



The Blind Owl

by
Sadeq Hedayat

Translated
by
Iraj Bashiri

© 1974, 1984, 2013

1st edition 1974
2nd revised edition 1984
3rd revised edition 2013

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Table of Contents

Introduction v

Sadeq Hedayat's Life 8

The Blind Owl 14

The Blind Owl: A Personal Note 67

The Message of The Blind Owl: An Analysis 76

Select Bibliography..... 95

Introduction

The following is my third revised version of the translation into English of the novella, *The Blind Owl*. The first version (1974) was a literal translation. It accompanied a structural study of the novella entitled *Hedayat's Ivory Tower: Structural Analysis of The Blind Owl*. A working translation, it served as the basis for my work that continued on the novella in subsequent years. What prompted that translation, in spite of the existing D. P. Costello translation, was that Costello had not adhered to the exact text of Hedayat. As a result, I thought certain crucial clues for understanding Hedayat's intent in writing the novella were missing. For instance, Costello had used the word "cobra" as a translation of Hedayat's "*mar-i nag*" (*Nag-serpent*). On the surface, "cobra" is an apt translation, especially for those who read the novella for entertainment. But for those who intend to understand the meaning of the work through an analysis of its various aspects, it is an inadequate translation. As we know now, the *Nag-serpent* plays a pivotal role in the whole story, by inference in Part One and, physically, in various forms in Part Two. The *Nag-serpent* gives the novella its backdrop and conveys the overall message of Hedayat, a message of liberation modeled on the life of Gautama Buddha. In fact, it is the element in the story that inspires awe and mystery, and imparts depth. These, and other India-related concerns, prompted me to provide a literal translation with my working analysis. The incentive for publishing the 1974 literal translation, therefore, was to facilitate communication about the analysis rather than to present a new translation.

In an effort to understand the works of Sadeq Hedayat better; in fact, to gain an overall view of his world, I teach a course on Persian Fiction and in it, alongside the works of other authors, I use the works of Hedayat. Analysis of Hedayat's short stories and discussion of those stories over decades, especially discussion of *The Blind Owl* in the context of the *Bardo Thodol*, have enabled me to enhance both my analysis and my translation of *The Blind Owl*. A revised analysis appeared in *The Fiction of Sadeq Hedayat* (1984) accompanied by a revised translation in *The Blind*

Owl and Other Hedayat Stories (1984). For all intents and purposes, I considered the revised translation to be the final version.

In 2011, I received a request for a literal translation of the novella, a sentence-by-sentence literal translation to be used in a series of instructional materials covering a wide spectrum of languages, including Persian. The format was a presentation in which a sentence from the novella on the left side had the literal translation of it in English on the right side. I completed that translation within a year and sent to those who had requested it.

While preparing this literal translation, I noticed that I had left out some words and felt that I could add those to the translation. I also saw a number of inadequacies in the 1984 translation that I could improve upon. This third revised edition, therefore, is the result of incorporating elements from the new literal translation into the 1984 translation. Fortunately, the "Working Papers" web format allows such changes. I feel that we are now closer to a complete translation of *The Blind Owl*.

Iraj Bashiri
Minneapolis
2013

Sadeq Hedayat's Life

by
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Like that of most writers, Sadeq Hedayat's biography is not free from controversy. Indeed, increasingly numerous interpretations of his thoughts, words, and deeds have made a retrospection of his life especially complicated. To avoid the difficulties of monolithically describing an enigmatic figure like Hedayat, we shall essay his life as factually as we can. This account will include his travels, professional activities, and authorship. In subsequent studies, we shall describe his learning and whether he realized the aspirations of his life, given Iranian circumstances in the nineteen thirties and forties.

Hedayat was born in Tehran on February 17, 1903, to a northern Iranian aristocratic family.¹ He was named Sadeq after his paternal grandfather (Nayer al-Mulk). According to his brother, Mahmud, Sadeq was the center of the family's attention:

Throughout his childhood, all the members of the family, the children as well as the adults, loved my brother Sadeq. His childish antics and his sweet and pleasant speech amused us all. Around the age of five or six, well before the expected time, he became calm and collected. He no longer displayed any desire for childish pranks. Rather he became an introvert avoiding the company of other children.²

At the age of six, Hedayat was sent to the 'Elmiyeh School where he studied until the end of his elementary school years. Then, about 1915, He joined the Dar al-Fonun where he began to receive a Western education under the supervision of European teachers. Soon, however, he lost the desire to pursue a rigorous course of study. Mathematics and its allied subjects bored him. He opted for learning French instead. His family then registered him at the Saint Louis Academy.

In his late teens, Hedayat broke with his family; although he occupied a room in his ancestral home³ for most of the rest of his life in Iran, he did not participate in his

¹ For background information on Hedayat's formative years and his life and Dastgheyb, p. 13.

² Cf. Siavosh Danesh, *Sadeq's Omnibus: A Collection of Short Stories* (Tehran: Mehr-i Danesh Publications, 1971), p. 11.

family's social life. Nor did he seek, during his school days or later, to use his family's great influence to secure himself a lucrative position.

His "new" life at the Saint Louis Academy consisted of studying the lives of great men of the past and learning French and English. In order to receive current and pertinent Western literary materials, he began corresponding with relevant European literary circles. They, in turn, supplied Hedayat with the titles that he needed. "Knowledge of the Unknown" seems to have been his main interest at the time—the books he read were on the astrolabe, on the art of divining and about the occult (*ruh shenasi*). He also wrote. For example, he alone wrote the entire school newspaper, published it, and distributed it. To this paper he contributed such pieces as "Zaban-i Hal-i yek Olaq dar Vaqt-i Marg" ("The Silent Language of a Donkey at the Time of Death"). Some of these early writings which now exist only in the newspapers and journals of the time must be included in the new editions of *Neveshteha-i Parakandeh* (Scattered Notes). He graduated from the Saint Louis Academy in 1925-26.

Hedayat completed research on and published his first study of 'Umar Khayyam, entitled "Ruba'iyat-i Hakim 'Umar Khayyam" ("The Quatrains of the Philosopher 'Umar Khayyam"), in 1923 when he was twenty years of age. This was during the final years of the Qajar dynasty, the dynasty in which his family held high offices close to the court.

Hedayat's study of Khayyam led him to examine the philosophies of two other Aryans, Zoroaster and the Buddha. In 1924, he published his first impressions in a brief study entitled "Ensan va Heyvan," ("Man and Animal"). Like Zoroaster's "Gatha of the Ox Soul," "Ensan va Heyvan" is primarily a defense of the animal kingdom against the ravages of man. And as do the dictates of the Buddha, it condemns the killing of animals for any purpose. Personally convinced, later on Hedayat became a vegetarian himself and remained a vegetarian to the end of his life (see below).

Neither this study nor the piece on Khayyam has any claim to stylistic achievement or uniqueness. "Man and Animal" does, however, show promise. Sometime in 1925-26, Hedayat traveled as one of a group of students whom Reza Shah had ordered to study in Europe and to return to Iran as teachers. He was to study engineering in Belgium but soon gave it up. He was then sent to Paris to study architecture. This, too, he gave up for dentistry. It did not take long before it became clear that none of these profession-oriented courses would stimulate him as much as the study of the arts. Consequently, he abandoned all such studies to spend his time traveling and sightseeing. For the next four years Hedayat committed himself to artistic and literary studies and to writing. While in Paris in 1926 he published an article entitled "La Magie en Perse" ("Magic in Persia") in *Le Voile d'Isis*. Using an analysis similar to the 1923 piece on 'Umar Khayyam, Hedayat investigated the origins of magic in ancient Iran and included a somewhat detailed account of the Zoroastrian pantheon, principles, beliefs, and eschatology.

After a brief stay in Paris, Hedayat traveled to Besançon and roomed at a boarding house for a while. Upon his return to Paris in 1927 he tried to commit suicide by throwing himself into the river Marne; he was rescued. The reason for this

attempt at self-destruction is not known. In a letter dated May 3, 1928, to his brother he explains the incident cryptically:

I did something really crazy, but luckily it did not do me in!⁴

In Europe, Hedayat became extremely self-conscious, devoting a good part of his time to the resolution of the problem of life and death. To this end he studied the works of Rainer Maria Rilke, especially *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Rilke's adoration of death so intrigued Hedayat that the latter wrote his own commentary entitled "Marg" ("Death") in 1927. This two-page commentary was published in Berlin in the journal *Iranshahr*. Here Hedayat extolled death as if he were inexorably attracted to it. In the same year he also published "Favayed-i Giyah-khari" (The Advantages of Vegetarianism) in Berlin, again in *Iranshahr*. This longer study is considered by some to be merely a revised edition of the earlier "Man and Animal" but by others, including Hassan Qa'emian, who later collected and, in 1955, published Hedayat's *Nevsh-teha-i Parakandeh* (Scattered Notes), to be entirely new. Whether a revision or a new piece, the work indicates that Hedayat sustained his interest in the subject.

Little is known about Hedayat's life and activities in France before 1930, the year he returned to Tehran. We know, however, that he was on government scholarship, did not have to work to sustain himself, and had a good deal of time to think and possibly to write.

Upon his return to Tehran in 1930, Hedayat published his first collection of short stories, entitled *Zinda be-Gur* (Buried Alive). Four of the stories in this collection had been completed while Hedayat was still in Europe; the rest were completed in Tehran (see bibliography).

It was now that Hedayat's government scholarship was cut. He had free residence at his family's home, but he had to find a job to sustain himself. At the time, writing was not a profession in Iran whereby one could earn a living. He, therefore, sought employment outside the government in the National Bank of Iran. Here he worked until 1933.

In Tehran, Hedayat joined the ranks of the students who had returned from Europe and who were facing repression, censorship, and threats of incarceration for their criticism of the regime. Among these returnees there were many who shared and supported Hedayat's antimonarchical, progressive, and isolationist views on the course that Iran should take. Indeed, three such young men, Mojtaba Minovi, Mas'ud Farzad, and Bozorg Alavi convinced Hedayat to organize a group to reflect their opinions. Hedayat agreed and soon a group called the *Rab'a* (Foursome) was ridiculing such conservative literati as Taqizadeh, Hekmat, Qazvini, and Eqbal-i Ashtiyani. This latter group clung steadfastly to the Iranian traditional literary staple, poetry, and their main contributions to literature were annotated editions of medieval manuscripts.⁵ As expected, no sooner had the new group begun its activities than it

⁴ Mahmud Katira'i, *Ketab-i Sadeq-i Hedayat* (Sadeq Hedayat's Book) (Tehran: Ashrafi & Farzin Press, 1971), pp. 182-183.

⁵ Cf. Dastgheyb, p. 18.

was denounced by the conservatives as "extremist" and was duly shunned by the majority. Gradually, however, the *Rab'a* furthered a body of fresh talent consisting of those musicians, writers, and painters who did not wish to be identified with the conservatives. Many politicians who had been searching for a forum for self-expression also joined the group. Among these new members mention can be made of Mas'ud Razavi, [Parviz Natel Khanlari](#), [Sadeq Chubak](#), Abol Qasem Anjavi Shirazi, and Hassan Qa'emian.

After becoming acquainted with these talented individuals, Hedayat set about educating those who needed his help to improve their social standing. For instance, he assisted many in polishing their manuscripts for publication. At times he went as far as rewriting sections of their works to make them acceptable to certain editors. Thus, in Tehran, two rival literary groups came into existence. One was the traditional group, the members of which worked from desks and offices. The other was the *Rab'a* whose members gathered in downtown teahouses and cafes. About the activities of the *Rab'a*, Mojtaba Minovi says:

Each of us had his own, distinct personality Normally we gathered in teahouses and restaurants and, if drinking is not considered a deviation from righteousness, at times we even consumed liquids harder than water! One could even hear us debate issues critically and with utmost vigor. Often people blamed us—some even hated us—but their opposition could do us no more harm than to prevent us from playing chess We fought for freedom and we fought with zeal. Hedayat was the hub of our operation. At first we thought that by recognizing Hedayat's value as a literary figure, we were encouraging him, but soon it was obvious that he encouraged us. He was the center and we were the satellites revolving around him."⁶

The works that Hedayat produced between 1930 and 1937 fall into three categories: (a) reformist literature, in which the activities of the *Rab'a* are clearly discernible; (b) works of fiction, primarily short stories, novelettes, and a novella; and (c) research dealing with Iranian history and men of letters.

In the present study we shall not address the activities of the *Rab'a*. Works such as *Vagh Vagh-i Sahab* (Mr. Bow Wow), produced to disdain the handling of contemporary issues, need separate attention as satire and humor rather than as fiction per se. Besides, these are co-authored works and the other contributors, such as Mas'ud Farzad (in the case of *Vagh Vagh-i Sahab*), will have to be studied before the works can be justly assessed.

In the genre of fiction, Hedayat published his second volume of short stories, entitled *Se Qatreh Khun* (Three Drops of Blood), in 1932, followed by his third collection *Sayeh Rowshan* (Chiaroscuro) in 1933. Both volumes must have been received casually: there is no mention of them or of Hedayat in the journals of the time. After *Sayeh Rowshan*, Hedayat published a novelette entitled "'Alaviyeh

⁶ Translated from Qa'emian's translation of Komissarov and Rozenfeld's "Selections from the Works of Sadeq Hedayat," in Nazariyat, (1965), pp. 272-273.

Khanum" ("Madame 'Alaviyeh") in 1934. This piece gained some prominence, not so much as a story but as an example of Hedayat's dexterity in handling language. This positive development, deriving from almost half a decade of writing and experimenting with styles, boosted Hedayat's career.⁷

Hedayat's contributions to a better recognition of Iran's past and of her men of learning, like his contributions to the *Rab'a* materials, deserve a separate study. Suffice it to mention here that Hedayat spent a good deal of his time in 1934-35 re-examining the works of 'Umar Khayyam, especially the philosophy that the sage had incorporated into his *Ruba'iyyat* (Quatrains). The result of these investigations appeared in print in 1934-35 as a most concise, well organized, and informative introduction to the *Quatrains* entitled *Taraniha-i Khayyam* (Khayyam's Quatrains) and illustrated by the painter Darvish. In the same study Hedayat also examined Khayyam's link to Iran's Aryan past on the one hand and to the philosophy of the Buddha on the other. This latter occupied a good deal of Hedayat's time during this period. He even incorporated an entire story about a Buddhist commander into the *Sayeh Rowshan* or Chiaroscuro collection. We shall discuss Hedayat's involvement with Buddhism in a separate study.

While he was re-examining the philosophy of Khayyam, Hedayat worked at the Chamber of Commerce in Tehran. Office work he found tedious, repetitive, and unproductive. He preferred the more relaxed life of learning and investigation. He sums up his nonliterary career, saying:

I was not well-known in places where I worked. My bosses were always dissatisfied with my performance, and when I left them, they were always happy to see me go.⁸

Hedayat had many friends, both Iranian and European. He corresponded quite regularly and entertained his friends and associates either in his residence or in a nearby cafe. Among his associates, one who kept up with him almost to the last days is Jan Rypka. Their association began in Tehran in 1934-35 when the Czech writer was there learning about Persian literature. While discussing the current literary trends in the country, Parviz Natel Khanlari, Rypka's teacher at the time, had mentioned the works of Sadeq Hedayat. Rypka later examined one of Hedayat's stories and decided that he should see the Persian author. He records his first impressions as follows:

Hedayat was a slender kind of chap. He was of medium height and had an intelligent face. I shall always remember his simplicity, warm smile, polite wit as well as his pervasive and vivacious disposition. Whenever we met thereafter, my feelings towards him remained the same. He had an unchanging personality, one quite in tune with his works.⁹

⁷ For a discussion of the language in this and other stories, see Chapter seven.

⁸ D.S. Komissarov, "Sadeq-i Hedayat" ("Sadeq Hedayat"), trans. H. Qa-'emian, *Sukhan*, vol. 9, no. 1, (1959), p. 843.

⁹ Jan Rypka, "Yadbudha," ("Memories"), *Sukhan*, vol. 11, no. 5, (1966), p. 461.

At the time of this meeting Hedayat was working with the *Rab'a* and was, as mentioned earlier, studying the works of Khayyam. This effort completed, Hedayat had once again to seek a new place of employment. He joined the General Department of Constructions and remained there until 1936.

The gradual rise of the *Rab'a* and their fame as a staunch antimonarchical, anti-Islamic group frightened the government. In 1936, as the world faced the threat of another war, the *Rab'a* became a target for annihilation. So, in the same year, for purely political reasons, it was officially disbanded; some members were jailed and some went into hiding. Hedayat chose to seek a new forum in India. There, he hoped, he would polish his Pahlavi (Middle Persian), examine some of the Middle Persian documents first hand and contribute to a better understanding of Iran's past. More than anything, he wanted to delineate what is Persian and what is Arabic in the cultural mix usually known as Islamic. He also hoped that in India he could publish some of his works held back for fear of censorship and, more importantly, that he could write down some of his thoughts—thoughts that he had not dared put down in Iran for fear of search and seizure by Reza Shah's government.

Hedayat stayed in India until sometime in 1938-39. There he published *Buf-i Kur* ([The Blind Owl](#)) in mimeograph form and marked it "Not for sale in Iran." This work, Vincent Monteil believes, had already been completed by 1930 but withheld from publication because of Hedayat's fear of censorship and retaliation against himself and his family.¹⁰ Monteil's contention, as we shall see later, cannot be refuted, given the political situation. But would Hedayat have been able to write his masterpiece so early in his career, especially that the piece includes many sophisticated images exclusive to Tibetan Buddhism?

From Hedayat's letters to Jan Rypka it can be gathered that his stay in India was not happy. Impecunious as always, he had to live with a friend. He writes:

About six months ago I turned all my worldly possessions, valued at less than a grain of barley, into banknotes. Now, after suffering much hardship and overcoming many obstacles, I have succeeded in reaching far-off India where I may be able to earn a morsel of food and pray for the well being of my friends. My monetary situation is not noteworthy. For the present I am sponging off one of my friends..."¹¹

It was in India that Hedayat began seriously to question the merit of a literary career in Iranian circumstances. He felt that his career as a writer had gained him nothing but enemies. He even considered breaking away and entering a new venture. In a letter to Rypka he says:

For some time now I have been taking lessons in Pahlavi from Mr. Bahram Angalsaria. [He means T. D. Anklesaria, the famous Pahlavi teacher. By playing on the first part of Anklesaria's name, i.e., writing *Angal*—parasite—instead of

¹⁰ Pasteur Vallery Radot, "Yek Nevisande-i Nowmid: Sadeq-i Hedayat," ("Sadeq Hedayat: A Disappointed Author"), *Sukhan*, vol. 5, no. 5, (1955), p. 351.

¹¹ Rypka, pp. 463-464.

Ankle, he ridicules his own future status were he to become a learned Pahlavi teacher.] But I believe that this [i.e., learning Pahlavi] will benefit me neither here below nor in the hereafter ... Now I realize that all that I have done and do has been and is futile... Recently I have been entertaining the thought of going into business with some partner and opening a small shop. But we lack sufficient capital ... I sent you a copy of a story entitled "'Alaviyeh Khanum" ("Madame 'Alaviyeh") some time ago. Now I have a novella, several travelogues, and about twenty stories ready for publication. As of now, however, there seems to be no prospect of their being published at any time soon.¹²

This letter was posted (Bombay, January 29, 1937) about six months after Hedayat's departure from Iran. In it he refers to *The Blind Owl* as a manuscript. We do not hear much from Hedayat until he writes Rypka again (September 5, 1939). In this letter, posted in Tehran, he tells Rypka of his own situation and expresses concern at the takeover of the Czech writer's homeland and for the writer's well being.

With the help of Master Anklesaria, Hedayat made a number of translations from the Pahlavi into modern Persian. Of these *Zand-i Human Yasht* (Commentary on the Vohuman Hymn) and *Karnama-i Ardashir-i Babakan* (The Deeds of Ardashir of the House of Babak) were published in Tehran in 1944 and 1945, respectively.

In India, Hedayat traveled far and wide, especially after meeting Mirza Esma'il-i Shirazi, the *Wazir* of the *Maharajah* of Mysore. At the *Maharajah's* request, the *Wazir* invited Hedayat to his palace where Hedayat stayed for a fortnight. During this time he met many prominent Indian personalities, interviewed the *Maharajah* himself and attended many parties. When palace formalities eventually caught up with Hedayat and he decided to leave, the *Maharajah* even offered to pay his train ticket to Delhi. This Hedayat refused, even though he was in need of money."¹³

Hedayat, as you recall, fled to India to prevent the government from incarcerating him along with Bozorg Alavi and many others. But he also hoped, while there, to find a way to commit to writing some of the works that he had held in his mind waiting an opportune moment. In India, where he could write freely, without fear of censors or government confiscators, Hedayat poured out his frustrations, not so much for others to read as to free himself from their pressure. The result, of course, is *The Blind Owl*, a work noteworthy for its narrator's confession of his inadequacies and for its author's eulogy of figures who have shown perseverance and self-motivation—not to mention compassion, sensitivity, and humanity.

Upon his return from India, Hedayat found to his dismay that the situation in Iran had gone from bad to worse. Of the repressive rule and the stifling of the intellectuals in the early 1940s Parviz Natel Khanlari says:

For a three to four year period—until after the events of *Shahrivar* 1320 [August 1941]—there existed no literary magazine throughout Persia, except the

¹² Rypka, p. 464.

¹³ Katira'i, P. 132.

official magazine *Iran-i Imruz* (Contemporary Iran) whose editor was held in trust by the police ... "¹⁴

Nevertheless, Hedayat set about living as he had lived before his trip to India. Again he worked in the National Bank of Iran. Then in 1943 he joined the *Journal of Music* and, a year later, moved to the Faculty of Fine Arts. He worked in various capacities in the latter organization until the end of his stay in Iran.

By 1942, the shock waves of the Second World War had reached Iran. Reza Shah had abdicated in favor of his son and crown prince, Mohammad Reza. The change, which allowed a temporary relaxation of censorship, gave the artists and writers in the capital an opportunity to regroup and to assert their views on the socio-political and literary trends of the day. Hedayat seized this opportunity and published his *Blind Owl* piecemeal in the daily *Iran*.

Another major change on the socio-political and, eventually, literary scene at this time was the emergence of the *Tudeh* Party or the Party of the Masses. Beginning among the youth who had been imprisoned with veteran Communists, the *Tudeh* party emerged from Reza Shah's prisons with a set of plans and goals for the future of Iran. Supported by prominent men such as Ehsan Tabari and Bozorg Alavi, it soon found numerous followers in Tehran and spread to the northern cities. Hedayat, it seems, did not join the Party officially but kept in close contact with its upper echelon through Alavi and others.¹⁵ His major concern now was to redirect his own writing in a way that, rather than emphasizing philosophy, would concentrate on mirroring the realities of the time. He wanted for every Iranian an opportunity to read his material, but more than that, as with the *Rab'a* members, an opportunity to identify with his concerns. The more he delved into the insurmountable social problems of Iran, however, the more he became depressed and dejected. The atrocities of the monarchy, the clergy, the landed gentry, the nobility, and the intelligentsia were such that one could not see where even to begin to reform the society. To ward off the depression of genuine helplessness, Hedayat turned to drugs and alcohol. And to expose corruption he turned to a less symbolic, nevertheless allegorical, mode of writing. Hedayat the realist was born.

His last volume of short stories was entitled *Sag-i Velgard* (The Stray Dog). This collection, published in 1942, contained eight stories, written mostly before his trip to India. Later in 1944 he published a volume of humor and satire entitled *Velengari* (Tittle-Tattle). This volume, like *Mr. Bow Wow*, must be analyzed by a critic of satire. In the same year he paid a two-month visit to Tashkent in Soviet Uzbekistan, where he was intrigued by the abundance of manuscripts dealing with aspects of Persian literature, life, and culture. That year, he also published a rather simplistic but scathing story entitled "Ab-i Zendegi" ("The Water of Life"). The trip to Tashkent and the proletarian piece "The Water of Life" could be related to a possible

¹⁴ Kamshad, p. 183.

¹⁵ See Khalil Malaki, "Hedayat va Hezb-i Tudeh" ("Hedayat and the Tudeh Party") *Tehrانشahr*, no. 41, March 1952; rep. in 'Aqayed va Asar, (Tehran, 1954), pp. 17-23; see also Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 334.

affiliation with the *Tudeh* Party. Bozorg Alavi, an ex-*Rab'a* member, was now a prominent figure in the Party, but Hedayat's actual relation to the *Tudeh* remains unknown. "The Water of Life" was followed in 1945 by another direct attack on the top. This work, entitled *Haji Aqa* (Haji Aqa), surpassed "The Water of Life" in political daring. In it, Reza Shah was portrayed as a peddler, selling Iranian resources to foreign and domestic "customers" alike.

With the loosely constructed *Haji Aqa*, Hedayat's career as a short-story writer had come full circle. It had started with mild criticism in *Buried Alive*, it reached the height of self-analysis and artistic criticism in *The Blind Owl*, and was ending with abusive criticism in *Haji Aqa*. There now remained very little of the artistry and the creative force that had produced *The Blind Owl* and, more than anyone else, Hedayat himself was aware of that. Indeed, as we shall see later, as early as *The Blind Owl* Hedayat laments his lack of talent for the task. Now, however, he was caught on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, the translation of *The Blind Owl* into French had brought him international renown; on the other hand, drug addiction and alcohol had sapped his ability to present works comparable to *The Blind Owl* or even "The Stray Dog." The end of a creative career was in sight.

In the 1930s, as we saw earlier, he was happy to work with the *Rab'a* and to create a forum for self-expression of the youth of that time. In the forties he apparently channeled the same kind of enthusiasm into the direction of the *Tudeh* Party. He hoped that the Party would eventually set the Iranians free both from the bondage of the Pahlavis and of their Western overlords as well as from the snare of Islam. His last piece of fiction, "Farda" ("Tomorrow"), published in 1946, reveals an unusual degree of sympathy for the rank and file of the *Tudeh* Party.

In 1947, Hedayat participated in the first Congress of Iranian Writers. The Congress, which was sponsored by the Iranian and Russian cultural centers, was dominated by conservative writers; as the proceedings show, the ex-*Rab'a* members like Alavi and Hedayat had little room to assert themselves even though the latter was on the Board of Directors of the Congress.

Tup-i Morvari (The Pearl Cannon) is Hedayat's last satire. It was written in 1947 but remained unpublished until the early days of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Even when published then, it was immediately confiscated. As we shall see, in *The Pearl Cannon* Hedayat becomes even more abusive than in *Haji Aqa*. But Hedayat knew that mere abuse was not sufficient to impress his critics or his admirers. The frustration of loneliness, drugs, and his inability to produce the works his public expected drove him deeper and deeper into himself. Finally, in 1948, Hedayat exploded once more—but for the last time. In an Introduction written for his long-time friend and associate Hassan Qa'emian to *Goruh-i Mahkumin* (In the Penal Colony), a Persian translation of Franz Kafka's work, Hedayat examined man's role in the cosmos. He found man helpless against society, time, and other forces and as obedient to them as a dog. He lamented that man must die like a dog at their hand because, as he said, man does not have the ability to master these unknown forces. This is the last piece to be published during Hedayat's lifetime.

Hedayat, according to Vincent Monteil, loved music, especially the works of Beethoven and Tchaikovsky.¹⁶ Often he hummed the "Pathetique" as he went about his work. Hedayat also painted. There is not much left of his paintings, but what exists has been brought together by Hassan Qa'emian and published in *Dar Bare-i Zohur va 'Ala'em-i Zohur* (About Occultation and its Signs). Of Hedayat's paintings the most controversial is his depiction of a deer: some have assigned it little artistic value; others have seen in it the wave of the future."¹⁷

Hedayat was a recluse by nature. Rather than confront people and voice his opinion about contemporary socio-political issues, as was the case with Ali Shari'ati, for instance, he tried to influence the public through his essays and stories. To this end he organized his thoughts independently and on a high plane, avoiding the daily squabbles of his peers who jockeyed for better and more lucrative social positions. Hedayat so valued his freedom from social bonds that, although he had a number of female friends, he did not marry. Moreover, he saw little merit in the institution of marriage."¹⁸ It comes as a surprise to learn this about a person as dedicated to the principles of the Zoroastrian faith as was Hedayat. But once we remember that Hedayat's interest in these religions was motivated more by art than by faith, his equivocation becomes less puzzling. For instance, along with the teachings of Zoroaster, Hedayat followed the precepts of the Buddha. According to Buddhist traditions, marriage leads to birth and rebirth, a process that necessarily perpetuates misery, old age, and death. Hedayat thought the individual capable of undertaking to end rebirth and he followed this line of thought to the end of his life.

Until 1974 when the author of this book took exception to the critics who, since the 1940s, had attributed Hedayat's creative genius to drug addiction and lunacy, little was known about Hedayat's life and craft. Kamshad's study, published in 1966, although quite comprehensive, revealed little of the depth of Hedayat's knowledge of the world outside Iran, especially India. Since then, many scholars have elaborated on the assertions in the 1974 study and have contributed to our understanding of Hedayat.¹⁹ Moreover, it is now readily accepted that Hedayat was an excellent craftsman, dedicated equally to the craft of short-story writing and to the enhancement of Iranian culture and its liberation from foreign domination. The contention that his writings are hallucinations is encountering more and more resistance.

¹⁶ Vincent Monteil, "Dar Bare-i Sadeq-i Hedayat" ("About Sadeq Hedayat"), in *Nevisandegan*, trans. H. Qa'emian, (1967), p. 23. See also Dastgheyb, op. cit., p. 17.

¹⁷ For a discussion of Hedayat's paintings see Qa'emian and Hedayat's *Dar Bare-i Zohur* (1963).

¹⁸ Much has been written about the reasons for Hedayat's remaining a bachelor to the end. Among them are his desire to break away from Karma, desire to remain free, and homosexuality. Cf. Siavosh Danesh, pp. 23-24; see also Monteil, in *Nevisandegan*, p. 37.

¹⁹ For instance, most of the new articles in Hillmann's *Hedayat's 'The Blind Owl' Forty Years After* revolve around the assertions in *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*.

