

writing, is found in the character of this model, at least to the extent of Dānešvar's commitment to the personal in writing.

In summary, the model is a character with a "modern" relationship to her environment, a relationship which we find in the writings of other early women writers. In the model character we have at least the stirrings of the negotiation with reality which we as readers have come to expect from the literature of the twentieth century. Dānešvar's "model" character is the essence of Dānešvar's modernity and her literary modernity.

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RITUALS OF RENEWAL: SĀDEQ HEDĀYAT'S *THE BLIND OWL*
AND THE WINE MYTHS OF MANUČEHRI

Sādeq Hedāyat's novel *The Blind Owl* was first published in 1937. By that time Iranian literature had adopted successfully the leading European prose genres of the 19th c. – the novel and the short story – and was acculturating sentimentalism, romanticism, and realism.¹ *The Blind Owl*, however, was an excursion into modernism – an *avant-garde* movement for Europe itself. It was seen as a radical departure from the new Iranian mainstream, so for almost five decades after its publication, research on *The Blind Owl* concentrated mostly on the features that defined it as an example of successful literary reception. Often analyzed in the context of the European and North American traditions, Hedāyat's novel was convincingly linked to a broad range of writings: from Kafka, Sartre and Rilke, to Edgar Poe, Eugene Sue and Dante.² Generally, apart from considering some Xayyāmīc traces in the novel, early research into its relationship with the Eastern traditions bypassed the Persian cultural space, and again emphasized "foreign" influences – e.g. the author's indebtedness to Indian literature and Buddhism.³

1 – On the early developments of Persian prose see, e.g., V. Kubičková, "Persian Literature of the 20th Century", in J. Rypka (ed.), *History of Iranian Literature*, Dordrecht, 1968, p. 389-395; M. Estelāmi, *Barrasi-ye adabiyāt-e emruz-e Irān*, Tehrān, 2535/1973 (4th edn. 1977), p. 104-114; Y. Āriyanpur, *Az Šabā tā Nimā: tārix-e 150 sāl-e adab-e fārsi*, 2 vols., Tehrān, 2535/1977, vol. I, p. 235-238. For a perceptive treatment of the role of translation and literary borrowing on literary change see A. Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry: Scenarios of Poetic Modernity in Iran*, Salt Lake City, 1995, p. 137-186. Although analysing the process of reception and literary appropriation in poetry, this chapter draws inferences applicable to the development of modern prose.

2 – See, for example, the articles published in M. Hillmann (ed.), *Hedayat's The Blind Owl Forty Years After*, Austin, 1978 (M. Mohandessi, "Hedayat and Rilke"; J. Johnson, "The Blind Owl, Nerval, Kafka, Poe and the Surrealists: Affinities"; B. Meghdadi and L. Hamalian, "Oedipus and the Owl"; C. Bryant, "Hedayat's Psychoanalysis of a Nation"; L. Alishan, "The Menage a Trois of *The Blind Owl*"), and especially the monograph of M. Beard, *Hedayat's Blind Owl as a Western Novel*, Princeton, 1990.

3 – E.g. Hillmann, *Hedayat's The Blind Owl*, cit. (R. Williams, "Buddhism and the Structure of *The Blind Owl*"; D. Champagne, "Hindu Imagery in *The Blind Owl*"), and especially I. Bashiri, *The Fiction of Sadeq Hedayat*, Costa Mesa, 1984. A rare glimpse into a Persian source of Hedāyat's can be found in L. Bogle, "Khayyamic Influence in *The Blind Owl*", in Hillmann, *Hedayat's The Blind Owl*, cit. As Ehsan Yarshater points out, conservative critics considered Hedayat a proponent of «themes and techniques alien to Persian tradition» (E. Yarshater,

