultation, we still see that Milton's Adam can better bear his expulsion from Paradise, than the *ta'zīyeh*'s Adam can absorb the consequences of Ḥusayn's martyrdom, even from within his idyllic abode. Once again, *ta'zīyeh's* emphasis is on pain and on a redemption still to come, while Milton's stress is on forbearance and on a salvation that is almost guaranteed. At the same time, we see that both Adams change as a result of what they witness and as a result of how well they have understood the message that the Angels have come to bring them. Nevertheless, the *ta'zīyeh's* Adam is a redeemed individual living in a fallen universe, whereas Milton's Adam is a fallen man, but one safe in the knowledge that his universe has been made whole by Christ's resurrection.

Moreover, Etan Kohlberg has postulated that "Shī'is, perhaps more than any other group in Islam, share an overwhelming sense of an all-pervasive evil."[17] Indeed, Kohlberg further informs us that this conception is not only the result of the mistreatment of the Prophet Muḥammad's family, but is the belief in an evil that has existed since the beginning of time.[18] While this evil can never be completely overcome, the faithful are expected to embody the virtue of "perseverance (*ṣabr*)," and consequently, "perseverance is what all Shī'is are expected to show pending the arrival of the Mahdī."[19] In this way, we have a fallen world, and as we see in *ta'zīyeh*, one that has always been waiting for the

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[16] Ibid., 385.
[17] Etan Kohlberg, "Some Shī'ī Views on the Antediluvian World," in *Belief and Law in Imāmī Shī'ism*, (Aldershot, Hampshire: Variorum, 1991), XVI, 45.
[18] Ibid. We know of course that there is no concept of original sin in Islam.
[19] Ibid., 51.

events of Karbalā' to bring it to its lowest point. However, we also see a notion of perseverance; that through the recognition of the importance of the martyrdom of Ḥusayn some parcel of good is allowed to survive and flourish. The world is fallen, it is as imperfect as Ḥusayn is perfect, and yet like Oedipus, it can still be instructed about its folly, and then go on to redeem itself through the acknowledgment of its error.

Ayoub has related that "all things are integrated into the drama of [Ḥusayn's] martyrdom."[20] What he means is that in the traditions, the earth itself weeps for Ḥusayn and even animals feel the weight of his tragic end.[21] We see this becoming integrated into several of the passion plays. For example, in one play, Ḥusayn is transported from Karbalā' to India (Hind) to save the Sultan of that country, who is also a believing Shī'a, from a lion attack. The Imām does not need to fend the lion off with a weapon, rather his presence and address are enough to cause the lion to exclaim, "May I be a sacrifice for thee! forgive my fault. Although a lion, I am still a dog at thy threshold! I am in fear and terror of thee. O my lord, forgive me; I did not know he [the Sultan] was one of the beloved [the Shī'a]."[22] Upon hearing what has been happening at Karbalā', the lion further wants to join the fray in defense of the Imām. This lion thus becomes the legendary lion said to have watched over the slain bodies at Karbalā until they could be properly buried. When the lion then sees the carnage that has taken place in Iraq, he cries, "O lord, if the heavens were to pass away at these deeds, it would not be out of place."[23] Thus, the killer lion is redeemed, not only through the intervention of Ḥusayn, but through his comprehension of the cosmic consequences of the Imām's tragic fate, and his subsequent willingness to participate in it

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[20] Ayoub, 145.
[21] See, for example, Ibid., 35 where the author relates how Jesus is told about the martyrdom of Ḥusayn by a lion or by a group of gazelles.
[22] Pelly, vol. 2, 59.
[23] Ibid., 61.

as best he can.

While everything and everyone has the chance to reflect on and change because of Ḥusayn's martyrdom, we have also seen how, in *ta'zīyeh*, this takes place across time. In the Bausani translation of the King Solomon preludes, the great King and even the meaning of his reign change because he becomes aware of the tragic fate of the Imām. As he tells the Queen of Sheba, with whom he is walking on the future site of the tragedy, "On this soil shall our love be ruined!"[24] The Queen then calls on everyone to put on mourning clothes, so that they can now watch the drama of al-Qāsim's wedding. As we have noted throughout, the story of Ḥusayn infiltrates time so that certain individuals may be redeemed through their comprehension of the significance of his martyrdom.