During the last years, Hedayat spent much of his time translating for pay the works of Kafka and other European writers (for a list of these works see Hassan Kamshad's bibliography as well as the bibliography at the end of this author's *Fiction of Sadeq Hedayat*). The dissolution of the *Tudeh* Party, alleged to have made an attempt on the life of the Shah in 1948, further drove Hedayat to translations and to mute forbearance of his fate. Years went by: 1949, 1950, 1951. He did not produce anything substantial. Nor did circumstances change, and Hedayat became increasingly restless. In a letter to Jamalzadeh, another longtime friend, he wrote:

The crux of the matter is that I am tired of it all. It has to do with my nerves. I pass the night in a situation much worse than that of a sentenced criminal. I am tired of life. Nothing gives me incentive or comfort and I cannot deceive myself any more. A gap has severed the line of communication between life, circumstances, etc., and me. We cannot understand each other any more.²⁰

Hedayat left Iran at the end of 1950. He went to Paris. There he visited some of his earlier haunts, an exercise that frustrated him further and drove him deeper into depression and self-destruction. His stay in Paris lasted four months. There, on April 4, 1951, he apparently gassed himself, ending a decade of misery, seclusion, addiction, fear, and loneliness.

Hedayat was a sensitive man. When leaving Iran, he could not bear to say goodbye to his aged parents at the airport. He carried a bag of dirt as a token of his devotion to his motherland; he also wrote a rather chilling note as a consolation to his friends and admirers:

We left and broke your heart. See you on Doomsday. That's all!²¹

The circumstances under which Hedayat lived his last years are not at all clear. For a number of reasons one could call his final days tragic. One tragedy is that although he had done his best to raise his readers' consciousness of their own plight, he had not succeeded even in familiarizing them with the major issues of the time. This realization, coming at a time when his physical and mental abilities could no longer support a new campaign (a short stint began with "The Water of Life" and ended with "Tomorrow"), distressed him more than anything else. Then, too, his critics were not treating him any better. Equally ignorant of the true issues before them, they were happy to question his sanity, to discredit his ability to write in Persian and, above all, to accuse him of creating a model of self-destruction for the youth of Iran. That the notes of a number of recent young suicides cited the influence of *The Blind Owl* further supported the critics.²² Moreover, the government and the court exerted a great deal of pressure. The latter could not ignore the tarnished image of the reigning monarch's father. Besides, in *The Pearl Cannon*, reproduced under

²⁰ Mahmood Nikooyeh, "Buf-i Kur: Per Lashez" ("The Blind Owl: Pere Lachaise"), *Rudaki*, no. 18 (1973), pp. 3-6.

²¹ Cf. Kamshad, p. 201; see also Qa'emian and Hedayat, *Dar Bare-i Zohur*, P. 11.

²² See, for instance, Mohammad Moqaddasi's attacks on Hedayat in *Afkar va 'Aqayed-i Buf-i Kuri* (Blind Owl-ish Thoughts and Ideas), and *Nasl-i Javan-i Iran va Buf-i Kur* (Iran's Youth and the Blind Owl). [See Bibliography.]

the assumed name of Hadi Sidaqat, Hedayat had insulted the royal family not by merely insinuating but indeed by openly stating much that could not be tolerated about even an ordinary household. Together these forces first tried to push Hedayat into their camp. Here he was supposed to live a happy life rather than, like Khayyam, to write for the ignorant and to die in contempt; but Hedayat refused their offer. They then decided to expel him from Iran.

And indeed life in Iran had become more and more unbearable, especially when many factions proclaimed their enmity, and first among them the court. Hedayat thus decided to go back to Paris. In Paris, however, he was beset by a totally different, though equally powerful, enemy. Old and irrepressible memories of his youth were returning and Hedayat had no option but to give them room to pass; but they would not leave. They became stronger and more telling. To this was added the fear of assassins who might have been engaged to forestall the return to Iran of someone who would spoil the delicate British machinations designed to secure the Shah's position and British interests. Thus, like Gholam and Zaghi, the insomniac characters in "Tomorrow," Hedayat could not sleep at night. In short he was being hounded by the very concerns from which he had tried to forge a solution for the misery of Iranians. Now, having failed to affect the situation, these intentions were coming back to settle on Hedayat's own threshold. By this time, however, they had grown into concrete fears such as persecution, execution, and extermination. "The Message of Kafka" clearly underscores the initial impact of these disturbing thoughts on the helpless author.

The circumstances in which Hedayat lived also obscure the cause of his death. Was it suicide or homicide? Here we shall discuss both possibilities but we shall not commit ourselves to either. Before an answer can be given, we shall need to research more into the circumstances of Hedayat's death, on the one hand, his suicidal tendency and, on the other hand, his antimonarchical and anticlerical tendencies.

Certain facts suggest that, despite his moralistic views opposing an active political stand, Hedayat had been a thorn on the side of the Pahlavi regime. He had openly criticized foreign intervention in Iranian affairs and had criticized both the regime and those factions in Iran that condoned the protection of foreign interest. In that the regime prevented its malaise about Hedayat's works from filtering down to Hedayat's readers, it could also cloak any measures it wished to take to punish the writer. The Iranians having read and heard the official reception of Hedayat's works could hardly doubt the veracity of an allegation of suicide. Before Hedayat, Ahmad Kasravi had treated the monarchy and the clergy in similar ways and had paid for it. This, however, is one side of the story. The other side has to do with Hedayat himself.

There is no doubt that Hedayat tried to take his own life in 1927 when he was in France. There is also no doubt that he was attracted to death, the afterlife, the existence of a soul and similar subjects. More importantly, there is no question that in later life, whenever he was depressed, he did think of suicide; he even talked about it openly in letters to his close friends.²³

²³ See Hedayat's letters in "Nameha-i Sadeq-i Hedayat" ("The Letters of Sadeq Hedayat"), *Sukhan*, vol. 6, no. 3 (1953), pp. 199-209. See also Seyyed

Our examination of Hedayat's fiction shows that the author's life can be divided into two distinct periods. One, before *The Blind Owl*, though it begins with an attempt at self-destruction, is a hopeful and constructive period. During this time, Hedayat produces some of the most memorable characters in Persian fiction. Characters like Haji Murad, Don Juan of Karaj, and Dash Akol uniquely portray Iran's transition from a traditional society into a brave new 20th century Iran. The other, his post-*Owl* period, is one in which he is cognizant of his own inherent inadequacies, inadequacies that he shares with the rest of humanity, superhuman inadequacies that he cannot overcome. To subdue his frustration he takes to drinking and drugs. Often he becomes depressed; to soothe his nerves he writes abusive pieces addressing issues that he had addressed earlier but had failed to influence.

Hedayat's death then could well have been the result of a difficult moment, such as the 1927 incident, or a well-thought-out plan to leave this world before old age sets in. In any event, the circumstances of Hedayat's death, as far as his literary career is concerned, are academic. It is clear that by 1951 Hedayat had neither the inclination nor the ability to create works like *The Blind Owl*. By the same token, his hours of desperation had made his pen a most lethal weapon against the monarchy and the clergy. These issues, the present author believes, are the predominant factors in deciding whether Hedayat's death was a homicide or a suicide?

Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh, 'Dargozasht-i Hedayat' ("Hedayat's Death"), *Sukhan*, vol. 25, no. 10 (1976), pp. 1016-1023. A list of Hedayat's letters appears at the end of the present volume.

The Blind Owl

by
Sadeq Hedayat



Translated
By
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There are certain sores in life that, like a canker, gnaw at the soul in solitude and diminish it. Since generally it is the custom to attribute these incredible sufferings to the realm of rare and singular accidents and happenings, it is not possible to speak about them to others. If one does talk or write about them, people pretend to accept them with sarcastic remarks and dubious smiles. In reality, however, they follow prevalent beliefs and their own ideas about them. The reason is that these pains do not have a remedy. The only remedy is forgetfulness induced by wine, or artificial sleep induced by opium and other narcotics. Unfortunately, the effect of these drugs is transitory. After a while, instead of soothing, they add to the pain.

Will it be possible that some day someone would penetrate the secret of these supernatural happenings and recognize these reflections of the shadow of the soul that manifest themselves in a coma-like limbo between sleep and wakefulness?

I shall describe one of these incidents that I experienced personally. That incident shocked me so much that I shall never forget it; its ominous scar will poison my entire life from beginning to the end of eternity where no man's understanding can fathom. Did I say poisoned? Well, I meant it scathed me and I will carry its scar for the remainder of my mortal life.

I shall try to put down everything that I recall, everything about the events and their interrelationship remaining in my memory. Perhaps by doing so I can make some sense out of them. No. I want to become sure. I want to personally believe it. It is immaterial whether others believe me or not. To put it plainly, I am afraid that I may die tomorrow without knowing myself. My life experiences have taught me that a frightful chasm separates me from the others. The same experiences also have taught me when to remain silent and keep my thoughts to myself. Nevertheless, I have decided that I should write. That I should introduce myself to my shadow—the stooped shadow on the wall that voraciously swallows all that I put down. It is for him that I am making this experiment to see if we can know each other better. Since the time when I severed my ties with others, I want to know myself better.

Absurd thoughts! Fine. Yet these thoughts torture me more than any reality. Are not these people who resemble me, who seemingly share my needs, whims and desires gathered here to deceive me? Are they not shadows brought into existence to mock and beguile me? Are not all my feelings, observations, and calculations

imaginary and quite different from reality? I write only for the benefit of my shadow on the wall. I need to introduce myself to it.

* * *

I thought in this base world, full of poverty and misery, for the first time in my life, a ray of sunshine shone on my life. But alas, instead of a sunbeam it was a transient beam, a shooting star that appeared to me in the likeness of a woman or an angel. In the light of that moment that lasted about a second, I witnessed all my life's misfortunes, and discovered their magnitude and grandeur. Then that beam of light disappeared into the dark abyss for which it was destined. No. I could not keep that transient beam for myself.

It was three months, no, two months and four days ago that I lost her. However, the memory of her enchanting eyes, no, the attractive malice of her eyes, has remained in my life forever. How could I forget someone who is so pertinent to my life?

No, I will not call her by name. She, with that ethereal body, slim and misty, with those two large, wonder stricken, sparkling eyes behind which my life gradually and painfully burned and melted away, no longer belonged to this base, fierce world. No, I shall not disgrace her name with earthly things.

After seeing her, I withdrew from the circle of people. I completely abandoned the company of the fools and the fortunate. Then, for forgetfulness, I took refuge in wine and opium. I have passed, and continue to pass, my life within the four walls of my room. My whole life is confined to four walls.

My daily occupation was painting designs on pen-case covers; my entire time was dedicated to the painting of designs on pen-case covers and consumption of alcohol and opium. I had chosen the ridiculous profession of pen-case-cover painting to confuse myself, to kill the time.

By a lucky chance my house is located outside the city, in a quiet and restful spot, away from the hustle and bustle of people's lives. Its boundaries are well defined and ruins surround it. Between here and the ditch there are some low mud-brick houses; the city begins beyond the ditch. I wonder what madman, or what ill-disposed architect has built this house in forgotten times. The strange thing is that when I close my eyes, all its nooks and crannies materialize before my eyes, and I feel its pressure on my shoulders. It is a house that could have been painted on ancient pen-cases.

I must write about all these events to assure myself that they are not figments of my imagination. I must explain them to my shadow on the wall. To begin with, before this incident, there was only one thing that cheered me up. Within the confine of the four walls of my room I painted designs on pen-case covers, and I passed the time with this ridiculous amusement. After I saw those two eyes, and after I saw her, all work and movement completely lost their inherent value, purport, and meaning. The strange and incredible thing is that, for some reason, from the beginning, all my painted scenes shared the same theme and structure. I drew a cypress tree under which an old man, wrapped in a cloak, hunching his shoulders in the manner of the

Indian *yogis*,²⁴ sat in a squatting position. He wore a *shalma*²⁵ around his head, and put the index finger of his left hand on his lips as a sign of astonishment. Opposite him a girl, wearing a long, black dress, was bending to offer him a lily. She was bending because a brook intervened between them. Had I seen this image before, or was it inspired to me in a dream? I cannot tell. I only know that this scene and this subject were at the center of my painting. My hand drew this scene involuntarily. Even more incredible was that there was demand for these paintings. I routinely sent some to India in care of my uncle. He sold them and sent the money to me.

I do not recall correctly. This picture appeared to me to be far and near at the same time. Now I recall an incident. I said I must write down my recollections. This has nothing to do with that. These notes were taken much later. They are not related to the subject at hand. The major thing is that I gave up painting designs on pen-case covers in order to devote my entire time to writing. Two months ago, no two months and four days ago. It was the thirteenth day of *Farvardin*.²⁶ Everybody had rushed to the countryside. In order to paint undisturbed, I had shut the window of my room. Around sunset, when I was busy painting, suddenly, the door opened and my uncle entered—that is to say, he said he was my uncle. I had never seen him before this. He had been on a distant journey from his early youth. He was a ship captain of sorts. I thought he had some mercantile business with me. He was a merchant as well as a captain. In any event, my uncle was a stooped old man. He wore an Indian *shalma* around his head and a yellow, torn cloak over his shoulders. A scarf covered his head and face. You could see his hairy chest through his open collar and you could count the hairs of his thin beard through his scarf. Through his red, fistulous eyelids and leprous lip, he bore a distant and ridiculous resemblance to me, as if my reflection had fallen on a magic mirror. I had always envisaged my father as looking something like that.

Upon entering, he retired to the corner of the room and sat there in a squatting position. Thinking that I should prepare something and offer it to him, I lit a light and entered the closet of my room. I searched everywhere for something suitable for an old man to eat. I did this knowing well that I didn't have anything in the house. I had finished all the opium and wine. Suddenly the built-in niche below the ceiling caught my eye. As if inspired, I recalled an ancient wine flask that I had inherited. Its wine could have been made on the occasion of my birth. The wine flask was in the niche. I had totally forgotten that such a thing existed in the house. To reach the niche, I put a nearby stool under my feet. Then, as I picked up the wine flask, through the air inlet in the niche, the following scene attracted my attention: In the field behind my room a bent, stooped old man was squatting under a cypress tree,

²⁴ A person who is a master of *yoga*, disciplined mental, and spiritual practices that originated in ancient India

²⁵ A turban worn by some Indian *yogis*.

²⁶ The first month of the Persian year (begins March 21). The 13th of *Farvardin* is called *Sizdahbedar*. It is the last day of a 13 days holiday. On this day, people leave their homes and go to the countryside partly for a picnic and partly to ward off any evil that might befall them on this ominous day. For further details, see <http://www.angelfire.com/rnb/bashiri/Nowruz/NowRuz.html>.

and a young girl, no, a heavenly angel, stood in front of him. She was bending forward to give the old man a black lily, with her right hand. The old man was chewing on the index finger of his left hand.

Although the girl was standing exactly opposite me, she was not paying any attention to what was happening around her. She was looking without seeing anything. An unconscious, involuntary smile had dried to the corner of her lips; it seemed as though she was thinking of an absent person. It was from the stool that I saw her dreadful charming eyes, eyes that, at the same time, were enchanting and reproachful. It was to the shining and dreadful balls of those worried, threatening and inviting eyes that my single beam of life was attracted, and it was to the depth of those same eyes that my life was drawn and in them was annihilated. This attractive mirror, in an unthinkable way to any human being, drew my whole being to itself. Her curved Turkmen eyes with their intoxicating supernatural beam frightened as well as attracted. She seemed to have witnessed, with those eyes, supernatural happenings beyond those any mortal could witness. Her cheeks were high, her forehead wide, her eyebrows thin and connected, and her lips meaty and half open. Her lips seemed to have just finished a long, warm kiss with which they were not yet satisfied. A tress of her disheveled, uncontrolled black hair that framed her silvery face was stuck on her temple. The tenderness of her limbs and the heedlessness of her ethereal movements bespoke her transient nature. Only dancing girls at Indian temples matched her harmonious gait.

Her placid form and sorrowful happiness distinguished her from normal human beings. Her beauty was not normal at all. To me she looked like images in opium hallucinations and in me induced the heated love of the mandrake.²⁷ She was slim and tall with a symmetrical line dividing her shoulders, arms, breasts, buttocks and shins. She was like the female mandrake that had been separated from the embrace of her mate.

She wore a wrinkled, black dress that, fitting her well, stuck to her body. When I saw her, she was about to jump over the brook that separated her from the old man. She failed. The old man laughed hysterically. He had a dry and repulsive laughter, a hybrid mocking laughter that made one's hair stand on end. Because his facial expression did not change, the resonance of his laughter emerged from the depth of a hollow.

Wine flask in hand and out of fright, I jumped off the stool. I was shaking involuntarily. It was a shiver in which fright and enjoyment were intermingled. I felt as if I had jumped up from a pleasantly nightmarish dream. I rested the wine flask on the floor and held my head between my hands. For how many minutes or hours? I don't know. When I came to, I picked up the wine flask and went back to my room. My uncle had left, and he had left the door ajar, like the open mouth of a corpse. The ring of the old man's dry laughter echoed in my ears.

It was getting dark and the lamp was smoking. The effect of the pleasant and frightful shiver that I had felt, however, was not wearing off. From this moment my life's direction changed. One glance was sufficient to bring about all that change.

²⁷ A poisonous plant of the nightshade family, with a thick, forked stem suggesting the human form.

That heavenly angel, that ethereal girl, touched me more deeply than any human being can comprehend.

I was no longer in full control of myself. Besides, it seemed that I knew her name from before. I was fully familiar with the evil in her eyes, with her color, scent and movements. It was as though my soul, in the life before this, in the world of imagination, had bordered on her soul and that both souls, of the same essence and substance, were destined for union. I must have lived a life very close to hers. I had no desire at all to touch her. I was satisfied with just the invisible beams that emanated from our bodies and mingled together. Isn't this the same as the terrifying experience shared by two lovers who feel they had known each other before and that, in the past, a mysterious relationship had existed between them? In this base world I wanted her love, and her love alone. Was it possible that someone else could affect me? Unfortunately, the dry, repulsive and ominous laughter of the old man tore our bonds asunder.

This thought preoccupied me throughout the night. Several times I decided to go to the hole in the wall and look, but the fear of the old man's laughter prevented me. The next day, the same thought preoccupied me. Could I give up seeing her entirely? Eventually, the day after that, with much fear and trepidation, I decided to put the wine flask back in its place. But, upon pushing aside the curtain that covered the entrance to the closet, I was confronted with a dark, black wall, a wall as black as the darkness that permeates my entire life. There was no crevice or hole or opening to the outside. The square hole in the wall had become a part of the wall, as if it never existed. I stood on the stool and examined the wall. But, no matter how hard I struck my fists against the wall and listened, and no matter how carefully I scrutinized the wall in the light of the lamp, I could not find a trace for a hole. My blows had little effect on the thick, massive wall that now appeared like a wall made of lead.

Could I give all this up permanently? How could I? Everything was out of my control. Like a soul under torture, no matter how much I waited, guarded, or searched for her, it was all to no avail. Like the murderer who returns to the scene of his crime, or like a chicken with its head cut off, I walked all around our house and the neighborhood, not for one or two days, but for two months and four days. I walked around our house so many times that I could identify every rock and pebble. I could not find even a trace of the cypress tree, the stream of water, or the people I had seen. For nights on end I knelt on the ground in the moonlight, wept and sought redress from the trees, the stones, and the moon that she might have looked at, but I could not find any sign of her. On the contrary, I realized that all those activities were useless. She was not of this world. The water with which she washed her hair must have had a unique and unknown source, perhaps in a magical cave. The warp and woof of her dress was not made of ordinary wool or cotton, or sewn by corporeal hands, like ordinary human hands. She was a distinguished creature. I realized that the lilies she carried also were not ordinary lilies. I finally concluded that if she were to wash her face in ordinary water, her face would wither and if she were to pluck ordinary lilies with her long and delicate fingers, her fingers would wither, just like ordinary flower petals.

I learned all these things. I found this girl, or should I say this angel, to be a source of astonishment and indescribable inspiration for me. Her delicate and

intangible substance created a sense of worship in me. I was certain that the gaze of a stranger, or of an ordinary person, would make her look shabby and withered.

Since the time when I lost her, since when a heavy wall, a solid, moist dam as heavy as lead, was created between her and me, my life has become useless and confounded. In spite of her kind look and the deep pleasure that I drew from seeing her, she did not have any answers for me. She did not see me. Nevertheless, I needed those eyes. A single glance from her was sufficient to solve all my philosophical difficulties and theological enigmas. After one glance from her, there would remain no mystery or secret for me.

From this time on, I drank more, and smoked more opium. But alas, despite these remedies for hopelessness, remedies meant to paralyze and numb my thoughts, remedies meant to make me forget thinking about her, day by day, hour by hour, even minute by minute her figure and her face materialized in my thought stronger and in a more meaningful form. How could I forget? Whether my eyes were open or closed, whether I was asleep or awake, she was in front of me. Through the hole in the closet of my room—as through a hole in the night that enshrouds thought and logic—through the square hole that opened to the outside, she was constantly in front of me.

* * *

I was not allowed to rest. How could I rest? I formed the habit of taking promenades quite late—at sunset. For some reason I felt compelled to find the stream of water, the cypress tree, and the lily plant. I had become accustomed to these promenades in the same way that I had become addicted to opium; it was as though some force compelled me to them. All the time along the way I thought only about her, recalling my initial glimpse of her. I wanted to find the place where I had seen her on the Thirteenth day of *Farvardin*. If I could find that place, and if I could sit under that cypress tree, I was sure some tranquility would appear in my life. But, alas, there was nothing there but refuse, hot sand, the ribcage of a horse, and a dog sniffing the top of the trash. Had I really met her? Never. I only saw her stealthily through a hole, through an ill-fated hole in the closet of my room. I was like a hungry dog that sniffs and searches the garbage. When people appear with more trash, he runs away and, out of fear, hides himself. Later he returns to seek his favorite pieces in the new trash. I was in a similar situation, only for me the hole had been blocked up. To me she was a fresh and tender bouquet of flowers thrown on top of a trash pile.

The last evening that, like other evenings, I went on a walk, it was dark and it felt like rain. Everything was covered in a thick mist. In the rainy weather that decreases the sharpness of colors, and diminishes the rudeness of the lines of objects, I felt a particular freedom and relaxation, as though the raindrops washed my black thoughts away. During this night, that which should not happen came to pass. I walked about involuntarily. But during these lonesome hours, during those minutes the duration of which I cannot recall exactly, in spite of the fog, her vague and shocking face—like the picture on pen-case covers emerging from behind the clouds and smoke—her

motionless, expressionless face continued to materialize before my eyes much more powerfully than ever before.

I think it was quite late at night when I returned. A dense fog was hanging in the air, so thick that I could not see in front of my feet clearly. But out of habit, and through a special sense that was awakened in me, when I arrived at my doorstep, I perceived a black-clad figure, the figure of a woman, sitting on the platform of my house.

I struck a match to find the keyhole, but my eyes, involuntarily, caught sight of the black-clad figure, and I recognized the two oblique eyes—two large, black eyes amid a silvery thin face—the same eyes that stared at a man's face without actually seeing. Even if I had not seen her before, I would have recognized her. No. I was not mistaken. This black-clad figure was she. Astounded and bewildered, I stood petrified in my place. I felt like someone who is dreaming, and who knows that he is asleep, but who cannot wake up when he wants to. The match, having burnt itself and my fingers, brought me to reality. I turned the key, opened the door, and drew myself aside. Like someone familiar with the way, she got off the platform and crossed the dark corridor. She opened the door of my room and entered. I followed her in. I lit the lamp quickly and saw that she had already retired to my bed and was lying on it. Her face was in the shade. I did not know whether she could see me or hear me. Her outward appearance showed no trace of either fear, or of a desire to resist me. It seemed as though she had involuntarily come to my house.

Was she sick? Had she lost her way? She had come here like a sleepwalker, quite unconsciously. The mental state I experienced at this moment is beyond the imagination of any living being. I felt a kind of pleasant, yet indescribable, pain. No. I was not mistaken. That lady, and this girl, who unceremoniously and without uttering a word had entered my room were the same person. I had always imagined our first meeting to happen like this. For me, this state was like an endless, deep sleep; one has to be in a very deep sleep to have such a dream. The silence that weighed on me was like an eternal life. It is hard to speak at the beginning, or at the end of eternity.

To me she was a woman who had something supernatural about her. Her face reminded me so strongly of the confounding oblivion of other people's faces that, upon seeing her, my whole body began to shake, and my knees gave way. I saw the whole painful story of my life behind her large eyes, her extremely large eyes, wet and glistening eyes, like black diamond balls thrown into tears. In her eyes, in her black eyes, I found the eternal night, the dense darkness that I had been searching for. I plunged into its awesome, enchanting darkness. I felt as though some force was being extracted from my being; the ground shook underneath my feet. At that moment, If I had fallen to the ground, I would have drawn an indescribable pleasure from that fall.

My heart stopped. Fearing that my breath might make her disappear, as if she were a piece of cloud or a puff of smoke, I restrained myself from breathing. Her silence was like a miracle. It was as though a glass wall intervened between us. This Moment, this hour, this eternity was choking me. Her weary eyes, as if witnessing something extraordinary that others could not see—as if seeing death—were gradually closing. Eventually, her eyelids closed. The intensity of the moment shook

me. I felt like a drowning man who was coming to the surface for air. With the edge of my sleeve, I wiped the perspiration on my forehead.

Her face had the same calm and motionless expression but it looked smaller and thinner. As she reclined she was chewing on the index finger of her left hand. Her face was the color of silver, and through her tightly fit, thin, black garment one could see the outline of her legs, arms, the two breasts, and all the rest of her body.

Since her eyes were closed, I bent over her to see her better. But no matter how closely I observed her, she seemed to be quite distant from me. Suddenly I realized that I was totally uninformed about the secrets of her heart, and that no relationship existed between the two of us. I wanted to say something, but I was afraid that her ears, accustomed to distant, soft and heavenly music might become hateful of my voice.

It occurred to me that she might be hungry or thirsty. Although I knew there was nothing to be found in the house, I entered my closet to find something for her. Then, as if inspired, I recalled that I had a flask of old wine that I had inherited from my father, up in the niche. I climbed the stool and brought the flask down. Tiptoeing carefully, I went to the side of the bed. She was sleeping like a tired, exhausted child. She was in a deep sleep and her long eyelashes, like velvet, were closed. I took the cap off the flask and gently, through her locked teeth, poured a cup of wine down her throat.

For the first time, because those eyes were closed, a feeling of sudden tranquility appeared in my life. I felt the canker that tortured me, and the nightmare that pressed my insides with its iron claws, had somewhat subsided. I pulled my chair closer to her bed and stared at her face. What a childish face, and what a strange disposition! Was it possible that this woman, this girl, or this angel of torture (because otherwise, I didn't know what to call her), was it possible that she could have a double life? How could she be so quiet, and so unceremonious at the same time?

Now I could feel the warmth of her body and smell the damp scent that rose from her heavy, black locks. My hand was not under my control, yet I raised it, and with it, caressed a lock of her hair, the lock that was always on her temple. Then I sank my fingers in her locks. Her hair was cold and damp, cold, absolutely cold. It was as though she had died several days ago. I was not mistaken. She was dead. I passed my hand in front of her chest and placed it on her breast and her heart. There was no sign of a heartbeat. I brought the mirror and held it in front of her nose. There was not the slightest trace of life in her...

Intending to make her warm with the heat of my own body, to give her my warmth and receive the coldness of death from her, hoping that in this way I could possibly blow my own soul into her body, I took off my clothes, climbed onto the bed and lay down beside her. Like the male and female mandrake, we became stuck to each other. To be exact, her body was like the body of the female mandrake severed from its mate, and it had the same burning passion of the mandrake. Her mouth was acrid and somewhat bitter; it tasted like the bitter end of a cucumber. Her whole body had become cold, as cold as hailstones. I felt my blood freezing in my veins, and the cold penetrating deep into my heart. Once I saw that all my efforts were useless, I climbed off the bed and put my clothes on. No. It was true. She had

come here to my room, to my bed, and surrendered her body to me. She gave me her body, and she gave me her soul—both!

When she was still alive and her eyes were brimful with life, only the memory of her eyes tortured me; but now, devoid of feeling, motionless, and cold, with her eyes already closed, she surrendered herself to me. With closed eyes!

This was the same creature that had poisoned my entire life; or maybe my life was originally susceptible to being poisoned, and I could not have had any other life than a poisoned life. Now here in my room she gave me her body and her shadow. Slowly, her brittle, transient soul, with no relationship to the world of corporeal beings, left her black, wrinkled dress—the body that tortured her—and joined the world of the wandering shadows. Perhaps it took my shadow with it as well. Her body devoid of any feeling or motion, lied there. Her soft, lax muscles, her veins, tendons and bones waited to rot. A delicious feast for the worms and rats that dwell under the ground!

In this adversity-stricken, miserable room, itself a grave, amidst the darkness of the eternal night that surrounded me, and sank into the walls, I had to pass a long, dark, cold, and endless night beside a corpse—beside her corpse. It occurred to me that from the beginning to the end of eternity, since the beginning of my creation, a dead body, a cold, motionless corpse without any feeling had shared my dark room with me.

At this moment my thoughts froze. A unique, singular life was created in me that was connected to all the existences that surrounded me and all the shadows that trembled around me. I felt an inseparable, deep relation with the world, with the movement of all creatures, and with nature. The current of some mind-disturbing, agitating stream was connecting the elements of my being with nature. No thought or image was unnatural for me. I could understand the secrets of ancient paintings, the mysteries in difficult, philosophical treatises, and the eternal foolishness of forms and norms. I had become a part of the revolution of the earth and the planets, participating in the growth of plants and the activities of the animal kingdom. Past and future, far and near, were at one with me and shared my sentient life.

