Iranian Revolutionary Painting on Canvas: Iconographic Study on the Martyred Body

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The figure of the martyred soldier is so ingrained in the Iranian public sphere that today, thirty years after the Revolution and twenty years after the cessation of the hostilities against Iraq, Iranian revolutionary painting on canvas keeps drawing most of its inspiration from the Shiite rhetoric of the martyred body and from the war. This article identifies and analyzes the iconographic forms of the martyred body in this pictorial production, which expresses primarily the concerns of the state. Relying on six works on canvas – painted before, during and thirty years after the Revolution – a scalable approach to the various representations of the martyred body is proposed, referring to Iran’s history.

In Tehran, the days and nights that followed the announcement of the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, on Saturday, 13 June 2009 were, for the Iranian people, troubled, chaotic. An anonymous correspondent of the French newspaper *Le Monde* reported:

It is an enigma among many others in these days of shock and despair. It all started on Saturday, June 13th, around noon ... While the results of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s victory had been proclaimed during the night, a man appeared in the front of the Ministry of Interior, over a barrel, arms outstretched, as ready to jump out of the sixteenth or seventeenth floor of this gigantic building in Soviet-cubisto style, halfway between the center of Tehran and the rich districts of the North-backed chain of Alborz.1

Several hundred protesters and the police were gathered at the bottom of the building. Further, the article specifies that the man had been retained, caught by adjacent arms. But this description “in picture,” at the same time as it symbolizes the extent of the social movement now disrupting Iran, sets the stage for our thinking: suicide,

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beyond a personal problematic, may take a political meaning. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is described as “martyrdom.”

In a previous study, devoted to the analysis of two war paintings—a work by an Iranian artist, Naser Palangi, painted during the Iran–Iraq War (1982) in the courtyard of a Mosque and the triptych War (1929) of the German Otto Dix, developed like an altarpiece—I had wondered about the representations of the human body in the destabilizing context for culture, and traumatic for humans, created by war. War, which deconstructs the self-consciousness and the relationship to the body, affects the perception of the world or the conception of the human condition, creating a special impetus to plastic research. When the instability and the most extreme violence affect everything, the representations of the body will necessarily arise in artistic creation as intuitive images of a problematic relationship to the world. Indeed, everything happens as if, by analogical substitution, the artists would give a tangible form to the idea of a disorganized cosmos. Naser Palangi systematically veils the dead bodies under a shroud while Otto Dix exhibits injuries, mutilations and decomposing bodies with a raw realism. Germany, during the Weimar Republic, wanted to draw a line through the war, representing things and men antebellum as if nothing had happened. Catherine Wermester explains that the Weimar Republic even wanted to replace—by way of advertisements extolling the virtues of prosthesis—the missing limb, undo the mutilation and, at the same time, the otherness of the injured soldier. German painters like Otto Dix and George Grosz took the opposing view regarding these discourses, denouncing tirelessly and even emphasizing—in their works having given rise to the artistic movement of New Objectivity—the incredible brutality that drives war. The specificity of the martyred body in Iranian revolutionary painting has then taken, in my mind, its full potential from the contrast or the figurative opposition it has with German painting of the 1920s. While the German artist cultivates the macabre, the Iranian artist is fascinated by the sublime. Endowed with a unique plasticity, the body is not self-evident. According to Marcel Mauss, the body is a montage. The pictorial representation of the body results from the symbolism attributed by a society or a social group at a specific time in its history. It depends on a social context that thinks and shapes the body, passing through it the changes that are affecting it, from the most conspicuous to the most secret ones. This processing is unconscious. It only reappears in consciousness thanks to feelings of an unusual strength.

Iranian revolutionary painting, which can be described mainly as war painting during the Iran–Iraq War, distinguishes itself as a bastion of the Revolution’s ideology and has a fundamental role in defending the Islamic revolutionary values. Some artists, predominantly from Tehran University, initiated the movement of revolutionary art (Honar-e Enqelabi) and then institutionalized it, by organizing a traveling painting

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exhibition from 11 February 1979. This exhibition led to the founding of the Center of Thought and Islamic Art (Howzeh-ye Andisheh va Honar-e eslami), independent at first, then attached in 1982 to the Islamic Propaganda Organization—when, paradoxically, the Islamic Republic took the lead in the war against Iraq. This Center has laid down for decades in Iran an artistic credo focused on the character of the martyr, whose body is conspicuous.

