CHAPTER TWO

EXAMPLES AND EXTENSIONS

The form and ideology of *hekayat*

The fundamental characteristic of the realistic novelistic ideology is the serious presentation of the common contemporary in literature\(^1\) which, as we have seen, can only significantly emerge if preceding epistemological shifts sanction the ordinary as the focus of literary representation. To further explain this and differentiate the novelistic and classical fictions based on the premise that fictional forms are ideologies themselves, I would like to give two examples of classical Persian fiction and elaborate on the formal implications of ideology and epistemology. The first sample is a *hekayat* from Sa‘di’s *Golestan* (1258) in the chapter on “The Virtues of Contentment”:

I had heard about a merchant who possessed one hundred and fifty camel loads of merchandise with forty slaves and servants. One night, he invited me to his *hojreh*\(^2\) in the Island of Kish. He did not rest from his incoherent twaddle that my such and such partner is in Turkestan and my such and such goods are in Hindustan and this is the title-deed of such and such an estate. He would say he desired to go to Alexandria where the climate was pleasant and would say, no the African sea is turbulent. Sa‘di, he said, I have another journey ahead and should that be undertaken I shall settle for the rest of my life and enjoy contentment. I asked what journey it was. He said: I shall carry Persian brimstone to China where I hear it is of high price and from there I shall carry Chinese porcelain to Rome and Roman brocade to India and Indian steel to Aleppo and Aleppo’s glassware to Yemen and Yemeni cloth to Pars and after that I shall abandon trading and sit in a store. He had talked of this lunacy so much that he was left with no more strength. Sa‘di, he said, do tell me something of what you


\(^{2}\) Customarily a *hojreh* is a shop in a bazaar, where merchants welcome customers and/or guests and socialize with them.
have seen and heard. I said: [poem] have you heard that in deep deliberation / a leader fell off his stallion / he said the narrow eye of a wealthy man / will be filled by contentment or by the earth of the tomb.3

There are a number of points about this story: it is obviously didactic and contrasts the infinite greed and ambition of mankind with the short span of life. The underlying irony emerges from an assumed incompatibility between long term planning and life’s unexpectedness. Moreover, the final moral of the narrative is not dependent on the time or location where this conversation takes place: the Island of Kish is mentioned only because the narrator/poet seems to have been there, other geographical locations are chosen to emphasize the length of journeys and perhaps the impossibility of fulfilling them all, and the conversation’s taking place during night is also irrelevant to the final lesson. Likewise, except for a very short description of the wealth of the merchant, “one hundred and fifty camel loads of merchandise with forty slaves and servants”, and random references to his properties, we do not have any other specificities of his wealth. For example, we do not know what his hojreh looks like, or whether or not he is married or has children, and how they relate to each other; we do not know whether or not he has amassed his wealth through innovation and hard work or if he has inherited it; we do not know how he treats his forty servants, how they feel about him, what they do, and why he needs them all, or what for. We are given a static image because the whole setting is reified by the last two lines, the moral of the narrative.

This hekayat does have realistic elements: for example, it happens in Kish, a real Island, and the products of various countries/cities are mentioned. However, its representation of society is not dynamic – its society is not portrayed in action. At the same time, in terms of plot, there are no meaningful causal links perceived between events: what pushes the merchant forward on the routes he describes is merely the logic of trade, which never becomes a lived human concern assumed by the narrative; the narration of the interaction between the merchant and the narrator/poet is formulated by an ideology that is simply uninterested in the motivations of the merchant. As encoded in the

3 Translations from Persian are mine, unless otherwise indicated. For this translation I have consulted an English translation rendered by James R. Newell; see www.thesongsofhafez.com.