At such times everyone takes refuge in a strong habit, or in a scruple that he has developed in his life: the drunkard becomes drunk, the writer writes, the stone-cutter cuts stones, each giving vent to his anxiety and anger by escaping into the strong stimulant of his own life. It is also in moments like these that a real artist, using his talent, creates a masterpiece. But I, I who was devoid of talent, a poor painter of designs on pen-case covers, what could I do? With these dry, glistening and lifeless pictures, all of which were the same, as models, what could I paint that could become a masterpiece? Yet, I felt an excessive upsurge of talent and warmth in my whole being, a special agitation and stimulus. I wanted to draw those eyes, which were now closed forever, on a piece of paper, and keep them for myself. This sensation forced me to action, that is, I did not do this voluntarily—one does not when one is imprisoned with a corpse. This very thought filled me with a special feeling of joy.

Eventually, I extinguished the lamp that was giving off smoke, brought two candlesticks and lit them over her head. Against the flickering light of the candles, her face assumed more repose, and in the interplay of the light and darkness in the

room, it acquired a mysterious, ethereal air. I took some paper along with my working tools and went to the side of her bed—this was her bed now. I wanted to, without being disturbed, copy this form that was condemned to a slow and very gradual disintegration, this form that seemed to be devoid of any motion and expression. I wanted to record its fundamental lines on paper. I wanted to choose from this face those lines that affected me. A painting, no matter how sketchy and simple, must have an impact, and it must have soul. But I, who was accustomed to printed designs on pen-case covers, now had to make myself think. I had to materialize in front of me my own fancy, that is, that aspect of her face that had control over me. I wanted to look at her face once, close my eyes, and then draw on the paper those lines of her face that I would choose. In this way, perhaps, using my own intellect, I could find a respite for my tortured soul. In short, I took refuge in the world of lines and shapes.

This subject had a special relevance to my dead style of painting—painting with a corpse as a model. It is a fact. I was a painter of corpses. But the eyes, her closed eyes—did I need to see them again? Was not their imprint on my thought and mind tangible enough?

I do not recall exactly how many times, until near morning, I copied her face. I know that none of my reproductions was satisfactory. I tore them up as soon as I finished painting them. I did not feel tired because of doing this, nor did I feel the passage of time.

It was about daybreak. A dull light had entered my room through the windowpanes. I was busy working on a picture that, in my own opinion, was better than the rest. But for the eyes! The eyes that had assumed a reproachful expression as if I had committed some unforgivable sin—I could not put those eyes down on paper. All the life and recollection of those eyes disappeared from my memory. My efforts were useless. No matter how intensely I looked at her face, I could not recall its expression. Then, suddenly, I observed that her cheeks reddened, assuming a liver-red color, like the color of the meat in front of a butcher shop. She came to life. Her exceedingly wide and astonished eyes, eyes in which all the brightness of life gathered and glimmered in a sickly light; her sick, reproachful eyes very slowly opened and looked at my face. This was the first time that she was aware of my presence. She looked at me and, once again, her eyes gradually closed. Although this event did not take more than a moment, it gave me enough time to capture the expression of her eyes and put it on paper. I drew this expression with the sharp point of the brush and, this time, I did not tear up the picture.

I got up from where I was painting, walked slowly to her and stood near her. First I thought she was alive, that she had come back to life, and that my love had invested my spirit with her body; but, as I drew near, I sensed the smell of a dead body—the smell of a decomposed corpse. Small worms were wiggling on her body and, in the light of the candle, two flies, the color of golden bees, circled her. If she were completely dead, then how did her eyes open? Was this a dream, or was it happening in real life? I don't know.

I do not wish anyone to ask why, but my main concern was her face, no, her eyes, which now were in my possession. I had the essence of her eyes on paper. Her body, a body condemned to destruction, to nourishing the worms and rats that dwell

under the ground, was no longer of any use to me. From now on she was under my control; I was no longer her vassal. Every minute that I so desired, I could look at her eyes. With utmost care, I took the painting and put it in my tin can, where I kept my profits, and I hid the tin can in the closet of my room.

The night was moving on, tiptoeing away stealthily. It seemed that it had recovered sufficiently from its weariness. Soft, distant sounds, like the sound of a fowl or a passing bird's dream or perhaps the whisper of the growth of the plants, could be sensed. The pale stars were disappearing behind the mass of clouds. I felt the gentle breath of the morning on my face and, at the same time I heard the crow of a rooster from afar.

What could I do with her body? It had already started to decompose. First it occurred to me to bury her in my room; then I thought of taking her out and throwing her in a certain well around which black lilies have grown. But keeping all these plots away from other people entailed much thought, labor, and dexterity. Furthermore, since I did not wish any stranger to look at her, I had to do all this alone and with my own hands. I was not thinking of myself, because, after her, what else was there in living? But as far as she was concerned, no ordinary human being, no one except myself, should ever glance at her corpse. She came to my room, and she surrendered her cold body and her shadow to me, in order to prevent others from seeing her; in order not to become defiled by the looks of any strangers. Finally a thought crossed my mind: it was to chop her body up and put it in a suitcase—my old suitcase—then carry the suitcase to a distant place, far away from people's eyes, and bury it there.

This time I no longer hesitated. I fetched a bone-handled knife that I kept in the closet and, very carefully, tore the thin black dress that, like a spider's web, had imprisoned her within itself; or should I say, I tore the only thing that covered her body. It seemed to me that she had grown taller. Then I severed her head. Drops of cold, coagulated blood poured out of her throat. I cut off her arms and legs and arranged her whole body, torso and limbs, in the suitcase. Then I covered her body with her black dress. Finally, I locked the suitcase and put the key in my pocket. When the job was complete, I felt relieved. I lifted the suitcase and weighed it: it was heavy. Never before had I felt so fatigued. I realized that I would never be able to carry that suitcase out by myself.

Once again, it was cloudy and a light rain was falling. I left the room to look for someone who would help me carry the suitcase away. Not a soul was to be seen anywhere near there. When I paid more attention, a little farther away from where I was, through the fog, I saw an old man with hunched shoulders. He was sitting under a cypress tree. I could not see his face over which he had wrapped a wide scarf. Slowly I approached him, but before I could utter a word, a hybrid, dry and repulsive laughter that made my hair stand on end issued from him. He said, "If you are looking for a porter, I can help you, huh. I also own a carriage that I use as a hearse. I carry corpses to *Shah 'Abdul 'Azim*²⁸ everyday and bury them there. I also make

²⁸ A religious complex that until recently included the tomb of Reza Shah. It is located in the south of Tehran, near the ruins of *Rayy*.

coffins. I have coffins for every person's perfect measurements, not a hair off. I am ready—right now!..."

He laughed so hysterically that his shoulders shook. I pointed in the direction of my house. Without giving me the opportunity to utter a word, he said, "It's not necessary. I know where you live. Right now. Right away, huh?"

He got up from where he sat and I started to walk towards my house. I entered the room and, with great difficulty, brought the "dead" suitcase to the threshold. In front of the house, I saw a ramshackle old hearse to which a pair of thin, black, skeleton-like horses was hitched. The old man, shoulders hunched, sat up there on the driver's seat. He had a long whip in his hand. He did not turn to look at me. With difficulty, I placed the suitcase in the carriage, in the middle of which there was a special place for putting coffins. Then I climbed into the carriage and laid myself down in the middle of the place intended for coffins. To be able to see the surrounding scenery, I placed my head against the back. Finally I slid the suitcase towards me, rested it on my chest, and, with both hands, held it tightly.

The whip whistled through the air, and the horses, whose labored breath issued through their nostrils like columns of smoke in rainy weather, began to move with long but gentle leaps. Their slim forelegs, like the hand of a thief, with fingers severed by law and plunged into hot oil, struck the ground gently and noiselessly. In the damp air, the sound of the bells on their necks had a special ring. An indescribable relief, the cause of which I did not know, filled me from head to toe so thoroughly that I could barely feel the movement of the hearse. The only thing that I felt was the weight of the suitcase on my chest. It seemed as though this weight—her dead body, her corpse—had always been pressing on my chest.

A thick fog covered the scenery on both sides of the road. The hearse was passing mountains, plains, and rivers with a special speed and comfort. Around me now a new and unique scene, one that I had seen neither in a dream nor in wakefulness, came to view. On both sides of the road there were mountains with serrated, jagged tops and strange, suppressed, cursed trees. From among the trees grey, triangular, cubic and prismatic houses with dark, low windows without panes, were visible. These windows resembled the giddy eyes of one who is experiencing a delirious fever. There was something in those walls that transferred their coldness and chill into a man's heart. It looked as if no living being could dwell in these houses. Maybe they had been built to accommodate the shadows of ethereal beings!

Apparently either the carriage driver was taking me along a special road or he was taking a by-road. In some places, only hacked tree trunks and crooked, bent trees surrounded the road. Behind the trees there were high and low geometrical houses, some conic, others in the shape of truncated cones. All the houses had narrow, crooked windows from within which black lilies grew, clinging to the doors and walls. Then, suddenly, the whole scene disappeared under a thick fog. Pregnant, heavy clouds were hugging and pressing the mountain peaks, and drops of rain, like wandering particles of dust, were floating in the air. After traveling for quite some time, the hearse stopped near a high, arid mountain. I slid the suitcase aside and got up.

Behind the mountain there was a secluded, quiet and pleasant spot, a place that even though I had not seen or recognized it, seemed to be quite familiar—it was not

beyond my imagination. The surface of the ground was covered with scentless black lily plants as if until now no mortal had set foot on that ground. I put the suitcase down. The old carriage driver, turning his face away from me, said, "This place is near *Shah 'Abdul 'Azim*. There is no place better for you than here. Not even a bird can be found here. Isn't that right?..."

I put my hand in my pocket to get change to pay the carriage driver, but all the money I had was two *qerans*²⁹ and one *'abbasi*.³⁰ The carriage drivers, uttering a disgusting laugh, said, "Forget it. Pay me later. I know where you live. Anything else I can do for you? Let me tell you one thing—as far as digging graves is concerned, I am quite experienced, you understand? Don't be shy! Let's go right over there near the river, by that cypress tree. I will dig a ditch the size of the suitcase for you, and then I will leave."

The old man, with an agility the like of which I could not imagine, jumped down from his seat. I picked up the suitcase and together we walked to a tree trunk, on the edge of the dry riverbed. Then he said, "Is this place good?"

Without waiting for an answer, with his pick and shovel, he began digging the ground. I put the suitcase on the ground and watched him with astonishment. The old man was going about his job with the agility and dexterity of an expert. While digging, he found something resembling a glazed jar. He wrapped the jar in a dirty handkerchief. At the end, he climbed out of the ditch and said, "Here is the ditch, huh. It's exactly the size of the suitcase, not a hair off, huh."

I put my hand in my pocket to pay him. All I had was two *qerans* and one *'abbasi*. The old man uttered a ghastly laugh and said, "Don't bother. Forget it. I know where you live. Besides—for my wages I found a jar. It is a *Raq* jar from the ancient city of *Rayy*,³¹ huh."

Then he laughed so hard that the hunched shoulders of his doubled-up body shook. He put the jar, wrapped up in a dirty handkerchief, under his arm, walked towards the hearse and, with a special agility climbed up onto the seat. The whip sounded through the air and the panting horses began to walk. In the damp air, the sound of their bells had a special ring. The carriage gradually disappeared into a dense fog.

Once alone, I felt relieved, as if a heavy burden had been lifted from on top of my chest. A pleasant tranquility enveloped me from head to toe. I looked around. I was in a small area, surrounded by pitch-black hills and mountains. On one of the mountain ranges there were some ruins and ancient buildings made of thick brick. A dry riverbed was also in that vicinity. It was a cozy, secluded, and quiet place. I was extremely happy. I thought, when those large eyes wake up from their earthly slumber, they will find this place suitable to their structure and mood. Besides this

²⁹ *Qeran* is a relatively recent coin not used before the Safavid period.

³⁰ *'Abbasi* is a relatively recent coin not used before the Safavid period. It is worth about four *shahis* or twenty *dinars*.

³¹ The ancient city of *Rayy* (also referred to as Rhages) was Iran's capital under the Seljuqs (11th and 12th centuries). As a Silk Road city, *Rayy* was host to both merchants and invaders. It was sacked and razed by the Mongols in 1220. Attempts at its restoration were not successful.

girl, who lived her life away from other people, had to be away from other people's dead.

I picked up the suitcase carefully and put it in the middle of the ditch. The ditch was exactly the size of the suitcase, not a hair off. Then I wanted to look into the suitcase one more time, a last look. I looked around. Not a soul could be seen. I took the key out of my pocket and opened the suitcase. When I pushed the edge of her black dress aside, there, amid the coagulated blood and wiggling worms, I saw two large black eyes, two expressionless eyes, fixed on me. My life had sunk to the depths of those eyes. Hastily, I closed the suitcase and covered it with dirt; then I walked on the dirt until it was well packed. Next, I brought some of those scentless black lilies and placed them on her grave. Then I fetched some rocks and sand and strewed them on the grave to obliterate all traces completely so that no one could distinguish it. I accomplished this task so well that even I myself could not distinguish her grave from the rest of the ground.

When my work was finished, I looked at myself. A black piece of coagulated blood was stuck to my soiled and torn clothes. Two flies, the color of golden bees, were flying around me, and small worms, wiggling among themselves, were stuck to me. I tried to clean the bloodstain off the tail of my garment but, the more I wetted my sleeve with saliva and rubbed it onto the stain, the more the bloodstain expanded and assumed a darker color. Soon the stain covered my whole body. I felt the chill of the coagulating blood on me.

It was near sunset. A light rain was falling. I began to walk involuntarily, following the tracks of the hearse; but as it grew dark, I lost the trace of the carriage tracks. In a thick, tangible darkness, I walked slowly, aimlessly, thoughtlessly, and involuntarily towards an unknown destination. I had lost her. I had seen those large eyes amid the coagulated blood, and now I was walking in a dark night. Because the eyes that had served as my life's beacon were extinguished forever, I was walking in the deep darkness that had shrouded my entire life. It was immaterial whether I arrived at a place or an abode; perhaps I would never arrive at any destination.

An absolute hush covered everything. I felt that everyone had abandoned me. I took refuge in the lifeless universe. A relationship was established among the cycle of nature, the deep darkness that had descended on my soul, and me. This silence is a language that is incomprehensible to mortals. The intensity of the intoxication made me dizzy; I felt like vomiting. My feet began to give out and I felt extremely weary. I walked into the graveyard on the side of the road and sat on a tombstone. I held my head in my hands, puzzled about my situation when, suddenly the echo of a dry, repulsive laughter jolted me back into reality. I turned in the direction of the sound and looked. It was a figure whose head and face were wrapped in a scarf. The figure sat beside me, holding an object wrapped in a handkerchief, under his arm. He turned to me and said, "I bet you were going to town and lost your way, huh? Perhaps you are asking yourself what I am doing in the graveyard this late at night! But rest assured, my calling is dealing with the dead. I am a gravedigger by profession, huh? I know every inch of this place. For instance, right today I went to dig a grave, and I uncovered this jar. Do you realize that this is a *Raq* jar, from the ancient city of *Rayy*, huh? Let's assume it's a useless jar. I give it to you to keep as a souvenir from me, O.K.?"

I put my hand in my pocket, took out two *qerans* and one *'abbasi* to offer him. The old man, with his repulsive, dry laugh, said, “No, forget it! I know you. I know where you live. Look, I have a hearse right around the corner. Let me take you home, huh? It's only a few of steps...”

He placed the jar in my lap and got up. He laughed so violently that his shoulders shook. I picked up the jar and began to follow the old man's doubled-up figure. At the turn in the road, there was a ramshackle hearse with two meager black horses. With amazing agility, the old man climbed up the hearse and sat down on the seat. As for me, I entered the carriage and lay down in the special place made for coffins. I placed my head on the high edge so that I could see the scenery. I put the jar on my chest and held it tightly.

The whip whistled through the air, and the horses, panting, began to move with long and gentle leaps. Their hooves touched the ground softly and noiselessly. In the damp air, the sound of the bells on their necks had a special ring. From behind the clouds, the stars, like the balls of some glistening eyes emerging from amid blood clots, watched over the earth. A pleasant relief filled me; only the jar, like the weight of a corpse, pressed on my chest.

In the darkness, fearing that they might slide and fall, the intertwined trees with their twisted branches seemed to be holding each other by the hand. Along the side of the road, there were some strange houses with distorted geometrical shapes and a few black windows. An evil, dull radiance, like the light from a glowworm, emanated from the walls of these houses. In an awe-inspiring scene, the trees were passing by in groups and clumps, escaping one after the other. It seemed, however, that the lily stalks became tangled in their legs and feet and made them fall to the ground. The smell of dead bodies, the smell of decomposed flesh had filled my soul. It was as if that smell had always been penetrating my body and as if I had passed all my life lying in a black coffin, being carried about amid mist and hovering shadows by a stooped, old man whose face I could not see.

The hearse came to a halt. I picked up the jar and jumped down. I was in front of my house. I hurried into my room, put the jar on the table, picked up the tin can, the same can which served as my piggy bank and which I had hidden in the closet of my room. I came to the door to give the tin can to the old carriage driver instead of a reward. But he had disappeared. There was no sign of either him or his carriage. Disappointed, I returned to my room, lit the lamp, took the jar out of the handkerchief and, using my sleeve, cleaned the dust off of it. It had an ancient, transparent purple glaze that had been transformed into the color of a crushed golden bee. On one side of the body of the jar, in the form of a diamond, there was a border of black lilies. In the middle of the diamond, there was the face of a woman whose eyes were black and large, eyes larger than normal, eyes that reproached me as if I had committed some unforgivable crime of which I was not aware. Spell binding eyes that were simultaneously worried, perplexed, threatening and hope inspiring. Timid yet attractive eyes from whose depths an intoxicating, supernatural light emanated. She had prominent cheeks, a wide forehead, slender and connected eyebrows, full, half-open lips, and disheveled hair, a strand of which was stuck to her temple.

I took the picture that I had painted of her the previous night out of the tin can and compared the two; my picture was not even slightly different from the picture on the jar. They were, you could say, pictures of each other. They were identical and an unfortunate painter of designs on pen-case covers had painted both. Perhaps, at the time of the painting, the spirit of the painter of the jar had entered my body and taken possession of my hand. The paintings were not distinguishable; except, my picture was on a piece of paper, while the painting on the jar had a transparent ancient glaze that gave it a mysterious air, an unusual, strange soul. In the depths of her eyes, the flames of an evil soul glowed. No, it was incredible. Those same large, thoughtless eyes, those same secretive, yet, at the same time, free disposition! No one could comprehend my feelings at this moment. I wanted to run away from myself. Could such a thing really happen? Once more all of my life's misfortunes materialized in front of my eyes. Weren't the eyes of one person enough in my life? Now two people were looking at me. Two people were looking at me through her eyes. No, this was absolutely unbearable. The eyes that were buried near the mountain, by the trunk of the cypress tree, on the edge of the dry riverbed. The eyes that were buried underneath black lilies, amid thick blood, in the middle of the feast of the rodents and insects; the eyes that before long, plant roots would penetrate and suck their sap; those eyes, brimful with vigorous life, were looking at me!

I had never imagined myself to be so unfortunate and damned. Nevertheless, at the same time, because of a latent guilt—I felt an unjustifiable, strange sense of pleasure—when I realized that I have had an ancient fellow-sufferer. Wasn't this painter of ancient times, who hundreds or perhaps thousands of years ago had painted this picture on this jar, wasn't he a fellow-sufferer of mine? Had he not passed these same stages that I am passing? Until this moment I had thought myself to be the most wretched of all creatures, but now I realized that at some time on those mountains, in those ruined houses and habitations built of heavy brick, among those people whose bones have rotted and whose limbs have turned into particles of living black lily plants—I realized that among them there had lived an afflicted painter, a damned painter; perhaps among them an unfortunate painter of designs on pen-case covers had lived—one exactly like me. Now I realized, or could understand that he, too, exactly like me, had been burning and dissolving amidst two large, black eyes. This realization comforted me.

Finally, I put my painting next to the painting on the jar. Then I went out of the room and prepared my special pot of fire. When the charcoal turned red, I brought the pot of fire inside and placed it in front of the paintings. Intending to collect my thoughts, I gave several pulls to the opium pipe and, in a state of ecstasy, stared at the pictures. Only the ethereal smoke of opium could collect my thoughts and relieve my anxiety.

I smoked all my remaining opium hoping the strange narcotic agent would dispel all my difficulties and push aside the veils that covered my vision. But could it dispel all those dense, distant, grey recollections? Then the state I longed for appeared; it was beyond my expectations. Gradually my thoughts grew exact, large and enchanting, and I entered a state of half-sleep and half-coma.

I felt the pressure and the weight on my chest were removed. It was as if the law of gravity no longer affected me. I was flying freely in pursuit of my thoughts that

were now large, delicate and precise. A profound, indescribable pleasure filled my being from head to toe. Relieved from the burden of my body, I was in a quiet world full of enchanting and delectable shapes and colors. Then my train of thought was interrupted and the remainder was dissolved in these colors and shapes. I was drowning in waves that were caressing and ethereal. I could hear my heart beat, and I could feel the blood moving through my veins. It was a very meaningful and intoxicating moment.

I wished, from the bottom of my heart, to give myself up to the inactivity of oblivion. And my wishes would be fulfilled, if such an oblivion existed; if it could endure; if when my eyes closed, beyond sleep, they would enter utter nothingness so that I could not feel my existence; if it were possible for my existence to become dissolved in a black stain, in a musical note, or in a colorful beam of light; if these colors and shapes would become larger and expand until they disappeared; if....

Gradually a state of sluggishness and numbness overtook me; it was like a pleasant fatigue or like delicate waves emanating from my body. I felt my life was passing in reverse. Gradually, the stages and events of the past, reminiscences of my obliterated, forgotten childhood appeared before my eyes. Beyond observing, I was participating in the memories; I could feel them. Moment by moment, I was growing smaller and younger; then, suddenly, my thoughts grew dark and vague. It seemed as though all my existences hung at the end of a thin hook; I was suspended at the bottom of a deep, dark well. Then I was unhooked. I was sliding and falling down without encountering any obstacles. It was a never-ending abyss in an eternal night. After that, some vague and obliterated veils took shape in front of my eyes, and I experienced a moment of utter oblivion. When I came to, I found myself in a small room, in a special position, a position that seemed strange, yet, at the same time, natural.

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I awoke in a new world the environs, mode of life, and activity in which were thoroughly familiar and close to me. It was such a familiar world that I could say I felt more at home in it than I felt in the environs of my previous life. In a way, this was an echo, or a reflection, of my previous life. In spite of its being a different world, it was so near and relevant to me that I thought I had returned to my original element. I was reborn in an ancient world that was closer to me, and more natural.

Dawn was breaking. A tallow burner was burning on the mantle in my room, and a quilt was spread in the corner. I was not asleep, however. My body felt hot and my cloak and scarf were stained with blood. My hands, too, were stained with blood. But, in spite of my restlessness and excitement, a feeling stronger than the desire to obliterate the traces of blood, even stronger than the thought of being picked up by the magistrate, preoccupied me. I had been waiting for a long time to be picked up by the magistrate anyway. In any event, I decided to, with one gulp, finish the poisonous wine in the cup in the niche. My need to write had become a compulsion. I wanted to drag out the fiend that tortured my soul. I wanted to record all that I had wanted to say but had refrained from saying. Eventually, after a moment of hesitation, I pulled the tallow burner closer and began to write as follows:

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I always thought forbearance from speech was the best of things. I thought that one should, like a bittern,³² spread his wings on the shore of the sea and sit there, alone. But now I am no longer in control, because that which should not have happened has come to pass. Who knows? Perhaps immediately, or an hour from now, a group of drunken night watchmen will come to apprehend me. I have no desire whatsoever to save my carcass. Even if I were to obliterate the bloodstains, there is little room for denial. Before they lay their hands on me, however, I will drink a cup of the wine in that wine flask; a cup of my own inherited wine that I placed in the niche.

I want to press my entire life in my hands, as if it were a bunch of grapes; and I want to pour its essence, no, its wine, drop by drop, like water containing the holy dust of Mecca, down the dry throat of my shadow. All I want to do before I go is to record on paper all the sufferings that, like consumption or leprosy, have eaten away at me in the corner of this room. In this way, I think, I will be able to control and organize my thoughts better. Do I intend to write a will? Never. I do not own any property that the government can confiscate, nor do I profess a faith that Satan can take away. Besides, what on earth is there that could have the least value for me? What is usually referred to as "life" I have already lost; I allowed it; I wanted it to be lost. After my departure, what the hell, I don't give a damn if anyone does or does not read my tattered notes! I am writing only because this drive to write has become a necessity for me. I am in need—I am in need more than ever before to convey my thoughts to my imaginary creature, to my shadow: that same ominous shadow that is bending on the wall in front of the tallow burner and which seems to be reading, actually carefully swallowing, whatever I write. This shadow definitely has a better sense of perception than I. I can hold a meaningful conversation only with my shadow. He is the one who makes me talk. Only he can know me. I am certain that he understands... I want to pour, drop by drop, the essence, no, the bitter wine of my life into my shadow's dry throat and say to him, "This is my life!"

Whoever looked at me yesterday saw a distressed, ailing youth; but if he looked at me today, he would see a stooped old man with white hair, sore eyes and a leprous lip. I am afraid to look out of the window of my room or to look at myself in the mirror, because everywhere I see multiple reflections of myself. To be able to describe my life for my stooped shadow, I must narrate a story. Oh, there are so many stories about childhood days, loves, acts of copulation, weddings and deaths and not a grain of truth in any of them. I am tired of telling stories and of fanciful phraseology.

I shall try to press this cluster, but whether there will be the slightest bit of truth in it, I do not know. I do not know where I am; I do not know whether the patch of

³² Bittern is a bird from the heron family. A wading bird, it tends to be more secretive than the rest of the members of this family.

sky above my head, or the few spans of ground underneath me, belongs to Nishapur,³³ Balkh³⁴ or Benares.³⁵ In any event, I do not trust anything.

In the past, I have seen so many contradictory things and have heard so many inconsistent speeches; the sight of my eye—this thin yet hard substance behind which the soul abides—has rubbed itself over so many surfaces that now I do not believe anything. I doubt the weight and permanence of objects, even the visible and manifest facts that belong to this very moment. For example, if I were to touch the stone mortar in the corner of our yard and ask it, "Are you stationary and firm?" If it were to respond in the affirmative, I am not sure whether I should believe it.

Am I a distinct, singular being? I don't know. But, when I looked into the mirror just now, I did not recognize myself. Without a doubt, the "I" of previous times is dead; it has disintegrated. There is no physical barrier between the two of us, however. I know that I should narrate my story. What I don't know is where to begin. All of life is made up of stories and tales. I must press the cluster of grapes and pour its essence, spoon by spoon, down the dry throat of this old shadow.

Because at this moment all my restless thoughts belong to here and now, it is difficult to know where to begin. My thoughts do not recognize any hour, minute or history. For me, something that happened yesterday might be more ancient, or less effectual, than an event that took place a thousand years ago.

Perhaps the reason for the appearance of all these reminiscences is the fact that all my relations with the world of the living are now severed—past, future, hour, day, month, and year all have become the same. These stages make sense to the ordinary people, to the rabble—yes, that is the exact word I was looking for—rabble with two b's. These stages apply to the rabble because, like the seasons of the year, their lives have recognized divisions and limits and because they live in the temperate zone of life. My life, on the other hand, my entire life, has had one season and one state. Even though a constant flame burns in the center of my body and, like a candle, melts me away, my life is in a cold zone, in eternal darkness.

My life is gradually melting away in the middle of the four walls that create my room, amid the strong fortification that surrounds my life and thoughts. No, I am mistaken. My life is like a fresh stump of wood lying at the side of a tripod: it is scorched and charred by the fire of the other burning wood, but it neither burns thoroughly nor stays fresh and green—the smoke and the fumes suffocate it.

Like all other rooms, my room, made of sun-dried and baked bricks, is built on the ruins of thousands of ancient houses. It has a whitewashed interior with a strip of inscription. It is exactly like a grave. The smallest details of my room, like the spider in the corner, are sufficient to occupy my thoughts for many long hours.

Since the time that I have become bedridden, no one pays any attention to me. That horseshoe nail hammered into the wall has supported my cradle, my wife's

³³ A metropolis in Khurasan that was destroyed by the Mongols in 1220. Khayyam, indirectly referred to earlier as the painter of the *Raq* jar, comes from Nishapur.

³⁴ A major center of Zoroastrianism and Buddhism in medieval times that was destroyed by the Mongols.

³⁵ Benares, a city on the banks of the Ganges River, is one of holiest of the seven sacred cities of the Hindus.

cradle, and, possibly, the cradles of many other children. A little below that nail, a piece of the plaster has come off the wall. From the exposed crevice, the smell of objects and creatures that had previously occupied the room comes in. The odor is so dense that no current or breeze can dispel its stagnant, lazy stench: the smell of bodily sweat, the smell of past sicknesses, the smell of bad breath, foot odor, the smell of bodily odor, smell of urine, the smell of rancid oil, of rotting mats and burnt omelets, smell of fried onion, smell of boiled medical herbs, the smell of mallow and newborn's first stool, the room-smell of a boy just beyond puberty, smell of vapors that have come in from the outside, as well as the dead smell or dying smells—all which are still alive and have retained their distinctive qualities. There are other smells, too, that, in spite of their unknown source, have left their imprint.

My room has a dark closet and two windows to the outside—to the world of the rabble. One of the windows opens onto our own courtyard, the other onto the street. Through this window, and that street, I am connected with the city of *Rayy*, the so-called “bride of the world,” with thousands of streets, alleys, unpretentious houses, *madrasahs*,³⁶ and *caravansaries*.³⁷ This biggest city of the world lives and breathes behind my room. Here, when I close my eyes, the scrambled shadows of the city, those that affect me—mansions, mosques and gardens—all materialize in the corner of my room before my eyes.

These two windows connect me with the outside, with the world of the rabble; but in my room there is a mirror on the wall in which I look at my face. In my limited life, a mirror is more important than the world of the rabble, which has no relation to me.