According to Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, the preponderance of the martyr’s figure responds to a historical process that affected the entire Middle East during the twentieth century. It is not peculiar to Iran or Muslims. The researcher points out that, in addition to revolutionary Iran, different communities, such as the Maronites of Lebanon, the Copts of Egypt or the Moroccan Jews in Israel tend to “create new saints more and more visible that serve as heroes of their Community.” The proliferation of contemporary heroes, martyrs and saints, “attended by the iconographic inflation,” affects the Middle East in a broad sense. Different models, from hero to martyr, have been successively acclaimed throughout the twentieth century in these countries. The elites of the Arab Nahda and the reformers of the Ottoman Tanzimat, maintaining the desire for a western secularized modernity, initially turned aside from saints, which became obsolete. This abandonment led, according to Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, to the emergence of the hero figure, who has grown from the inter-war period until the 1960s. Then, people from the Middle East venerated “the nationalist leader fighting” or “the head of state, champion of his independent country at a time where the Third world—a term that emerged during the Suez crisis in 1956—became apparent.” But, in the 1980s, the long-standing failure of these heroes to embody something other than the fight gave rise to another model, that of the sacrificial violence embodied by the martyrs, fruits of contemporary conflicts. These neo-martyrs, breaking with tradition, were particularly publicized during the Afghan conflict, the Iran–Iraq War, the guerrilla war of the PKK against the Turkish state and the first Intifada in the occupied territories in Palestine. The decade of the 1990s experienced a radicalization of the attitude of the neo-martyrs, who began to resort to suicide bombings, unleashing now a “self-sacrificial” violence.

By the sacrifice of his life, the neo-martyr wants to demonstrate the merits of the cause he defends and tends by his act to sanctify it. Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen specifies that the iconography of the cult of heroes, then martyrs, is a reflection of hagiographic representations of the cult of saints, but to the dominant religious symbols, different other symbols are added, urging to the political claim or even to the armed struggle. Iranian revolutionary painting has to be considered as a representative movement of a society undergoing chaotic changes, where new groups such as the neo-martyrs emerge, challenging the standardized models that have currency in our postmodern societies.

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6 Ibid., 5.
7 Ibid., 6.
8 Ibid., 17.
9 Ibid., 20.
Revolutionary painting was widespread in Iran during the first decade after the Revolution. The figure of the martyred soldier is still ingrained in the public sphere but has less visibility. Today, thirty years after the Revolution and twenty years after the cessation of the hostilities against Iraq, the current movement of Iranian revolutionary painting on canvas keeps drawing most of its inspiration from the Shiite rhetoric of the martyred body and from the war. I would like to identify and analyze the iconographic forms of the martyred body in this pictorial production, which expresses primarily the concerns of the state. Relying on six works on canvas, I will propose a scalable approach to the various representations of the martyred body, referring to Iran’s history. This corpus consists of a work painted during the pre-revolutionary resistance (1974), of two paintings dating from the early years of the Iran–Iraq War (1981) and of three others exhibited at the Seventh Biennial of Iranian Contemporary Painting (February 2008, Tehran). On the basis of a visual study, a contextualized reading and a content analysis, I will try to highlight the central place and the role granted to the figure of the martyred soldier, especially since the Revolution of 1979, in the pictorial art of Iran. I have chosen to focus on Eric Butel’s research, devoted to the study of wills and memoirs of Iranian veterans of the Iran–Iraq War, from which I quote extracts. Compared to the body of an ordinary deceased, which is not associated with any particular value, the martyr’s body in Iran sends clear signals that form the draft of a language I will attempt to read.