As we try and find what drives Ḥusayn's contest with time, let us consider one of the revolutionary thinkers, as well as detractors of *ta'zīyeh*: 'Alī Sḥarī'atī and his criticism of all rituals of lament in Shī'ism. It is well-known that he reproved what he considered to be the "Black" Shī'sm, a religion of lament and indolence, instigated by the Safavid period, in favour of his on conception of revolutionary "Red" Shī'ism, which he termed "Alavi" Shī'ism because it was to be a return to the active struggles of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib.[25] In one of his complaints against the mourning rituals which emerged from "black" Shī'ism, he states: "Karbala is not a stage of pathos or a sorrowful incident. It is not a tool to stimulate self flagellation or yearly repeated crying and fainting. Karbala is a school of thought, not a cemetery . . . it is civilization, building and blooming; it is a realm of life,

[24] My translation. The Italian reads, "In questa terra il nostro amore sarà rovinato!" Bausani, "Drammi popolari inediti sulla leggenda di Salomone," 190.
[25] Ali Shariati, *Red Shi'ism*, trans. Habib Shirazi, (Houston, Texas: Free Islamic Literature Inc., 1974), 7-17.

love, action, responsibility, courage and awareness . . . ."[26] Also, when we look into Sẖarī'atī's own work on art, he argues, "Art is imitating precisely what is beyond the tangible, beyond nature, in order to decorate nature in its image, or to make something the human being wants to be in nature and does not find. It is there to fulfill his feelings of need and agitation, loneliness and most of all, his need to transcend . . . ."[27] We know that in the first quotation, Sẖarī'atī is aguing against passivity, and in favour of his revolutionary ideal, but we also see that *ta'zīyeh*, as an art form embodies all the prescriptions that he himself proposes for the arts: imitation beyond nature, showing the absent human ideal, healing loneliness, and the desire for transcendence. Elsewhere in the same work, he postulates, "knowledge means struggling, thinking, making observations and adjusting one's view to reach something . . . . We should continue saying and thinking as we reach towards it [i.e. truth]."[28] Now, perhaps we have misunderstood the Iranian thinker on the subject of art, for he is not only advocating art as an object of beauty, but as a source for (revolutionary) action. However, along with other "Nietzschean" conceptions in this work, Sẖarī'atī acknowledges the cognitive struggle which takes place in human creativity. He no doubt thought of *ta'zīyeh* as passive, but we have seen how it reflects Ḫusayn's cosmic struggle for truth, making it visible and tangible, and yet giving it a forum where those who participate can fulfill feelings of need.

In this respect, we might attribute to the mythical Ḫusayn a variation on the attribute of "immanence." If we turn again to George J. Stack, and his elective affinity between Emerson and Nietzsche, he tells us that the two men converge in their conception

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[26] Ali Shariati, *[Alavi and Safavi Shi'ism]*, (Tehran: Student Library of the Faculty of Letters, 1972), 11; quoted in Moghaddam, 88, n. 50. I believe that this passage has been translated by Moghaddam himself from the Persian.
[27] Ali Shariati, *Art Awaiting the Saviour*, trans. Homa Fardjadi, (Tehran: The Shariati Foundation, 1979), 22.
[28] Ibid., 14.

of a religion or philosophy of immanence. While we know that Nietzsche was to exploit this idea in dubious ways with his new Dionysian religion, it is still a useful category, when not taken too literally.[29] Stack says that this concept of immanence emerged from Emerson's musings on power, and summarizes the theory as follows:

> The basic form of power that man desires is *not* power over others, but a subjective sense of energy, strength, health, a feeling of overcoming 'resistances.' This 'plus' factor in life is a good if it is directed towards constructive goals or if it is 'in the right place.' Individuals who possess this 'vital force,' those comprising the 'affirmative class,' have a monopoly on 'the homage of mankind,' for genuine success in life is usually associated with this 'positive power.'[30]

While we may say that Ḥusayn has certainly achieved religious immanence according to this description, we must also point to the aesthetic immanence of the story of his martyrdom. Another favourite Emersonian term is the notion of "becoming," or as he says in his famous essay "Self-Reliance," "Life only avails, not the having lived. . . . This one fact the world hates, that the soul *becomes*. . . ."[31] Ḥusayn's "having lived" avails in the religious sense, but in the aesthetic sense, his story "becomes." In this way, we can see that Ḥusayn's story is always in a state of becoming, especially in *ta'ẕiyeh*, but also if we add to this all the changes that it have been made to it, down to its revision in the works of the architects of the Iranian revolution. Here, Esmail's drive to interpret becomes important, "finding the spirit beneath the letter." The richness of Ḥusayn's story allows for it to be told over and over again, always with new dimensions.

Let us return briefly to the passion play about Adam and Eve that we examined earlier on. Here, we witnessed two struggles. One was that of Adam, who could not bear

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[29] We know that both Emerson and Nietzsche were interested in a new, dynamic set of exemplary men who could come and renew culture and thought. If we wanted to propose our own "elective affinity" it might be to compare this concept to some facets of the doctrine of the Imamate.

[30] Stack, 158. I believe that Stack is drawing on Emerson's essay "Power," like his essay "Fate" from *The Conduct of Life* (1860), and in which he argues, "All power is of one kind, a sharing of the nature of the world. The mind that is parallel with the laws of nature will be in the current of events and strong with their strength." Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Power," in *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson in One Volume*, (Roslyn, New York: Black's Readers Service Company, n.d.), 328.

[31] Emerson, 106. I first became aware of this through Bloom, see for example *Agon,* 145-78.

the sight of Ḥusayn's martyrdom and became transformed by it. However, second was the struggle of the tragedy of Karbalā' to incorporate itself into Adam's tale. In essence, *ta'zīyeh* has taken one legend and made it into another. Or, as Nietzsche says, "art is not merely imitation of the reality of nature but rather a metaphysical supplement of the reality of nature, placed beside it for overcoming."[32] The play is able to reflect a truth about existence: the need to lament the tragedy around which time revolves. However, it then creatively inserts this truth in a place where it can have the outmost significance: the blissful world of the first man. We learn from Kohlberg that in Shī'ī piety, Adam and Eve are forgiven by God for their sin (which is to have been jealous of the *ahl al-bayt*) once they beg for forgiveness in the name of the five "sublime ones," as they are called in Bausani's translation.[33] Thus, the prelude in question seems to be taking the step of redeeming Adam before he can succumb to such jealousy. The story of Ḥusayn's narrative must overcome all other stories, and subjugate them to its own purpose. This in turn gives life to his tale, strengthening it aesthetically, by demanding its priority and showing how it influences the entire history of time.

If we ask ourselves why this should be so, we must commit the impiety of comparing the entire history of the Prophets and their successors to any other narrative. Had they been epic heroes, we would see each of them faced with his own trials and tribulations but also eventually able to successfully overcome them, with a happy ending for all in sight just before Ḥusayn's adventure begins. Into this almost triumphant account, enters the tragedy of Karabalā', casting a shadow over the seeming happiness of the past and reminding the world of the perils of existence. At the same time, Ḥusayn is not lost forever, but like a returning Odysseus (but much more noble than Odysseus), he goes

[32] Nietzsche, *The Birth*, 140.
[33] Kohlberg, 56.

everywhere and then comes back (symbolically in the passion plays) or will come back (with the help of the Mahdī) to cast out the ill-intentioned suitors from his home and ensure the continuance of his line. At the same time, we would not dare to speak of the figure of Ḥusayn as a literary character. Shakespeare's Hamlet lives because of the depth of the psychological portrait given to him by the playwright. The symbolic Ḥusayn, and not the historical one, lives because his story is so simple and yet so elusive. His story is continually being expanded upon symbolically to add to the understanding of its ultimately unchanging significance.