Interest in the traits which anchor *The Blind Owl* in the Persian literary tradition gathered momentum in the late 1980s and in the 1990s. Thus, Nasrin Rahimieh was among the first to note that *The Blind Owl* «reflects the author's longing for new art forms». ⁴ She points out that Hedāyat drew new material not only from European literatures, but also from Iranian folklore and Indian and Zoroastrian mythology. Homa Katouzian traced the roots of the novel back to Hedāyat's own writings. ⁵ Youssef Ishaqpour emphasized the mystical affinities of *The Blind Owl*. ⁶ A conference organized at the University of Austin, Texas, focused on "Sadeq Hedayat and Persian Literature". ⁷ Hourā Yāvāri sought parallels between *The Blind Owl* and the 12th c. romantic epic *Seven Beauties* (*Haft Peykar*) by Nezāmi Ganjavi. ⁸

The present paper, which explores the echoes of the lyrical legacy of Persia in *The Blind Owl*, belongs to the latter trend. It is part of a larger study exploring the novel's links to the Persian classical tradition and folklore. ⁹ The project is based on the assumption that *The Blind Owl* is not only a work of fiction, but also an artistic manifesto on cultural reform; that it is an allegorical parable, which raises the issue of continuity and change, and examines the nature of the transition from classical to modern art – questions important for Hedāyat as a cultural reformer, and central to the Iranian intellectual discourse of the 1920s-30s. ¹⁰ This reading of *The Blind Owl* was prompted largely by the allegorical

ed., *Sadeq Hedayat: An Anthology*, Boulder, 1979, p. vii). That view was shared by modern critics attuned primarily to the Western characteristics of the novel.

4 – N. Rahimieh, "A Systemic Approach to Modern Persian Prose Fiction", *World Literature Today*, LXIII, 1 (1989), p. 15-19, p. 16.

5 – H. Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat: The Life and Literature of an Iranian Writer*, London and New York, 1991.

6 – Y. Ishaqpour, "At the Tomb of Sadeq Hedayat", *Irān Nāmeb*, X, 3 (1992), p. 419-472.

7 – See M. Hillmann, "Afterword: Sadeq Hedayat and the American School of Persian Studies", *Irān Nāmeb*, X, 3 (1992), p. 19-34.

8 – H. Yāvāri, *Ravānkāri va adabiyāt: do maḥm, do ensān, do jahān: az Bahrām Gur tā rāvi-ye Buf-e kur*, Tehrān, 1995.

9 – Other papers of mine have examined the links of *The Blind Owl* to Iranian folklore (M. Simidchieva, "The Headless Shadow and Other Apparitions: Folkloric Fragments in Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*", presentation at MESA '95, Washington, December 6-10, 1995) and to the Persian court romance *Vis o Ramin* by the 11th c. poet Faxr al-Din Gorgāni (M. Simidchieva, "The River That Runs Through It: A Persian Paradigm of Frustrated Desire", *Edebiyat*, VI, 1995, p. 203-222).

10 – The treatment of cultural issues in poetry and fiction is a well-established tradition in modern Persian literature. Thus a parable addressing the need for cultural reform can be found in the work of the 19th c. writer Mīrzā Malkom Xān Kermāni "A Traveler Relates" (*Sayyāhi guyad*; see Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry*, cit., p. 41-59). The subject of language reform is central to M. 'A. Jamalzāde's short story "Sweet Persian" (*Fārsi ũekar ast*; first pub. in 1921), and Hedayat's own short story "Patriot" (*Vaṭanparast*; first published in 1942). Allegorical writing motivated by reformist agenda is also evident in the poetry of Nimā Yušij (see K. Talatoff, *The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian Literature*, Syra-

implications of the novel's title, and by the suggestive details of its contents. ¹¹

The symbolic significance of the novel's title has been explored in previous research. ¹² To the list of traditional symbolic meanings of the word discussed by other authors can be added one more, an unconventional meaning which arguably Hedāyat himself created. It is not contained in the word "owl" as such, but arises from a traditional juxtaposition of the owl to the nightingale, rooted both in Iranian folklore and in Classical Persian literature. Traditionally, the two birds are held to be polar opposites on account of their song: the owl's voice is discordant, the nightingale's harmonious; the owl augurs misfortune, the nightingale sings of love. In Classical Persian literature the nightingale is a conventional metaphor for the court poet. It is my contention that Hedāyat extended the analogy, positing the owl for the modernist writer. ¹³ Thus the title hints at the allegorical dimension of the novel, and invites the reader to compare this work of modern literature with classical poetry. The allegorical significance of *The Blind Owl* can be gleaned from the developments of the plot. The short summary below privileges only those elements which are of essence for the allegorical reading of the novel.