Contextualized Description

I begin with the work of Rahim Najfar, Martyr, painted in 1974 (Figure 1). The pattern of the martyred body has quickly imposed itself, from the start of the resistance against the Pahlavi monarchy, in Iran’s revolutionary iconography. The White Revolution (economic, social and land reforms) initiated by Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi in the 1960s had sparked off riots, led by Ruhollah Khomeyni who took lead of the opposition. Having initially sentenced him to death in 1963, the Shah, aware of his influence, transmuted this sentence to exile, wanting to avoid making him a “martyr.” Khomeyni then conceptualized and spread his thoughts around the principle of velayat-e faqih, which gives political and religious authority to the heirs of the Prophet until the return of the Hidden Imam. Meanwhile, between 1965 and 1972, ’Ali Shariati, sociologist and philosopher, published his Islamic Studies and gave numerous lectures in Tehran universities. In 1973, he was kept prisoner for eighteen months by the SAVAK, the secret police of the Shah’s regime. Rahim Najfar was dependent on the views of these leaders and painted this work in a context of repression and toughening resistance.

Even if it is in order to innovate, experience mobilizes processes or materials drawn from the legacy of culture. The artist, committed alongside the religious opposition,
Figure 1. Rahim Najfar, *Martyr*, gouache, 1974 (32x27 cm), collection of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.
has updated in his painting the great myths sparking off the collective identity, such as the Last Judgment, preceded in the Quran by an indefinite waiting time. A long line of dead, wrapped in shrouds, is waiting calmly for justice. All these faceless, identical dead bodies are wending their way illuminated by a star and form something like a path for two distinct bodies who are lying in their coffins, blood tainting their immaculate shrouds and their bearded visible features. The point of view used to see them in their coffins (second body’s envelope) is traditional of the miniature, located in the sky, equivalent to the sight of God, while the focal point of all the work is adjusted to the viewer’s eyes, located from the front. These two wrapped characters seem to be Hasan and Hosein, second and third martyred Imams revered by Shiites, pointed out by their mother Fatemeh, the daughter of the Prophet. Fatemeh in black chador and the face veiled as a Saint, is surrounded by these Imams as children, who she makes witnesses of their own destiny. The two children, as the two martyred bodies, are watching the viewer of the picture. At the foot of the Saint and her two sons, a lion contemplates the horde of the dead, this privileged community of martyrs that accompanies the Imams. The lion is an old religious symbol designating ‘Ali, the first Imam martyred by his enemies. Indeed, Imam ‘Ali is also called Asad Allah al-Ghalib (“the victorious lion of God”).\(^{11}\) The Shiites refer by this name to the metamorphosis of ‘Ali into a lion, as told in the Miradj, the ascension of the Prophet.

During his miraculous night ascent to the throne of God, the Prophet had met along the way a lion at which he had thrown a ring in the mouth to distract it. Later, at some point during the assembly of The Forties, ‘Ali in possession of this ring, gives it back to the Prophet Mohammad.\(^{12}\)

This symbol of the lion is taken up by the revolutionary discourse as an effective way to combine religious connotations and bravery. It carries a double image. Under the hand of the fighters of the Iran–Iraq War, one can read: “It was here that Abolfazl Nowvidi, another of our men, achieved martyrdom. He was a pure young man. During the attack, he roared like a lion, and had mystical prayers in the dead of night.”\(^{13}\) Sirus Lorestani also writes in his memoirs: “This kind of courage can only be found in the divine men, who are totally turned to God and have a lionheart.”\(^{14}\)

The scene is sparse, limited to an ochre earth as well as a sky and a sea of the same deep blue. The sea can be referred to the water of eternity from the celestial fountain of Kawthar, which the Imam Ali, Fatemeh’s husband and father of the Imams Hasan and Hosein, pours the chosen people of the Last Judgment. A sea of blood has not appeared yet, as it did in the works painted from the 1979 Revolution and especially

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\(^{14}\)Sirus Lorestani, *Khaterh-ye ruziba-ye razm* (Khorramabad, 1997), 45.
from the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War (20 September 1980). The blood is shown only as a trace on the shrouds. In this pre-revolutionary painting, the representation of the collective destiny of a homogeneous community of dead, guided by the Imams, seems to prevail. The overdrive of the martyred bodies gives the painting a strong community base and creates a mass effect needed in order to resist skepticism. This faceless community has not been shaken out of its silence yet, but testifies by its presence.