Furthermore, in *ta'zīyeh*, only Ḥusayn, of all heroes, accomplishes this triumph over time. For example, there is a play dedicated to the Sufi hero al-Ḥallāj and his own martyrdom and symbolic renewal.[34] In this play al-Ḥallāj is killed and then strangely reincarnated when a young girl drinks his blood and then gives birth to his "spiritual son." While Louis Massignon, the editor of the piece, feels that it is a Shī'ī play because al-Ḥallāj's "son" gives praise to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the play lacks the presence of Ḥusayn and his story. Perhaps we can speculate that it comes from Kāshifī's work, blending Sufism and reverence for the Twelve Imāms. More importantly, what draws our attention is that, in this case, the story presented here could not sustain the presence of Ḥusayn. His story would easily eclipse that of the martyred Sufi, who reincarnated or not, does not share Ḥusayn's role as a kind of king of time. We see something similar in the coffeehouse paintings inspired by *ta'zīyeh*. Scholars have noted that the passion plays in Iran have derived a good deal of inspiration from Firdawsī's *Shāhnāma*.[35] This has even been called the "evolution" of the hero concept in Persian culture, where appreciation for Ḥusayn

[34] See, Abdelghafur Rawan Ferhadi, "Le Majlis de Mansûr-e-Hallâj, de Shams-e-Tabrêzi et du Mollâ de Roum," ed. Louis Massignon, *Revue des Études Islamiques* 23, (1955): 69-91.
[35] Moghaddam, *passim*.

builds upon the appreciation of folk heroes in general. We cannot deny that this is partly true, and certainly true if we know that *ta'zīyeh* authors borrowed directly from Firdawsī's work, and yet something else happens too. In the *Shāhnāma*, the hero Rostam unwittingly slays Sohrab in battle, not knowing that the younger man is his son.[36] This situation filled with pathos reminds us of all those Greek heroes who fall through such ironic errors. The coffeehouse painters were fond of depicting scenes from the *Shāhnāma* as well as from Karbalā'. When they represent Rostam and Sohrab, the older man holds the younger man's head in his lap and gazes down at his broken body. This is also Ḥusayn's stance in the paintings as he holds the head of 'Alī Akbar. However, as Chelkowski relates, here it is *ta'zīyeh* that has influenced the portrayal of Rostam,[37] and not Firdawsī's work which has had an impact on the Karbalā' narrative. The painting of the pre-Islamic hero perhaps seeks to redeem him by including him in Ḥusayn's own terrible grief for his son.

This is the agonistic dimension to Ḥusayn's conquest of time.[38] We know that in Shī'ism, the idea of redemption is of serious religious importance, and that this comes through suffering, through lamenting the fate of Ḥusayn, his family and descendants, and through gaining their intercession on the Day of Judgment.[39] However, this theme also manifests itself at an aesthetic level, where the legendary history of the world is rewritten in order better to showcase these religious principles. In this rewriting or reinterpretation of the world and time there is an aesthetic leap that is more than simply dogmatism. As Nietzsche has told us, dogmatism represents the death of myth, and in turn this death of myth is synonymous with the end of a people's ability to renew itself on a cultural level. In

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[36] Ibid., 32-43.
[37] Peter J. Chelkowski, "Narrative Painting and Painting Recitation in Qajar Iran," *Muqarnas* 6 (1989): 109.
[38] I will admit that I have considered the question of *ta'zīyeh's* agonistic temperament from Harold Bloom's point-of-view, not only in *his Anxiety of Influence*, but throughout his works.
[39] Ayoub, 197-8.