Of all the scenery of the city, in front of my window, there is a butcher shop that uses two sheep a day. Each time I look out of the window I see the butcher. Early every morning, two black, gaunt packhorses—consumptive horses who cough heavily and whose skeleton-like forelegs end in hoofs as though, following some severe natural order, their forelegs had been cut off and the stumps plunged into boiling oil—these horses, with carcasses hanging on each side, are brought to the front of the shop. The butcher strikes his hennaed beard with his greasy hand, then, with a buyer's eye, appraises the carcasses, chooses two, weighs their fat tails in his hand and takes them in and hangs them on two hooks. Breathing heavily, the packhorses move on. The butcher rubs and caresses the bloodstained, slit-throated bodies whose eyes are transfixed and whose bloodstained eyelids seem to emerge from the middle of their black skulls. He takes a bone-handled knife, carefully cuts their bodies up into pieces and, with a smile, sells the lean meat to his customers. He performs all this with a great deal of pleasure! I am certain that he draws a special pleasure and intoxication from this. The burly yellow dog who has dominated our

³⁶ *Madrasah* (also *madreseh*) is a theological seminary in which the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* are taught and discussed. Outwardly a *madrasah* might resemble a mosque but it lacks most of the distinctive features of a mosque. It has rows of small rooms that accommodate the students of Islamic theology studying there.

³⁷ A *caravansary* is a stopping place where caravans stayed for the night to rest and to be protected from the bandits that roamed the desert.

neighborhood, and who constantly begs the butcher with submissive and innocent-looking eyes, that dog also knows that the butcher enjoys his profession

A little distance farther away, a strange old man sits under an archway. He spreads a display cloth in front of him with the following items: a sickle, two horseshoes, several types of colored beads, a long-handled knife, a mousetrap, a rusted pair of pliers, a dropper for adding water to inkpots, a gap-toothed comb, a trowel, and a glazed jar covered by a dirty handkerchief. I watch this old man for hours, sometimes for days and months. He always wears a dirty scarf and a cloak made in *Shushtar*;³⁸ his collar is open and the white hair of his chest protrudes through it. With a talisman attached to his arm, and with fistula eyelids afflicted by some stubborn, shameless disease that eats at them, day after day, he sits in that same position. On Thursdays, however, in spite of his yellow or missing teeth, he recites the *Qur'an*. This seems to be how he makes his living, for I have never seen anyone buy anything from him.

This man's face seems to have been a part of every nightmare that I have ever had. What stubborn, foolish thoughts, like weeds, emanate from behind his narrow forehead or from the top of his close-cropped head, on which there is a protuberance and around which he wraps a yellowish turban? There seems to be a special relationship between the old man's life and the assortment of wares on display in front of him. Several times I decided to go and talk with him, or to buy something from his display, but each time I hesitated and did not go. According to my nanny, in his youth, this man had been a potter. Now, as a retailer, he keeps only this one jar for himself.

These were my links to the outside world. Now the world inside: the only people left for me were a nanny and a whore of a wife. Nanny is her nurse as well. She is the nanny of the two of us. In addition to my wife and I being close relatives, granny had breastfed us together. In principle, her mother was my mother as well, because I never saw my own parents. Her mother, a tall lady with grey hair, brought me up. I loved her mother like my own. In fact, it was because of my love for the mother that I married the daughter.

I have heard several different stories about my parents. But I imagine only one of them, the one that nanny told me, is true. Nanny told me that my father and my uncle were twins; both of them had the same face, the same physiognomy and the same disposition; even the quality of their voices was similar, so much so that they could not easily be distinguished from each other. Furthermore, such an intrinsic bond and sense of mutual sympathy existed between them that if one became ill, the other one, too, became ill. They were, as the saying goes, spitting image of one another. Anyway, they both chose to be merchants and, at the age of twenty, both went to India. They took *Rayy* goods, such as different types of material, shot silk, printed cloth, cotton cloth, *jobbas*,³⁹ shawls, needles, ceramic bowls, fuller's earth, and pen-case covers to India and sold them there. Apparently my father stayed in the city of Benares, and sent my uncle to the other cities of India for commercial enterprises.

³⁸ Shushtar is an ancient fortress city in Khuzestan Province of Iran well known for its woven handicraft.

³⁹ *Jobba* is a tall gown or cloak.

After some time, my father fell in love with a virgin girl, a *Bugam Dasi*⁴⁰ dancer at the temple of the *Linga*. The girl, as a part of her job, performed religious ritual dances in front of the large *Linga*,⁴¹ and took care of the temple. She was a warm-hearted girl with olive-colored skin, lemon-shaped breasts, large, slanted eyes, and narrow connected eyebrows between which she wore a red beauty mark.

Now I can imagine *Bugam Dasi*, my mother, dancing with measured and harmonious movements to the tune of *sitars*,⁴² drums, lutes, cymbals, and horns. She is wearing a gold-embroidered, colorful silk *sari*;⁴³ her dress is open at the neck; her heavy, black tresses, as dark as the eternal night, over which she wears a brocaded headband, are knotted at the back of her head. She wears bracelets on her wrists and ankles, and a golden ring on her pierced nostril. Her eyes are large, black, languid and slanted; her teeth are brilliant. She is dancing to a soft and monotonous melody played by naked men wearing *shalmas* only; she is dancing to a meaningful melody in which all the mystery, magic, superstitions, lusts and sufferings of the people of India are summarized and secured. Depending on appropriate movements and lustful gestures, holy movements, *Bugam Dasi* opens up like flower petals, shimmies her shoulders and arms, bends, and once again returns to normal. What effect must these symbolic movements, eloquent without the use of words, have had upon my father? The acrid, pepperish smell of her sweat, mingled with the scent of champak⁴⁴ and sandalwood oil, heightens the lustful crescendo of this scene, especially amid the fragrance of the sap of trees from distant lands, reviving suppressed, distant sensations: the smell of a medicine chest, of Indian drugs kept in nurseries, of unidentified oils from a land full of meaning, tradition and ancient rituals—perhaps a smell like the smell of my homemade concoctions. All these must have revived my father's latent and suppressed memories.

My father became so ensnared in the love of *Bugam Dasi* that he embraced the dancing girl's religion and joined the cult of the *Linga*. As soon as the girl became pregnant, however, they expelled her from the service of the temple.

Right after I was born, my uncle returned from his trip to Benares. His taste and his sense of love being the same as my father's, he too fell deeply in love with my mother and seduced her—his external and intrinsic resemblance to my father facilitated his task. When the affair was exposed, my mother threatened to abandon

⁴⁰ *Bughan Dasi* means a slave to pleasure.

⁴¹ *Linga* (also *Lingam*) is a stylized phallus often depicted in conjunction with its opposite, the *yonis*. The *Linga* connotes maleness, vitality, and creative power.

⁴² A lute-like instrument with a long, fretted neck, a resonating gourd and usually six playing strings and a number of strings that vibrate sympathetically when plucked.

⁴³ *Sari* is a strip of unstitched cloth, worn by women in the Indian Subcontinent. It ranges from four to nine yards in length and is draped over the body in various styles.

⁴⁴ An evergreen timber tree native to India and having fragrant orange-yellow flowers that yield an oil used in perfumery.

both, unless my father and uncle underwent a trial by the *Nag*-serpent;⁴⁵ she would belong to the survivor of the trial.

The trial required that my father and uncle be isolated in a dark room, like a dungeon, in which a *Nag*-serpent was let loose. It was assumed that whoever was stung by the serpent would scream; then the snake charmer would open the door of the room and save the other. *Bugam Dasi* would belong to the survivor.

Before being confined to the dungeon, my father asked *Bugam Dasi* to perform the sacred ritual of the temple and, once more, dance before him. She agreed to his request and, in the light of the flame, danced to the tune of the snake charmer's flute. With the meaningful, harmonious and wanton movements of a *Nag*-serpent, she twisted and turned. Then my father and my uncle were confined in a special room with a *Nag*-serpent, but instead of the expected shriek of anguish, a moan amid a hair-raising peal of laughter, the laughter of a madman, was heard. When they opened the door, my uncle walked out. To everyone's astonishment his face was aged and anguished. He had heard the snake's hiss and the sound of its coils sliding upon one another; he had seen the snake's round, evil eyes, its poisonous fangs; and he had seen its body: a small head and a long neck, terminating in a spoon-shaped pustule. Aged and deranged from dread and fright, my uncle walked out of the room with his hair turned white.

According to the condition and the promise, *Bugam Dasi* was given to my uncle. There remained the frightful fact, however, that this man could have been either my father or my uncle. The survivor was deranged; he had lost his memory completely, and he did not recognize the child. Based on this lack of recognition, nevertheless, everyone imagined he was my uncle. Doesn't the totality of this story have some bearing on my life? Hasn't the resonance of that hideous laughter, or the terror of that trial, influenced me? Doesn't all that affect me?

Henceforth, I was nothing more than a stranger and an extra mouth to feed. At last my uncle, or father, pursuing his mercantile affairs and accompanied by *Bugam Dasi*, returned to the city of *Rayy*. He brought me along and entrusted me to the care of my aunt.

Nanny claimed that my mother, when saying goodbye, entrusted my aunt with a purple wine flask for me. In the wine, she said, poison from the fangs of *Nag*, the Indian serpent, was dissolved. What better keepsake than purple wine, the elixir that bestows eternal tranquility, could a *Bugam Dasi* leave behind for her child? Perhaps she, too, squeezed her life, like a cluster of grapes, and bestowed its wine upon me—some of the same poison that killed my father. Now I appreciate the value of her gift to me!

Is my mother alive? Perhaps at this very moment that I am writing she is dancing; twisting and turning her body like a serpent in the light of a torch in the

⁴⁵ *Nag* (also *Nag*-serpent) is a snake-spirit with long fangs and a slit in the middle of the upper lip. In Buddhistic lore it is the life force that determines birth and rebirth and hence it is connected with the wheel of life. The legend of the Buddha tells how the *Nag*-serpent wound itself around his body seven times, but, since it could not crush him, it turned into a youth bowing low before Gautama.

*meydan*⁴⁶ of some remote Indian town. She twists and turns as if a *Nag*-serpent has bitten her. She is surrounded by women, children and curious naked men, while my father or uncle, white haired and stooped, sits in the corner of the *meydan* watching her. Looking at her, he recalls the dungeon, the hissing and the sound of the angry snake's body as it slides, holding its head high up, eyes glittering, its neck assuming the shape of a hood, with a gray line resembling a pair of spectacles at the back of its neck.

In any case, I was a nursing child when I was put in the arms of the same nanny who also nursed my cousin, this same whore who is now my wife. I grew up under the supervision of my aunt, the tall lady with grey hair on her temple. Her daughter, the whore, and I grew up together in this house.

Ever since I have known myself I have looked upon my aunt as though she were my mother, and I have loved her. I loved her so much that later on, because of their resemblance, I married her daughter, namely, my own foster-sister. Maybe I should say I had to marry her. This girl gave herself to me only once. I shall never forget that; it happened at the bedside of her dead mother. It was quite late at night when I, in my pajama, entered the dead woman's room to pay my respects for the last time. Everyone else in the house was asleep. In the room, I saw two camphor candles burning at her bedside. To prevent Satan from entering her body, a *Qur'an* was placed on her abdomen. When I pushed the cloth that covered her face aside, I saw my aunt with her usual dignity and attraction. It seemed that her face had abandoned all earthly concerns; it had assumed an expression that inspired reverence in me. It made death appear a normal and natural thing. A sarcastic smile had dried on the corner of her lips. I kissed her hand and began to leave the room when, upon turning my head, to my astonishment, I saw this same whore, who is now my wife, enter the room. She pressed herself as hard as she could against me, pulled me to herself and kissed me passionately, right in front of the dead mother, her dead mother. I was so ashamed that I wanted to sink into the floor. I didn't know what to do. The dead body with its protruding teeth seemed to mock us. It seemed that its quiet smile changed. Involuntarily, I embraced the whore and kissed her. At this moment the drapes of the adjacent room were drawn and my aunt's husband, the whore's father, entered. His shoulders were hunched and he wore a scarf.

He burst into hideous laughter that made my hair stand on end; his shoulders shook violently. He did not look at us; I wished I could sink into the floor. If I could, I would have slapped the dead body for looking at us like that. What a disgrace! I ran from the room. I ran out for the sake of this same whore. Perhaps she had created this scene to force me to marry her.

In spite of our being foster brother and sister, and in order to uphold the reputation of their family, I had to marry her; it was rumored that she was not a virgin, a fact that others intimated but I did not know, and could never know. On our wedding night when we were left alone, no matter how much I implored and begged her, she did not give in to me and did not take off her clothes. All she said was, "Wrong time of the month!" She did not admit me in any way near her. Rather, she put out the light, retired to the other end of the room, and slept there. She shook like

⁴⁶ *Meydan* is a public square or an open field.

a willow tree, as if she were thrown into a dungeon with a dragon. No one believes this, and it is incredible; she did not allow me even to kiss her on the cheek. The next and the following nights too, like the first night, I slept on the floor, on the same spot as the first night; I did not dare do otherwise. In short, for many nights, I slept on the other side of the room from her. Who believes this? For two months, no, for two months and four days, I slept away from her and did not dare approach her.

She had already fixed a virginity token. I don't know whether it was a kerchief on which she had sprinkled a pigeon's blood, or the handkerchief that she had used on the night of her first lovemaking. Neither do I know whether she had kept it all along and was using it now to ridicule me. I know, however, that those who congratulated me exchanged winks. I am certain in their hearts they said, "He must have found out last night!" I pretended that I didn't hear any of that. They laughed at me; they laughed at my stupidity, making me more determined, one day, to put all that down.

After I discovered that she had all sorts of lovers, and thinking that she did not like me because a *mullah*,⁴⁷ reciting a couple of Arabic verses, had taken away her freedom and put her under my authority, I decided to possess her by force. I carried out my decision. But after much struggle she got up and left and I had to be satisfied with rolling all night in her bed enjoying her warmth and scent. And that is the only night that I ever had a satisfying sleep. After that night she slept in another room.

Usually in the evening, when I came home, she would still be out. I never knew whether she was in or out. In fact, I didn't want to know, because I was condemned to loneliness and to death. This is incredible, but I tried at all costs to establish contact with her lovers. No one will believe this. But when I discovered that she had taken a fancy to someone, I would, with much humility and disgrace, watch, follow, cajole and flatter him, until eventually, I would make his acquaintance and bring him to her. Do you know who her lovers were? A tripe peddler, a jurist, a liver peddler, the chief magistrate, a judge, a trader, and a philosopher. Although their names and titles were different, they all had learned their professions from the man who sells boiled sheep's head. She preferred all those men to me.

Fearing that I might lose my wife, I belittled myself to an unbelievable degree; I even went as far as aping the manners, ethics and attractive behavior of her lovers, but I ended up being a sorry pimp mocked by fools. How could I learn the ways of the rabble anyway? Now I know. She loved them because they were shameless, smelly fools. Her love was inseparable from dirt and death. Was I really willing to sleep with her; was it her apparent beauty that attracted me; was it her hatred towards me; was it her coquettish gestures; was it my life-long love for her mother, or was it a combination of all these things? No—I don't know. I know one thing, though. This woman, this whore, this witch had poured some poison into my soul, into my existence, a poison that not only made me want her but made all the atoms of my body need the atoms of her body. They shrieked for her atoms. I had a great desire to be on a lost island where there were no other people. I wished that an earthquake, a storm or a tornado would strike all the rabble, who breathed outside my door and who raced around having fun, dead so that only she and I would remain.

⁴⁷ A learned teacher or expounder of the religious law and doctrines of Islam.

Even then wouldn't she prefer an animal, an Indian serpent, or a dragon to me? I wished we could spend one night together and die in each other's arms. This seemed to be the sublime culmination of my life –of my existence.

As though the suffering that consumed me was not sufficient, I became disabled; like a moving corpse, I gave up all activity and was confined to the house. No one was privy to our mutual secret. My aged nanny, the companion of my gradual death, took sides with the whore and reproached me. "How does this poor woman put up with this lunatic husband?" I heard this and similar talk all around me and behind my back. And they were right. The degree of my helplessness was incredible.

Daily, I wasted away. When I looked at myself in the mirror my cheeks were red, the color of meat at the butcher shop. My body was feverish and my eyes had assumed a languid and sorrowful expression. This newly acquired state intoxicated me. I could see the messenger of death in my eyes; it was evident that I was dying.

At last they sent for the physician; the healer of the rabble. He was the family doctor who, in his own words, had "brought us all up." He entered wearing a yellowish turban and a long beard. He took pride in having administered a drug for strengthening my grandfather's virility, in having poured rocket seed and rock candy down my throat and in having made my aunt take cassia extracts. Anyhow, sitting at the side of my bed, taking my pulse, and looking at my tongue, he prescribed that I should take ass's milk and barley juice and advised that I fumigate twice a day with mastic and arsenic. He also left several lengthy prescriptions with nanny containing weird and strange extracts and oils like hyssop, oil of bay, extract of licorice, camphor, maiden's hair, chamomile oil, goose oil, linseed, fir-tree seed and other such trash.

I grew worse. Only my nanny, who was her nanny, too, grey-haired and old, sat in the corner of the room at the side of my bed, pressed cold cloths on my forehead, brought me herbal extracts and talked to me about the facts and events of my childhood and of the whore's as well. For instance, she told me that my wife's habit of chewing on the nails of her left hand until they are sore goes back as far as the cradle. Sometimes she told me stories, too. Since these stories were related to my childhood, I recall that they minimized my age and made me feel like a child again. She talked about when I was very small and my wife and I slept in the same cradle, a large, double-sized cradle. Now some of the incredible episodes of those stories are more natural to me.

The illness had created a new world for me, an unrecognizable, vague world full of pictures, colors, and desires unimaginable to a healthy person. And because of that the change of events in these stories impacted me with an indescribable amount of anxiety and intoxication. I felt I had become a child. At this very moment that I am writing, I feel I am experiencing those same feelings. Those feelings belong to the present, not to the past.

Perhaps the actions, thoughts, desires and habits of the ancients bequeathed to later generations through these tales have been among the necessities of life. For thousands of years, people have said these same things, performed these sexual acts, and have faced these same childish predicaments. Isn't all of life a comical story, an incredible, foolish tale? Am I not writing my own incredible account: the story of my

own past? Tales are only one means of avoiding unfulfilled and unattainable desires imagined by storytellers, each according to his own mentality and hereditary traits.

I wish I could sleep like in the days when I was an innocent child—a comfortable and tranquil sleep—and I wish that when I woke up my cheeks would be red, the color of meat at the butcher's, that my body would be hot, and that I would be coughing—horrificing, deep coughs—coughs that could not be traced to any known recesses of my body, like the coughs of the packhorses that brought the sheep carcasses to the butcher shop early in the morning.

I recall clearly that it was completely dark; I was in a coma for several minutes and, before going to sleep, I talked to myself. At this moment I felt—I was sure—that I had become a child and that I was lying in a cradle. Then, even though everyone in the house was asleep, I felt that someone was at my side. It was around daybreak, the time when the sick know life seems to transcend the limits of this world; my heart was beating hard but I was not afraid at all; my eyes were open but because of the darkness I could not see anyone. Several minutes passed, then an unpleasant thought occurred to me. I said to myself, “Perhaps it is she!” At this very moment I felt the chill of a hand on my feverish forehead.

I shuddered. Two or three times I asked myself, “Wasn't that the hand of the Angel of Death?” Then I went back to sleep. When I awoke in the morning, my nanny said that her daughter (I mean my wife, that whore) had come to my bedside, placed my head on her knee and rocked me like a child. Perhaps a sense of maternal love had been awakened in her. I wish I had died at that moment. Perhaps the child she was carrying had died. Had her child been born yet? I did not know.

In this room that steadily grew narrower and darker than the inside of a tomb, I was constantly waiting for my wife, but she never came. Isn't my current situation of her making? This is not a joke. For three years, no, for two years and four months, but what are days and months? They have lost their import for me. For one who lives in a grave, time loses its significance. This room was the grave of my life and thought. To me, all the activities, the sounds, and the pretentious life of the others, the life of the rabble—bodily and mentally cast out of the same mold—was strange and meaningless. Since becoming bedridden, I had awakened in a strange and incredible world in which the world of the rabble had no place. I had become a world unto myself, a world full of mysteries. I felt compelled to investigate every nook and cranny of that world.

During the night when I wallowed at the edge of the two worlds, moments before I sank into a deep and empty sleep, I dreamed. In the twinkling of an eye, I was living a life different from my own; I breathed in a different atmosphere, distant from myself, as though I intended to escape from myself and change my destiny. When I closed my eyes, my real world, whose imaginary pictures had a life of their own, returned to me. These pictures appeared and disappeared at random, as though my will had no influence on them. But I cannot be too sure about that either; the scenes that materialized before me were not normal dreams, because I was not asleep yet. In silence and with composure, I could separate these pictures from each other and make comparisons among them. As a result it was becoming apparent that until then I had not known myself, and that the world did not have the force and the meaning

that I thought it did; such force and power was now over-ruled by the darkness of the night. If only I had been taught to look at the night and enjoy and love it!

I am not sure whether at this time my arm was under my control; I thought that if I were to leave my hand to itself, following some unknown and unidentifiable stimulus, without my influencing it in any way, it would begin to move by itself. If I was not constantly and consciously controlling it, my body, too, was capable of doing unexpected things. For a long time now I had the feeling that I was undergoing a process of living degeneration. Not only my body, but my soul, too, contradicted my heart; they were constantly in disagreement. I was constantly undergoing some sort of strange dissolution and disintegration. Sometimes I thought of things that I myself could not believe; at other times, I experienced a feeling of pity. In every case my intellectual faculty reproached me. Often when holding a conversation, or when attending some business, I would enter the discussion of various subjects, while my attention was elsewhere. I was engaged in thinking about myself and, in my heart, I blamed myself. I was a mass undergoing a process of degeneration and disintegration. Apparently, I have been and shall continue to be like this: a strange, incompatible mixture...

The unbearable fact was that I felt myself quite detached from the people whom I saw and lived with; only a superficial resemblance, a vague and remote, yet close, resemblance united us. Indeed, it was the mutual necessities of life, like resemblance, that diminished my astonishment. The resemblance that tortured me most of all was that the rabble, too, like me, loved that whore. They loved my wife. She, too, was more inclined towards them. I am sure that there was a flaw in the character of one of us.

I refer to her as the whore because no other designation suits her as accurately as this word does. I don't want to use "my wife," because the wife-husband relationship did not exist between us; thus, if I were to use such a term, I would be deceiving myself. From the beginning of eternity I have referred to her as the whore. Besides, this name held a special attraction for me. I married her because she approached me first, not because she loved me in any way, but because this, too, was part of her cunning and duplicity. No, she did not have the slightest love for me. As a matter of fact, how could a sensual woman, who needs one man for lust, another for love and still another for torture, fall in love with only one man? I am not sure whether all her men could be subsumed under one or another of these categories. I am certain, however, that she had chosen me for torture. Indeed, she could not have made a better choice for, in spite of all the problems, I still married her because she resembled her mother and because she had a vague and distant resemblance to myself. Now, not only did I love her but the atoms of my body desired her, especially those in my midsection. I do not wish to hide my true feelings under the fanciful blanket of love, fondness, and theosophy. I do not like euphemism. I felt that an emanation or an aureole, like those one paints around the head of a saint, was seated in the middle of my body; and that this sickly and unpleasant aureole desired the aureole in the middle of her body and strove with all its might to attract it to itself.

When I felt better, I decided to leave. Like a damned, leprous dog that knows it must die, or like birds that hide themselves away to die, I decided to disappear and

lose myself. I got up early in the morning, picked up the two cookies in the niche and, making sure that nobody saw me, ran out of the house; I escaped from the affliction that had enmeshed me. I passed through many streets without any predetermined destination and, distraughtly walked by the rabble who, with greedy faces, were in pursuit of money and lust. In fact, I did not need to see them to know them; one was enough to represent the rest. They were all like one big mouth leading to a wad of guts, terminating in a sexual organ.

Suddenly I felt more agile and lighter; my leg muscles were operating with a special momentum and rapidity that was beyond my imagination. I felt that I had been cut free from the fetters of life. I raised my shoulders, a natural movement dating back to my childhood days when I did the same thing upon being freed from a task or a responsibility.

The rising sun was burning hot. I reached some quiet and empty streets. On my way, there were some grey houses designed in strange, singular, geometric shapes: cubic, prismatic and conic houses with low, dark windows; the windows did not have any shutters and the houses seemed to be temporary and abandoned. No living being, apparently, lived in those houses.

Like a golden knife, the sun sheared the edges of the shade on the wall and took them away. The streets, confined between old, whitewashed walls, were adding to their own length. Everything was motionless and quiet, as though nature was obeying the sacred law of the quietude of the burning atmosphere, the law of silence. Every place harbored so much mystery that my lungs did not dare inhale the air.

Suddenly I realized that I had left the city gate behind. With a thousand sucking mouths, the heat of the sun was drawing sweat from my body. Under the blazing sun, the desert bushes had assumed the color of turmeric. From the depths of the sky, like a feverish eye, the sun bestowed its burning heat on the silent, lifeless scene. The soil and the plants of this area, however, had a special aroma, an aroma so strong that upon inhaling it I was reminded of my childhood. I clearly recalled both the activities and the words of that era as if it had happened only yesterday. As though reborn in a lost world, I felt an agreeable giddiness. This feeling, which had the intoxicating quality of an ancient, sweet wine, penetrated my veins and sinews, reaching my very existence. I could identify with all the thorns, rocks, tree trunks and the tiny shrubs of wild thyme. I recognized the familiar scent of the vegetation. I began to think of my past—of my own far and distant days—but all those recollections, as if through some magic, sought distance from me; they were living together independently, with a life of their own. I was no more than an outcast, a helpless witness to the deep whirlpool that separated me from those sweet recollections. Compared to those days, today my heart was empty, the shrubs had lost their magical fragrance, the distance between the cypress trees had increased and the hills were dryer. I was no longer the creature that I used to be, and if I could materialize that creature and speak to him, he would not hear me, nor would he understand my words. He would have the face of an acquaintance but he would not be me, not even a part of me.

The world appeared like an empty and depressing mansion. A special agitation filled my chest as though I were compelled to investigate all the rooms in this mansion with bare feet. I passed through interconnected rooms, but at the end of each, that whore confronted me. One by one the doors, of their own accord, closed

behind me. The trembling shadows of the walls with their obliterated corners, like some female and male black slaves, stood guard over me.

When I reached the *Suren* River, a dry and barren mountain appeared in front of me. The dry and hard figure of the mountain reminded me of my nanny, although I could not establish a point of comparison between the two. I passed by the side of the mountain and reached a small, pleasant spot surrounded by mountains. The ground was covered with black lily plants, and above the mountain there was a high fort made of hefty mud bricks.

Feeling fatigued, I retired to the bank of the *Suren* River and sat on the sand beneath an ancient cypress tree. This enclosure was a quiet and secluded spot, one in which no one had walked before. Suddenly I noticed that a small girl emerged from behind the trees and walked in the direction of the fort. She wore a black dress of very thin and light warp and woof, apparently of silk. Biting the index finger of her left hand, she moved freely, as if sauntering in a carefree mood. It seemed to me that I had seen her before, and that I knew her; but because of the distance between us, and because she was directly under the intense light of the sun, I could not recognize how she suddenly disappeared.

I was petrified; unable to move even slightly. This time, however, I saw her with my own bodily eyes as she passed in front of me and disappeared. No matter how hard I tried I could not remember whether she was real or a figment of my imagination; whether I saw her in a dream or in wakefulness. I felt a special tremor in the column of my spine and it seemed to me that all the shadows in the fort on the mountain came to life and that that girl was one of the ancient citizens of the city of *Rayy*.

Suddenly, the scene made sense. I recalled that as a child, on a Thirteenth day of *Farvardin*, my mother-in-law, the whore and myself had come here. I don't recall exactly for how long the whore and I ran after each other that day and played behind these cypress trees; but I recall that later on a group of other children joined us and we played hide-and-seek. At one time, when I searched for this same whore, I found her by the side of the same *Suren* River. She slipped and fell into the river. They pulled her out and took her behind the cypress tree to change her clothes. I followed. They held a prayer veil in front of her so that she could not be seen, but stealthily I saw her whole body from behind the tree. She smiled as she chewed on the index finger of her left hand. They then clad her in a white cape and spread the black silk dress, made of very delicate warp and woof, on the ground to dry in the sun.

I lay down on the fine sand at the foot of the cypress tree. The sound of the water, like a discontinuous, unintelligible speech murmured in a dream, reached my ear. Involuntarily, I sank my hands in the warm, damp sand; I pressed the warm and moist sand in my fist: it felt like the firm flesh of the body of a girl who was just pulled out of the water and whose clothes were changed.

I don't know how much time passed in between, but when I left that place, I began to walk involuntarily. Everywhere was quiet and still. I walked without looking around. A force beyond my control made me go. Although all my attention was concentrated on my feet, I was not walking; rather, like the girl in black, I was sliding on my feet. When I came to, I found myself in the city in front of my father-in-law's house.

I don't know why I happened to be at my father-in-law's house. His small son, my brother-in-law, was sitting on the platform. He was the spitting image of his sister! He had slanting Turkmen eyes, prominent cheeks, a wheat-colored complexion, a lustful nose and a thin, strong face. As he was sitting there, he had put the index finger of his left hand in his mouth. Involuntarily, I approached him, took the cookies out of my pocket and gave them to him, saying, "*Shajun* sent these for you"—he used to call my wife *Shahjan*⁴⁸ instead of calling his own mother by that name. With his slanted Turkmen eyes, he cast a curious glance at the cookies that he held doubtfully in his hand. I sat on the platform, put him on my lap and hugged him tightly. His body was warm, the calves of his legs were like those of my wife and he had the same unceremonious disposition. His lips resembled his father's, but the very same thing that in the father evoked a sense of disgust in me was attractive and charming in the son. It seemed that his half-open lips had just finished a long, warm kiss. I kissed him on his open lips, which resembled my wife's; his lips tasted like the bitter end of a cucumber, acrid. Probably the whore's lips, too, taste the same.