The Islamic Revolution in 1979 banned from the public sphere most of the artistic creations produced under Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi and only allowed works responding to the artistic and religious creed—of which Rahim Najfar’s work is a perfect example—developed from the mid-1970s. Besides the cultural breaking, there was also the war, to which Iranian revolutionary painting was immediately attached. Hosein Khosrojerdi and Naser Palangi—whose pictures (Figures 2 and 3) I am going to tackle successively—are among the major painters of the Revolution. On outbreak of the war in 1980 some of these committed artists, such as Naser Palangi, joined the front; where Palangi drew, photographed and painted soldiers and people for two years. This experience certainly left its mark on the painter who, in the heart of his works, directly faces the eternal laws of life and death.

Figure 2. Hosein Khosrojerdi, *The light of History*, 1981 (160x130 cm), postcard published by the artistic Center of the Islamic Propaganda Organisation.
Figure 3. Naser Palangi, *Shroud of Blood*, 1981 (300x140 cm), postcard published by the artistic Center of the Islamic Propaganda Organisation.
In *Light of History* (Figure 2), Hosein Khosrodjerdi created at the beginning of the war (1981) an epic work, where two men in uniform or two postures of a single man, occupy the foreground. The persuasive power of the work is enhanced by the use of a figurative and scalable narrative, featuring a split body in motion. The first body, kneeling, like someone in prayer ready to bow down, seems to represent the step of the “liberating explosion” of martyrdom, symbolized by the flash of light flowing from the gun. According to Eric Butel, some soldiers saw martyrdom as the “incandescent spark of the Union.” A veteran, Mohsen Motlaq, wrote: “The cold nights of Karkheh always brought freshness to the burning soul of the mystics and pious persons with a burning heart and placed these moments under the sign of the hope of night operations and of the day of the Union.”

Death is considered equivalent to a mystical ecstasy. The second body, fallen forward, depicts another time of death, the settling, experienced as a liberation. The fighter has rushed headlong into the path of martyrdom (the Iran–Iraq War was largely a war of volunteers, not of reservists). The last gasp of the soldier goes through the weapon, his gun, which looks like an extension of his body, possessed of an overabundance of being. This “super-body,” as staged in this painting, helps to tame the unknown. According to Michel Maffesoli, in a pressurized context, “the worsening of all contrasts and all abysses” helps the soldier to bear the perspective of death.

The face of the kneeling man is serene, disconnected from the suffering. For the Iranian soldiers who decided on martyrdom, being able to free themselves from suffering was fundamental. They lived pain as redemptive and purifying for the soul. This fighter is already out of the world. He faces the Earth, which is humanized, “made bodily,” transformed into a head whose forehead is tied by a green headband that the Iranian soldiers would put on before the attacks and that this fighter is putting on too. This Earth, which symbolizes the desire for unity, totality, of the fighter society, is not represented as a dead, inert substance, but as a source of vital strength. This is a sphere impregnated with a supernatural power. The Earth here seems to serve as a metaphor for the larger reality, of which the factors determining the human condition and history are part. Changing the scale of the earthly creatures and of the space that encompasses them allows the representation of a new world, which would be shaped by the metaphysics. The work is painted through a filter of blood, whose red color is even covering the green of Islam or the green of the uniforms and the headbands.

Meanwhile, in 1981, Naser Palangi painted *Shroud of Blood* (Figure 3), a work in which interdependent shrouds placed side by side, again the expression of a collective, seem to symbolize the transcendence of an ideal society based on self-denial. Their vertical position could mean that the martyr is not passive in death but rather the active

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“witness” of a higher cause. The shrouds are stuck with a headless body. This patchy presence of the body, by breaking with the human standard (body, in this work, is only implicit, suggested by the shroud, transformed at the foreground into a pure white robe, and by blood), refers to a traditional representation of the martyr’s body in the Iranian revolutionary iconography: the headless martyr recalls that Imam Hosein was beheaded in Kerbala in 680 (hence the tears at the neckline of the shroud) and that his head was sent to the Umayyad caliph in Damascus. The flight of the soul is symbolized by the upward movement of the dove, which is taking flight at the bottom of the painting.