Nietzsche's conception, myth, the renewal of life in a culture, is closer to truth than mere historicized facts. Harold Bloom would tell us that in order for a creative renewal to take place, it must carve out a space for itself, and must go beyond what has been said and done before. In this way, *ta'zīyeh* is a prime example of a creative cultural renewal. It takes the traditions of the past, and brings them out into the open and makes them visible and vivid, adding to them on the symbolic level, whether through its inclusion of anachronisms or its using the works of the great poets to improve its scripts. Even if we say that as texts, the passion plays are not enough to surpass the more literary and perhaps more sophisticated body of Shī'ī traditions, as an ensemble of elements made into ritual, they bring the mythic elements in the tradition to new creative heights. While most studies of *ta'zīyeh* have sought out its origins and influences, we see that what is most important is how it has reached beyond these origins. The story of Ḥusayn, whatever its antecedents or relationship to universal archetypes, does not remain in a state of imitation, but pushes forward to become an influence in itself.[40] In this way, even as it carries the past along with it (the religious past, or the pre-Islamic Iranian past, etc.), it molds it in such a way as to make it new and make its own version of it authoritative. It defies what has come before with its own truths, which represents its ultimate aesthetic leap.

However, how do we define this agonistic aesthetic nature of *ta'zīyeh*, and how do we discern that myth has been transformed into something new, and something more beautiful than the harsh reality of existence that hides behind it? For example, if we consider the Islamic arts as a whole and ask ourselves which of them best embodies the

[40] Again, this is a Bloomian conception. For example, the American critic argues that the greatest of poets "achieve a style that captures and oddly retains priority over their precursors, so that the tyranny of time is almost overturned, and one can believe, for startled moments, that they are being *imitated by their ancestors*." Of course, Bloom is talking about individual authors and works, and we are always thinking of the grand narrative of Ḥusayn and its communal portrayal in *ta'zīyeh*.

spirit of the religion, and which is the most exquisite, there is no question that our answer will be calligraphy. Whether in Damascus or Isphahan, Cordoba or Bukhara, it is the beauty, symmetry and even the deceptive simplicity of Islamic calligraphy which draws our attention. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr has said, "The esoteric doctrine concerning the nature of calligraphy combined with the beauty of its immediate presence . . . provide the key for understanding the central position of this art in Islam and the reason for its privileged position in the hierarchy of Islamic art as well as its important role in Islamic spirituality itself."[41]

How then are we to interpret a photograph on the title page of a booklet devoted to *ta'zīyeh*?[42] Here, on a piece of canvas, or perhaps a wall, the names "Allah, Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hasan, Husayn" are traced out in thick lettering. Inside the letters themselves, someone has drawn miniscule scenes from the tragedy of Karbalā': heroes on horseback, veiled holy personages surrounded by halos, a row of dead soldiers, a cortege of camels, a lion. Shall we call this a sacrilege, or rather dismiss it and decide that some untutored individual has unknowingly violated the core principles of Islamic art? The object in question is most likely a piece of folk art and Samuel Peterson would probably tell us that it owes its inspiration to the passion plays. However, perhaps this strange reflection of *ta'zīyeh* can also tell us something about the spirit of the plays themselves. This object does not reflect the tranquility and harmony, and some would say piety, of traditional Islamic calligraphy, and we could attribute this difference to the aristocratic sponsorship of the traditional art, and the popular basis for *ta'zīyeh*-inspired art. Nevertheless this picture

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[41] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, (Ipswitch, Suffolk: Golgonooza Press, 1987), 34.

[42] I am referring to Milla Cozart Riggio, ed., *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Popular Beliefs in Iran (Essays prepared for A Drama Festival and Conference held at Trinity College Hartford Seminary April 30-May 2, 1988)*, (Trinity College, Hartford Connecticut: n.p., 1988). The photograph in question is on the title page of the booklet and bears the caption "'Allah, Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hasan, Husayn.'" Decorated with Karbala scenes, Isfahan, ca. 1910 (*photo by Samuel R. Peterson*).

strikes us with how *ta'zīyeh* has trespassed into the realm of the sacred, literally filling it with the tragic scenes of Karbalā', and yet creating an object of beauty in the process.

