Iran holds a special place in the Islamic world; it is one of those countries which, having been Islamicised early on in the overwhelming thrust of Islam in the seventh century, knew how to preserve its ethnic and linguistic identity. Deep down, Iran remains a world at the crossroads of two great continents of thought; on one hand it looks obliquely towards the East, its language and immemorial myths associate it with India and the Indo-European world and, on the other hand, its position of bordering upon the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia and its conflicting relationships with ancient Greece render it incontestably a neighbour of the West. Placed between these two worlds, Iran has played the role of privileged intermediary. We know, for example, that there existed an Iranian form of Buddhism, the iconography of which influenced Persian poetry, we also know that in the second century the Parthians and the Sogdians were active agents of Buddhism in China and that Iranian Messianism and eschatology infiltrated late Judaism after the liberation of the Jews of Babylon and their integration into the Achaemenid empire founded by Cyrus. One can provide many such examples, however the fact remains that Iran is still, in every sense, a country which is both mediator and median, as much in its capacity to assimilate these multiple influences and to recreate them in original form as in its inexhaustible efforts to elaborate the most prodigious syntheses. It is not an accident that a philosopher like Sohravardi, as early as the twelfth century dares to espouse the prophet, Zarathustra, with the sage, Plato, and to reunite them in the prophetic lineage of the Abrahamic tradition. This synthesizing role, illustrated so eloquently by Sohravardi, remains one of the essential traits of the vocation of Iran.

This cross-cultural mingling, these original innovations in the fields of religion, art and philosophy make of the Iranians a complex people of many and mixed identities and also explain the multiple facets of a visionary’s viewpoint, the pinnacle of which is reached in the sublime summits of a poet like Hafez. But what is the Iranian identity if one can talk of such as an identity at all? If, in Arabic countries, religion is often confounded with ethnic identity, it is not at all the same in the non-Arabic cultural zones where the language and the literature delve into a more ancient collective memory. Thus, in Iran, religious identity no longer unveils all the epistemological fields of our presence in the world. Far from it. The three identities, ethnic, religious and modern encase each other, creating within each other platforms of interference, exploiting territories which remain, for the most part, incompatible with each other. This situation, full of contradictions, promotes a state close to schizophrenia.

In Iran today these three entangled arenas are seen to appear in vivo. The pre-Islamic past reaches back to early antiquity and the great, Achaemenid, Parthian and Sasanian empires, carried out, in all probability and over a huge territory stretching from the Indus to Asia Minor, the same function as the Roman empire in the Western world. From that time onwards the past remains, if not quite alive, at least strongly present in the collective memory. Incorporated into myths and into epic poetry, it finds its point of crystallization in the book of “Shahnameh” of Ferdowsi (tenth century). It continues to remind the Iranians of the deeds of their ancestors, the cult of their heroes and the legends of the great kings who reigned over this immense empire. In
contrast to this far-reaching past, comprising more than thousand of years, the Islamic identity is much more recent; whilst dating from 1400 years ago, it embodies the religious imagination and holds more affective resonances than does the national identity.

Furthermore, a large part of the eschatological myths of Zoroastrianism has been judiciously integrated into the Shi'ite religious psyche. If at the level of national history, one is confronted with the more or less masked conflicts between the Imperial Iran of the Book of Kings and the Shi'ite Iran of the blood of the Martyrs, these conflicts diminish appreciably when one reaches messianic and eschatological levels, the latter being, in both of these cases, the Transfiguration of the world. By way of example, the idea of the Saviour: the Hidden Imam in Shiasm, who will come to draw to an end the cycle of Saintliness (Walayat) at the end of Time, is deeply rooted in the messianic psyche of Iran. Already, a philosopher of the seventeenth century, Qotboddin Eshkavari, had recognized in the person of the future Zarathustra, the Saoshyant, he whom the Shi'ites designate as the awaited Imam. Another, later thinker – Jafar Kashfi (d. 1850) – in a work written in Persian, had created a whole imamite cosmology centred on the opposing forces of Light and Shadow; moreover, he had established a sacred history of the world which followed the three essential periods of Mazdeism: the Creation, the Mingling and the Separation. Finally the return of the twelfth Imam greatly resembles that of the eschatological heroes of Zoroastrianism: separating the Light from the Shadows and returning the world to its original Purity.