Summary of *The Blind Owl*

The novel is a first-person narrative whose narrator appears in two guises, and in two different settings: *Part I* is the story of a painter in love with an elusive ethereal girl. *Part II* is a "hysterical self-analysis" (Kamshad's term) of a sick young man, who is examining in writing his hopeless desire for a lascivious woman. The artist of *Part I* lives in isolation, amidst ruins, far beyond the city limits and the concerns of everyday life. The "writer" of *Part II* resides in the midst of a bustling city, yet in total alienation from the "rabble" around him. The setting of

cuse, 2000, p. 26-50). On the heated debates between traditionists and reformers in the early decades of the 20th c. see, e.g., Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry*, cit., p. 101-136.

11 – For details on the allegorical reading of the novel see M. Simidchieva, "The Nightingale and the Blind Owl: Sadiq Hidayat and the Classical Persian Tradition", *Edebiyat*, X, 1994, p. 247-277.

12 – See, for example, M. Ghanoonparvar, "Buf-e kur as a Title", in Hillman, *Hedayat's The Blind Owl*, cit., p. 68-75.

13 – *The Blind Owl* is a rather puzzling title for this novel, and its relevance to the text is not immediately apparent. There is only one cluster of references to an owl, all in one enigmatic paragraph towards the end of Part II, and all in the context of writing. Contemplating the characters which people his narrative, the "writer"-narrator refers to himself as a screech owl who has difficulty emitting his infamous cries – i.e. he has difficulty expressing his troublesome thoughts: «The old odds-and-ends-man, the butcher, Nanny and the bitch, my wife, were shadows of me, shadows in the midst of which I was imprisoned. I had become like a screech-owl, but my cries caught in my throat and I spat them out in the form of cloths of blood. Perhaps screech-owls are subject to a disease which makes them think as I think. My shadow on the wall had become exactly like an owl and, leaning forward, read intently every word I wrote» (S. Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, trans. D.P. Costello, London, 1957, p. 127; see also Šādeq Hedāyat, *Buf-e kur*, 12th edn., Tehrān, 1348/1969, p. 168-169).

Part I is practically invisible: there are only sparse, "functional" references to isolated objects which are affected by the plot action. This method of depicting the setting in a narrative is characteristic of folklore and medieval literature.¹⁴ In contrast, the *setting of Part II* is presented in long and detailed descriptions cluttered with naturalistic detail – very much in the manner of the 19th-20th c. European novel. Although disparate, the two parts are held together by two components: by the narrative voice which does not change in tenor; and by the structural frame-work of the novel whereby the bi-partite exposition is bracketed by a single introduction and a conclusion.

In the *Introduction* the narrator acquaints the reader with the suffering which has changed the course of his life, and has impelled him to write as a means of self-knowledge and self-reflection.

In *Part I* the narrator presents himself as a painter of papier-mâché pen-cases. His designs are all the same – an endless reproduction of a single scene: an old man sitting under a cypress tree and biting his index finger in a gesture of amazement; a young woman standing across a stream and holding out to him a flower of morning glory. His artless renditions are brought to an end after a visit by a mysterious old man in Indian attire. Looking for some refreshment to offer to his unexpected guest, the painter goes into his closet to get a bottle of wine left to him by his parents. As he reaches up for the inherited wine, he glimpses through a hole in the wall the living prototype of his painting. The ethereal beauty of the girl in his vision fills him with loathing for his stilted art, so he abandons his craft and goes in search of the muse. His quest remains futile, until one night the ethereal girl comes to him of her own accord and lies on his bed, as if entrusting herself to him. Impulsively, the artist pours between her lips a sip of his inherited wine, but notices that she has turned into a corpse – «utterly cold and long dead». After a hopeless attempt to revive her, he tries at least to preserve her features in a portrait. However, her most essential feature – her magical glance – eludes him. He captures it only after the corpse comes miraculously to life for an instant and opens its eyes. After recording on paper the glance of the ethereal girl, the painter has no further use for her decaying body. To bury the corpse, he dismembers it and packs it into a suitcase. An old grave-digger takes him to a suitably deserted place near the shrine Šāh ‘Abd al-‘Azim, on the banks of a dry river-bed. While digging the grave of the muse, the old man unearths a clay pot from the ancient city of Rey and gives it to the painter. At home the artist discovers on it a picture of a woman. His portrait of the ethereal girl is an exact replica of the ancient painting. Ruminating on his aesthetic kinship with the ancient artist, the painter sits by his charcoal burner and sinks in an opium dream.