This in many ways is Nietzsche's "*sublime* as the artistic taming of the horrible."[43] We have also seen some commentators on *ta'zīyeh*, Benjamin among them, designate the drama as sublime. The Karbalā' scenes defy the harmony and order proposed by traditional calligraphy and yet do not shatter the beauty of the art form by making it chaotic and ugly. Rather, the piece in question preserves certain elements of the art form, and then revises the notion of harmony with that of tragedy, finally creating an object that embodies both pleasure and pain, the hallmarks of sublime art.

The idea for the sublime in art was popularized by the Hellenistic Greek writer Longinus, in his work "On the Sublime,"[44] a textual criticism of Greek literature. The concept of the sublime only became popular in Europe after the Renaissance, and perhaps peaked in popularity during the eighteenth century as an alternative to the more formal aesthetics of the period. For, at this time, "the sublime made a strong claim for the dignity of the thought and of the religious emotions that could be conveyed better in lofty . . . poetry than by any other means."[45] The sublime was then taken up by the Romantics, perhaps the German Romantics in particular, who appreciated "the sublime's mixture of pleasure and pain,"[46] from whom Nietzsche surely took it to designate art's redemption of tragedy.

If we return to Longinus, he proposes his work as a stylistic critique of the writers of the past. Nevertheless, like Nietzsche, who no doubt ultimately follows in his footsteps,

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[43] Nietzsche, *The Birth*, 60.
[44] Glenn W. Most, "After the Sublime: Stations in the Career of an Emotion," *The Yale Review* 90, no. 2 (April 2002): 106-7
[45] Ibid., 110-11.
[46] Ibid., 113.

the Greek writer also imbues his concept of the sublime with an emotional and spiritual intensity, not to be matched by purely textual criticism. The sublime here is also an agonistic contest where life must emerge the victor:

> as though inviting us to some great festival, she [nature] has brought us into life, into the the whole vast universe, there to be spectators of all that she has created and the keenest aspirants for renown; and thus from the first she has implanted in our souls an unconquerable passion for all that is great and for all that is more divine than ourselves. For this reason the entire universe does not satisfy the contemplation and thought that lie within the scope of human endeavour; our ideas often go beyond the boundaries by which we are circumscribed, and if we look at life from all sides, observing how in everything that concerns us the extraordinary, the great, and the beautiful play the leading part, we shall soon realize the purpose of our creation.[47]

Ultimately, Longinus' description is also *ta'ziyeh's* sublime, to be a spectator of all that the universe has to show, to break boundaries, to have a passion for that which is greater than the self, and to realize its place in creation, even when it is to weep and remember. Longinus also forgives works that are not perfectly constructed if they are gifted with some sublime passages.[48] This is what *ta'ziyeh* strives to do, to take the tragic in life and to redeem it through its own unique veil of art.

This is undoubtedly the hidden element in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, in Emerson, in Esmail and in Bloom, which has led us to use them in our analysis of the passion plays. This is what has been described as the naturalist position in art, the one that hopes that "art's pleasures . . . have evolutionary value in that they make life seem worth living, which is the best guarantee that we will do our best to survive."[49] While harmony is usually touted as the greatest virtue of religious art, *ta'ziyeh* proposes its own anti-harmony which is no less spiritual for having less ease. Ḥusayn and the tragedy of Karbalā' cannot be accommodated by the easy grace of the more detached arts. They need a format

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[47] Longinus, *On the Sublime*, in *Classical Literary Criticism*. trans. T.S. Dorsch, (New York: Penguin Books, 1965), 146. My attention was drawn to this quotation thanks to Most's article.
[48] Most, 108.
[49] Shusterman, 366.

which allows them to compete, strive and assert themselves against all other visions. The result in *ta'zīyeh* is its fusion of pleasure and pain, terror and redemption, neither harmonious nor chaotic, but rather between the two in a place that can only be called sublime. This is the final aesthetic position of *ta'zīyeh*, to be always seeking more life in an effort to realize the purpose of creation, to blend both the completely harmonious and pleasing, as well as the completely pessimistic and shocking, and thus to exist in the aesthetic dimension of the triumphant sublime.