The last three paintings in our corpus are recent. The martyr’s body which appears in the center of Farhad Sadeghi’s work, *Resistance* (2007) (Figure 4), resonates with the tree trunks lined up in the background. The legs and feet of the character are only sketched. The slanting position given to the body, in relation to the vertical lines of the trunks, brings some dynamism. Portraying the character with his back turned and departing allows the artist to point up that other veil of the body, the wings, which take shape in the upper part of the body. They may symbolize the soul of the martyr on the way to heaven (the symbol of the dove is here transferred to the body of the martyr). The fighters of the Iran–Iraq War were also compared to the “soldiers of heaven”. This expression alludes to a verse from the Quran, where God sends archangels to help the armies of the Prophet (Quran, XXXIII-9, Les Factions).

One can also read in the memoirs of Fathollah Nad’ali:

> I saw very few people as pure, as devoted and as passionate about the holy Imams. His rosy face was beaming with the light of faith and his body made a perfume of paradise. As if he knew himself that he was going, in an hour, to sit between the wings of angels.\(^{18}\)

According to Eric Butel, the front could be regarded as a place of epiphanic manifestations, whether in the case of the descent of the angels, divine messengers of the divine Court coming to soldiers’ assistance, or in the case of the rise to the sky of the fighters themselves, after their martyrdom.\(^{19}\) The sanctity of the cause includes those who defend it, who are thereby sanctified.

In Kazem Chalipa’s *Resistance* (2007) (Figure 5), the body almost disappears from the canvas. Only one arm, as red as the earth, remains of this bodily eclipse taking place at the top of the painting. Kazem Chalipa, alongside Hosein Khosrojerdi and Naser Palangi, is part of the first generation of revolutionary artists, but he made this work, as well as Farhad Sadeghi, thirty years after the Revolution, on the occasion of the Seventh Biennial of Iranian Contemporary Painting (Saba Cultural Center, Tehran, 2008). During the Biennial, revolutionary painting was exhibited on the top floor of the cultural center, in a small space, while the ground floor and two entire other floors were devoted to uncommitted

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\(^{18}\)Nad’ali, *Khaterat*, 40–41.

\(^{19}\)Butel, “Le martyr dans les mémoires de guerre iraniens,” 216.
pictorial movements. The dividing up of the exhibition’s space itself indicates the process of marginalization which is now affecting revolutionary art in Iran. This arm on the ground (last bodily vestige after an explosion?) can be considered as a call, “an outstretched hand,” but can also symbolize the Hand of Fatemeh, which, for the Shiites, represents five of the most important Saints: the Prophet, his daughter Fatemeh, ‘Ali, Hasan and Hosein, the three first Imams. This part of the body painted at the top of the canvas sets the martyr at the border of the material and heavenly worlds, referring to another technique of Persian miniature. The earth, matrix watered with blood, is scattered with stones without shadows, symbols of eternity but also evoking memory and graves. In this recent work, the silhouette of the body is not outlined by a shroud but by the chaffiyeh, the scarf which constitutes one of the main symbols of the Palestinian struggle. This scarf and the iterative title of the works, Resistance (Moqavemat in Persian), is common to two of the three paintings dating from 2007 (Figures 5 and 6).

Today, twenty years after the end of the Iran–Iraq War, Iranian revolutionary
painting seems mainly to feed on another conflict, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. But this was an issue that preoccupied the revolutionary artists from the beginning. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict was already an important theme in several other exhibitions since the 1980s onwards, as during the first post-revolutionary Iranian Painting Biennial.

Finally, Ahmad Khalilifard has chosen, in his painting entitled *Resistance* (2007) (Fig. 6), to individualize the martyred body. This recent evolution in the representation of the martyred body gives more life to the evocation of martyrdom and makes it closer to the viewer. The artist also seems to have got the martyrdom out of the metaphoric universe of the works from the early days of the Islamic Republic, to anchor it in a dreamlike world. The scene takes place at night. The soldier is walking toward the viewer of the painting. Does he travel all over the Earth? Indeed, Mohsen Motlaq stated as follows:

I decided to tip on these pages a drop of their ocean of patience and knowledge, so that those caught with love would remember a moment, by breathing it, the days of djahad [holy war] and martyrdom, and explore this land.  

