

## *Absurdity and Creation in the Work of Sadeq Hedayat*

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Two impulses, the desire to create and the desire to withdraw into oblivion and death, lie at the heart of Sadeq Hedayat's character. He was painfully sensitive to human weaknesses, loneliness, and suffering in a world that seemed all the darker through his eyes because the values against which he measured it were so demanding. He expected more of and for humanity than could be attained. A part of him sought to reject a life doomed to such imperfection, to draw back from the searing pain of a consciousness without hope.

Yet it is also through this pain of consciousness that the creative act arises. This second force, the impulse to objectify the vision of Absurdity by transforming it into art, provided for Hedayat a somewhat precarious counterbalance to the impulse of negation. For creation, however tentative, constitutes a challenge to the forces of darkness. In the very act of depicting a universe without meaning, the artist implicitly contributes meaning of his own.

In Hedayat's most important work, *Buf-e Kur* [*The Blind Owl*] (1937, 1941), this objectification of experience in art constitutes the essential means of self-revelation and self-realization.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the novel, the nar-

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rator says that his sole purpose in shaping into words his confused impressions of his experience is to "reveal myself to my shadow," that indistinct reflection of his mind "stretched out across the wall." His greatest fear is "that tomorrow I may die without having come to know myself."<sup>2</sup> Later, this desire for self-revelation through art--or writing--is embodied in the image of wine:

I wish now to squeeze out every drop of juice from my life as from a cluster of grapes...It is my wish, when I have poured the juice--rather, the bitter wine--of my life down the parched throat of my shadow, to say to him, "This is my life" (pp. 46-47).

It is only at the end of the book--when in effect the "wine" of the narrator's experience has been "poured down the throat of the shadow"--that the shadowy self assumes a significant form. But the wine is poisoned, and the identity it confers is at best ambiguous.

The image of wine in *The Blind Owl* reflects a conception of the self that is not stable, inherent, or internally defined, but rather derived from and continually reshaped by one's relation to one's world--both the contemporary world, and that of the living past. Thus, inevitably, if one experiences the world as meaningless or base, not only one's experience of it, but also one's very being is "poisoned" by it. The creative act itself--the act of writing--serves not only to reveal the self but, simultaneously, to poison and destroy it. The "wine" thus offers only a temporary cure for what the narrator calls the "disease" of existence, whether as a means of oblivion or a means of consciousness. Only so long as the creative aspect of consciousness is strong enough to offset its poison is a person like Hedayat able to stand up against the Absurd and live. When it ceases to be sufficient, the impulse to oblivion and death prevails.

In *The Blind Owl* these conflicting impulses are embodied structurally and symbolically. The short stories, on the other hand, give a graphic and immediate depiction of the Absurdity of the world Hedayat experienced, and the Ideal against which he measured it. There is a quality of nightmare about them, a nightmare all the more terrible be-

and showed that "our absurd and flimsy existence cannot fill the boundless emptiness in which we struggle; and our infrequent pleasures shatter before the confirmation of Nothingness."<sup>5</sup> According to Hedayat, Kafka does not deal in his works with the supernatural, but with the

Simple, often-encountered themes of our life. We are confronted with common people, with office-workers laboring under the same troubles and temptations that we ourselves have, people who speak our language. Everything seems to pursue its accustomed course. But suddenly a feeling of terror catches us by the throat: all these things which were so serious, so reasonable, so commonplace for us, all at once lose their meaning. The hands of the clock begin working differently, distances no longer correspond to our devices of measurement, <sup>6</sup> the air grows thin and we breathe with difficulty.

Hedayat's characters, like Kafka's, are often painfully ordinary men and women with whom the reader has all too much in common, people who fulfill the routine duties of uneventful lives, without complaining or asking many questions. Their "crimes," like those of Kafka's Josef K., are those of weakness or omission, the sin of somehow having missed the essential turning and never really having lived. And then, suddenly, the "stage sets collapse"<sup>7</sup> and a fearful abyss opens up between them and the world in which they had managed to get along so far. Or, rather, like Homayun in "Gerdab" [The Abyss] they become conscious for the first time of a gulf which had been there all along, but which they simply had not noticed until now.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, however, this recognition does not lead even--as Camus suggests--to a state of "hopeless lucidity," nor is the landscape bathed in a "doleful illumination."<sup>9</sup> If anything, the sky grows still darker, and the path before one's feet still more treacherously uncertain. The physical setting itself sometimes suggests the impossibility of answers. Sharif, at the end of "Bon'bast" [Dead End], stumbles unseeing down a road shrouded in drizzling rain.<sup>10</sup> Homayun, in "Gerdab," wanders in a daze through streets silently filling with snow. Hedayat's characters never really "understand." They simply bow their heads and stumble on, or retreat into insanity or death.