Conclusion

The editors of an anthology dedicated to Shī'ism inform us, "Although there exists no work on the philosophy of art from the viewpoint of Shi'ism, the contribution of Shi'ism to Islamic art and the place that art-forms play in Shi'i religious rites are well-known. In themselves, they indicate the important place art occupies in Shi'i spiritual life."[1] Naturally, the first place that we would search for such a philosophy of Shī'ī aesthetics would be the tragedy of Karbalā'. However, after this initial step forward, we would see that the poetry, prose, songs, paintings and decorative objects dedicated to this one event would take up several volumes, in addition to many more that would be needed if we were able to look past the martyrdom of Ḥusayn.

Of these, *ta'zīyeh* would not doubt occupy a special place, not only for the plays themselves but also for the many art forms that were born from its tragic stage. In this study, we have watched as the Persian passion plays developed from the earliest of lamentations for the events of Karbalā', to the processions, to the recitations of each calamity and each heroic deed, to the fusion of these last two into a dramatic form, and beyond that to the architecture and visual arts of Iran. We have seen the *ta'zīyeh's* repertoire expand from presenting the central moments of Shī'ī piety, to incorporating the eras of the earliest Prophets and finally even accommodating the turbulent changes of the Iranian revolution. Also, we learned that here there are no spectators and no spectacle, but rather a unified assembly of mourners participating in a religious ritual, but also in a decidedly aesthetic event. The passion plays thus reflect the concerns and themes of a larger religious tradition, and yet with each performance they reinvigorate tradition while renewing their bond to it.

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[1] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, et. al. ed. *Shi'ism: Doctrines, Thought and Spirituality*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 330.

The objective of this study was to evaluate *ta'zīyeh* from an aesthetic stance, to try and capture the energy and spirit of this unusual theatre. We have tried to use Nietzsche's work to show us that the Persian passion plays are not only tragic, but something more; to show that they are a fusion of Apollinian harmony and Dionysian dissonance. At the same time, it is strange to think that Nietzsche was writing *The Birth of Tragedy* as *ta'zīyeh* was attaining its apogee under the reign of Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh. At first, we say that no thinker could have less in common with the pietistic rituals of a religiously devout people. Even if we know that Nietzsche praised the Islamic religion for saying "yes" to life in his *Twilight of the Idols*, we have to wonder if Muslims would accept this as a compliment. Furthermore, Nietzsche is the great forerunner of European twentieth century modernism, not only in an artistic, but in an intellectual, sense, and this was the time that Iranians were gearing up for some of their greatest struggles with modernity. Does *ta'zīyeh* reflect an essential modernism, as some critics have attempted to show, or does it reflect ageless concerns and thus become part of a universal artistic forum?

It is in this vein that we have argued that *ta'zīyeh* is in many ways engaged in an agonistic struggle against time, but one in which it succeeded in recapturing it and subjugating it to its own its own artistic and religious vision. We have said that this is both Nietzsche's vision of tragedy born out of the rapture of beauty and illusion with the deepest recesses of human reality. We have also called it the sublime, that painful pleasure which accords man a greater understanding of his universe and his place in it. In this sense, the passion plays are both modern and universal, reflecting themes that have always existed but one which will continue to need artistic renewal throughout the ages.

If we return to the original question about the need to elaborate a philosophy of art in Shī'ism, we would no doubt suggest the sublime as a starting point. The sublime incor-

porates both the spiritual and material needs of art. Thus, if we again consider this great corpus of art, from the most sophisticated of elegies, to the most naïve of portraits of Imām Ḥusayn, we see that each in its own way must necessarily confront tragedy, and that each, by its very existence is a reaffirmation of life and the desire to live.

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