14 – The role of the description in the exemplae of early medieval prose are discussed in M. Simidchieva, "Nekotorye osobennosti razvitiya persoyazychnoy didakticheskoy prozy XI-XII vv.: Na materialakh *Kabus-name*, *Siyasat-name* i *Chahar makale*" (Some characteristic of the development of Persian didactic prose of the 11th-12th cc.: *Qābus-nāme*, *Siyasat-nāme* and *Čahār maqāle*), Diss. Institute of Oriental Studies, Soviet Academy of Sciences, Moscow, 1989, p. 101-123.

The narrator awakes all covered in blood, in the world of *Part II*. He fears arrest and intends to forestall it by drinking a cup of the poisoned wine left to him by his mother, an Indian dancer. Yet he is seized by a compulsion to examine his tormented life in writing. Here the narrator presents himself as a sick young man, married to a faithless woman who denies him all conjugal intimacy. Presumably the "Bitch" (*Lakkāte*) as he calls her, has many lovers – among them an old peddler who was once a potter. On the peddler's spread of "useless old wares" the narrator sees a clay pot and a knife. The old man would eventually pass both of them to him. (Earlier in the plot, feverish and plagued by nightmares, the narrator has inadvertently broken a similar pot). Tormented by hopeless desire for the Bitch, the narrator takes the knife, disguises himself as the old peddler, and finally gains admittance into his wife's bedroom. In the heat of passion he inadvertently pierces her with the knife. Terrified by her cry, the narrator runs back to his room, only to discover in the mirror that he has turned into the old man. His bloody hand is clutching the eye of the Bitch.

The *Epilogue* finds the narrator sitting again by the opium brazier as in Part I, while the old man scuttles away, clutching the ancient clay pot under his arm.

In short, *Part I* is the story of a painter motivated by platonic love, while *Part II* is the story of a "writer" motivated by frustrated carnal desire. In the allegorical reading of the novel, the two parts of the exposition can be seen as two alternative visions of the creative impulse – classical inspiration (Part I) vs. Freudian sublimation (Part II). The rhetorics of the literary debates provide contextual grounds for this interpretation. Thus the painter's endless reproductions of the same Classical scene echo the reformers' contention that traditional art is nothing but a mindless repetition of outdated models.¹⁵ The old grave-digger, who helps the painter bury the muse, seems like a personification of the derogatory nick-name "grave-diggers", which Hedāyat and his friends from the reformers' group *Rab*^c had for their traditionist arch-opponents from the literary circle *Sab*^c.¹⁶ The ethereal girl appears to be a personification of the conventional metaphor "the maiden of speech" (*dušize-ye kalām; kalām-e bekr*), denoting masterful poetry and creative imagination.¹⁷ The dismemberment of the ethereal girl in Part I and the breaking of the clay pot in Part II can be perceived as oblique references to the destruction of the traditional art form.

Are there similar inferences to the question of cultural continuity? Does the novel make allusion to Persian tradition, and does it broach the question of its

15 – See, e.g., a reformer's satirical remark regarding the lack of originality in the works of traditional poets: «They had a few pat, inherited words (*čand kaleme-ye mo' ayyan-e mowrus*) which the entire community of nonsense-mongers had memorized and would use indiscriminately in all their correspondence... I read a hundred books by them, and found not a single new idea... I saw a thousand qasidas, all in the same manner and following the same pattern...» (Mirzā Malkom Xān quot. in Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry*, cit., p. 46).