At this very moment I saw his father, the stooped old man who wore a scarf, leave the house. He went on his way without looking in my direction. He laughed convulsively, a dreadful laughter that made his shoulders shake and caused one's hair to stand on end. I was so ashamed that I wished I could sink into the ground. It was getting near sunset. I got up as though trying to run away from myself and involuntarily headed for home. I did not see anything or anyone; it was as if I were traveling in some unknown and unidentifiable town. Scattered, geometrically designed houses with only a few black, deserted windows surrounded me. It seemed that no living creature could inhabit those white-walled houses from which a faint light emanated. The incredible thing is that whenever I stood between the moon and one of these walls, I cast a very large and dense shadow, but my shadow was headless. My shadow did not have a head. I had heard that those whose shadow is headless die before the year's end.

Frightened, I entered my house and took refuge in my room. I had a bloody nose and after losing much blood, I fell unconscious on my bed. My nanny began tending me.

Before going to bed, I looked at myself in the mirror; my face was distressed, vague and lifeless, so vague that I did not know myself. I climbed into bed, pulled the quilt over my head, rolled over and faced the wall. Then I curled up, closed my eyes and continued my ruminations about those delicate images that form my dark, depressing, dreadful, yet intoxicating destiny. I entered the realm where life becomes death and death becomes life, where distorted images take shape, and where past, slain, obliterated and suppressed desires, shrieking for vengeance, come to life. At moments like this, I withdrew from the world of matter, and gave myself up to annihilation in an eternal flux. Several times I murmured to myself, "death, death ... where are you?" This calmed me down and my eyes gradually closed.

Upon closing my eyes, I found myself in the *Muhammadiyah* Square. There a high gallows was set up and the rag-and-bone dealer who sits in front of my room

⁴⁸ *Shahjan* is the literary form of the colloquial form *shajun* used above. It is a name that literally means dear king or dear highness.

had been strung up. At the foot of the gallows several drunken watchmen were drinking wine. I saw my mother-in-law, her face glowing with anger—like my wife's face when she becomes angry: her lips pale and her eyes become round—plowing among the crowd trying to attract the attention of the hangman who wore a red garment. She was shouting, "String this one up, too!..." Terrified by this nightmare, I jumped up from sleep; I was extremely feverish. My body was drenched with sweat and a consuming heat glowed on my cheeks. To save myself from the clutches of this nightmare, I got out of the bed, drank some water and sprinkled some more on my face and head and returned to bed. I could not make myself go back to sleep.

In the shadowy light of the room, I was staring at the water jar in the niche. It seemed to me that as long as the water jar was in the niche I would not go to sleep. I was overwhelmed by a groundless fear that the jar was going to fall down. To prevent this, I got out of the bed to secure the jar but, in response to some unknown stimulus, my hand purposefully struck the jar; it fell down and broke into pieces. Anyway, when I pressed my eyelids together to make myself go back to sleep, it struck me that my nanny was up and was looking at me. I clenched my fists under the quilt, but nothing out of the ordinary happened. In a coma-like state, I heard the front door open, then I heard the sound of nanny's slippers as she went out and bought bread and cheese. Now I heard the cry of a vendor from afar, shouting, "Mulberries are good for bile!" Yes, as usual, tiresome life had started all over again. The amount of light was increasing. When I opened my eyes, I saw a trembling reflection of sunlight thrown onto my ceiling by the water in the pool; it had entered my room through a hole in the wall.

Now my previous night's dream appeared distant and vague, as though I had seen it as a child many years ago. When nanny brought my breakfast, her face had assumed an incredible and comical form. It was thin and elongated as if it had fallen on a magic mirror or was pulled down by some weight.

Although Nanny knew well that the smoke of the *hooka*⁴⁹ was detrimental to my health, she smoked in my room anyway. She had to smoke or she wouldn't be herself. Nanny had spoken so much about her house, her daughter-in-law and her son that she had made me a partner in her own lustful pleasures. How foolish! Sometimes, for no reason, I would think about the lives of the people at my nanny's, but for some reason everything related to the life-style and the joys of others nauseated me.

What relationship could exist between the lives of the fools and healthy rabble who were well, who slept well, who performed the sexual act well, who had never felt the wings of death on their face every moment—what relationship could exist between them and one like me who has arrived at the end of his rope and who knows that he will pass away gradually and tragically?

⁴⁹ *Hooka* (same as water pipe) is an instrument for smoking tobacco. It consists of a base filled with water and a hollow, wooden body on top of which the tobacco is placed in a ceramic top. The fire placed on the tobacco produces smoke. The smoke, before it is inhaled through a pipe that connects the body of the hooka to the smoker's mouth, passes through the water and to be cooled.

Nanny treated me like a child; she wanted to see every phlegm in the basin, combing my hair and beard, putting my nightcap straight whenever I entered the room. I did not feel shy with my nanny in any way. Why should this woman, who bore no relationship to me at all, involve herself so deeply in my life? I recall how when, as children, the whore and I used to sleep under a *korsi*⁵⁰ that was set up on the cistern. Nanny slept with us under the *korsi*. In the morning light, when I opened my eyes, the design on the embroidered curtain hanging in front of the doorway came to life. What a strange, terrifying curtain it was! It depicted a stooped old man, who resembled the Indian *yogis*, wore a turban, and sat underneath a cypress tree. In his hand he held an instrument that looked like a *sitar*. In front of him stood a beautiful young girl, like a *Bugam Dasi* or a dancer at the Indian temples. Her hands were in chains and it seemed that she was being forced to dance in front of the old man. I used to think to myself that the old man's outward appearance and the white color of his hair and beard must be the result of his having been thrown into a dungeon in which a *Nag*-serpent had been released.

It was probably one of those gold-embroidered curtains that my father or my uncle had sent us from far-off lands. When I stared at this picture for a long time, it frightened me. I would awaken my nanny who, with her bad breath and coarse, black hair rubbing against my face, would hug me tightly. This morning when I opened my eyes, she seemed to be exactly the same as then except for the wrinkles on her face. They appeared deeper and harder.

Often, in order to forget, to run away from myself, I would recall my childhood. This was to help me feel the same as I did before the sickness, to make me feel that I was healthy. I still felt that I was a child and that there was a second being that had pity on me, who would pity this child who was about to die. In my moments of distress and fear, the quiet face of my nanny—her pallid complexion, dull, motionless, sunken eyes, thin nostril wings, and wide, bony forehead—revived those memories in me. Perhaps some mysterious rays emanating from her brought me comfort. Nanny had a fleshy mole covered with hair on her temple. I believe this was the first time that I have seen it. Usually I did not look so closely at her face.

Although nanny's outward appearance had changed, her thoughts had not. Her attachment to life had increased; so had her fear of death. She reminded me of the flies that, at the beginning of the fall season, take refuge in the room. My life, however, was changing daily, even by the minute. It seemed that, for me, the many years that it takes to change a normal life were speeded up a thousand times. But the pleasures that those changes brought me, instead of being manifold, were nil, less than nil. There are those who begin to struggle with death when they are twenty years of age, while others die in a moment, a very quiet and peaceful death; they die in the same way that a tallow burner that has run out of fuel is extinguished.

At noon, when my nanny brought me my lunch, I upset the soup bowl and shrieked; I shrieked with all my might. All those living in the house gathered in front

⁵⁰ A table-like device for heating houses in winter. A heavy quilt covers the top and hangs over the sides. Fumeless coals covered by ash are placed in a brazier under the table. Family members sit around the table, under the quilt, avoiding touching the hot brazier with their feet.

of my door. The whore, too, came, but she did not stay. I looked at her belly. It was swelled up. No, she was still carrying the child. They sent for the physician. It pleased me inwardly that I had created some trouble for this foolish lot.

The physician, who wore a long beard, arrived and had me smoke opium. Opium, what a valuable drug for my suffering-ridden life! As I smoked, my thoughts grew large, subtle, and magical; they soared. At such times I traveled in a world beyond the ordinary. My thoughts and my imagination, free from the attraction and the weight of earthly things, rose toward an empyrean tranquility and stillness. It was as though I sat on the wings of a golden bat and roamed in a radiant, empty world unimpeded. This experience was so profound and so delightful that it surpassed even the intoxication induced by death.

I left the pot of fire, where I was smoking opium, and walked to the window that opens onto our courtyard. Nanny was sitting in the sunlight cleaning vegetables. I heard her talk to her daughter-in-law. She was saying, "We all have lost our hearts. I wish God would kill him and put him out of his misery!" I knew then that the physician had told them that my disease was incurable.

As for me, I was not surprised at all. How foolish people are! She said all this but when, an hour later, she brought my herbal extracts, her eyes were swollen and blood shot because of excessive weeping. She forced herself to smile in front of me. They were play-acting, but were quite clumsy at it. Did they think that I did not know? Anyway, why was this woman so very fond of me? Why did she think of herself as the companion of my sufferings? All she did was to thrust her bucket-like, black, wrinkled nipples into my mouth for pay. I wished her breasts were afflicted with leprosy. Now, looking at her breasts, I am nauseated even to think of having sucked the sap of her life through those breasts and that our body temperatures had met and become one. Should she be treating me with the boldness of a widow, simply because when I was a child she used to rub my body all over. Because at some time in the past she had held me over the latrine, she continues to treat me like a child. She might even have used me as her lesbian partner, or her adopted sister, that some women choose for themselves.

She did "take care of me," as she put it, with a great deal of curiosity and attention. If my wife, that whore, attended me, I would never allow nanny to touch me. In my estimation, my wife's dominion of thought and her sense of beauty surpassed nanny's, or else lust had created a sense of shyness and bashfulness in me.

For these reasons, I felt less shy with my nanny, and that is why only she took care of me. Perhaps my nanny believed that fate, or her star, had arranged things in this way. Using my sickness as an excuse, she told me all the intimate details of her family's life: their joys, their quarrels; she revealed every corner of her simple, cunning and beggar-like soul. She told me that she was not happy with her daughter-in-law, as if that woman were a second wife, encroaching on her son's love and lust for her. She said all this in a most indescribable, vengeful tone! Her daughter-in-law must be a beautiful girl. I have seen her through the window that opens onto the yard. She has hazel eyes, blond hair, and a small, straight nose.

Sometimes my nanny talked to me about the miracles of the prophets. She thought what she had to say consoled me, while in reality I was merely envious of her low level of thinking and of her foolishness. Sometimes she came to me to

gossip. For instance, several days ago she told me that her daughter (the whore, that is), at an auspicious hour, had been sewing a resurrection garment for the child, for her own child. Then, as if she knew well what she was talking about, she comforted me. Sometimes she goes around the neighborhood and brings me medicine from the magician, the fortune-teller, the cupper, and the augur, and discusses my situation with them. On the last Wednesday of the year⁵¹ she went eavesdropping; she returned with a bowl full of onions, rice and some rancid oil. She said that she had begged these for the sake of my health—later, stealthily, she fed all that crap to me. In between I had to take the herbal extracts that the physician had prescribed; those same unholy concoctions: hyssop, extract of licorice, camphor, maidenhair, chamomile, oil of bay, linseeds, fir-tree seeds, starch, London-rocket seeds, and a thousand other kinds of trash...

Several days ago she brought me a prayer book with a layer of dust on top of it. But neither the rabbles' prayers nor any of their books, writings or thoughts was useful for me. What use did I have for their nonsense and their lies? Wasn't I myself the result of many succeeding generations, and weren't their hereditary sufferings inherent in me? Wasn't the past in myself? Never have any of these—the mosque, the call to prayer, the ablutions, the noisy spitting, the bowing and prostration in front of the Almighty or absolute Creator with whom one could converse only in Arabic—none of these has ever had any effect on me.

Even when I was healthy and attended a mosque several times, my efforts to harmonize my thoughts and feelings with those of others were futile. My eyes scanned the glazed tiles and the intricate designs on the walls. Those designs then relieved me from the obligations of the mosque and transported me into a realm of delightful dreams

During the prayer, I closed my eyes and hid my face in the palms of my hands. In this self-created night, I uttered my prayers as if they were some irresponsible words spoken in a dream. My pronunciation of the words of the prayer was devoid of inner meaning because I preferred to speak to a friend, or an acquaintance rather than to God or to an All Powerful One--God was too much for me!

Inasmuch as I was lying in a warm, damp bed, none of these problems was of the slightest interest to me. I did not wish to know whether God existed, or whether as an embodiment of the wishes of the rulers of the earth He was created to confirm their divinity and to facilitate their robbing of their subjects. In other words, was God an imaginary picture of the ills of this world projected onto the heavens? At this stage of my life, I only wished to know if I could make it through the night. In comparison with death, I found creed, faith and belief to be weak and childish, like a kind of entertainment for the healthy and fortunate. Compared with the frightful reality of death and my state of degeneration, all my education on the subjects of spiritual reward and punishment and the Resurrection Day was nothing but a tasteless,

⁵¹ The New Year celebrations begin on the eve of the last Wednesday of the year. Late that day a bonfire is made and everyone jumps over the fire while reciting: "My yellow color for you/Your red color for me!" The episode under discussion follows jumping over the fire. For further details, see <http://www.angelfire.com/rnb/bashiri/Nowruz/NowRuz.html>.

deceitful notion. The prayers I had learned were wholly ineffectual in warding off the fear of death.

No, the fear of death had dominated me and would not leave me alone. Those who have not experienced suffering do not understand the meaning of these words. The urge to live had been intensified in me to the degree that the smallest moment of pleasure compensated for the longest hours of palpitation and anguish. I recognized the existence of suffering, but, having no tangible manifestation, I could not describe it. I had become an unknown and unrecognizable breed among the rabble, so much so that I had forgotten that I had ever existed in their world. The dreadful thing is that I did not feel either completely alive or totally dead; I was a moving body that, thrown out of the world of the living, had recourse only to oblivion and to the tranquility of the dead.

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Early in the evening I left the pot of fire where I smoke opium and looked out of the window. I saw a black tree and the shuttered entrance door to the butcher shop. Many dark shadows blended into each other, making everything assume an aura of emptiness and transience. Innumerable shining stars pierced the pitch-black sky that resembled an ancient black tent. At this moment, I heard the call to prayer; an untimely call to prayer—perhaps a woman, maybe the whore, was giving birth, or was on the bricks, as the saying goes. Interspersed with the call was the barking of a dog. I thought to myself, "If there is any truth in the saying that everyone is assigned a star in the sky, my star must be remote, dull, and insignificant; perhaps I never had a star!" Then I heard the voices of a group of drunken watchmen who passed in the street and played practical jokes on each other. Then, altogether, they sang in chorus:

Let us go and drink *mey*⁵²—
The wine of the kingdom of *Rayy*;
If not today, then what day?

Frightened, I pulled myself aside. Their singing echoed in a peculiar way in the air then gradually grew distant and faint. No. They were not looking for me; they did not know... Once more darkness and silence returned, covering everything. I did not light the tallow burner in my room because I felt like sitting in that dense liquid which permeates everything—in darkness. I was accustomed to darkness. There, in the darkness, my lost thoughts, my forgotten fears, and my terrifying and incredible recollections, hidden in the unknown recesses of my brain, came alive, moved about and mocked me. These threatening, formless figures, these thoughts lurked everywhere; in the corner of the room, behind the curtain and at the side of the door.

A frightening figure was right there, beside the curtain. It was not moving; it was neither gloomy nor cheerful. Every time I turned my head in its direction, it stared right at me. It had a familiar face, as if I had seen this very face when I was a child. It

⁵² *Mey* (also *sharab*) is the literary word for wine.

was on a thirteenth day of the month of *Farvardin*. I was playing hide-and-seek with some children on the bank of the *Suren* River. There this face, along with other ordinary faces, had appeared to me. This face also resembled the face of the butcher across from my room. Obviously this man was involved in my life and I had seen him quite often. And possibly this was the shadow of my twin, a creature that was limited to the boundaries of my life...

As soon as I got up to light the tallow burner, the figure automatically disappeared. I walked to the mirror and concentrated on my face. The picture in the mirror seemed to be that of a stranger. It was incredible and terrifying; my reflection was stronger than myself and I had become like the reflection in the mirror. It seemed that I could not remain in the same room with this reflection. I was afraid that if I ran, my reflection would chase me, like two cats facing each other to fight. Instead, I covered my eyes with the palm of my hand to create an eternal night for myself. Often these moments of fright were accompanied by a special intoxication; I felt giddy, my knees gave way and I felt nauseated. Then suddenly I realized that I was standing on my feet. Standing like that was like a miracle for me. How could I be standing on my feet? I felt that if I moved one of my legs I would lose my equilibrium; I felt quite dizzy. The earth and its creatures were away from me. Vaguely I hoped for an earthquake or a tornado, so that I could be reborn in a quiet, bright world.

As I was entering the bed, several times I said to myself, "death... death..." In spite of my closed lips, I was afraid of my own voice. I seemed to have lost the courage that I once had; I was like the flies that invade the house at the onset of fall: lean, lifeless flies afraid of the buzz of their own wings. They cling to the wall and remain motionless until they realize that they are alive; then they ricochet wildly against the doors and windows until their dead bodies fall to the floor.

As soon as my eyes closed, a vague world materialized before me, a world wholly of my own making, compatible with my thoughts and observations. Anyway, it was a world of wakefulness in which no obstacles or impasses barred my thoughts and imagination. Time and space had lost their effect. This lust-purged feeling, produced in the depth of my being, a product of my latent needs, created some incredible, but natural, shapes and events before me. When I woke up, I was still doubtful of my existence and had no sense of time and space. It seems that all my dreams were of my own making and, therefore, I was already familiar with their interpretation.

It was quite late at night when I fell asleep. I found myself walking and breathing freely in the streets of an unknown city. The houses in this city were built in strange geometrical shapes: prismatic, conic and cubic; they had dark, low windows with lily plants clinging to the doors and windows. The inhabitants of the city had died a strange death; they were all petrified in their places and two drops of blood had run from their mouths to their clothes. Whichever I touched, his head broke off and fell down.

I came to a butcher shop. There I saw a man who resembled the rag-and-bone dealer, who sits in front of our house. He wore a scarf and was carrying a long-handled knife in his hand; he stared at me with red eyes, the lids of which seemed to have been cut. When I tried to take the knife away from him, his head came off and

tumbled down. Overcome with fright, I escaped. I ran through the streets. Everyone that I saw was petrified in his place. I was afraid to look behind me. When I reached my father-in-law's house, I saw my brother-in-law, that whore's little brother; he was sitting on the platform. I took two cookies out of my pocket to give to him, but when I touched him, his head, too, came off and fell down. I shrieked and woke up.

It was still dusk. I was suffering from palpitations of the heart. The ceiling seemed to be pressing on my head. The walls were extremely thick and my chest seemed about to burst open. My sight was dim. For a while, terrified, I stared at the rafters, counting and recounting the beams. When I pressed my eyes shut, I heard the door open. It was my nanny. She wanted to sweep my room. She had taken my breakfast upstairs to the upper chamber. I went upstairs and sat on the balcony in front of the sash-window. From there I could not see the rag-and-bone dealer who sits in front of my room, but I could see the butcher to my left. His activities, however, which had seemed frightening, grave and measured from my window, seemed comical and poor from up here. Apparently he was not a real butcher, but was only play-acting. They brought in the lean black packhorses who coughed heavy, dry coughs and on whose sides two sheep carcasses were hung. The butcher stroked his mustache with his greasy hand, appraised the sheep with a buyer's eyes; then with difficulty he carried two of them to his shop and hung them up on the hooks. He rubbed his hand over the legs of the sheep as if caressing them. Perhaps, last night, too, who knows that when he played with his wife's body he did not remember the sheep; he might even have thought of the profit that she might have brought if he were to kill and sell her.

When the cleaning was finished, I returned to my room and made a decision; a frightening decision. I fetched the long-handled knife from the tin can in the closet of my room, cleaned the blade with the tail of my shirt, and put the knife under my pillow. I had made this decision a long time ago, but something in the activities of the butcher, in his chopping, weighing and appraising the legs of the sheep revived a sense of imitation in me. It was necessary for me to experience this pleasure. Looking at the sky through my window, among the clouds I saw a patch of absolutely deep blue. It seemed that to reach there I must climb a very high ladder. The horizon was covered with thick, yellow and deathly clouds that weighed heavily on the city.

The weather was horrible yet intoxicating. For some reason, I found myself bending toward the floor. In weather like this I always thought of death, but only now, now that death with its bloodstained face and bony hands had me by the throat, now I wanted to carry out my decision. I had decided long ago to take that whore along with me so that later on, after my death, she wouldn't say, "May God have mercy on him. He suffered enough!"

At this time, they were carrying a coffin in front of my window. The coffin was covered with black drapes and on top of it two candles were burning. The sound of *la ilaha il-allah* (there is no god but God) drew my attention to the procession. The trades people and the passersby halted their activities and walked seven steps behind the coffin before continuing their business; even the butcher, for the sake of having performed a ritual good deed, followed the coffin for seven steps before returning to his shop. The rag-and-bone dealer, however, did not move from where he sat at his

display. Everyone had assumed a stern, serious face! Perhaps this procession had reminded them of their mortality and of the other world. When my nanny brought herbal extracts to me, she was frowning. She was passing the large beads of a rosary through her fingers and praying to herself. Later on, she said her prayers aloud in a contemptible way, reciting, *allahomma*,⁵³ *sallahomma*...

She behaved as though I was in charge of the forgiveness of the sins of the living! But none of this buffoonery had the slightest effect on me. On the contrary, I was pleased to see that, even though temporarily and deceitfully, the rabble were living several seconds in my world. Was not my room a coffin? Was not my bed colder and darker than a grave? The same ready-made bed constantly inviting me to sleep! Several times the thought that I was in a coffin had occurred to me. At night my room seemed to shrink and press in on me from all sides. Isn't this the same as the feeling that one experiences in the grave? Is anyone informed about the condition of the senses of the deceased?

Although at the time of death the blood ceases to circulate, and although after twenty-four hours some parts of the body begin to decompose and disintegrate, for quite some time the hair and the nails continue to grow. Do senses and thoughts also cease when the heart stops, or do they continue a vague life using what blood remains in the smaller vessels? The feelings surrounding the thought of death are frightening in themselves; thus, by extension, the feeling that one is actually dead must be most terrifying and unbearable. There are some old people who die with a smile on their lips, so quietly that one could say they go from one sleep to another. They are like tallow burners that quietly burn themselves out. But what are the feelings of a robust youth who dies suddenly—one whose bodily powers put up a fight with death—what are his feelings? I had often thought about death and about the disintegration of my body. I was accustomed to these thoughts—so much so that they no longer frightened me. On the contrary, I wished earnestly to die, to cease existing. I was afraid, however, that the particles of my body might blend with those of the rabble, an idea that I could not bear. Sometimes I wished that I had long hands and long sensitive fingers so that I could carefully gather the particles of my body and prevent them from getting mixed with those of the rabble.

Sometimes I thought that my observations were very similar to those of people in their death throes; the zeal for life, anxiety, awe and fear, all had abandoned me. The rejection of all indoctrinations imposed on me produced a special sense of tranquility. The hope for nonexistence after death was the only thing that consoled me. The thought of a second life frightened me and made me tired. I was still not used to this world in which I was living; what good would another world do me? I had a feeling that this world was not made for me but for a group of pseudo-intellectuals: a group of shameless, diabolical, rude, and beggar-like mule-drivers who lack insight and wisdom. It was made for those who were created to suit it, those who, like the hungry dog in front of the butcher shop wagging its tail for a bit of offal, are used to flatter the mighty of the earth and the sky. The thought of a second life frightened me and made me tired. I had no need to see all these nauseating worlds and those repulsive figures. Had God acquired his worlds so

⁵³ Initial words of "Praise be to Muhammad and his family!"

recently that he wished to intimidate me by exhibiting them? I cannot tell lies. Were I to have a second life, I should wish for dull and blunt thoughts and feelings; I would like to breathe freely and without feeling fatigued; and lastly I would like to continue my life in the shade of the columns of a *Linga* temple—a world in which I could run around freely without the sun hurting my eyes or the bustle of life and people's voices hurting my ears.

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I was incessantly growing inward; like an animal that hibernates during winter, I could hear other peoples' voices with my ears; my own voice, however, I could hear only in my throat. The loneliness and the solitude that lurked behind me were like a condensed, thick, eternal night, like one of those nights with a dense, persistent, sticky darkness that waits to pounce on unpopulated cities filled with lustful and vengeful dreams. My whole being could now be summed up in my voice—an insane, absolute record. The force that, out of loneliness, brings two individuals together to procreate has its roots in this same insanity. This insanity exists in everyone and is mingled with a sense of regret, that gradually tends toward death... Only death does not tell lies!

The presence of death annihilates all that is imaginary. We are the offspring of death and death delivers us from the tantalizing, fraudulent attractions of life; it is death that beckons us from the depths of life. During the ages that we still do not understand language, when, at times, in the middle of playing we come to a halt, we do so to hear the call of death... throughout our lives, it is the finger of death that points at us. Has it not happened for someone to suddenly, without reason, experience a moment of deep thought, so deep that he loses his bearing in time and space and does not know what he is thinking about? And after he is jolted back into reality, does he not need to become reacquainted with the real world? That is the call of death.

In this damp bed smelling of sweat, when my eyelids grew heavy and I was about to surrender to nonexistence and eternal night, all my lost memories and forgotten fears came to life: fear that the feathers in the pillow might turn to blades of daggers, that the button on my bed-clothes might grow as big as a millstone, that the piece of bread which falls to the floor might shatter like a piece of glass. I was apprehensive that should I fall asleep, the oil in the tallow burner might spill over and cause the whole city to go up in flames. The compulsive thought that the paws of the dog in front of the butcher shop might echo like the sound of the hoofs of a horse. Nagging fear that the rag-and-bone dealer sitting at his display might suddenly begin to laugh, a laughter that he could no longer control. I was afraid that the worm in the footpath of our pond might become a serpent, and that my quilt might become a tombstone with hinges that would slide and lock its marble teeth and bury me alive. I was afraid that I might lose my voice and no matter how much I screamed, nobody would come to my help...

I wished to recall my childhood; but when my wish came true and I felt like I did in those days, it was as difficult and painful now as it was then: coughs that resounded like the coughs of lean black packhorses in front of the butcher shop;

spitting phlegm with the fear that there might be traces of blood in it. Blood, that tepid, salty liquid, the essence of life that emerges from the depths of the body and must be vomited and the constant threat of death that irrevocably tramples over all thought and obliterates any fear or trepidation.

Life, coolly and dispassionately, reveals to each person his own reflection, as if everyone carries several masks within him. Some, the thrifty, constantly use the same mask. Naturally this mask becomes dirty and wrinkled. Others save their masks for their children, and there are still others who constantly change their masks. It is only when they begin to age that they realize they have run out of masks. It is from behind that last mask that their real faces emerge.

Some kind of lethal influence permeated the walls of my room and poisoned my thoughts. I was certain that a condemned criminal, before he was put to death, a chained lunatic had occupied this room. Not only the walls of my room, but also the view outside, the butcher, the rag-and-bone dealer, my nanny, that whore and all that I saw—the bowl from which I ate my soup and my clothes—all these had conspired to create these thoughts in my mind.

Several nights ago in the cloakroom of the bathhouse, when I took my clothes off, my thoughts took a different turn. Later on, when the bath-attendant poured water on my head, I felt as though my black thoughts were washed away. In the bath chamber, I looked at my shadow on the steamy wall and saw that I was as delicate and brittle as I was ten years ago when I was a child. I also recalled that my shadow used to fall on the steamy wall just like that. I looked closely at my body, at my thigh, my calf and at the middle of my body; it was a disappointing, lustful sight. Their shadows, too, were like they were ten years ago when I was a child. I felt that my entire life, like an aimless shadow, has passed me by, like the flickering, meaningless shadows on the wall of a bathhouse. Perhaps the sturdy, heavy and robust fellows cast a bigger and denser shadow on the steamy wall of the bathhouse; a shadow that left a trace of its existence for a long time, while my shadow disappeared instantaneously. In the cloakroom, when I was dressing, my appearance and my thoughts changed one more time. It was as though I had entered a new world; as if I were reborn in the very world that I hated. In any event, since miraculously I somehow did not dissolve like a chunk of salt in the bathing pond, I was certain that I had acquired a second life.

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My life appeared to me as unnatural, uncertain and incredible as the design on the pen-case I am using at this moment. It seems that a painter who has been possessed, perhaps a perfectionist, has painted the design on the cover of this pen-case. Often, when I look at this design, it seems familiar; perhaps it is because of this design that I write or perhaps this design makes me write. Depicted on the cover of the pen-case is a cypress tree underneath which a stooped old man, like an Indian *yogi*, is squatting. He is wrapped in a cloak and wears a turban. He has placed the index finger of his left hand on his lips in astonishment. Opposite him, a girl wearing a long, black dress and assuming an unnatural posture—perhaps a *Bugam Dasi*—is dancing before him. She is holding a lily. A brook separates the two.

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I dispersed all my dark thoughts in the delicate and heavenly smoke at the side of the opium brazier. Now it was my body that thought, it was my body that dreamed, it was my body that glided as if it were freed from the gravity and pollution of the air; it soared in an unknown world full of unknown colors and shapes. The opium had inspired in me a vegetable soul, a sluggish vegetable soul, and I traveled in the world of plants. Had I become a plant? But as I sat on the leather mat, wrapped in my cloak, dozing off in front of the pot of fire, for some reason I thought of the rag-and-bone dealer. He, too, sat before his display with hunched shoulders as I do. This thought frightened me. I got up, threw the cloak to one side, and walked to the mirror. My glowing cheeks were the color of meat at the butcher shop; my beard, though disheveled, lent me an expression of attractive spirituality. The look in my sickly eyes was offended, childish, and fatigued, as though all that was terrestrial and human had abandoned me. I liked my face; it made me lustfully intoxicated. Looking at my reflection in the mirror I said to myself, "Your suffering is so profound that it is caught at the bottom of your eyes... even if you cry, it is not certain that you will be able to shed any tears!..."

Then again I said, "You are a fool! Why don't you finish yourself? What are you waiting for?... What more do you want? Isn't the wine flask in the closet of your room?... Take a slug and there you go!... fool!... you are a fool..." Then I realized that I was talking to the empty air!