The soldier is surrounded by lots of light’s particles, bubbles or flowers, and by four fishes, which move along the horizon line. The soldier also carries, in addition to his rifle and the Palestinian scarf, a ball of light. According to Eric Butel, some martyrs associated, in their will, the inner purity to the luminescence of the martyred body. In his will, the martyr Hosein Hadi thus wrote that martyrdom is the “light in the darkness and the lamp of hope in the dark night of despair.” Another soldier also described the martyr as “the torch that lights the way to be pure and bright.” The light establishes the martyred body as a lighthouse, as a guide.

In the process of describing these six paintings, the character of the martyr appeared meaningful both in terms of the Shiite religious tradition, of the Iranian national experience of eight years of war and of the socio-political structure of a country where the power is rooted in the divine right. I will now proceed to a systematic analysis of the works’ content, in an attempt to highlight the implications inherent in the theme of the martyred body. How does the body become significant for someone who exposes himself to death, and for those who have to witness its collapse?

Content Analysis

These six works seem to decline a pictorial language that revolves strictly around the body of the martyr, designed as a generic body not referring to a specific individual. These bodies are actually types that refer to the figure of saints, the dead or soldiers. These three categories of characters have most often been used in Iranian revolutionary painting to evoke martyrdom. Hardware accessories (all war-related) as well as symbols (the light that reflects the divine; white or red colors that are associated with purity; green referring to Islam) are more or less mobilized, before or after the Revolution, to signify martyrdom. The suggestion of a direction, between up and down or more subtle, diagonally, or even by the position inside the painting, is also a technique used to describe the transition, the progression from one state to another. Because the martyred body is a mediator: he is going to take flight or to move forward in the water, as expressed by its animal attributes (dove or fish), leaving the ground, sidling into or out of the elements, moving in or between several worlds. The posture of the martyred bodies is also relevant because it is one of the few indicators—indirect therefore polysemous—of the inner feelings of the character, whose face displays an undifferentiated serenity. Indeed, standing, recurring for dead bodies (the opposite of the traditional representation of death), can be considered as a sign of determination and courage while kneeling, the manifestation of a body in prayer, is a mark of respect and submission. The

20Motlaq, Zendeh had Kameyl, 50.
21Hosein Hadi, Safiran-e nur 1, no. 186 (Tehran): 301.
immobility or the movement of the body is suggested depending on whether or not martyrdom is effective. Dismemberment, decapitation refers to the sacrifice and to the violent loss of life. Non-figuration of the facial features (veiled or not visible due to the absence of the head, to the reclining or turned posture), the persistent use of bodily veils, sometimes multiplied in layers, appear to be many attempts to remove flesh, feeling, individuality and to insist on transfer, transfiguration. The physical reality, its mutilation, its destruction or its transformation into a corpse, disappears behind multiple screens, giving way to a symbolic existence, that of a potential martyr. Ayatollah Khomeyni moreover emphasized in his speech that the martyr had an existence in the afterlife: “Perhaps one imagines that we went to war against such infidels and have been killed, one imagines it is a waste, but this is not a loss, those who were killed are alive with God.”


25 Djahangiri, Safiran-e nur 1, no. 234 (Tehran).
In agreement with Table 1, it appears that the representation of the martyred body in the afterlife is collective. If the figuration of the previous time and of the time of death affects only the individual, the body of the martyr is represented, once dead, as inserted in a community. Patrick Baudry, in *Le corps défait*, emphasizes that the relationship to death is culturally constructed and points out that death can best arouse a human communion.26

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Painting No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moving forward martyrdom with determination</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>The martyr advances led by an inner light, the gun on his shoulder.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The moment of the “liberating explosion”</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Death is translated by the spark of the gun and the split body.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The disappearance of the living world immediately after death: the testimony by blood</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>After death, the martyred body is lying on the ground, matching earth which has collected his blood and is about to disappear from the living world as from the painting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The passage to the afterlife</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>The turned angel, without any visible limbs, is moving away, expressing the passage between two worlds and the mutation of a living body in a dead one but living from another life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death after the funeral rites</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>The martyred bodies have lost all corporeality and become meaningful only by wearing a shroud.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death after the funeral rites and among the saints</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>The bodies of martyrs are completely wrapped in shrouds and form a procession, awaiting the Last Judgment, under the aegis of a Saint, Fatemeh, of the Imams Hasan and Hosein, and of Imam ‘Ali.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Steps of the journey toward martyrdom that can be seen in the corpus of six works

God knows how the pure hearts were tied with each other, how full of enthusiasm and how selflessly the comrades acted in front of each other during these initiatives. Perhaps, ardor and enthusiasm arose from the thought of the bloody journey and of the unforgettable flights waiting for us.  