16 – On the use of the designation "grave-diggers" in Hedāyat's literary circle, see Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat*, cit., p. 54.

17 – On the image "maiden of speech" in the Persian poetic tradition, see Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry*, cit., p. 51.

relevance to modern Iranian literature? Indeed, the idea of cultural continuity is addressed on several levels in Hedāyat's narrative, most directly, perhaps, through the symbolism of the clay pot, featured in both parts of the novel. The discovery of the ancient clay pot from the city of Rey – unearthed by the old grave-digger and passed on to the painter – suggests the transmission of a legacy originating in pre-Islamic and Classical times, recovered by the traditionalists (or the *bāzgašt* poets), and passed on to the reformers.¹⁸ The most startling element in this sequence is the artist's sudden realization that his portrait of the ethereal girl is an exact replica of the painting on the ancient clay pot, and that there is not «an atom of difference» between the two.¹⁹ In his own mind this discovery establishes beyond doubt the aesthetic kinship between him and the ancient painter, thus bridging the chasm between historical epochs, and rendering insignificant the differences in media (glazed ceramics and paper) and artistic styles.²⁰

Since the artist's painting is a portrait of the dead ethereal girl who may be equated to the poetic ideal, it may be inferred that the method he employs in his rather unusual self-appointed task of painting «a dead woman»²¹ provides a recipe for the successful «recasting» of tradition (Karimi-Hakkak's term): «My intention was to portray... this form which was doomed slowly and gradually to suffer decomposition and disintegration and which now lay still, a fixed expression upon its face. I felt that *I must record on paper its essential lines. I would select those lines of which I had myself experienced the power.*»²²

18 – By ascribing the ancient clay pot to the city of Rey, Hedāyat evokes a host of historical, religious and cultural associations. Rey (ancient Raga) was one of the cities mentioned in the Achaemenian inscription of Bisotun which declares Darius I hold over the empire (M. Mo'in, *Farhang-e fārsi*, 6 vols., Tehrān, 1985, vol. V, p. 636). In Hedāyat's own writings Rey is the site of the historical drama «Parvin, a Sasanian Girl» (*Parvin doxtar-e Sāsāni*, pub. 1930), which depicts the Persians' last stand against the invading Arabs. In addition, Rey is the site of a number of Shi'a shrines, among them Šāh 'Abd al-'Azīm and Bibi Šāhrbānu (Bibi Šāhrbānu was ostensibly the daughter of the last Sasanian monarch Yazdegerd III, given in marriage to 'Ali's son Hōseyñ after the fall of the Persian empire. Thus she exemplifies the confluence of the two traditions). Finally, Rey – or rather the vicinity of the shrine Šāh 'Abd al-'Azīm – was also the burial site of Nāšer al-Dīn Šāh (1848-96), the last autocratic Qājār monarch who presided over a period of reforms in Persian culture and society, which prepared the ground for the rise of the Constitutional movement.

19 – Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, cit., p. 41; Hedāyat, *Buḡ-e kur*, cit., p. 58.

20 – Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, cit., p. 42-43: «*I realised that I had an ancient partner in sorrow. Was not that ancient painter who, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years ago, had decorated the surface of this jar my partner in sorrow? Had he not undergone the same spiritual experiences as I? Until now I had regarded myself as the most ill-starred of created beings. Now I understood for a space that on those hills, in the houses of that ruined city... had once lived men whose bones had long since rotted away... And among those men there had been one, an unlucky painter, an accursed painter, perhaps an unsuccessful decorator of pen-case covers, who had been a man like me, exactly like me;*» see Hedāyat, *Buḡ-e kur*, cit., p. 60.

21 – Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, cit., p. 25; see Hedāyat, *Buḡ-e kur*, cit., p. 39.

22 – Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, cit., p. 24-25; see Hedāyat, *Buḡ-e kur*, cit., p. 38.

In other words, the painter's aim is to preserve the essence of a doomed ideal, which has lost its vitality and can no longer be revived. He succeeds only through a *subjective selection, abstraction, and creative reinterpretation* of its most striking features.