The different thoughts that converged in my mind were not related to each other. I could hear my voice in my throat, but I could not understand the meaning of my words. In my mind these sounds blended with other sounds and lost their identity. My fingers seemed to be longer now, like the time when I was feverish; my eyelids were heavy, and my lips had become thick. Upon turning away from the mirror, I saw my nanny standing in the doorway. I burst into laughter, but my nanny's face was motionless. Her lifeless eyes stared at me, but they showed no trace of surprise, anger or sorrow. Generally one laughs at a foolish act, but my laughter was more profound than that; I was laughing at the grand folly, at all that man has failed to solve and the comprehension of which is beyond his reach; I laughed at that which is lost in the darkness of the night, and at death.

My nanny picked up the pot of fire and, with measured steps, walked out of the room. I wiped the sweat off my brow; the palms of my hands were covered with white flecks. I leaned against the wall and placed my head upon it. I seemed to feel better. Then I began to whisper this tune, the origin of which is not known to me:

Let us go and drink *mey*—
The wine of the kingdom of *Rayy*;
If not today, then what day?

Occurring to me before a crisis, this tune always made me agitated and uneasy; like a knot around my heart, it was a depressing sign, the calm before the storm. At

such times the real world abandoned me and I lived in a luminous world immeasurably distant from the terrestrial one.

At such times, I was afraid of myself; I was afraid of everyone. Undoubtedly this fear was related to my sickness, which had weakened my thoughts and my body. I was even afraid when I looked at the rag-and-bone dealer and the butcher through the window of my room. There was something frightening in their actions, and in their appearance, but I could not say exactly what. Nanny said something that frightened me. She swore by the holy prophets that she had seen the rag-and-bone dealer visit my wife's bedchamber at night. Through the door, she had even heard the whore's own words, saying, "Take off your scarf!" And this is even more incredible: the day before yesterday or the day before that, when I shrieked and my wife appeared behind the half-open door of my room, with my own eyes I saw the traces of the old man's dirty, yellow and decayed teeth, teeth from between which Arabic verses of the *Qur'an* flowed, on my wife's cheek. To begin with, what prompted this man to, since my marriage, appear in front of our house and remain there? Did he forsake the world for the sake of this whore? I recall that on that same day I went over to his display and asked him the price of the jar. Through his scarf, two decayed teeth and a leprous lip, and laughing hysterically, with laughter that made one's hair stand on end, he said to me, "Don't you look at what you buy? This jar is not worth much, huh, young man. Take it! I hope it brings you luck!" His voice had a peculiar ring as he said, "This jar is not worth much. I hope it brings you luck!" I put my hand in my pocket, took out two *derhams*⁵⁴ and four *peshizes*⁵⁵ and placed them on the corner of his display. He laughed again; a hideous laughter that made my hair stand on end. I could have sunk into the ground with shame. Covering my face with my hands, I returned home.

The entire display spread before him had the rusty smell of dirty things refused by life, as if he intended to flaunt what life has refused, or perhaps he merely intended to display them. Wasn't he himself old and dejected? The articles in his display were all lifeless, dirty, and worn out; nevertheless, the display had a persistent life as well as some profoundly meaningful designs! These dead articles had more effect on me than living human beings did.

Nanny gave me and everyone else the news of the old man's visits to my wife's bedchamber. Sleeping with a dirty beggar! Nanny also told me that my wife had become infested with lice and that she went to the bathhouse. What kind of a shadow did she cast on the steamy wall of the bathhouse? Perhaps a lustful shadow quite confident of itself. On the whole, this time I did not disapprove of my wife's taste, because the rag-and-bone dealer was not a commonplace, vulgar and colorless man like the stud-males who attract foolish women with an inordinate desire for coition. The layers of misfortune encrusted on the old man's head and face, along with the misery that emanated from him, distinguished him as a demi-god; and even though the old man was not aware of this, he was a manifestation, a representative of creation itself.

⁵⁴ *Derham* was a silver coin used in the Islamic lands since the 8th century A. D. It weighed one *derham*.

⁵⁵ *Peshiz* was a medieval coin with relatively small monetary value.

In any case I saw the traces of two decayed teeth, from behind which Arabic verses came forth, on my wife's cheek, on the cheek of this woman who did not admit me, who humiliated me and whom, despite all this, I loved—even though she had not allowed me to, even once, kiss her on the cheek!

The sunlight was yellowish and pale when I heard the plaintive sound of the kettledrums; it was like the sound of entreaty and supplication that revives the fear of darkness and all inherited superstitions. The moment of crisis, the foretold moment for which I had been waiting, arrived. My body was burning from head to toe, and I was suffocating. I went to my bed, lay down and closed my eyes; the intensity of the fever had distorted my vision in such a way that everything seemed bigger and had fuzzy margins. Instead of sinking, the ceiling seemed more elevated. My clothes pressed against my body. Without any reason, I sat up in my bed and murmured, "This is the limit... it is unbearable..." I became silent. Then mockingly, but loudly and clearly enunciating, I said to myself, "It is the..." and added, "I am a fool!" I was not paying any attention to the meaning of what I said; I was merely amusing myself with the vibrations of my voice. Maybe I talked to my shadow to dispel loneliness. Then I saw something incredible: the door opened and that whore entered my room. Obviously, every now and then, she thought of me. I should be grateful! It showed that she, too, was aware that I am alive, that I suffer and that I am undergoing a gradual death. This was good grounds for being thankful; however, I wished to know if she were aware that I was dying because of her; if she were, I would die peacefully and happily—I would be the happiest man on the face of the earth.

Upon the whore's entrance, all my evil thoughts vanished. Some rays emanating from her being or some blessing in her gestures comforted me. This time she was healthy; she was plump and mature. She wore a heavy, gray, doubled up mantle, her eyebrows were plucked and darkened with woad, and she wore a mole; to her face she had applied some white facial powder and rouge and she had added collyrium⁵⁶ to her eyelashes. In short, she entered my room all made up. She seemed content with her life. Involuntarily, she placed the index finger of her left hand in her mouth. Was she the gentle lady, the delicate, ethereal girl who wore a wrinkled black dress, who played hide-and-seek with me on the bank of the *Suren* River, the childish, transient and free girl whose provocative, sexy calves were visible through her skirt? Until now, whenever I looked at her, I was not aware that she was that same ethereal girl, but now, as if a curtain was removed from before my eyes, for some reason I was reminded of the sheep in front of the butcher shop and she resembled a lump of lean meat. All the traces of her inherent attractiveness had been lost. She was a mature, grave, made-up woman who was preoccupied with the thought of life! A complete woman! My wife! With fear and dread, I realized that my wife had grown up and was an adult, while I had remained a child. To tell the truth I felt ashamed to look her in the face; I felt ashamed especially of her eyes. She yielded herself to everyone except me; my only consolation was the vague memory of her childhood when she had a simple childish face and had been a vague, transitory being, when

⁵⁶ An antique term for a lotion or liquid wash used as a cleanser for the eyes, particularly in diseases of the eye.

there had been no trace of the rag-and-bone dealer's teeth on her face—no, she was not the same person.

"How are you feeling?" She asked sarcastically.

"Are you not free? Are you not doing whatever you wish to do? What's my health to you?" I snapped at her.

She slammed the door and left; she didn't even turn to look at me. I had forgotten how to communicate with the people of the world, with the living. This woman, whom I thought had no feeling whatsoever, took offense at my act! Several times I wanted to get up and go to her and throw myself at her feet and ask for forgiveness. Indeed, I wanted to cry because I thought if I were able to cry, it would decrease the intensity of my remorse and I would feel better. How many minutes, hours, or centuries passed, I don't know. I was like a lunatic who becomes intoxicated with his own suffering. The state of ecstasy that I experienced is beyond human comprehension; I was the only one who could experience such a state, a state beyond the reach of even gods, if they actually existed... At that moment I discovered that I was indeed superior; I was above the rabble, above the phenomenal world, and even felt that I had surpassed those gods who are the offspring of human lust. I had become a god, even bigger than a god, because I felt within me an eternal, infinite flux.

... But she returned. She was not as cruel as I had imagined. I rose, kissed her skirt and, coughing and crying, threw myself at her feet. I rubbed my face against her calf and several times called her by her real name—her real name seemed to have a special ring to it. But as I embraced her legs, which were bitter, soft and acrid, like the taste of the bitter end of a cucumber, in my heart—at the bottom of my heart, that is—I repeated "whore ... whore!" and I cried and cried. I lost all track of time, but when I came to, she was gone.

As I sat before the smoking tallow burner in the same position in which I sit at the opium brazier—like the rag-and-bone dealer who sits at his display—for an instantaneous moment, I experienced the full impact of the intoxicating pleasures, the caresses and suffering of mankind. I was bending over the tallow burner immobile, gazing at the soot that, like black flakes of snow, was covering my hands and face. When my nanny, carrying a bowl of barley-broth and some chicken *pilaff*,⁵⁷ entered my room and saw me, she screamed in terror and backed away, dropping the tray and my dinner. It pleased me that at least I was able to frighten her. I got up, cropped the wick with a pair of snuffers and walked to the mirror. I rubbed the soot into my face—what a horrible face! I began to pull under my eye and tug the corners of my mouth, I puffed out my cheeks, I pulled the tip of my beard up and twisted the ends, I made all kinds of faces; my face was capable of assuming all manner of frightening and comical expressions. Although I recognized these expressions and I could feel them, they still struck me as funny. All these were my faces and they were in me; they were murderous, horrible and comical masks that I could transform, one into another, using the tip of a finger. In myself, I saw the reflections of the old *Qur'an* reciter, the butcher, and my wife; it was as though an image of each existed within me, but none of them belonged to me. Are not the

⁵⁷ A steamed rice dish often with meat, shellfish, or vegetables in a seasoned broth.

substance and the expressions of my face responses to an undefined stimulus created by the cumulative doubts, copulations, and disappointments inherent in my ancestors? And that I, the custodian of this burdensome inheritance, due to some insane and humorous inclination, have involuntarily allowed my thoughts to assume these formal and rigid expressions! Only at the time of my death, perhaps, will my figure be freed from the binds of this compulsion and assume its natural expression!

Even at that last minute, however, couldn't the expressions that my ridiculous desire has engraved on my face prove too deeply incised to be obliterated? In any event, I had gained insight into my capabilities and I realized my potential. Suddenly, I burst into laughter. And what a hideous frightening laughter it was! It made my hair stand on end, because I did not recognize my own voice. It was like a sound from the outside, a laughter that I usually heard deep in my throat, now resounded in my ear. Then, I began to cough and a clot of bloody phlegm, a piece of my liver, fell onto the mirror. I moved the phlegm around on the surface of the mirror with my finger; then I turned and looked behind me. I saw a terrified nanny staring at me; her face was pale, her hair was disheveled and her eyes were lifeless; she was holding a bowl of barley broth like the one she had brought me earlier. I covered my face with my hands and hid myself behind the closet curtain.

When I tried to go to sleep, a fiery ring pressed on my head from all around. The pungent and lustful smell of the sandalwood, which I had put into the tallow burner, filled my nostrils; it smelled like my wife's leg muscles. The mildly bitter taste of cucumber ends was still in my mouth. I rubbed my hand against my body and, in my imagination, I compared my body (my thigh, my calves, my arms) with my wife's; again the outline of my wife's thigh and buttocks, and the warmth of her body, materialized before me. It more than materialized because it fulfilled a need. I desired her body near me. To dispel this lustful temptation, I needed to make a move, to make a decision but, before I knew it, this fiery ring around my head became so scalding that it plunged me into the depth of a vague sea with frightening figures.

It was still dark when the voices of a group of drunken watchmen passing in the alley woke me. Playing practical jokes on each other they sang in unison:

Let us go and drink *mey*—
The wine of the kingdom of *Rayy*;
If not today, then what day?

I recalled, no, upon a sudden inspiration I remembered that I had a flask of wine in the closet of my room. A cup of this wine in which poison from the fang of a *Nag* was dissolved could dispel all the nightmares that life could create... but that whore...? This word intensified my jealousy towards her and made her appear livelier and more energetic than before.

Could I imagine anything better than this: to give a cup of that wine to her, to gulp one down myself and to die together with her in the throes of a convulsion? What is love? For the rabble love is a kind of indecency, a transient vulgarity; the rabble's conception of love is best found in their obscene ditties, in prostitution and in the foul idioms they use when they are halfway sober, such as "shoving the donkey's foreleg into mud," or "putting dust on the head." My love for her, however,

was of a totally different kind. I knew her from ancient times—strange slanted eyes, a narrow, half-open mouth, a subdued quiet voice. She was the embodiment of all my distant, painful memories among which I sought what I was deprived of, what belonged to me but somehow I was denied. Was I deprived forever? This possibility produced a most frightening sensation in me—a pleasurable sense of temptation that compensated for my disappointed sense of love.

For some reason I continued to think of the butcher in front of the window of my room who rolls up his sleeves, says *bismillah*⁵⁸ and cuts the meat. His expression and attitude were constantly before my eyes until finally I, too, made a decision—a frightful decision. I got out of my bed, rolled up my sleeves and picked up the bone-handled knife from where I had put it under my pillow. I hunched my shoulders and threw a yellow cloak across my back; then I wrapped a scarf around my head and face. I felt that I had acquired a composite attitude, one that blended the characteristics of the butcher with those of the rag-and-bone dealer.

I tiptoed in the direction of my wife's room. Her room was dark. I opened the door quietly. As though muttering to herself in a dream, she said aloud, "Take off your scarf!" I approached her bed and held my face against her mild, quiet breath; she had an incredibly pleasant and life-giving warmth! It occurred to me that if I breathed in this warmth for some time, I would become alive again. For a long time now, I had been under the impression that, like mine, everyone's breath was hot and scalding. I concentrated all my senses to see if there was another man in her room—that is if any of her lovers were present—but she was alone. I realized that all those things people said about her were absolute lies and slander. How could one be sure that she was not still a virgin? I felt ashamed to have attributed so many fanciful acts of wrongdoing to her. This contrition, however, did not last more than a moment, because right away I heard someone sneeze outside; this was followed by stifled, mocking laughter which made my hair stand on end, as if someone had pulled all my veins out of my body. If I had not heard this sneezing and this laughter, if Providence had not willed that I wait, then, following my decision, I would have cut her flesh into pieces and I would have given it to the butcher in front of our house to sell to the public. I personally would have taken a piece of her thigh to the old *Qur'an* reciter, as a piece of sacrificial meat; then I would return to him the next day and ask, "The meat that you ate yesterday, do you know whose flesh it was?"

Were it not for his laughter! I should have done this at night when I did not have to look the whore in the eyes. I felt ashamed of the expression in her eyes as she reproached me. Anyway, I picked up a piece of material that was impeding me and hastily ran from the room. I tossed the knife on the roof since it was this long-handled knife that had created all these murderous thoughts in me. I discarded the long-handled knife that resembled the butcher's, and rid myself of it.

In my room, in the light of the tallow burner, I saw that I had picked up her dress, a dirty dress which had been in contact with her flesh, a soft, silk dress made in India which smelled of her body and of champak perfume; these scents had remained in the dress because of her warmth—because of her existence. I smelled it, placed it between my legs and went to sleep. I had not spent a night as comfortably as this

⁵⁸ Initial words of "In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful."

before. Early the next morning I awakened to the sound of my wife clamoring. She was making a fuss about the loss of her dress, saying repeatedly, "It was a brand-new dress!" though I knew it had a tear in the sleeve. Even if it meant bloodshed, I was not about to give it up. Wasn't I entitled to one of my wife's old dresses?

When nanny brought ass's milk, honey and bread for me, I noticed that she had put a bone-handled knife at the side of my breakfast tray as well. She said she saw it on the rag-and-bone dealer's display and bought it. Then, raising her eyebrows indicating my wife's room, she said, "It might come in handy!" I picked up the knife and examined it. It was my own knife. Then, like one who is offended and who has a complaint, she said, "Well, my daughter (that whore, that is), at this early hour of the morning is accusing me of stealing her dress last night!"

"Really!"

"Yes. Would I tell you a lie? Yesterday your wife saw streaks of blood... we knew that the child... her explanation is that she became pregnant in the bathhouse. One night I massaged her back; her arm was all black and blue. She showed her arm to me and said, "I went into the cellar at the wrong time and the you-know-who pinched me!"⁵⁹... Did you know that your wife has been pregnant for a long time?"

I laughed and said, "No doubt the child looks like the old *Qur'an* reciter. She must have been thinking of him when the child first moved in her womb!"

Then nanny left the room in a storm as though she was not expecting such an answer. I got up right away and with shaking hands picked up the bone-handled knife, took it to the closet, placed it in my souvenir box, and closed the lid.

No, it was impossible for the child to be mine; it certainly belonged to the rag-and-bone dealer!

In the afternoon, my door opened and her small brother—the whore's little brother—entered chewing his nails. It was impossible not to recognize immediately that they were brother and sister. They were that much alike! He had a small, narrow mouth, meaty, wet and lustful lips, languid eyelids, slanted, astonished eyes, prominent cheeks, disheveled, date-colored hair, and a wheat-colored complexion. He was a replica of that whore; he even showed a trace of her satanic temperament. He had an insensitive Turkmen face devoid of any spirit, a face designed for life's combats, a face that validated anything that assured survival. It seems that nature has taken some precautions; it seems that the forefathers of this pair lived at the mercy of sunshine and rain and that they fought the elements, giving them not only their shape and expression (with certain modifications), but also endurance, lust, greed and hunger. I knew what the taste of his mouth would be: the mildly bitter taste of the stem end of a cucumber.

When he entered the room, he looked at me with his astonished Turkmen eyes and said, "Shajun says the physician said that you are about to die and we shall be rid of you. How do people die?" I said, "Tell her I died a long time ago. "

"Shajun said, 'If I had not lost the child, the whole house would be ours.'"

⁵⁹ You-know-who refers to spirits that populate dark places and pounce on unsuspecting people.

I burst into laughter involuntarily; it was dry, hideous laughter that made one's hair stand on end, laughter in which I could not recognize my own voice. The child ran from the room in terror.

At this moment I knew why the butcher wiped the bone-handled knife on the leg of the lamb with pleasure. The pleasure of cutting lean meat in which coagulated blood had accumulated, like silt, and had oozed out in the form of bloody water dripping off the windpipes of the sheep. The yellow dog in front of the butcher shop knew it, so did the dimmed, staring eyes of the severed head of a cow thrown on the floor of the shop, and so did the sheep heads with eyes on which the dust of death rested—they all had seen. They, too, knew!

Finally, I realized that I had become a demi-god and that I was above all the low, petty desires of mankind. I felt the eternal flux within me. What is eternity? Eternity for me was playing hide-and-seek with that whore on the bank of the *Suren* River; it was a momentary closing of my eyes when I hid my head in her lap.

Suddenly I seemed to be talking to myself; I was talking to myself in a strange way; to wit, I intended to talk to myself, but my lips were so heavy that they would not budge. I was talking to myself with immobile lips and with an inaudible voice!

In this room that like a grave grew narrower and darker each moment, night and its horrible shadows surrounded me. In front of the smoking tallow burner, my shadow—wearing my sheepskin, the cloak that I wrapped around me, and my scarf—was mutely cast on the wall.

My shadow was more profound and more exact than my real being. It seemed that the old rag-and-bone dealer, the butcher, nanny, my whore of a wife were all my shadows, shadows that held me prisoner. At this moment I resembled an owl. My laments, however, were caught in my throat and I spat them like clots of blood. Perhaps the owl, too, has a sickness that makes it think as I do. My shadow on the wall was exactly like an owl; hunched over, it carefully read my writings. Doubtless it understood them well; it was the only one who could understand them. When I looked at my shadow from the corner of my eye, I was terrified.

It was a dark, silent night, like the night that surrounded my life, a night with frightful figures mocking me from the door, the wall and from behind the curtain. Sometimes my room became so narrow that I felt I was in a coffin. My temples burned and my limbs refused to move. A weight, like the weight of the carcasses carried to the butcher on the back of black, gaunt packhorses, pressed against my chest.

Death, like a mute who has to repeat each word and when he finishes reciting a hemistich must repeat it, murmured its own song quietly. Its sound penetrated the flesh like the reverberations of a saw; it shrieked and then suddenly was muffled.

I had hardly closed my eyes when a group of drunken night watchmen passed my room swearing at each other and singing in unison:

Let us go and drink *mey*—
The wine of the kingdom of *Rayy*;
If not today, then what day?

I said to myself, "Now my arrest is inevitable!" As soon as I said that, I felt an upsurge of superhuman force within me. My forehead cooled. I got up, threw my yellow cloak over my shoulders, wrapped my scarf a couple of times around my head, hunched my shoulders, picked up the bone-handled knife from the closet where I had hidden it in my souvenir box, and tiptoed in the direction of the whore's room. When I reached the threshold, I saw that her room was plunged in utter darkness. As I listened attentively, I heard her voice saying, "Are you here? Take off your scarf!" Her voice had a pleasure-inducing ring to it; she sounded as she did when she was a child—as if unconsciously murmuring in a dream. I had heard this voice once before in a deep sleep. Was she dreaming? Her voice was muffled and thick; it had changed to the voice of the small girl who played hide-and-seek with me on the bank of the *Suren* River. I stopped for a moment and heard her repeat, "Come in and take off your scarf!"

Quietly, I entered the dark room, took off my cloak and scarf, took off my clothes; but for some reason, I entered the bed still holding to the bone-handled knife. The warmth of her bed gave me a new life. I embraced her pleasant, damp and sensual body in memory of the slim girl with a pale face and innocent, large Turkmen eyes who played hide-and-seek with me on the bank of the *Suren* River. No—I attacked her like a savage, hungry beast loathing her from the bottom of my heart. My feelings of love and hatred for her were mixed. Her cool, silvery body, my wife's body, like a *Nag*-serpent that tightens her coils around a victim, opened up and enveloped me. The fragrance of her bosom was intoxicating; the flesh of her arm, coiled around my neck, felt pleasantly warm. I wished my life would end that instant, because at that moment all my feelings of hatred and vengefulness towards her had disappeared. I tried to keep from crying. Without my feeling it, like a mandrake, her feet were locked behind mine, and her hands were clasping the nape of my neck. I felt the pleasing warmth of live and fresh flesh. All the particles of my burning body drank this warmth. I felt that, like a prey being gradually swallowed, she was pulling me into herself. My senses of fear and pleasure were blended in each other. Her mouth tasted acrid like the bitter end of a cucumber. Sweating amidst this agreeable pressure, I lost consciousness. My body, along with all the particles of my being sang a song of victory. Condemned and helpless, I surrendered to the whimsical waves of this boundless sea. Her hair, which smelled of champak, was stuck to my face. Mutual cries of anguish and joy issued from the depth of our beings. Suddenly she bit my lip so violently that it was cut open in the middle. Did she bite her own finger like this too, or did she discover that I was not the old man with the leprous lip? I tried to cut myself loose, but I could not move even slightly; my struggles got me nowhere. Our flesh was welded together.

I thought she had gone mad. Amidst the struggle, involuntarily, I moved my hand and felt the long-handled knife enter some part of her body. A warm liquid poured over my face. She shrieked and let go of me. I held the warm liquid that had gathered in my fist and threw the long-handled knife away. This action freed my hand that I rubbed across her body. It was utterly cold—she was dead. At the same time I began to cough, but it was not really coughing; it was the echo of that dry, hideous laughter that made one's hair stand on end. Hurriedly, I threw my cloak over my shoulders and returned to my room. I opened my hand in the light of the tallow

burner and saw that her eye lay in the palm of my hand. My whole body was soaked with blood.

I walked to the mirror, but out of fear I held my hands in front of my face. I resembled, no, I had become the rag-and-bone dealer. The hair of my head and beard, like the hair on the head and face of one who survives confrontation with a *Nag-serpent*, had turned white. My lip, like the old man's, was split open, my eyelids were without lashes, and a clump of white hair protruded from my chest—a new soul descended upon me. My thinking changed, my feelings changed and I could not free myself from the clutches of the fiend that was awakened in me. Covering my face with my hands I burst into an involuntary peal of laughter, a laughter more violent than ever before, one that shook my entire being, a deep laughter that could not be traced to any known recess of my body, a hollow laughter that reverberated in my throat and emerged from the depths of nothingness. I had become the rag-and-bone dealer.

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I felt the anguish of one who is awakened from a long, deep sleep. I rubbed my eyes. I was in my old room. It was dawn and a wet fog covered the windowpanes. The crow of a rooster came from afar. The red coal in the brazier in front of me had turned to cold ash, unable to withstand the blow of a single breath. My thoughts, too, I felt, like the red pieces of charcoal, had turned into hollow ashes unable to withstand the blow of a single breath.

The first thing I looked for was the *Raq* jar that the old carriage driver had given me in the graveyard, but it was not in front of me. Then, I saw someone with a stooped shadow, no, a stooped old man who had covered his head and face with a scarf and who carried something like a jar wrapped in a dirty handkerchief under his arm. He was laughing: a hideous, hollow laughter that made one's hair stand on end.

The moment I moved, he left my room. I stood up, intending to pursue him and recover the jar that was wrapped in a dirty handkerchief; but the old man, with a peculiar agility, disappeared. I returned to my room and opened the window that gives to the alley. He was carrying the bundle under his arm. His maniacal laughter made his shoulders shake violently. He trudged along until he disappeared into the mist. I returned from the window and looked at myself. My clothes were torn, and I was covered from head to toe with coagulated blood. Two golden flybees were flying around me and small, white worms were wriggling on my body; the weight of a dead body pressed against my chest...

THE END

The Blind Owl:
A Personal Note

by
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In my course called "The Fiction of Iran and Central Asia," I spend a few sessions on *The Blind Owl*. I do this after we have covered almost all aspects of Hedayat's fiction and are about to move on to the works of Sadeq Chubak, Al-i Ahmad, and other authors. By this time, the students have read the novella and studied a brief discussion of the *Bardo Thodol*. These sessions are designed to acquaint them with the analytical side of Hedayat and stimulate their curiosity, especially in working with allegory and symbols, as opposed to straight textual analysis. I usually begin the discussion with an introduction.

You have read *The Blind Owl* and are familiar with aspects of the *Bardo Thodol*. Today, and the next couple of sessions will be devoted to an understanding of how Hedayat might have put his *Blind Owl* together. A work like *The Blind Owl*, of course, has many aspects: artistic, socio-political, cultural, philosophical, religious, literary, and others. Each of these aspects needs to be dealt with separately and by experts. At the end of all those analyses, a synthesis might be provided that would thoroughly describe the workings of the novella. As you will see, taking into account what we have covered and what will be covered in the next couple of sessions, we are very far from that kind of a comprehensive synthesis.

In this discussion, I want to bypass those issues, as well as major issues such as time, location, character, setting, atmosphere, and the other aspects of the novel, and pursue a single strand of thought—Hedayat's motivation for writing *The Blind Owl*. I want to derive that from the structure that he embeds in the novella. This kind of investigation does not infringe on the study of all the other aspects of the novella that I outlined above. It is, however, a good exercise for you in learning to distinguish structure, understand its significance, and use it for getting an overall picture of short stories, novellas, and novels.

There was a time when I taught the works of Sadeq Hedayat, short stories mostly, while I still had not read his masterpiece, the novella we are about to work with, his *Blind Owl*.

How could that be? is the students' normal reaction. They do not put it into so many words but you can clearly read it on their faces. I go on and explain that as a child I was always mindful of what I was told. In Iran of the 1950's, at school, and at home, young people were advised to stay away from the works of Sadeq Hedayat,

especially his *Blind Owl*. A few young people had strayed from this rule and, reportedly, had committed suicide.

- But you did read it eventually? Asks a student sarcastically.

- Of course I did, I say. How else could I be talking about it now? I read it but I could not make any sense of it. It confused me and when I thought about it and couldn't make head nor tail of it, it frustrated me. Then, I thought I might have missed something important in the story, so I read it a second time; the effect was worse. Thereafter, each time I read it, I felt I was being thrown into some kind of a recursive semantic loop, reading the same thing over and over. Eventually, however, I came to realize that I was not reading the same thing over and over. Gradually, things that seemed to be the same on the surface appeared to have different meanings depending on circumstances. Only I did not have a clue as to what those circumstances were!

Having worked with Hedayat's other stories, especially "Dash Akol," "The Stray Dog," "The Patriot," and many others, I firmly believed that Hedayat was a master craftsman. So I was not ready to agree with the current literature on him that attributed the unusual and depressing atmosphere in some of his stories, like "Three Drops of Blood" and "Buried Alive," to his possible addiction to narcotics. Some of these stories were written before and some after *The Blind Owl*. Invariably, they pointed to a sound mind; in fact, they pointed to a clear and serene mind with a full appreciation of life's beauties.

Eventually, I came to the conclusion that the situation was not as clear-cut as some critics would have us believe. It is true that addicts have their moments, but one still needs a tremendous amount of artistic dexterity to put a masterpiece like *The Blind Owl* together. The same ability that Hedayat exhibits in his "Three Drops of Blood" and "Buried Alive."

There is a haunting scene in the novella that one cannot read and easily put it away. That was the scene that engaged me most intensely. The narrator, who by profession is a painter of pen-case covers ...

- What is a pen-case?

- Pen-cases are finely wrought, small long boxes in which, in the old days, scribes kept their reed pens.

In any event, as you recall, the narrator is a painter. He has a visitor, his uncle. To serve him some of his rare wine that he keeps high up in a niche in his closet, he climbs on a stool and, while fumbling for the wine flask, through a chink in the wall, he sees a fascinating scene: a girl in a fine black dress stands opposite from an old man who wears the clothes of Indian mendicants; he squats under a cypress tree and places the index finger of his left hand on his lips in astonishment. A brook separates the two. The girl, who holds a black lily, tries to cross the brook to offer the lily to the old man, but she fails and falls into the brook. At this, the old man laughs hysterically so that his shoulders shake. The impact of the old man's hollow laughter causes the narrator to disengage himself from the scene.