There is a dreary and terrible opacity to life, and lucid action is nearly impossible in the face of the Absurd. The one inescapable certainty of Hedayat's vision is that human beings, with all their aching solitude, persist in searching for a place in the world in which they will belong, for someone with whom to communicate, someone in whom they can find understanding and love.

Again, in "Kafka's Message," Hedayat gives his fullest description of the human plight:

Man is isolated, alone, without refuge or support; an anonymous alien in a land unsuited for him. He is unable to establish ties or bonds of affection with anyone; and he realizes this himself, as his whole bearing shows....He tries to wedge himself into some secure position; but at last he can no longer conceal the truth: he knows that he is superfluous. He is not free, either in his thoughts or his actions or his general behavior....He feels impelled to exonerate himself. He fabricates excuses; he flees from one explanation to another; but he is the slave of his own rationalization....

Or later,

Absurdity is our only acquaintance....We must pass with lowered heads down this corridor in which we find ourselves; there are walls on two sides, and at any moment our way may be barred and we may be arrested. For we are pursued by a sealed judgment, and we do not recognize the laws they thrust in our faces. Moreover, there is no one to guide us; we must try to figure everything out for ourselves. Whenever we turn to someone for support, he asks, "I beg your pardon, do I know you?" and goes on his way.<sup>11</sup>

One of the characters in Hedayat's story "Farda" [Tomorrow] describes in equally bleak terms this loneliness and the perilous illusion of companionship to which it can give rise:

All my friends and acquaintances I have known only as in a troubled sleep. Like a man travelling through

arid land where there is no grass or water for hours on end, consoled only by the thought that there is someone walking behind him. But when he turns to reach out his hand to him, he finds--no one. And just at that moment, he loses his footing and falls into a chasm he had not seen.<sup>12</sup>

Once again, as always, man is alone, isolated by his immutable situation in the world, by the Absurd in the world around him, and by that peculiar manifestation of the Absurd which arises from within himself. Yet still he is haunted by a hope which he cannot shake off.

In fact, it is one of the major recurrent patterns of the stories that the more hopeless a character's isolation, the more intense and presumptuous his hope for companionship and love. The title character of "Sag-e Velgard" [The Stray Dog], cut off by the very fact of his outcast situation as well as by the prejudice, the cruelty, and the cold indifference of the world around him, is nevertheless unable to forget the warmth and affection of the family in which he once belonged. Despite his physical wretchedness, despite the kicks and beatings he has received from men, he still hopes to find the one who will at last look into his eyes and understand him, and who will take care of him.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the title character of "Davud-e Guzhposht" [Davud the Hunchback]--painfully aware of his physical deformity, and even half conscious of the spiritual deformity, the arrogance and bitterness and self-consciousness, which has arisen from it--is, even in the moment of deliberately rejecting it, obsessed with the vain hope that a woman will appear who will love him and even be willing to marry him. Davud cannot free himself from the opinion of those who despise him; and he is intensely afraid of their ridicule, although he knows that he cannot escape it. Because of this fear, he rejects the bond of understanding which he recognizes in the eyes of a dog dying by the side of the road and resists the impulse to comfort the dog and hold its head in his lap. When a few minutes later, the illusion of love is once again painfully shattered, he returns to the dog--only to find that it has died.<sup>14</sup>

Sometimes a man's isolation arises from his very virtue, which imposes upon him a relationship he can never

after escape. In "Dash Akol," the title character reluctantly gives up his valued independence and liberty to carry out the will of a man he scarcely knew, to take care of the man's family after his death. He grows to love the daughter Marjan, but is prevented from expressing his love by the role of father which the will has forced upon him; there is no one but a parrot in whom he is able to confide. He is obliged to supervise the preparations for Marjan's marriage to an older, less attractive man, and to pretend to share their joy.<sup>15</sup>

The tragedy of Khodadad in the story "Laleh" [Tulip] is similar. He is a vigorously independent man of about 60 who for years has lived quite happily in seclusion at the foot of the mountains. His self-sufficiency is suddenly threatened by the mysterious arrival one cold night of a young gypsy girl. Since she is unable or unwilling to tell who she is or where she came from, Khodadad nicknames her "Lal" [mute], a name later transformed to "Laleh" [tulip]. Since she seems to have no home, he reluctantly lets her stay with him. His feeling for her gradually grows to a deeper love, and he becomes increasingly unwilling to accept their immense disparity in age or the fact that she regards him as her father. Slave to the audacious hope which he himself knows to be futile, he refuses even to consider the proposals of marriage of a young shepherd of the area--only to find one day that he has lost her altogether. Vanishing as mysteriously as she had come, she returns to her people with a young gypsy man she loves.<sup>16</sup>