Could Hedāyat have followed the same method in creating his own literary masterpiece? In Middle-Eastern literatures, writing literary «responses» is a well-established gesture of paying homage to tradition while endeavouring to change its course. In addition, artistic reinterpretations of familiar subjects tend to highlight differences of treatment and style. If *The Blind Owl* is conceived at least partially as a *naẓire* to classical poetry, it might be possible to find its Classical antecedent by revercing the process: we could isolate the most striking features of this modern masterpiece, and seek a match for them in the Classical tradition. The inevitable element of subjectivity in this approach corresponds to the importance assigned to subjective choice in Hedāyat's own narrative – subjectivity is, after all, a defining feature of modern art.

For me personally, *The Blind Owl* is summed up by the grisly episode of the *dismemberment of the ethereal girl* in *Part I*; and the claustrophobic *sense of confinement* which dominates *Part II*, where the narrator not only lives under the constant threat of arrest, but is already a prisoner, confined to his sick-room and trapped within the labyrinth of his own delusional thoughts.

These two striking features of the novel – dismemberment and imprisonment – have a famous classical antecedent: they stand encapsulated together, in precisely the same order, in a single *beyt* from the 10th c.: «The mother of the wine must be sacrificed / its child taken [arrested] and thrown into prison» (*Mādar-e mey rā bekard bāyad qorbān / bačče-ye u rā gereft-o kard be zendān...*). This is the famous first line of Rudaki's poem «The Mother of the Wine», one of the two earliest extant *qašidas* in the New Persian language: for many Persians and Persianists alike, this *maḡla*^c marks the rise of Classical Persian literature.

However, Rudaki (d. ca. 940 CE) was not the only Classical author who resorted to this particular scenario. The story about the sacrifice of the grapes and their reincarnation as wine enjoyed popularity among many Persian poets. William Hanaway points out that references to it occur in the works of the Abbasid poet of Persian descent Abū Nuwās (d. 810), widely credited with the introduction of the Persianite *qašida* into the Classical Arabic Literature of the Golden Age (8th-10th cc.).²³

23 – See W. Hanaway, «Blood and Wine: Sacrifice and Celebration in Manučihrī's Wine Poetry», *Iran*, 26 (1988), p. 69-80, p. 74. He also points out that the image of the grapes as the daughters of the vine appear in the works of other Arab poets of this period, and that in the Arabic poetry of Iran during the Umayyad period there are references to wine in conjunction with the Zoroastrian celebrations Now Ruz and Mehregān (*ibid.*). On the innovative role of Abū Nuwās in Arabic poetry see R. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, Cambridge, 1988, p. 290, 294, and J. Meisami, «Arabic and Persian Concepts of Poetic Form: Divergencies in Interrelated Poetic Systems», *Proceedings of the 10th International Comparative Literature Conference* (New York 1982), New York, 1985, vol. II, p. 146-155, p. 151. The so called Per-

The bloody sacrifice of the grapes and the imprisonment of their “child,” the wine, is mentioned also in the *divāns* of Persian poets from the 10th c.-11th c., and most famously in the *divān* of Rudaki, whose work is associated with the revival of Persian literature and the advent of the so called “Persian Renaissance”.²⁴

Even greater attention is given to this theme by the 11th c. Ghaznavid panegyrist Manuĉehri (d. ca 1040 CE), whose *divān* contains a cluster of six poems on the same subject (two *qaṣidas* and four *mosammaṭs*), often referred to as «the wine myths of Manuĉehri».²⁵

If Rudaki and the poets of the 9th-10th c. CE elevated New Persian to the status of a literary language and revived Persian literature written in their native tongue, Manuĉehri and the other 11th c. Ghaznavid panegyrists participated in another reform: experimenting with new rhetorical techniques favoured by Arabic poets, they steered Persian literature away from its initial simplicity and *šū‘ubi* fervor, and introduced greater complexity of style and diversity of themes.²⁶ In many ways the Ghaznavid poets were instrumental for the thorough acculturation of the syncretic Arab-Muslim norms into the Persian literary mainstream. Not surprisingly, Persian court poetry as represented in their writings (rather than

sianite *qaṣida* replaced the desert imagery of the typical Bedouin *qaṣida* with garden imagery (see Meisami, “Arabic and Persian Concepts...”, *cit.*, p. 149).