In subsequent days and nights, the narrator looks all around his dwelling for the cypress tree, the brook, and the ethereal being in black, but he cannot find any trace of any of those. He becomes obsessed with the scene; obsessed enough to devote his promenades to finding that location. But there is no trace of the old man, the girl in

black, or the brook. Once the emotional impact of the scene wears off, only the memory of the girl's black eyes remains with him, haunts him, and tortures him.

Now, that is what happened to the narrator of *The Blind Owl*. Let me tell you what happened to me as a result of reading *The Blind Owl*. I, too, became obsessed with that same scene, albeit for a totally different reason. I felt that if I were able to find the prototype that Hedayat might have used in writing that scene, I would be able to understand the novella and put it aside.

- Well, did he? Did he have a model?" Asks an impatient student.

- Now you are wrecking my story, I say smiling and we all laugh.

- I was sure that he had a model and that it had to be somewhere in the literature.

Now, if there was a prototype and it was within Hedayat's reach in the 1930's, given the technological advances since then, I was sure I should have no problem finding it. The only difficulty, of course, was that Hedayat was an avid reader. As a result, I had to cast a wide net.

I approached the situation with this thought in mind: It is not important how much a person reads, but it is important what he or she reads. As time went by, I read most of the literary and cultural materials that were available to Hedayat in the 1930's. These included ancient Zoroastrian texts, medieval Islamic materials, even Finno-Ugrian mythology. But I could not find the faintest resemblance between the contents of those works and what I was seeking. I read European and even Native American cultural materials that I felt might be relevant to the scene, but none showed the degree of correlation that could make them viable bases for further study.

It is unbelievable to me, looking back at those days after three decades, that I could have been so obsessed with a scene. Every movie I saw, every painting I looked at, every miniature I examined, this scene was in the forefront of my mind. I looked at everything with the notion that it might lead to a clue to the meaning of the scene that the narrator repeatedly painted on the narrow covers of pen-cases. In other words, at that time anything and everything was a potential contributor to the resolution of my hypothesized prototype of the enigmatic scene.

My search, I should add, was not totally fruitless. Along the way, I discovered that Hedayat had incorporated concepts, at times even copious passages, from the works of 'Umar Khayyam, Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka, and the *Buddha-carita* of Asvaghosha in *The Blind Owl*. But none of those works, influential as they were for an understanding of Hedayat's eclectic mind, contributed to the final resolution of my dilemma. Rilke's powerful imagery appears in many places in *The Blind Owl*, but none comes even close to the enchantment that the scene that I was obsessed with commands. Similarly, the *Buddha-carita* charts the infrastructure of the novella and relates its message to the life of Gautama Buddha, but it does not touch upon the parts of the novella that are centered on this pivotal scene.

I should also add that during those same years, I bought many books. Some of them not directly related to my job that, at the time, was that of an Assistant Professor of Iranian studies and Turkish. But, as I said, I was casting a wide net with the theory that an understanding of this particular scene might provide a clue to Hedayat's message, if any. The message concept was paramount in my mind because in his other stories, like "The Stray Dog," he had used particular scenes to highlight social or political problems. In the case of "The Stray Dog," for instance, as you

recall, he highlighted the plight of the Iranian student returnees, including himself, from Europe.

Among the books that I had bought there was a copy of the *Bardo Thodol*, also referred to as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. In my office, it took its appropriate place beside *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. The contents of neither book were attractive to me, yet given the morbid atmosphere of the novella, either had the potential of containing the solution to the riddle of the owl that I was seeking.

- What led you in the direction of the Indian materials?

- Good question. A single word. If you recall, Hedayat does not use the word "cobra" to refer to the snake in the dungeon. He uses "Nag-serpent." D. P. Costello, in his translation, had translated the Nag-serpent as cobra. I wondered why Hedayat did not use the Persian equivalent and insisted on using the Indian word. The word "Nag" led me to the *Buddha-carita* of Asvaghosha that I mentioned earlier and to Hedayat's use of the life of the Buddha as the background of the novella. But that is a different story. The word *Nag*, especially the role it plays in the life of the Buddha, attracted me to the Indian materials.

One late afternoon, sitting in my office, I decided to read the *Bardo Thodol*. Strangely, that afternoon I felt that that book had the answer I was seeking. But from the very start, the *Bardo Thodol* proved to be a difficult read. The very first paragraphs filled me with a feeling that is best expressed by the narrator of the novella as: 'an experience that I shall never forget.' Never before had I read a book as morbid as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

As I read on with apprehension, the feeling of fear that had crept into my consciousness and stayed there, increased. I felt I was an untrained *Lama* attending a corpse laid out in front of me. The whole atmosphere in my office felt eerie. By the time that the discussion reached the stage of setting the corpse 'face-to-face' with the *Clear Light*, I could no longer bear reading. I gave up. I felt it was too much of a price to pay. In fact, I convinced myself that, like the other books I had read, this one, too, would be of little help and would yield no substantial information. So convinced, I closed the book, placed it back on the shelf beside *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* where it belonged, and called it a day.

Ironically, three years later, after reading many more books, examining more paintings, correlating more images, and delving deeply into Central Asian and African shamanistic rituals, I found myself sitting in my office, looking at the shelf holding *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Again, that same overwhelming feeling of three years ago, the feeling that had motivated me to read the book in the first place, emerged. This time, however, my research, too, pointed to the *Bardo Thodol*. I stilled myself, picked up the book and sat deep in my chair. No matter how difficult, I said to myself, I should read this book from cover to cover.

- May I ask what time period all this is taking place?

- Roughly between 1973 and 1983.

I had hardly read past 'setting face-to-face,' where I had quit the last time, when I came across this rather long discussion of the activities of the soul in the nether regions, activities that can be summed up in the following:

Upon his arrival, the *Lama* sits on a mat beside the corpse and sends the consciousness of the deceased person in search of the *Clear Light*. The consciousness searches for the *Clear Light* but, most likely, is distracted from recognizing the bright Light. The source of the distraction is visions from the *Sangara*. In one such vision, the consciousness sees Dharma-Raja, the Lord of Death, before whom the souls of the deceased stand. Ethereal in nature, the souls carry a handful of black or white pebbles, each symbolic of their accomplishments or lack thereof on the earth plane. The souls that carry white pebbles—a very infrequently met number—are assigned to one of six *lokas* where, free of the wheel of rebirth, they will dwell in tranquility. The souls that carry black pebbles are thrown into the River of Forgetfulness from where they are taken to the Place of the Wombs to be reborn.

After reading this discussion, I was elated. I felt like a miner who after many years of working in a dark mine hits a large streak of gold or lapis-lazuli. I sat back and thought about this new scene. I read it again. Then, in my mind, I carefully compared it with the scene in *The Blind Owl*. The similarities were unmistakable. The tension that had kept me in its grip for all that time relaxed. I saw, for the first time, what role the ethereal girl played. She was the soul of the narrator standing judgment before the strange old man (Lord of Death). The color of the pebbles shone light on the significance of the black lily that the girl carried. Similarly, the laughter and the girl's falling into the brook, all of those elements of the scene fell into place.

- Then why does the narrator become so devastated?

Because, apparently, this is not the first time that he is confronted with this scene. The color of the lily that his soul carries denotes that, once again, he has allowed his consciousness to undermine his concentration and prevented him from ignoring the scene and bringing the wine-flask down. Put differently, this is the first time that he had come prepared to ignore the old *yogi* and concentrate on the wine flask (Clear Light), but he has failed. Upon seeing the scene he realizes that, once again, the Lord of Death has won.

Subsequent to this, he realizes that for his soul to become able to cross over without failure, he needs a deeper understanding of the workings of the *yogi* (Lord of Death), especially his manifestations of *maya* (desire). He realizes that desire does not have a given shape, not one that can be put on paper and be made one's own by repeatedly working with it. Each time that desire appears to the individual, it has a different, often a more attractive form, than the previous times. It does not allow the individual enough time to recognize it.

- What did this realization do for you?

- First of all, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* lost its morbidity and turned into a torch leading me in the darkness of *The Blind Owl*. It explained the role of desire in the life of the narrator, especially in part two where it is referred to as the Whore.

- You said at the beginning of the lecture that you felt that the resolution of the symbolism in the scene might have other dimensions. Did you find out, for instance, why Hedayat used the *Buddha-carita* and the *Bardo Thodol* as opposed to other books, such as the works of Herman Hesse?

- Of course, I did. Hedayat lived in Reza Shah's Iran where, as we have seen, "freedom" was a forbidden word and where any expression of liberty was punishable by long years of incarceration and, at times, death. I think we need another session to look at that aspect of the work. Here, I intended to show how a scene in one work might serve as a clue for understanding an enigmatic scene in another book or, for that matter, for understanding a whole book.

- So, what does the wine flask or the *Clear Light* stand for?

- It stands for the ultimate goal that every individual is unwittingly striving to reach but which, almost always remains unfulfilled.

- Why does it remain unfulfilled?

- Because the individual reaching for it is invariably distracted by some other project that at that particular moment seems more important. That is what the narrator was afraid of happening to him, i.e., being distracted. Unfortunately for him, that is exactly what happened to him. The realization of this loss of opportunity is instant. It is paying attention to the job at hand. Not allowing extraneous things to break your concentration.

- You broke your concentration and paid for it with three years of additional reading, didn't you?

- Yes, indeed I did. But, by the same token, when I decided not to allow my feelings to run my life, I succeeded in finding what I thought was the prototype.

- How does the narrator know that he is done for, so to speak?

- As I said, this does not seem to be his first time being distracted by a similar scene. Each time, however, he learns something that, in the end, helps him break the cycle.

- So, is it the scene that attracts him or something else?

- It is something specific in the scene.

- What?

- The girl's eyes. That is what is missing in his design on the pen-case covers. He is not familiar with the eyes.

- Why are the eyes so important?

- Because they belong to a world with which he is not familiar: The world of the *Nag-serpent*.

- But there is no *Nag-serpent* in the scene.

- Yes, you are right, The *Nag-serpent* does not appear physically in the novella until in Part Two. Traces of the existence of the *Nag-serpent*, in its sense of the bestower of life and death, and of desire, however, appears in Part One. The eyes of the ethereal being or, more correctly, the essence of desire symbolized in her eyes, permeates Part One.

- Is that what the painting scene in Part One is about?

- Exactly. That is how he captures the essence of desire. In other words, he adds to his original design the one element that is missing. From here onward, equipped with this additional knowledge, he can concentrate on recognizing what, in essence, the Whore in Part Two is: an ephemeral corporeal being. After he dismisses her body as meat at the butcher shop, he confronts her in her dark chamber where she cannot use the magic in her eyes.

- Why does he kill the ethereal girl?

- Hedayat makes a fundamental distinction between the girl's otherworldly eyes and the rest of her "corporeal" being. The corporeal body that is made up of the natural elements is of little concern to him. The eyes that command life and death and which serve as the source of his downfall must be recognized, understood, and eliminated. It is the essence of the eyes, pure desire, that, on judgment day, undermines the soul's concentration and causes its downfall. In Part One, therefore, the *Nag* is identified by function rather than by presence. In Part Two, like *maya*, the *Nag* manifests itself in a number of forms: the desirable Whore, the actual *nag*-serpent that acts as judge in the dungeon, the rag-and-bone dealer, the *Bugam Dasi*, the narrator's grownup wife who has lost all her attraction, and the Whore/*Nag*/rag-and-bone dealer synthesis in the Whore's bedchamber. The narrator's transformation into the rag-and-bone dealer, therefore, is the culmination of his domination of the Whore. It indicates that he is free from the wheel of life. Now he can sit under the cypress tree and pass judgment, dole out life and death, and oversee the dirty display we know as creation.

- This is such a profound story. What do you think prompted Hedayat to write it?

- This is a question that needs a different analysis of the novella; one that we can deal with in a different session. As I said, at the present, I am concerned merely with the background structure of the novella. For its meaning we have to look at Reza Shah's Iran, a society the repressive dynamics of which demanded a Buddha-like determination and concentration on the part of those who intended to gain liberation to live a normal life.

- By bringing the Buddha in, you are making this difficult. Why the Buddha?

- The Buddha, as is well known, discarded frivolity for substance. His life story is an expression of mankind's struggle against pomp and glory. Yet, pomp and glory were all that Reza Shah's "Dazzling Age" was bringing to Iran of the 1930's. With utmost dexterity, therefore, Hedayat rejects Reza Shah's "Dazzling Age." He seems to be saying: Do not buy into Reza Shah's western-inspired spectacle. Rather, concentrate on your inner drive, the wine flask your ancestors have left within you. The old rag-and-bone dealer would put it this way: Look at what you buy!

- Did Hedayat's audience understand what he was talking about, especially through these rather thick layers of philosophy from 'Umar Khayyam to Zoroaster to the Buddha?

- Writers do not write for a particular generation. They write to inform posterity. The Iran of the 1930's can be reconstructed by using many other sources. The zeal for freedom that the Iranians of Hedayat's time, and, indeed, present-day Iranians under the Islamic Republic have can be reconstructed only through artistic ways. Generations will examine the feelings expressed in *The Blind Owl*, recognize the causes that had contributed to their making, and, the suffering that they had caused. Similarly, they will eventually learn that the rare knowledge necessary to rid them of their oppressors, is within themselves. That is what the Buddha did, that is what the narrator of *The Blind Owl* did, and that is what Hedayat advocates to generations of Iranians yet to come.

Now, if you don't have any other questions, I will stop here. For next time, look at Part Two and find out how the knowledge about the eyes of the ethereal being that

is learned in Part One is successfully used to undermine the power of the Whore, in Part Two.

- One last question. Is it possible to summarize for us, in a few sentences, your understanding of the two parts and how they relate to each other?

- Of course. Think of the narrator in Part One as a person who knows about his own inadequacies and diligently works to compensate for them by ritually reviewing the causes of his downfalls. Furthermore, suppose a time comes that he feels absolutely confident that he has everything under control and that he will not fail, i.e., nothing can undermine his concentration. Now imagine the same individual when the test comes and he realizes that he has ignored one crucial point, one point that spells doom for him; in the case of the narrator, the eyes of the ethereal being or, more accurately, the essence of desire in the eyes. It is that realization that devastates him. In Part Two, the only thing he has to deal with is the essence of desire symbolized in the Whore. But the Whore, his previous experience has shown him, is nothing but the desire that is lodged within himself. So he sets about identifying, isolating, and eliminating aspects of his own self: sexual desire (the corporeal Whore), the desire to kill (butcher instinct), the desire to rule (rag-and-bone dealer), the desire to guide (nanny), and others. In terms of Part One, when these instincts are eliminated, he is at the level of when he opened the "dead" suitcase and took one last look. Recall that only the eyes looked him in the face, i.e., they were the only things that were holding him back. He then, with full concentration, enters the dark bedchamber and eliminates the eyes. Unlike the previous time, he disarms the Whore and does not allow her to undermine his concentration. Needless to say, by the time he reaches the Whore in the bedchamber, the Whore's eyes have lost all their luster. I think I said more than I wanted to say, but that's all right.

Iraj Bashiri
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The Message of *The Blind Owl*: An Analysis

By

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The following article is an analytical study. It correlates the events in the *Bardo Thodol* with those in *The Blind Owl*. The aim of the study is to explain the structural makeup of the novella, the nature of its characters, and the reasons for the liquidity of time and space in it. While reviewing this article the reader must keep in mind that *The Blind Owl* is a work of fiction and the correspondences are not as accurate as one would like them to be. While the author is fully aware of the details, he has the option of distorting them, change their sequence, or refer to them symbolically. The idea, therefore, is not to present one-to-one correspondences but to show that Hedayat used the concept of liberation from these materials to make a point regarding man's ability to liberate himself from bondage of other humans, dogma, and even the cosmic wheel.

The original Persian text of *The Blind Owl*, marked "not for sale in Iran," appeared as a mimeographed publication in India in 1937. It was assumed at the time that Hedayat feared the repressive rule of Reza Shah; he feared especially that with the publication of this work he might have violated the established norms. He was aware that the propagation of a message that focused on the strangulation of the Iranian people, on the denial of individual human rights, and on the need for individual enlightenment would not remain undetected.

Unable to decode Hedayat's message in a coherent, logical manner critics of the work relied on "gut" feelings and personal reactions to the novella's depressing setting and morbid circumstances as criteria for substantiating their arguments. No substantial study appeared in which a step-by-step development of events in the novella would lead to a sound and logical conclusion regarding either the intent of the author or the message of the book.

In order to discover the message of *The Blind Owl*, one has to "dig" quite deeply into ancient Indian religious tradition, perhaps deeper than some recent critics have felt the need for. This is necessary because Hedayat, although an Iranian Muslim with deep interests in native traditions, displays in his novella an astonishing mastery of Indian and Tibetan Buddhistic teachings. The reader of this article, therefore, should be forewarned that before he is able to recognize Hedayat's message, he must be led through some unfamiliar territory. However, no substantial knowledge of Buddhism other than that contained in this article is required; a rudimentary

acquaintance with the rituals and concepts ensures sufficient confidence and insight to follow the discussion.

In the final analysis, *The Blind Owl* focuses on the subject of freedom. But freedom from what? Generally we think about freedom in terms of social and political institutions. Hedayat, too, is concerned with institutionalized freedom. The area of his greatest concern, however, is cosmic bondage, a universal experience that inspires unending hopelessness in all.

Introduction⁶⁰

Is it possible that the concept of the *Clear Light* (from Tibetan Buddhism) may embody the message of *The Blind Owl* in the same way that the *Nag-serpent*⁶¹ held the clue to its structure? No longer a patchwork of hallucinations, a conglomeration of transposed passages and images, Hedayat's masterpiece is gradually emerging as a

⁶⁰ Since 1973, when research on *Hedayat's Ivory Tower: Structural Analysis of The Blind Owl* began, this author has continuously worked with this and other works of Hedayat. As a result, a new translation with an exhaustive explication de texte for the novella is now in its final stages.

The Blind Owl is a difficult book. Language is one factor in its difficulty, but the main factor, so often played down by critics who would rather hash and rehash the old concepts, is the impenetrable symbolism in the novella. It is the symbolism that clouds the concepts and dissipates the relations that should bring the concepts together coherently and meaningfully. This is why the translator of the novella often finds himself literally among islands of vague, seemingly unrelated concepts, and is forced to intuit some sense into them. The more objective the translation, the greater the risk of deviation from established norms.

Fortunately, as this essay shows, inroads have finally been made whereby we can look at *The Blind Owl* from within its own structural and semantic framework and reach conclusions that can then be corroborated with the historical and socio-political, as well as artistic and literary trends in Iran at the time of its publication. The path to the discovery of the message of Hedayat is not easy, especially for any serious student of Iranian and Islamic studies who examines the novella for the first time. Research in fields totally outside Iranian and Islamic studies is called for. The message itself, however, is as universal as the framework that carries it.

The work cited above, of which the present article is a condensed version (a portion of a chapter on symbolism), combines the efforts of Western and Eastern scholars, focusing on the Indo-Iranian and Indo-European influences on the novella from a theoretical and abstract point of view. It also deals with the message of the novella—freedom—on three distinct levels: individual, social, and cosmic.

Because of the complexities of this article and to avoid overlapping, no attempt is made to present bibliographical references, explanatory notes, and criticisms other than what is essential for the discussion. This information is available elsewhere and need not be repeated here.

I would like to thank the following colleagues for their assistance and encouragement in the writing of this article: Professors M.A..R. Barker, Peter Chelkowski, L.P. Elwell-Sutton, William Hanaway, Annemarie Schimmel, and Gernot L. Windfuhr.

⁶¹ *Nag* is a snake-spirit with long fangs and a slit in the middle of its upper lip. In Buddhist lore, it is the life force that determines birth and rebirth and hence it is connected with the Wheel of Life. The legend of the Buddha tells how the *Nag-serpent* wound itself around his body seven times, but, since it could not crush him, it turned into a youth bowing low before Gautame (cf., the final scene of *The Blind Owl* where the narrator faces the Whore). The Wheel of Rebirth is closely related to the law of moral compensation, and in the sense of action-reaction and cause and effect, it rules over the lives of all those who have not succeeded in achieving *Nirvana*. *Nirvana* is a state of supreme Enlightenment beyond the conception of the intellect. It is the annihilation of all we know as the personal, separate self.

meaningful philosophical utterance on man's most sublime quest—the quest for freedom.

Using the *Clear Light* as the focal point of the work, Hedayat summarizes the Tibetan rituals described in the *Bardo Thodol* perfectly and, alongside them, presents his own views of a man's loneliness, disappointment and potential. Sensitive to the social problems of his time (hardly different from our own reality), aware of the need to speak up for his generation and for those who follow, cognizant that all literary activities are monitored closely by Reza Shah's literati, Hedayat wraps his indelible message in ancient Indian traditions normally unknown to Muslim Iranians. Drawing on a highly eclectic mind and a ceaseless zeal for freedom from the many forces that compel man to form social ties, to create religious institutions and to fear an almighty, Hedayat sets out to write about the disappointments of mankind, experienced in self-imposed "prisons" guarded by the self and the elements. After the reader masters certain morbid rituals and transcends the symbolism, however, he will reach the unadorned, although still elusive, meaning of the work.

This article deals with one scene, the scene that the narrator sees through an air-inlet in the wall of his dwelling. The presence of this scene, the most significant and by far the most haunting in *The Blind Owl*, is felt throughout the work. By analyzing this sense, therefore, this article also analyzes the entire corpus of the novella.

To identify the components of the scene meaningfully and to use those components to effectively analyze the enigmatic symbolism in the work and decipher its message, it is necessary to study the spiritual as well as the practical aspects of the Tibetan death rituals that Hedayat has skillfully incorporated in the novella. In the pages that follow, these rituals are presented in a concise and selective fashion after the exegetical commentaries of *Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup*.⁶²

⁶² *The Blind Owl* is a complex network of structure and meaning. Much of this is not readily observable. For the benefit of those unable to review *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*, a brief summary of the findings therein follows: the study opens with a survey of Hedayat's life and what we know about him. In this section the lack of our knowledge regarding Hedayat the man is emphasized, as elsewhere the wealth of such knowledge has been assumed. The book includes a literal translation of *The Blind Owl* and briefly reviews the previous English translation demonstrating the need for a final, annotated translation. Significant variations in meaning result from differing translation of relatively insignificant words such as Whore instead of bitch and *Nag*-serpent instead of cobra. The troublesome last sentence of the work is discussed in depth and reasons are given for the incomprehensibility of the previous translation. The structural analysis of *The Blind Owl* follows the translation. This, the core of *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*, has opened the way for this essay. The author found, as have others, that large passages from Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* appear verbatim in the work. However, he established a pattern as to the placement of these passages. It appears that Hedayat used the life story of the Buddha as it appears in Asvaghosha's the *Buddha-carita* as the structural frame of *The Blind Owl*. The substance of all the events and their sequence in the *Buddha-carita* are carefully worked into *The Blind Owl* in a cyclic style—it is at the break between these cycles, for instance, that the passages from Rilke appear. *Hedayat's Ivory Tower* carefully documents these complex structured cycles that underlie the entire work, detailing Rilke's influence and the various motifs which Hedayat drew upon from Zoroastrianism and from the *Ruba'iyat* of Omar Khayyam. Clearly established is Hedayat's mastery of the Buddhistic lore, his familiarity with Rilke and Zoroastrianism plus the fact that *The Blind Owl* is a carefully crafted work involving years of planning.

All of these are discussed in the context of the literary media of the latter part of the 1920's in France. This is the time during which Rilke reached the height of his towering influence on European literature, and the time of Rilke's death. It is also the time of the inception of the first

It should be noted that *The Blind Owl* is in two parts, each part depicting a phase on a continuum of the cosmic drama dealing with birth and rebirth. While in the first life the character is distracted by visions that destine him to rebirth, in the second life, using the knowledge gained in his previous life, he successfully recognizes the cause of his rebirth and eliminates it. The analysis that follows details the dynamics of the narrator's cosmic metamorphosis.

Finally, Hedayat follows the fundamental activities of the Tibetan rituals, even parts like the actual physical dismemberment of the body in orthodox ceremonies (not included in most texts), with an extreme degree of circumspection. Reading *The Blind Owl* with the Tibetan materials in mind, one feels as if Hedayat felt compelled to preserve the texts on a different plane. For the following analysis, however, we shall dispense with the details and concentrate on the essentials. Those interested in details are referred to the original version of this article that was published by *Studies in Islam* in 1980 and to the texts of *The Blind Owl* and the *Bardo Thodol*.

The three stages of the Bardo

The *Bardo Thodol*, also known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, chronicles the journey of the soul from one life to another in three transitional stages, or *bardo* periods, emphasizing that the teachings of the *Lama* are effectual only if mastered during one's life on the earth plane. Practical use of these teachings during the terrifying *bardo* state after death is believed to help the consciousness of the diseased to concentrate on the recognition of the *Clear Light* and, consequently, to avoid distraction from the regions of *Sangsara*.⁶³ Failure to master the teachings (i.e., inability to recognize the *Light*), results in a repetition of *Sangsaric* existences or rebirths.

The *bardo* process described below assumes that the soul undergoes the full *bardo* (49 days) and is reborn. This is the process that most human beings are believed to undergo.

When the final stages of earthly life approach, a *Lama* (priest) is sent for. Upon his arrival, the *Lama* seats himself upon a mat at the head of the corpse and makes sure that the death throes are finished. Throwing a white cloth over the face of the deceased, he dismisses all lamenting relatives from the death-chamber. He orders that the doors and windows be closed to ensure the correct performance of the service. Then he places a piece of printed-paper on the cloth covering the face. On this paper there is a picture, some symbols and writings. The central figure on the paper represents the deceased with legs bound in an attitude of adoration. Surrounding this figure are the Symbols of the five excellent sensuous things.

The *Lama's* aim, at this stage, is to restore complete consciousness to the deceased, who has fallen into a swoon immediately after death. He tries to accustom

Buddhist circles in Paris. An encyclopedic man of Hedayat's caliber and curiosity could hardly have been able to resist the attractive temptation of this decade.

⁶³ Although this summary and the summaries that will be provided later for portions of *The Blind Owl* are quite inclusive, they do not replace the actual text. No doubt the reader would be better able to judge Hedayat's possible use of the *Bardo Thodol* (*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*) in *The Blind Owl* if he were to examine the latter with reference to the full text of the former. For the purposes of this article, however, this summary seems to be sufficient.

the deceased to the unfamiliar environment of the otherworld. Furthermore, assuming that the deceased is one of the unenlightened multitude incapable of immediate emancipation, he prepares the deceased's soul to combat the forces of *Maya*,⁶⁴ teaching him to concentrate on the *Clear Light* and thus enabling him to achieve a degree of salvation.

When the ritual at the house of the deceased is finished, the corpse is taken to the House of the Dead, where it may lie for as long as forty-nine days. Before the corpse is removed, however, the *Lama* presents the soul with a 'scarf of honor' and advises him to partake only of the foods offered to him.

On the nether-world plane, from the moment of death for three and one-half or sometimes four days, the consciousness of the deceased is believed to be in a state of trance, unaware that it has been separated from its human-plane body. This most important period, during which the *Primary Clear Light* dawns, is called the, *Chikhai Bardo*.

At the beginning of the *Chikhai Bardo*, the *Lama* sets the deceased face-to-face with the *Clear Light*. He tells him that he should concentrate all his energy on the recognition of that *Light*. The deceased is also told that during this *bardo*, along with the *Clear Light*, visions from the *Sangsara* will appear to him. The *Lama* warns the deceased to ignore these visions because their main purpose is to interfere with his concentration and to attract him away from salvation and into a *Sangsaric* existence. If the soul fails to recognize the *Primary Clear Light*, the *Lama* sets him face-to-face a second time, this time with the *Secondary Clear Light*. If his failure to recognize the *Clear Light* continues for four days after he recovers from his after-death swoon, he enters the second, or the *Chonyid Bardo*.

The *Chonyid Bardo* is of great importance especially for those who have meditated much during their lives on the earth plane. During this *bardo* the soul experiences terrifying feelings. He hears dreadful sounds; awesome scenes are enacted before his eyes. The *Lama*, to help him concentrate on the *Clear Light* and avoid distraction by these frightful apparitions, tells the soul that he no longer has a body of flesh and blood and that nothing can harm his thought-body. He warns the soul not to be frightened by these apparitions, that are merely offspring of his own mental faculties, and not to be distracted by the awesome sounds that seem to emanate from a hollow. These sounds, the soul is told, are the sounds of the deceased's own breathing. The ordinary soul, however, at this stage can no longer

⁶⁴ *Sangsara* (also *Samsara*), is the world of becoming. *Sangsara* or life on the earth-plane is the antithesis of *Nirvana*.

Maya is the mysterious process that engenders and maintains the cosmos. *Maya* is an illusion in the sense that it obscures the true nature of the world from man. The mistaking of *Maya* for the true nature of the cosmos is called *Avidya* or Ignorance. Man's ignorance results in his clinging to *Maya*. The clinging to *Maya* is called *Tanha* or Desire. The trio: *Maya*, *Avidya*, and, *Tanha* that form a closed cycle, *Karma*, are incessantly at work. Each member causes and supports the others: Ignorance (*Avidya*) results from a failure to identify Illusion (*Maya*) as such, which causes clinging to Illusion (*Tanha*). *Tanha* supports the illusion and fosters reliance upon it. Thus, according to the rule of *Karma*, man's preoccupation with *Maya* is based on his ignorance as the latter makes progress and is transformed into the other elements of the cycle, especially Desire. The ultimate release from the Wheel, or the achievement of *Nirvana*, is realized only when man can abandon even the desire for abandoning desire.

concentrate and is terrified by these awesome, sounds, lights and rays which overwhelm him simultaneously.

The process of setting face-to-face continues. For the next fourteen days the Peaceful and the Wrathful Deities dawn and shine on the deceased. The Peaceful Deities dawn during the first seven days of this *bardo*. They appear in the form of bright, divine lights with special colors. Along with these bright lights various dull lights from the regions of *Sangsara* will shine. If the soul fails to recognize the bright lights of the Peaceful Deities, he will be attracted to the dull lights of stupidity, violent anger and egotism; to intense attachment to *Karma*,⁶⁵ and to intense jealousy. This failure sets the soul on the path to rebirth.