One of Hedayat's strongest depictions of loneliness and ineradicable hope appears in "The Stray Dog." On the surface, this is simply a vivid evocation of the wretched condition of the dog in Muslim countries, where it is considered religiously unclean, the lowest and most despised of creatures. Hedayat, however, seems clearly to have intended it as a parable of the human condition--of the state of each of us as "outcast" in relation to the rest of society. Never really able to communicate or to be loved, deprived in body and spirit, we can only endure through the memory of a lost home and the hope of a new one.

The very setting of the story, as it is described in the opening paragraphs, suggests its universal application. The story takes place in and around the "square

of Varamin," a microcosm which contains in its shops "all it takes to...supply life's essential needs." Everything within the square suffers from the cruel heat of midday, and all look forward to the "first breeze of evening and the shadow of night." Meanwhile, though, in the shade of an old sycamore--dusty, twisted, and hollow inside--two small boys shout their wares, possibly a suggestion of de-based "religion" as guardian of business in this miniature world. And a "thick, muddy stream drags itself laboriously along" by the side of the square. Here, without detracting from the concrete immediacy of his setting, Hedayat has evoked the whole of society, including that "stream" of life which moves on the periphery of the established order. Moreover, in one seemingly paradoxical sentence describing the dog Pat, Hedayat not only suggests that Pat is a symbol for man, but, doubling back, defines man himself as a "homeless dog":

There was not merely a likeness, but actually a kind of identity, between his eyes and those of man--those two hazel eyes full of the pain and torment and hope only seen in the face of a homeless dog.

When things become too much to bear, Pat takes refuge in memories of his past life--when he had a home and a master, was cared for and loved, and had responsibilities in return. It was the irrational and irresistible attraction of sex, the existential "fact of the flesh," which led him to break these bonds and which lost him this "paradise." The description of his encounter with the "bitch"--especially the image of the channel under the wall into the garden which, once driven out, he can never again re-enter--suggests the fact of birth as it separates us from the "ideal existence," which can hereafter only exist in the mind.

One might think, from Hedayat's frequent use of death as a symbol of the recovery of the ideal, that here in fact the "lost paradise" could be regained, that there is the possibility of a better existence beyond death. But it is precisely this that he denies. In a curious episode near the end of "The Stray Dog," Pat does seem to find his master again, although he only half recognizes him. Starving, bruised, exhausted, Pat has dragged himself to a ditch at the edge of town, but wakes up in the night in excruciating

hunger and returns to the square to search for food. Suddenly, a car roars up and a man gets out. He stoops to pet the dog, and, when Pat follows him into a cafe, feeds him all he can eat. Although Pat is afraid to get in the car with the man when he leaves again, he is equally unwilling to lose "for the second time" the only one who has ever shown him kindness. As hard as he can, he chases along behind the car till he finally loses it somewhere outside the city, and, utterly exhausted, collapses in a ditch by the side of the road to die. This vision of a new life was after all only a cruel hallucination at the threshold of death. The master had not returned. The ditch was the same. Abandoned finally even by his hope, Pat must enter death alone.

Death is only the most extreme of the forms in which the Absurd reveals itself. But in its power to strip life of its reassuring veil, it becomes the instrument through which all aspects of the Absurd are laid bare. Similar in some ways to Khodadad, Sharif in "Dead End" lives an isolated, limited, but not really unhappy life until his solitude is interrupted by a beautiful and unexpected friendship. But just when he has become wholly dependent on someone else for his happiness, this relationship is taken from him, and the flimsy fabric of his life is broken. Yet it is not "fate" alone which destroys him. Sharif's life before was not, like Khodadad's, a strong and beautiful, if lonely, one. His work at the office was empty and stultifying; and it served moreover as a protective screen between him and life. It kept him from having to think or feel deeply, and it shielded him from any recognition of the emptiness of all his activity. Ever since his close and only friend drowned in front of him years before, nothing in his life has mattered deeply to him. Then suddenly one day, a stranger arrives at the office, whom Sharif discovers to be the son of his dead friend. It seems to him that his friend has come back to life, and this restored relationship once again constitutes the whole meaning of his existence. Still, it is a false and essentially selfish relationship. Sharif loves Majid not for himself but for the memory of his father. While asking everything from the boy, he has nothing within him to give in return. It is thus Sharif, in a sense, who forces upon the son the fate of the father. Majid too dies engulfed, by drowning. And Sharif is left, not simply as he was before, but with



the terrible recognition of a life which is a hollow shell.