Thus, the contents of Iranian consciousness, at least those reflecting its lengthy past, are very rich and contain, as we have just seen, several historical levels of residue. Moreover, all these ancient strata are crystallized in the wisdom of poets. From amongst the hundreds of poets recognized in the literary history of Iran, the Persians have chosen five (or six, according to others) as being the representative examples of their poetic vision. The reasons behind these choices do not arise only from the exceptional qualities of the poets concerned, but also from the fact that their genius marks the culmination of the great genealogical currents of thought and presents themselves as endpoints of a vision of the world in which they each embody, in their own way, different aspects. Ferdowsi (circa 934–1020), for example, is the culminating point of an epic which, inspired by Avestic myths and Parthian legends whilst passing by the Sassanians, was revived after the Arab invasion, thanks to the reawakening of the national Iranian conscience, in order to find its definitive form in the ‘Book of Kings.’(Shahnameh). Omar Khayyam (circa 1048–1122) still arouses today lively controversies. He unveils, however, a paradoxical theme of Persian mind in which attitudes as contradictory as faith and scepticism, submission and rebellion confront each other. He symbolizes the singularity of a soul which is not content with either Islam or infidelity (Kafr), neither from here nor from there, neither of dogmatic certitude nor of systematic doubt, but rather sees the world take form as a succession of images, turning around a magic lantern and fading into nothingness. Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–1273) is the apotheosis of a grand mystic tradition, whence the genealogy reaches back as far as Bayazid Bastami and Hallaj and passes by Sanai and Attar. It is hardly surprising that his great masterpiece, the “Mathnawi”, was considered by Iranians to be the Qur’an in Persian. Saadi (1213–1292) is probably the most representative type of Iranian paideia. Not only does he represent the fine flowering of the peoples of the Iranian world, but also, because of the pedagogical importance of his thoughts, his wise moderation and his practical morality, his work has become in some way the ‘gold standard’ for all human social behaviour. A polyvalent genius, Saadi is also an undeniable master of lyrical
poetry, furthermore the stupefying clarity of his language and the elegance of his turn of phrase have awarded him the rare reputation of being of an 'inaccessible simplicity'. Hafez (1325–1389) is 'The interpreter of Mysteries' of Persian literature. Unique in his genre, he is, at the same time, this miraculous equilibrium, in which contents and forms are united in indissoluble perfection; this fertile melting-pot where the essence of the mystical vision, the magic of the verb and the great erotic-mystical symbols blend together. Hafez is also an audacious denouncer of all hypocrisy, of all censorship which emanates from inquisition. For him, truth is too paradoxical to reveal itself in the hollow sermons of preachers, too rebellious to be impoverished by the stupid prohibitions of censors. These five poets, or six if one includes Nezami, together constitute an ever-present constellation in the mind of the cultivated Persian. The latter will consequently know moments of heroic outpourings in letting himself be carried away by the epic cadence of Ferdowsi (he will re-live the narrative era of the epic poem), will intoxicate himself to the point of ecstasy in the incandescent rhythm of Rumi, will collect himself through the subtle dialectic of Hafez or will glance disillusionedly at the vertiginous dance of the atoms with Khayyam.

Each of these poets is an interlocutor present in the dimension of the time which he evokes, whether that is the narrative time of the epic events of the past, the mystical time of the return to the original beginning, the time of uprooting in ecstatic bounds or the discontinuous time of suspension, arriving like so many flashes of lightning, as in Khayyam’s vision. It is hardly the chronology of the calendar which determines which poet is from which era as, by way of example, the classical poet would precede the romantic poet and the latter would precede the symbolist, but rather their common relationship to the centre of memory which invests them all with its aura in such a way that they become like the rays of a centralised sun. This is why the Persian has a tendency to see things in pictures, to express himself in sonorous rhythms, to think via poetry. Perhaps, nowhere else have thought and poetry known such an exceptional symbiosis.

In Berlin, at the House of World Cultures, contemporary Iranian artists from the interior and from overseas will meet together, bringing with them the complexities of their multiple identities, passing through the filter of exile, of the diaspora and the unparalleled constraints imposed by every form of censorship. But what is this space in which they will face one another? What is this identity which will connect them to the rest of the world? Doubtless, it is their modern identity, the one which brings them face to face with the legacy of their past and with the world in which they live. In a certain way the three tier structure which I have evoked, in discussing the three Iranian identities, is a double-edged sword, for it is at the same time both an obstacle and a passage. It has to be able to provide a stepping stone between displaced, heterogeneous worlds, it must be able to proceed further than the historical ruptures of modern times.

But how does one arrange these three territories without them mutually excluding each other? In a certain way, this three tier structure allows for unsuspected possibilities of comprehension, on the condition that one can manage to accommodate their respective spaces, also on the condition that one can separate them without breaking them, can learn to travel through the multiple levels of being without becoming entangled in crises of identity. Faced with the unidimensional man of modern times, the amphibious situation, that these three tiers can procure, is a godsend; for it works as well in the horizontal dimension of history as in the vertical sense of the higher orders. People who belong to the extra-occidental cultural area are trapped in a fault-line of worlds which repel and deform each other. If assumed with lucidity and without resentment, this ambivalence can enrich them, extending the
registers of knowledge and enlarging the range of feelings. But, driven back from the
critical field of knowledge, these three layers provoke blockages and disfigure, as in a
shattered mirror, the reality of the world and its mental images. This unifying art of
remodelling heterogeneous spaces is, to my mind, the third way, which escapes at
the same time from monolithic visions of ideologies as from the illusion of
unrealizable utopias. It is perhaps the way of tamed schizophrenia.

Translated from the French by Pamela Merali