For the next seven days the Wrathful Deities shine. These, like the Peaceful Deities, are apparitions thought into existence by the intellect of the deceased. The *Lama* reminds the deceased that the Wrathful Deities are a disguised form of the Peaceful Deities and that both are apparitions projected into existence by the deceased's own mental powers. Along with the bright lights of the Wrathful Deities, dull lights from the six *lokas*⁶⁶ also shine. The *Lama* warns the deceased to ignore the dull lights, concentrating on the bright lights.

If the deceased's failure to recognize the bright lights continues, the Peaceful and the Wrathful Deities will shine on him simultaneously: the Peaceful in the form of Maha-Kala, the Wrathful in the form of Dharma-Raja, the Lord of Death. These combined Deities, in a Judgment Scene, make the final decision governing the destiny of the deceased, who still has both the potential to walk down one of six paths leading to the Buddhas of the six *lokas* or to be hurled down the abyss of rebirth to suffer in *Sangsara*.

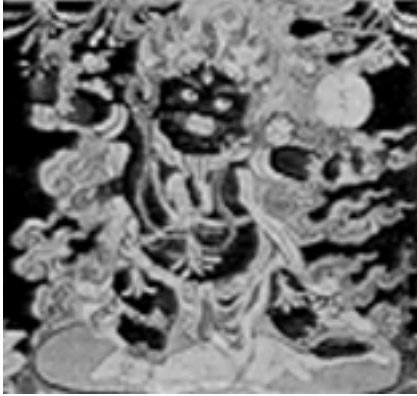


The structure of the Tibetan Judgment Scene is quite complex. Included is a barrier that divides the domain of judgment (above the barrier) from the domain of rebirth (below the barrier). Directly above the barrier are the Buddha, the Lord of Death, and those who assign *lokas*. From here, two pathways lead to the *lokas*, each holding several fortunate souls (that have defied rebirth). But the scene holds much more than that. For instance, there are a number of deities who emerge from various corners to perform specific ritualistic acts, each highly symbolic and intricate. For our purposes, however, a description of the most essential elements should be sufficient. The central figure in the scene is Dharma-Raja, the Lord of Death. He wears the third eye of spiritual wisdom on his forehead and stands enhaloed in flames of wisdom, on a solar throne. His headdress is adorned with human skulls and

⁶⁵ *Karma* is action in the sense of action-reaction. It is the law of compensation, a doctrine indivisible from that of Rebirth.

⁶⁶ *Loka* refers to one of the six possible worlds to which a soul, if it is saved, is sent. The narrator of *The Blind Owl* is destined for the *Preta*-world or the world of unhappy ghosts.

a serpent forms his necklace. In his left hand he holds the mirror of *Karma*, in which every good and evil act of the deceased under judgment is reflected. Furthermore, he sits underneath the *Bodhi* tree that accommodates the Lord Buddha (cf., detail from the main picture, top center above the Lord of Death, the Buddha is flanked by the *lokas*, three on each side).



Directly in front of the Lord of Death stands Sprehu Gochan, holding the scales. Each soul that appears before the Lord of Death carries either white or black pebbles (see picture below). Those carrying white pebbles are souls that have recognized the workings of Illusion, avoiding temptation from *Sangsara*; they walk down the pathways of the Buddha of the *loka* to which they are assigned. Those carrying black pebbles are souls that continue to be under the domination of *Karma*; they are hurled down the abyss. The River

of Forgetfulness carries them to Mount Meru and the place of their rebirth (cf., detail of the main picture, below). Floating down the River of Forgetfulness, the souls return to the Place of the Wombs where they are reborn.

The sight of these terrifying visions fatigues the soul and the sound of his own breath, like laughter issuing from a hollow, frightens him. He falls into a swoon. Upon revival, the soul returns to the death-chamber, where he lately saw his earth-plane body. It is at this point that he realizes that he has died,



he is, however, still under the impression that he dwells in a body of flesh and blood. Soon, with the realization of death becoming stronger, his thought-body becomes weak and the soul feels naked. He begins to search for the place of his rebirth, the place in which his judgment had been set. Before finding this place, however, the soul must find a body that can take him there.

In the third or the *Sidpa Bardo* a body is assigned to the soul, and the soul's relentless search for his place of rebirth begins. This is a *bardo* body, a seemingly fleshly body resembling the soul's earth-plane body but endowed with miraculous powers. It casts no reflection in a mirror or pond and it casts no shadow on a wall.

Donning this *bardo* body, the soul continues the search for his place of rebirth. He journeys toward Mt. Meru, enduring rain and snow, harsh *Karmic* winds and terrifying sounds of mountains crumbling, of seas overflowing, and of fires roaring.

The search is ceaseless; the soul perseveres undistracted until the womb from which he is to be born is found. Now many dull lights shine upon the soul. By the power of *Karma* the soul is bathed in the light of the place in which he is to be reborn. If the soul is to be born as a *Preta* (unhappy ghost), for instance, he is

enveloped by the dull red light of the *Preta*-world and experiences visions of places of darkness and gloom.

Finally, the time comes when the *Lama* instructs the soul to find the appropriate womb from which he will be born. As the soul enters the womb so chosen, the recollection of the body of past life becomes more and more dim, the body of future life becomes more and more clear, and the soul is eventually reborn.

Let us follow this very brief discussion of the activities of the soul from the time of death until it is reborn with a discussion of the activities of the narrator of *The Blind Owl* from when his uncle comes to visit him until the time that, according to the narrator himself, he is reborn.

The Scene through the air-inlet

We encounter the narrator one late afternoon on the Thirteenth of *Farvardin*.⁶⁷ He is painting in his room while all the other inhabitants of the city of *Rayy* have rushed to the countryside to pay their respects to the dead. The door and the windows of his dwelling are closed so that he can concentrate on his painting.

Suddenly the door of the dwelling opens and the narrator's uncle enters. The narrator, "as if inspired," begins to search for a wine-flask; the wine therein has been made in celebration of his birth. This wine-flask is not within his reach nor can he reach it without using a stool.

While reaching for the wine flask, through a chink in the wall, the narrator sees the following scene being played outside his dwelling: an ethereal being, a girl, in a fine black dress stands opposite an old man who squats under a cypress tree. The old man wears the clothes of Indian mendicants. A brook separates the two. The girl, holding a black lily, tries to cross the brook and offer the lily to the old man. Failing that she falls into the brook. The old man laughs so hysterically that his shoulders shake.

Now let us reconsider this scene in tandem with the Tibetan death rituals. The uncle (*Lama*) inspires the narrator (consciousness of the deceased person) to bring him a cup of the rare wine (*Clear Light*) prepared on the occasion of his (narrator's) birth. While reaching for the wine flask, the narrator's thoughts give expression to his hidden *Karmic* desires and, rather than concentrating on finding the wine-flask, he is entranced by a most hallucinatory vision. Like a wonder-struck child watching moving pictures cast upon a screen, he watches a bent, stooped old man (the Islamicized version of the Lord of Death) squatting beneath a cypress (*Bodhi*) tree. A young girl—an angel (the narrator's own soul) stands before the old man, carrying a most undesirable token, a black lily (black pebbles). She bends to offer the lily to the *yogi* from across a brook (River of Forgetfulness) that separates them. She fails and falls into the brook. At this the old man, who bites the index finger of his left hand (holds the mirror of *Karma* in his left hand), shakes with hybrid laughter, startling the narrator.

⁶⁷ For the significance of *Farvardin*, see *A History of Zoroastrianism* by Mary Boyce (1975), vol. I, pp. 119-120; also Taqizadeh's *Old Iranian Calendars* (1938), pp. 49ff.



The impact of the scene on the narrator is intense. As he recalls the incident later, he calls it "an incident which has shocked me so much that I shall never forget it; its ominous brand will poison my life throughout from the beginning to the end of eternity where no man's understanding can fathom."⁶⁸ In fact, Hedayat lifts the description of the narrator's overwhelming disappointment upon realizing that he has mistaken *Karmic* manifestations for the *Clear Light*, and places it among the major opening paragraphs of the novella. The passage clearly shows how devastated the soul becomes upon the realization of the immensity of its past errors; it also shows how fascinating, enchanting and transient the pleasures one derives from the phenomenal world can be, and how costly:

In this base world, full of poverty and misery, for the first time I thought a ray of sunshine shone on my life. But alas it was not a sunbeam, it was only a transient beam, a shooting star, which appeared to me in the likeness of a woman or an angel. And in the light of that moment, lasting only about a second, I witnessed all my life's misfortunes, and I discovered life's magnitude and grandeur. Then this beam of light disappeared again in the dark abyss in which it was destined to disappear. No. I could not keep this transient beam for myself.⁶⁹

The narrator sees two things and they appear to him in sequence. As he searches for the wine-flask, he encounters a pair of eyes so attractive that the prompting that he had received regarding the wine-flask abandons him altogether. Rather, he becomes spellbound. The second thing he sees is the consequence of his inability to carry out the first action, i.e., bringing down the flask. This consequence registers itself almost instantly in the color of the lily that his soul mate carries to the old man. We know that he had made the recognition of this scene the fulcrum of his past life, making sure that he would recognize and dismiss it. Instead he finds himself attracted to it even more intensely.

Recall that the terrifying behavior of the Deities frightens the soul, causing him to fall into a swoon; then begins the soul's search for his place of rebirth. In the novella the following happens. The girl's fall into the brook causes the old man to laugh hysterically. Upon hearing this laughter, as expected, the narrator falls into a swoon. When he comes to, again as expected, he goes back to his room to serve some of the wine to his uncle, but his uncle has left. The open door symbolically

⁶⁸ Cf. *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*, p. 53. All quotations are from a revised translation of the novella based on my recent analysis. Certain inconsistencies between the two translations is expected.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, P. 54.

points to the narrator's need to find the place of his rebirth, the place that, incidentally, is the same as the place where his judgment was held.

It is worthy of note that the narrator's recognition of his error has the potential of guiding him to a tranquil life, after being set face-to-face, of course. What he still needs to know is that the rare wine in the flask is the elixir that dispels desire. The discovery of the nature of the wine and of its relationship with desire remains in the narrator's future and is disclosed in the second, the more life-like part of the novella.

The Journey

It is virtually impossible to provide an account of the manner in which Hedayat interlaces the narrative of the *Buddha-carita* with the actions of the soul in the *Sidpa Bardo* whereby Hedayat moves the action in *The Blind Owl* from the narrator's dwelling to *Shah 'Abdol 'Azim*.⁷⁰ Neither is it actually necessary to carry out such an *explication de texte* of the novella for our purpose. What follows, therefore, is a brief summary of the relevant events in the rest of the first part of *The Blind Owl* viewed through the Tibetan materials.

When his thought-body dies, the narrator needs to get rid of it. In this he is assisted by his *bardo* body (carriage driver who looks like his uncle and who is as agile as a youth). With the help of the old man he sets forth in the direction of *Shah 'Abdol-'Azim* (place of the wombs). They arrive at the foot of a stark, black mountain (Mt. Meru). Hedayat's description of this foreboding region corresponds with the *Lamas'* description of Buddhistic cosmography almost to a fault.⁷¹

At *Shah 'Abdol-'Azim*, the old man offers the narrator an ancient *raq* jar that he had found earlier and disappears. This jar is the womb from which the narrator is to be reborn as a *Preta*, or unhappy ghost.

While resting in the womb, as expected, the narrator feels his past life diminishing. Eventually, he falls down a crevasse (abyss of rebirth) and awakens in the womb—a familiar place.

In the womb

At the beginning of part two, the narrator describes the setting of the second part of the story and identifies the protagonists of the tale. This part of the novella centers on the events surrounding the narrator's birth, of which he is told many versions. He chooses his nanny's version as the most credible.

The birth story is the nucleus of the second part of the book. Viewed superficially, it constitutes only the opening, but viewed analytically, it is the entire story of the second part. Hedayat frames the birth story and the second part of the novella, in such a manner (the nature of the characters, the setting and the time frame allow such a manipulation), that at the beginning of the birth story the narrator enters

⁷⁰ *Shah 'Abdol-'Azim* is a religious complex (including the tomb of Reza Shah) situated among the ruins of Rayy, south of Tehran.

⁷¹ For details on Buddhistic cosmography, see *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, pp. 61-66, 146 (fn 5), 184.

the dungeon womb as his own begetter and, at the end of the novella, he walks out of it, a rag and bone dealer (for details see below).

As mentioned, the events in part two are more life-like than those in part one; they also represent a more earth-plane replica of the narrator's relentless struggle with the forces that had brought about his downfall in part one. In other words, the enchanting eyes of his first experience now appear as a *Nag*-serpent in a dungeon, on the one hand, and as a Whore of a wife on the earth-plane, on the other hand. In either case, the narrator finds himself dominated by a power that he had failed to defeat earlier. The question is, will he be able to recognize the fact that the *Nag*-serpent and the Whore are none but the ethereal being of his former experience? Will he relate the ethereal being, the possessor of the enchanting eyes that had destined him to this dungeon womb, with the Whore and, beyond that, with desire?

The birth story indicates that the narrator's father and uncle are identical twins. They travel together from *Rayy* to *Banares*. There they both sleep with a *Bugam Dasi*, the narrator's mother, only one of them "lawfully". To determine the father of the nursing child, both men are thrown into a dungeon in which a *Nag*-serpent has been let loose. After the trial one of the men emerges. The survivor is unrecognizably deranged and no one has since been able to determine whether the narrator's father is this deranged man, or the man who never left the dungeon.⁷²

The birth story is quite incredible and there remain many questions: what happens to the *Nag*-serpent? What happens to the man who never comes out of the dungeon? The narrator ponders the fate of these creatures as much as he thinks about his own. Recalling the events of his past life, he philosophizes that if he has brought himself into the womb that now holds him, i.e., if he is here because of his own inability to restrain his own *karmic* desires, then who is his father and who is his uncle? No one but he himself! What is then the nature of the characters that surround him, the butcher, the rag-and-bone dealer, the Whore, and the others? They are all apparitions thought into existence by his own intellect in the same way that he had created the judgment scene intellectually during the crucial moment when he was supposed to concentrate and bringing down the wine flask in his previous experience.

The butcher, a self-serving man, deals with weighing, cutting up and evaluating things. He is meticulous, accurate and frighteningly professional. His main instrument is a bone-handled knife (power of brain in the skull); he is reminiscent of the Wrathful Deities. Apparitions personifying reason, they proceed from the psychic brain center symbolized in the novella by a window that opens to the butcher's shop.

The rag-and-bone-dealer, not the thinking man that he appears to be, is a thoughtless, "cosmic" being. As an apparition, he is the personification of the Peaceful Deities. He is as aged as are the cosmic symbols (sickle [moon], beads[planets], gapped comb [mountain ranges], etc.) that he views ceaselessly on his display. As a retired potter, he is responsible for the existence of the jar (the womb) that he hides from the public. A modicum of the philosophy of 'Umar

⁷² The prototype of the dungeon story, of course, is the circle in the center of the Wheel of Rebirth within which three animals (a pig, a peacock, and a serpent) are biting each other's tails circling the Wheel perpetually *ad infinitum* (for details see Anne Bancroft's *Religions of the East*, pp. 124ff.).

Khayyam on the nature of the revolving atomistic particles adds great depth to the characters of both the butcher and the rag-and-bone-dealer.

Returning to the dungeon scene once again, as the narrator's certainty that he is his own begetter increases, his mother *Bugam Dasi*, symbol of the propensities that have the potential to distract man and destine him to rebirth, becomes increasingly identifiable with the ethereal being of his previous *bardo* experience. As the story progresses, earth-plane characters lose their identity as real characters in a work of fiction. The father and the uncle, the father-in-law, the butcher, and the rag-and-bone-dealer all melt into one indistinguishable being: the narrator. In the final analysis the reader finds himself in the same setting, dealing with the same characters as he was in the first part. The struggle, too, is the same. It centers, once again, on the narrator and his ability to recognize his wife for what she is and deal with her accordingly.

The narrator recalls that in his earlier experience, he inadvertently lost his only remedy for achieving a tranquil world to the eyes of the ethereal girl. The passing of the wine-flask as a family heirloom from his mother to her further substantiates this hunch. In time, the narrator recognizes the wine-flask to be the only means that keeps him a slave to the Whore. Jolted out of ignorance, he says:

Now I recognize what a valuable gift she (his mother) has given to me!⁷³

Cognizant of the miracle that the wine-flask can work for him, the narrator becomes determined to extract it from the possession of his foster-sister. The closest earth-plane solution for the acquisition of the wine-flask is marriage. The marriage solution, however, does not prove useful since the girl refuses to sleep with the narrator; thus the marriage is never consummated, and appears that it never will be.

Unable to communicate with the Whore, the narrator becomes sick and eventually dies. Rather than cooped up in his dwelling, as he was at the end of his past life, now he walks in the full light of a burning sun. In addition, this time, as we know, he is equipped with a highly significant bit of information totally lacking in his previous experience—he knows that only what he thinks into existence can exist. He is determined, therefore, not to repeat the mistake of his previous *bardo*. In other words, he tries to put as much distance as he possibly can between the enchanting eyes of his nemesis and himself. In the passage below, a recreation of the judgment scene, is indicative of the amount of progress that he has made since his last encounter with the ethereal being:

Suddenly I noticed that a small girl emerged from behind the trees and went in the direction of the fort. She wore a black dress made of very fine and light warp and woof; apparently of silk. Biting the index finger of her left hand, she moved freely as if sliding in a carefree mood as she passed. It seemed to me that I had seen her before, and that I knew her: but due to the distance between us, and due to her being directly under the intense light of the sun, I could not recognize her and she disappeared suddenly.⁷⁴

⁷³ Cf., *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*, p. 88.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98. 15.

In the *Bardo Thodol*, the result of the judgment scene is always conclusive: the soul is either saved or hurled down the abyss. Hedayat's use of the scene in this case leaves the result inconclusive. The narrator, as the scene shows, is not attracted to the ethereal being as he was in his previous experience, nor is there a brook into which the girl could fall. The significant thing for understanding the rest of the second part of the novella is that from here on the narrator has the upper hand.

The technique used by Hedayat in framing the story from this point on is probably best described by Hedayat himself: a hide-and-seek technique in which the Whore holds the "bottle" that is vitally important to the narrator's salvation. And, ironically, the same bottle holds the unquestionable elixir for the death of the Whore.

After she is recognized in the judgment of the second *bardo*, we find the Whore held prisoner by the narrator. This is evident from yet another version of the judgment scene that appears on an Indian curtain strategically placed in this part of the story. As for the narrator, he has to learn some even more intimate information about the ways of the Whore before he can dispossess her of her power:

What a strange, terrifying curtain it was! Depicted on it was a stooped old man resembling the Indian *yogis*. He wore a turban and sat underneath a cypress tree. In his hand he held an instrument that looked like a *setar*.⁷⁵ In front of him stood a beautiful young girl, like a *Bugam Dasi*, or a dancer of an Indian temple. Her hands were in chains and it seemed that she was being forced to dance in front of the old man.⁷⁶

The urge to redeem the wine-flask becomes stronger. The narrator, however, does not have the necessary vision to see through the "veils" that hide the 'Light' from him. To learn the ways of the world, he consults the rag-and-bone-dealer (his own sense of attachment to the phenomenal world). The rag-and-bone-dealer, as if responding from the depths of the narrator's own self, responds:

Don't you look at what you buy?⁷⁷

Veils of ignorance begin to fall, and for the first time the blind owl sees a dawning of the light he has been seeking. He acquires a super-natural insight enabling him to round out the character of the Whore. The next time the Whore comes to him, therefore, the narrator looks at her not with the desirous eyes of the youth who peeked at her from behind the trees when she was pulled out of the *Suren River*,⁷⁸ but with the critical eyes that see through her like a dagger of the mind would:

⁷⁵ *Setar* or *sitar* is a lute-like instrument with a long, fretted neck, a resonating gourd or gourds, and usually six playing strings and a number of strings that vibrate sympathetically.

⁷⁶ Cf., *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*, p. 103.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, P. 99.

Until now whenever I looked at her I was not aware (that she was the girl who I played hide-and-seek with on the bank of the Suren river), but now, as if a curtain was removed from before my eyes, for some reason, I recalled the meat in front of the butcher's shop. To me she was like a lump of lean meat. All the traces of her inherent attraction had totally abandoned her. She was a mature, sober, made-up woman whose only concern was living--a genuine woman--my wife!⁷⁹

The wine-flask, the 'fountain' of the narrator's immortality, lies behind the flickering existence of the Whore who is now helplessly dominated by the narrator. The same urge that compelled the narrator to mutilate the body of the ethereal girl in the previous experience—the butcher instinct—compels him to invade the Whore's bedchamber:

I said to myself: "Now that my arrest is inevitable..."⁸⁰

Chanting his favorite song (cf., Mantra)⁸¹ to help him ward off distraction, the narrator enters the bedchamber, holding his bone-handled knife firmly in his hand. The Whore tries to disarm him, but he does not relent:

I took off my cloak and my scarf; I took off my clothes, but for some reason, I entered the bed still holding to the bone-handled knife.⁸²

The dungeon womb that thus far has been dark and foreboding for the blind owl is now neither dark nor foreboding. The fearsome *Nag*-serpent (the Whore), too, is tame and huggable:

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 121-22.

⁸⁰ Cf., *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*, p. 130.

⁸¹ The song that the narrator sings is:

Let us go and drink *mey*,
The wine of the Kingdom of *Rayy*;
If not today, then what day?

In terms of its structure this song is reminiscent of the song of the devotees who have practiced it in a thoroughly scientific manner under a competent guru. In *Chonyid Bardo* these devotees take refuge in the sacred essence *Mantras*:

Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus
Hail to the Lord of Speech
Hail to the Holder of the Dorje

These essence Mantras, which aid the devotee in focusing his concentration, praise the three protectors of Lamaism; the first is the essence Mantra of the Bodhissativa Clenrazee (Skt. *Avalokita*), "The Seer with keen eyes," The Great Pitier; the second, the Bodhissativa Jampalyang (Skt. *Manjughosha*), "The God of Mystic Wisdom," and the third, the Bodhissativa Chakdor (Skt. *Vajra-Pani*), "The Wielder of the Thunderbolt".

⁸² *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*, p. 130.

Her cool, silvery body, my wife's body, enveloped me as would a *Naga*-serpent tighten his coils around his prey.⁸³

In the bed, desperately struggling, the Whore bites the narrator on the lip (symbolic of the *Puja* of the *Naga*-king to the Buddha), transferring the poison to him. Holding the third eye of the Dharma (cf., Dharma Raja, the Lord of Death) in his hand, the narrator (who is his own begetter) walks out of the dungeon womb, deranged.

The end of the story is predictable. The gravedigger returns to collect the jar (the womb) for the use of other unfortunate beings. He disappears into the same mist from which he had emerged. About the role of the characters in his future experiences, the narrator who is no longer a victim to the thought processes that victimize ordinary beings, says:

The red embers in the pot of fire in front of me had turned to cold ash unable to withstand a single breath. My thoughts, too, were like the embers--hollow and ash-like--unable to withstand a single breath.⁸⁴

The Message

The concept of the *Clear Light* from Tibetan death rituals is employed in this analysis as an extra-literary device to aid us understand several things. First, to discover the structural makeup of the enigmatic scene that the narrator sees through the chink in the wall of his closet; second, to understand the nature of the characters, setting, and the time element in the novella; third, to clarify the role and the import of certain symbols in the work in general; and, fourth to determine the reason for the balanced two-partite division in the work. Social, political and cosmic meanings of the work are discovered automatically once the elements mentioned above are discussed and grasped.

It is not always necessary to buttress the examination of the structure of a work of fiction with an exhaustive study of its background. In the case of *The Blind Owl*, however, due to the repressive steps taken by the government of the time, we need to make an exception. Reza Shah's government was against any type of expression of freedom, covert or overt. Would not it be prudent for Hedayat, therefore, for self-preservation as well as for the well being of his family, to literally bury his message in Indian traditions? The narrator of the novella says it best:

"...In all these, I sought what I was deprived of; something which belonged to me and which I had been denied."⁸⁵

These are the words of a very frustrated man on the verge of making a vital life and death decision. What the narrator confesses to, right before the words quoted above are spoken, is love for something dear for him, something which naturally belongs to him but which is denied him. We have seen throughout the story how

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁸⁴ Cf., *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*, p. 129.

⁸⁵ Cf., *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*, p. 125.

relentlessly he pursues freedom and pines for a peaceful life away from others. Throughout the work he strives to recognize the elements that veil ignorance and deny him liberty. It is thus for the sake of liberty, for the sake of breaking away from the binding strings of the Whore, that he decides to resort to violence. By fetching his bone-handled knife (far-reaching power of the mind) and using it (unleashing his frustration on paper for everyone to read) without any qualms, he combats the forces that perpetuate evil and corruption.

At the beginning of the novella, the narrator is a painter of pen-case covers who, like the rest of the residents of the ancient city, is tied to a ridiculous profession. Like the other residents of *Rayy*—butchers, rag-and-bone dealer, doctors, jurists, tripe-peddlers, philosophers and other such urban residents—he adheres to ritual and follows edict and dogma blindly and uncritically. Fortunately for him, the judgment scene that he sees through the air-inlet of his dwelling reveals the very strings with which the Whore manipulates her puppets. As a result he gives up the money that he receives from his uncle and goes into the business of writing for himself. The way to his salvation will be long and lonely, but he feels he is on the right track.

From the lonely corner of his grave-like dwelling, he sets out to perfect his world; his aim is to recognize and document every corruption and every evil deed so that he can expose, in the bright light of day, the deeds of the creature that denies him what is rightfully his. Once he achieves perfection, he intensifies his single-handed struggle against the operation of the Whore. He knows that once his dagger of the mind begins its dissection, the other residents of *Rayy*—his father, his uncle, the rag-and-bone dealer, the hearse-driver and the rest—will rise in unison against the repressive rule of the Whore; they will join his struggle.

Here the reader of the novella might expect a real confrontation for which the last passage quoted above serves as the inevitable resolution. From the narrator's point of view, however, the struggle is already over. What remains is to record the account of the victory as a lesson for the uncritical adherents to dogma.

The semantic framework of *The Blind Owl*, as is evident from the discussion of a scene from the work, is rather complex. The chief element of the matrix, liberty, is discussed on three distinct levels: personal freedom, community salvation, and freedom from the binding elements of the cosmos. The latter being emphasized the most. The achievement of each of these freedoms entails an intense search for the truth, and a relentless struggle before the goal is attained. It should not, therefore, surprise us to find that Hedayat, a child of the Constitution era, when Iranians struggled to attain individual human rights, should adopt two pioneering books, the *Buddha-carita* and the *Bardo Thodol*, both successful models of emancipation, as the framework for his story.

According to *The Blind Owl*, salvation for the individual is possible as long as the individual is willing to pay the price. He must give up interest in childish desires for the ordinary and initiate a tireless quest in pursuit of Truth. What about the community of tripe peddlers, jurists, doctors, butchers and philosophers? Can they be saved? Is there any salvation for a community of frustrated pen-case cover painters who relate to a Whore, and who blindly obey her deceitful wishes? No. As long as the situation remains such that the Whore can cloud their vision with vestiges of transient glory and as long as that community slavishly and unquestioningly

continues to paint pen-case covers for petty "gains" (cf., the piece of gut thrown by the butcher to the dog), there exists little hope for salvation for them.

In *The Blind Owl*, Hedayat emphasizes the importance of individual salvation, stressing that individual reform is the prerequisite for community reform. Every individual in *Rayy* must realize the intrinsic significance of his own inborn gift of freedom; he should individually struggle to unshackle the fetters that bind him to the authority of the Whore. There are no Messiahs forthcoming! The individual can become a recluse and attain a degree of false freedom; or he may, like the narrator of *The Blind Owl*, wage an unending war against ignorance and, by enlightening his fellow residents, prevent illusion from perpetuating ignorance in his community.

As a member of the cosmos, however, man is powerless. He is born without his consent, he lives in spite of himself and dies against his wishes. Thus, while repressive authority on the community level can be crippled by the disobedience or the desertion of the man who would be free, the crushing notion that the revolving atomistic particles of the human body are shaped and reshaped by the whimsical ways of Time, is unshakable—one cannot leave the cosmos.

In the past man has questioned the existence of authority by eliminating the notions of reward (heaven) and punishment (hell) offered by the scriptures. He has eliminated or replaced many a tyrant, but his struggle with the cosmos has always remained depressingly inconclusive. For example, when the narrator compares the picture in his tin can with the one on the ancient *raq* jar, he finds that the compositional elements of the two are identical, and that over the many centuries that have intervened between the first painting and the next, nothing significant has changed.

Rarely do people challenge the domineering authority of the cosmos; thus its repressive rule remains paramount. A few, however, like the Zurvanites and 'Umar Khayyam, have tested the binding force of the cosmos. 'Umar Khayyam's agony, which is so vivid in his *Quatrains*, is indicative of the weight and pressure of the cosmos as it crushes its victim.

The attainment of peace and freedom exacts a high price. The prerequisite for *Nirvana* is the loss of interest in childish desires. When such prerequisite is fulfilled, however, there remains little incentive for living; life on the earth-plane becomes a burden. Hedayat's brief but profound note to Jamdlzadeh says it all:

The crux of the matter is that I am tired of it all. It has to do with my nerves. I pass my nights in a situation much worse than that of a sentenced criminal. I am tired of things. There is nothing that can give me incentive or comfort, nor can I deceive myself any more. A gap has severed the communication line between circumstances, life, etc., and me; so that we cannot understand each other any more.⁸⁶

More than a complaint about social injustice (although that is an important factor), this passage is one of Khayyamian bitter laughter; the laughter of a man who has lost interest in childish desires and who is pitted with a *Nag*-serpent in a cosmic dungeon. He laughs hysterically and his shoulders shake violently as his ancient shadow appears against the silvery light of the *Nag*.

⁸⁶ Cf., *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*, p. 48.

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