Death is thus the ultimate "dead end," both culmination and revelation of the absurdity, the emptiness, of the life which had gone before. This confrontation with the Absurd which death brings takes place at the conclusion of "Dead End." But it occurs in "The Abyss" before the story begins. Shattered by the suicide of his closest friend, Homayun turns the whole of his terrible and irrational grief against his wife and child, destroying in the process the one meager happiness remaining to him. The disastrous chain-reaction which begins with his unfounded accusation of his wife is triggered first by his intense grief for his friend--which makes him see in everyone and everything, including his own daughter, the image of his dead friend's face--and then by his hurt at the fact that his friend had not confided in him. But there are deeper and less flattering causes. In his will, Bahram left everything to his friend's daughter Homa. Homayun's inability to accept this generosity leads him to manufacture ulterior motives in the hypothesis that his wife has been unfaithful and that Homa is really Bahram's child. Yet still deeper lies the nagging consciousness of his own infidelity to his wife during the three years he was stationed away from home in Bandar Abbas, and his selfish lack of thought for his wife and child on his return. All this, however, would not have been enough to instigate Homayun's impulse of wanton self-destruction. It is the fact of death itself, in its horror and immediacy, which opens up before him the yawning abyss of nothingness. Into this gulf he sacrifices everything which had previously given meaning to his life. Before the specter of Bahram's death, the love he had once felt for his wife evaporates, and he is left only with the awareness that she is no longer young or beautiful and with a physical disgust at her attempted consolations, at her ability to turn from grief back to considerations of life. Likewise his work, which before had possessed a semblance of purpose and value, and which had given him at least the anticipation of a pleasant evening with his friend and family, suddenly appears pathetically absurd. He recalls simpler and happier days when, as a child, he had gone with his parents to the country and had lain in the grass under the trees watching the threshing:

With a plaintive sound, the thresher chopped the golden heads of wheat, while the...oxen..., their backs wounded by the goad, circled round and round till sunset. He realized now how those animals must feel. He too had gone blindly in circles all his life--like the draft horse at the oil press, like the oxen threshing. He thought of the monotonous hours he had spent behind his desk in the small office in the customs house, endlessly making the same marks on the same papers. From time to time his coworker would look up at the clock and yawn, then pick up his pen and resume his work--writing the customary figures in their proper columns, comparing them, calculating, checking through the account books.

It is the experience of death that leaves Homayun face to face with the Absurd in his own being. And it is his inability to stand up to it which makes him drag others along with himself into the abyss.

Hedayat's view of the human condition is a felt perception, not a coolly reasoned intellectual one. It is the product not of abstract philosophical argument, but of his own painful confrontation with the impregnable obscurity of human life. His vision may be considered "narrow" or one-sided, but only in that it was necessarily bounded by the limits of his own lived experience. It makes no claim to universality, but it is no less "true" for being so essentially his own. The nature of the bias, the slant through which the world appeared to him, can be seen in his interpretation of the life and writings of Kafka, the European writer in whom he most strongly recognized a fellow spirit. Further, through an investigation of the essential differences in the visions of the two men, the peculiar quality of Hedayat's conception of man and the Absurd universe can be more clearly perceived.

The specific shape which the Absurd assumed in the lives of Hedayat and Kafka was strikingly similar in certain respects. Both came from families which exerted tremendous pressure on them in directions they were temperamentally unable to follow, a pressure they were equally unable to shake off. In Kafka's case, this coercion came from the example and influence of his father. For

Hedayat, it came from a long family tradition of outstanding public service. Under this pressure, both men pursued an uncongenial course of studies, then let themselves become tied to the intolerable routine of minor office work. In both, the pettiness of their jobs and the sense that they had failed somehow to live up to what was expected of them produced a feeling of guilt and worthlessness, and deeper, through their own real certainty of their abilities, an almost hypersensitive defensiveness.<sup>17</sup> Finally, both of them were obsessed, to different degrees, with the thought of death and, at times, with the idea of suicide.<sup>18</sup> At the end of a revealing "autobiographical sketch," Hedayat simultaneously suggests and denies the influence upon him of the judgment which "others" made of him:

There is nothing outstanding in my biography--nothing has happened in my life which might be of interest. I neither occupy a high position, nor do I hold a genuine degree. In school, I was never an excellent student; on the contrary, I was pursued by failure. Everywhere, wherever I worked, I was always a forgotten, nameless employee; and my superiors were dissatisfied with me--they were glad when I left. Altogether, I am quite a forgotten creature, a good-for-nothing: this is the judgment of those around me. Perhaps it is true.<sup>19</sup>