Author of L’islamisme et la mort. Le martyre révolutionnaire en Iran, Farhad Khosrokhavar, distinguishes the passage of “sacrifice-martyrdom” for the defense of a political cause, before and during the Revolution, from “martyrdom with deadly effect” or “martyropath” close to the suicide, in post-revolutionary Iran. The deadly dimension, auto and hetero-aggressive, that these self-sacrificial behaviors include, goes beyond political action, which would simply “attempt” (from Latin attemptare), “boldly attempt” to breach, to open an access. But this violence plunges on the contrary into the “assassination attempt,” which refers to war and death. The defended cause prevails and alienates the individual. One’s body and one’s existence are used to benefit this cause.

Contemporary Iranian martyrdom appears to result, on the one hand, in the many social changes that occurred in the country in the twentieth century. The sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar believes that the failure to achieve the numerous dreams of the revolutionary youth, which buried itself in an unstructured environment, opened “a deadly space where the confused ego is consumed within one’s flesh.” As part of Iranian Islamism, the status of the body becomes the key issue of the conflicting relationship with modernity. This body catalyzes the social difficulties of the “near-individual,” the systemic melancholy of the social field in the lack of distinguishing marks, the vagaries of the utopian revolutionary politics and then war.

On the other hand, secular Muslim intellectuals such as ‘Ali Shariati, but also revolutionary clerics like Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari and the Ayatollah Khomeyni, have reactivated in the symbolic heritage of Shiism what could be used for the political affirmation of the subject. Their rereading of Hosein’s myth, the third Imam revered by Shiites—set up as a political model and as an absolute symbol of the struggle against a despotic power (the Umayyads in the seventh century)—was decisive. According to Eric Butel, the body of the martyr, involved in a process of symbolic revival of the passion of Hosein, his brothers, his sons and seventy-two of his supporters, all slain in Kerbala in 680, became a political body.

The preponderance of the martyr’s figure in Iranian revolutionary painting therefore seems to come from its ability to unify, in a phantasmagorical mode, the social, political and religious fields. From this perspective, the martyr first represents a hero, a political model, who gives the society an example of courage, participating in nation-building by the evocation of these mythologies and in national defense by

29 Ibid., 23.
30 Ibid., 15.
31 Butel, “Le martyr dans les mémoires de guerre iraniens,” 626.
his courage and commitment to fight at the cost of his life. Crowning this first level, the martyr also offers a new model of holiness, rooted in the continuity of the tradition from which it came. However, Eric Butel describes this new model as an “incomplete holiness, mutilated by its political exploitation.” It seems indeed that the martyr does not give rise today in the same way to great support from the Iranian population. Exploited to suppress “on behalf of the martyrs’ blood” the desire for autonomy and fundamental freedom, this paradigm of self-realization is affected in Iran by the current renewal movement of revolutionary values.

The Iranian revolutionary painters from the very beginning said they tried to give their art a new legitimacy, to renew the weakened ties between the painting, the society and the sacred. After the Revolution, the revolutionary painters claimed to be in the center of the artistic scene as the only masters and orchestrators of a new identity. Some revolutionary painters even considered the practice of their art as another way, certainly more “indirect” than martyrdom, on the path to perfection, following the thought of Ayatollah Khomeyni:

What they [the philosophers and artists] have discovered through science, reason and mysticism, those [the martyrs] have experienced it, and what they [the philosophers and artists] have looked up in books and writings, those [the martyrs] have discovered it in the arena of blood and in the way of God.33

32 Butel, “Martyre et sainteté dans la littérature de guerre Irak-Iran,” 312.