Hedayat recognizes in Kafka the perpetual conflict of opposing forces which lay at the basis of his own life. Both of them were deeply convinced of their own abilities, yet deeply wounded by the low opinion of others. They recognized their difference from others--their superiority of sensibility and perception. But they also felt their painful isolation. Though to a degree they valued this enforced solitude, something in them also longed for a place in human society, longed to conform and live an ordinary, happy, comfortable life.<sup>20</sup> Like the narrator in Kafka's "Investigations of a Dog," they sometimes wonder whether they have not perhaps paid too high a price for their fidelity to the truth within them. Like Kafka's "Dog," they recognize, along with the desire to seek and speak the truth, the opposing desire to silence the truth within them and live as undisturbed as possible.

In "Kafka's Message," Hedayat stresses two points: Kafka's solitude, both as loneliness and as a feeling of incompatibility with the world around him; and what seemed to him Kafka's unflinching freedom from illusion, his ability to look squarely at the absurdity of existence without taking refuge in the other-worldly reassurances of religion. Consequently, he quarrels with Max Brod for emphasizing Kafka's later interest in Zionism, and all that appears optimistic, positive, or theistic in his vision.<sup>21</sup>

Yet Hedayat undoubtedly underestimated the degree of Kafka's genuine faith in a Truth beyond this world, as well as the degree to which Kafka was in fact drawn to people, both individually and collectively. Ultimately, Kafka's faith in the objective existence of a transcendent Reality probably defines much of essential difference, in tone and emphasis, between the lives and works of the two men. While there exists in both a similar mixture of hope and despair, of the desire for creation and communication and the desire to withdraw from the consciousness of the Absurd, these qualities existed in them in different proportions. For one who has faith in the actual existence of a transcendent Reality, however inaccessible to man, it is easier to see the necessity for continuing unrelentingly the ultimately futile search for it. Hedayat's Ideal, on the other hand, possesses no external reality. It exists only in the individual consciousness and has no meaning beyond the individual. Consequently the impulse to act, to create, to communicate with others stands more precariously before the impulse to despair.

Still more important is the fact that Hedayat faced a far more terrible manifestation of the Absurd in the social and political situation in which he lived than Kafka ever did. For Kafka, the absurdity of the social structure meant the impersonality, the pettiness and corruption, and the irrationality of the bureaucratic machine. For Hedayat, it meant a brutal, repressive dictatorship, under which freedom of expression was ruthlessly suppressed, with even the most intimate literary gathering watched closely by Reza Shah Pahlavi's ubiquitous police. The slightest opposition to the regime exposed one to extreme physical danger.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, it was expected of writers that they lend full support to the government, especially in its campaign for modernization, which intellectuals like Hedayat saw as hand-

ing the country over to Western political and commercial powers, and betraying its national and cultural integrity.

In Hedayat's stories, the Absurd appears in ways which touch a character personally. In *The Blind Owl*, however, the landscape of the Absurd encompasses the whole political and cultural reality of society, of contemporary Iranian society in particular. The quality of that landscape, and of the individual's response to it, can be seen as deriving from precisely those aspects of Hedayat's vision in which he differs most strongly from Kafka. The tone of the work is dark; and the desire to withdraw into solitude and oblivion is only precariously held in check by the impulse to create. Moreover, the meager and very much qualified hope which does appear in the work derives not from any immutable transcendent Reality, but from a quite fragile and corruptible, even mortal, Ideal. And it rests not in one's search for the Eternal, but in the response of the individual to the conditions of this world.

The eternal struggle in Hedayat between creation and negation is embodied in *The Blind Owl* in his treatment of art as the underlying theme of the work. Though art is essentially creative, it is also indissolubly linked for Hedayat with destruction and negation as well. Art is described as a process of distilling experience into "wine"; if the experience is evil, the "wine" will be poisoned and will transmit the poison to the whole of one's being in a still more concentrated form. In fact, since for Hedayat identity is molded and defined by experience, this "poisoning" of the being through art will be even more fundamental, more radically "incurable." Consequently, although art in this work is primarily a means of achieving consciousness, it can also contribute intensely the desire for unconsciousness and oblivion. After describing the beauty of his opium dream, the narrator adds the wish that it were possible for art itself to be one's mode of death.

If only oblivion were attainable...if it were possible for my being to dissolve in one drop of ink, in one bar of music, in one ray of coloured light, and then these waves and forms were to grow to such infinite size that in the end they faded and disappeared... (p. 42).

Nonetheless, it is art as creative act which predominates in *The Blind Owl*. As a means of "distilling" experience, and of achieving self-awareness, it is also to some extent a means of gaining control over the facts of experience by absorbing them into the conscious self. Painting is of importance throughout the book and functions much as the concept of writing does. It appears in the decoration of pen-case covers, in the ancient painted jar from the city of Rey, and in the narrator's insistence on painting truly the eyes of the "ethereal girl" before he buries her:

The essential was her face, or, rather, her eyes--and now they were in my possession. I had fixed on paper the spirit which had inhabited those eyes and I had no further need of the body, that body which was doomed to disappear, to become the prey of the worms and rats of the grave. Henceforth she was in my power and I had ceased to be her creature (p. 26).

This is the virtue of art, that it makes possible a kind of control over the absurdity of experience. What the narrator does in painting the eyes is analogous to his shaping and communicating of his "terrible experience" through writing (p. 45).

Hedayat considered the self as shaped and defined by one's experience of the world. But for him, the "world" meant not the facts of the present alone, but the whole of the living past as well. If the present represents the limited arena within which one may act, it is from the past that one derives the ideals which can bestow order and meaning upon the Absurd landscape of the present. The past and the Ideal are also associated with the concept of art, which derives from both, and is the medium through which experience may be shaped and ordered. Only, unfortunately, just as identity in the works of Hedayat is unstable and shifts its aspect under the pressure of its environment--so too art, the Ideal, and even the past possess no single, reliable immutable character. At every glance--like figures in a nightmare--they are changed, pulled out of shape, distorted.

Essentially there are only three principal "characters" in *The Blind Owl*, two of whom are in a sense only aspects of the consciousness of the third, the narrator himself. By means of the device of echo and repetition,

what seem at first to be distinct figures--the old man of the paintings and the vision through the closet window, the hare-lipped uncle, the hearse driver, and the Quran reader--are drawn together into one. And the description of the narrator's peculiar relation with his wife, "the bitch," in the second main section of the book is actually only a retelling of the first section--the experience of the revelation, death, and decomposition of the "ethereal girl." It is through the variations in the figures that the complex interrelationships of Past, Present, Art, and the Ideal are examined.

The "disease" from which the narrator suffers is described as the "experience which has poisoned my existence," and this experience is first of all his association with the ethereal girl as embodiment of the Ideal. The vision which the narrator sees through the closet window--of the girl, the stream, and the old man beneath the cypress tree--is the stereotyped scene of his pen-case covers and the ancient jar come to life. After the narrator seeks in vain for another glimpse of the girl, she appears suddenly one night at his door, follows him silently up to his room, and falls upon his bed. In the hope of restoring her, he pours down her throat that ambiguous wine from the closet shelf--only to find later, to his horror, that she has died. In a sense, it is the wine itself which has "killed" her. Wine in the book is represented variously as pure and as poisoned; as associated with the ancient past (the wine of Rey); with the narrator's own immediate "past" (the poisoned wine which his mother distilled from her own experience and left as an inheritance to her son); and finally, with the whole of the narrator's own experience, encompassing the present and both aspects of the past (described as the "bitter wine" which he squeezes from his life). The poisoning of the ethereal girl is a way of showing what inevitably happens to the Ideal when brought into profane contact with the "poisonous" physicality, baseness, and time-boundness of the actually experienced present.

Although the ethereal girl dies in her original form, she reappears in the base distortion of the "bitch"--the whore of the neighborhood, "plump and comfortable-looking ...[and] well-pleased with life" (p. 111). In amazement, the narrator asks, "Was this the same graceful creature, was this the slim, ethereal girl who, in a black pleated

dress, had played hide-and-peek with me on the banks of the Suran?" (p. 111). She is now no stranger to the actual world; she has made herself at home in the neighborhood of "butchers" and "drunken policemen," and has herself become an influence of defilement and corruption--an instrument of the Present. Hedayat may be saying that this is the inevitable fate of the Ideal, or of Art, when the present is "poisoned." He himself watched art under Reza Shah Pahlavi<sup>23</sup> either "die" or become the accomplice of the forces of corruption and brutality.

As the Ideal is either destroyed or distorted by the poisonous influence of experience, so the "repulsive old man" and the girl's relation to him undergo analogous change. The "old man" in each of his various aspects provides the link between the narrator and the culture and values of the past. It is the grave-digger who gives him the painted jar which he has unearthed from the ancient city of Rey, and which the narrator makes a ludicrously inadequate attempt to pay for. Later, he receives what is apparently the same jar from the Quran reader, the seller of odds and ends. But the old man's character as transmitter of ancient values is ambiguous. Except in the scenes painted on the vase and on the narrator's pen cases, he is depicted as ugly, dirty, and repulsive; and as the Quran reader, the modern embodiment of tradition in established religion, he surrounds himself with broken and worthless objects, among which he keeps the vase, covered with a dirty handkerchief. Moreover, he is further defiled by his association with the "bitch," whose favorite he is. In addition, the ancient vase is continually slipping away from the narrator once he thinks he has gained possession of it. When he returns to consciousness after killing the "bitch," he looks for the old flower vase and finds it gone. Then he notices beside the door

...a bent old man with his face partly concealed by a scarf wrapped around his neck. He was holding under his arm something resembling a jar, wrapped in a dirty handkerchief. He burst into a hollow, grating laugh... (p. 129).

Why does the narrator commit this "murder"--for which he subjects himself to inevitable arrest sooner or later by the "drunken policemen"? Perhaps because this is the only



response left open to the artist when art, or the Ideal, has become bound up with and distorted by the present. Hedayat remarked that Kafka destroyed the illusions which make the present palatable, and which the powerful of the world use to exert their control over others, and further that he refused to become the tool of those who would use literature to "transform black to white."<sup>24</sup> The true artist must attack and if possible destroy both the distortion of art and the whole body of illusions and evil with which it has become involved.

After this act, the narrator discovers with horror that his reflection in the mirror has become that of the repulsive old odds-and-ends man, while his amorphous shadow on the wall has assumed the identity of an owl. The latter is perhaps the most significant of all the book's ambiguities. The owl is the Iranian symbol of death and destruction--and it represents here, in part, the poisoning of the narrator's "self" by the wine of his experience, which he has now at last succeeded in squeezing out and "pouring down the throat of his shadow" in the creative act of writing out the story. But the owl is an ambiguous prophet for the whole of the society as well. Iranians believe that an owl perched on a new house is an omen of destruction, but that an owl on the wall of a ruin is an omen of renewed prosperity and fortune.<sup>25</sup> The narrator's house is in one sense "new," since it is part of the rest of the "new" city. But its walls were built over the ruins of the ancient city of Rey. The image of the owl could suggest the possibility of destroying the baseness and corruption of the "new" society and restoring what is good in the values of the past. Two curious episodes in the book may point in this direction. In one passage, in a dream, the narrator wanders through an unfamiliar town full of futuristic structures,

weird houses of geometrical shapes--prisms, cones, cubes....All the inhabitants of the town had died by some strange death. Each and every one of them was standing motionless with two drops of blood from his mouth congealed upon his coat. When I touched one of them his head toppled and fell to the ground.

I came to a butcher's shop and saw there a man like the odds-and-ends man in front of our house. He had

a scarf wrapped around his neck and held a long-bladed knife in his hand and he stared at me with red eyes from which the lids seemed to have been cut off. I tried to take the knife from his hand. His head toppled and fell to the ground... (p. 94).

The implication of these passages is of course far from obvious. The debased inhabitants of the present appear alive, but are dead--at least in dream. And the ancient inhabitants of Rey return to life--perhaps, if only from a certain angle of vision, at a certain hour of the day. The image of the owl is also highly ambiguous. It is blind, and its prophetic "vision" thus cannot wholly be relied upon. Furthermore, even if its vision should be correct, it has lost its voice and cannot speak. Under the sway of "drunken policemen," the artist can only keep silent--or speak in parables.

Hedayat has been criticized for presenting problems without solutions.<sup>26</sup> Clearly he did not see it as his place to provide sure answers, only to portray in life that which is ultimately unanswerable. Although his work is permeated with a vision of the Absurd--and an Existentialist perspective can be helpful in illuminating its meaning--Hedayat remains too much of an idealist, is too much repelled by the time-bound limitations of the human condition, and indicates too little real faith in human freedom to be considered an Existentialist himself. There is a concern for responsibility in his writing, but it remains implicit. What he does is to subject the reader to the experience which Sartre says is the purpose of the Existentialist writer.<sup>27</sup> In disclosing to us the bleak landscape of the world, in juxtaposition to an alternative landscape of the Ideal, he forces us to understand and to choose. He leaves on our shoulders the burden of responsibility for creative action.

#### NOTES

1. Hedayat's stories are full of characters who are not sure who or what they are. The desire for self-realization appears most directly in the story "Tarikhaneh" [The Darkroom]. In "Zendeh be-Gur" [Alive in the Grave], the narrator's desire for death is

equalled by his desire to communicate his story. Sadeq Hedayat, "Tarik-khaneh," *Sag-e Velgard* [*The Stray Dog*] (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1963); "Zنده be-Gur," *Zنده be-Gur* [*Alive in the Grave*] (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1958).

2. Sadeq Hedayat, *Buf-e Kur*, 5th ed. (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1955), p. 2. (Quotation here, as elsewhere in this essay, is from *The Blind Owl*, translated by D. P. Costello (New York: Grove, 1957).
3. Cf. Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, tr. G. Humphreys Roberts and Richard Winston, 2nd ed. (New York: Schocken, 1960).
4. Hedayat, "Payam-e Kafka" [Kafka's Message], *Goruh-e Mahkumin* (tr. of Kafka's *In der Strafkolonie* [*In the Penal Colony*]), ed. Hasan Qa'emiyan (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1958), p. 22.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 16. (Translations from "Payam-e Kafka" and from the stories are my own.)
6. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
7. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, tr. Justin O'Brien (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 10.
8. Hedayat, "Gerdab" [The Abyss], *Three Drops of Blood*, p. 10.
9. Camus' *The Myth*, as discussed by Jean-Paul Sartre in "Camus' 'The Outsider,'" tr. by Annette Michelson in Sartre, *Literary and Philosophical Essays* (London: Rider and Co., 1955), p. 26.
10. Hedayat, "Bon'bast" [Dead End], *The Stray Dog*, p. 66.
11. *Idem*, "Kafka's Message," pp. 12-13.
12. *Idem*, "Farda" [Tomorrow], *Neveshteh'ha-ye Parakandeh* [*Scattered Writings*], ed. Hasan Qa'emiyan, 2nd ed. (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1965), p. 195.

13. *Idem*, "Sag-e Velgard" [The Stray Dog], *The Stray Dog*.
14. *Idem*, "Davud-e Guzhposht" (Davud the Hunchback), *Alive in the Grave*.
15. *Idem*, "Dash Akol" [Dash Akol], *Three Drops of Blood*.
16. *Idem*, "Laleh" [Tulip], *Three Drops of Blood*.
17. This feeling of self-contempt or, more accurately, of worthlessness in the eyes of others, appears throughout Kafka's writings. See, for example, "The Metamorphosis" and "The Verdict," and more directly in his "Letter to His Father."
18. Consider, for example, Kafka's "A Dream," in which he watches in fascination as his own grave is prepared for him; "The Verdict," in which the condemnation of the father impels the young man to suicide; Brod's description, in the biography, of Kafka's own temptation to end his life. Hedayat, on the other hand, made a number of actual attempts at suicide, and finally did take his own life in Paris in 1951. He speaks in "Three Drops of Blood" of a man's death or, more specifically, his mode of death as something which is born with him, which is "written on his forehead."
19. Bozorg Alavi, *Geschichte und Entwicklung der modernen persischen Literatur* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1964).
20. Hedayat, "Kafka's Message," p. 27.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 24, 26, and 32. Cf. also Brod's biography of Kafka, p. 172, where he quotes from the section "Reflections on Sin, Pain, Hope, and the True Way," from *The Great Wall of China*, tr. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken, 1946), pp. 289-90.

"Man cannot live without a permanent faith in something indestructible in himself. At the same time this indestructible part and his faith in it may remain permanently concealed from him. One of the forms in which this concealment may be expressed is the belief in a personal God."

See, too, Brod on pp. 174-175 and ff.

22. Alavi, *Geschichte* (p. 91) cites as examples the murder of the patriotic poet 'Eshqi in 1924 (p. 91), and the seven-year imprisonment and eventual strangling of the poet Farrokhi in 1939 (p. 97). See also Jalal Al-e Ahmad, "Hedayat-e Buf-e Kur," in *'Elm va Zendegi*, no. 1 (1951), pp. 65-78, for a discussion of the influence of Reza Shah Pahlavi's dictatorship on the tone and imagery of *The Blind Owl*.
23. Reza Shah Pahlavi, ruled 1925-1941.
24. Hedayat, "Kafka's Message," p. 16.
25. Cf. for instance the folk beliefs of Khunsar.
26. Cf. Parviz Daryush, in "Ada-ye Dayn be Sadeq-e Hedayat" [Repaying a Debt to Sadeq Hedayat], in *Ketab-e Mah* [Book of the Month] (Shahrivar, 1962), p. 33. (This is an especially valuable study of Hedayat's work.)
27. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Qu'est-ce que la litterature?" [What is Literature?], *Les Temps modernes*, II:18-III:22. Tr. as *What Is Literature?* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), and as *Literature and Existentialism* (New York: Citadel Press, 1965).