24 – According to Jerome Clinton, the fact that “The Mother of the Wine” is one of the two complete *qaṣidas* of Rudaki’s that has survived when so much of his *divan* has been lost, might be grounds to «attribute this piece of good fortune [as much] to the commonness of the theme as to unique coincidence» (J. Clinton, *The Divan of Manuĉihri Damghani: A Critical Study*, Minneapolis, 1972, p. 112). Hanaway points out that verses which mention the Zoroastrian festival of Mehregān, usually associated with wine, often appear «in the Persian poetry of Rudaki, Daqīqi, Farukhi, Unsuri, Fakhr ad-Din Gurgani, Qatran, Mas’ud-i Sa’d-i Salman, Mu’izi, Azraqi, Anvari and others of the pre-Mongol period» (Hanaway, “Blood and Wine...”, *cit.*, p. 71).

25 – On the mythical significance of Manuĉehri’s wine-making poems see A. Pagliaro and A. Bausani, *Storia della letteratura persiana*, Milano, 1960, p. 331-333; Clinton, *The Divan of Manuĉihri Damghani*, *cit.*, p. 111-120; Hanaway, “Blood and Wine...”, *cit.*

26 – On the literary shift which took place on the borderline between the 10th-11th cc. CE as the Ghaznavid school of poetry gradually gained ascendancy in Persian letters, see Pagliaro and Bausani, *Storia della letteratura persiana*, *cit.*, p. 309, 318-319; J. Rypka, “History of Persian Literature up to the Beginning of the 20th Century”, in J. Rypka (ed.), *History of Iranian Literature*, Dordrecht, 1968, p. 69-348, p. 174; Z. Šafā, *Tārix-e adabiyāt dar Irān*, vol. I, Tehrān, 1972, p. 308-309 and 361-363. Paradoxically, perhaps, the “mother of the wine” theme finds favour both with Rudaki, lauded as the most important figure in the revival of Persian literature, and the Ghaznavid panegyrist Manuĉehri, whose work is often considered a foremost example of the “back-sliding” of Ghaznavid court poetry into emulating Arabic models (on the importance of Arabic influences on Manuĉehri’s poetry see, e.g., H. Massé, “Manoutchehri, poète persan du XIe siècle”, *Annales de l’Institut d’études orientales* (Faculté des Lettres de l’Université d’Alger), I (1934-35), p. 213-232, quot. in Clinton, *The Divan of Manuĉihri Damghani*, *cit.*, p. 150; Rypka, “History of Persian Literature...”, *cit.*, p. 176; Šafā, *Tārix-e adabiyāt*, *cit.*, p. 582). This apparent contradiction should be considered in the light of Manuĉehri’s interest in markedly Persian motifs (See Pagliaro and Bausani, *Storia della letteratura persiana*, *cit.*, p. 329; Clinton, *The Divan of Manuĉihri Damghani*, *cit.*, p. 150-151). Clinton views Manuĉehri’s Arab imitations as a sign of his aesthetic quest in establishing his own style (*ibid.*).

the writings of the Samanid poets and Rudaki) became the standard of excellence and literary sophistication in later times.

Thus – from Abū Nuwās’s Arabic renditions of Persian motifs, to Rudaki’s restoration of Persian-language poetry, and on to the Ghaznavid adaptation of Arabic standards of eloquence for Persian use – “the mother of the wine” theme has been present at critical junctures in the historical development of Persian literature. It seems to gain in prominence at times of profound stylistic change, and in the work of innovative, trend-setting authors.²⁷ Why has it endured, and what interest could this theme hold for a modernist reformer like Hedāyat?

Perhaps the answer can be found in the complex nature of the “renaissance” phenomenon. Undeniably, the 9th-11th cc. were for Persian culture a period of revival, but they were also a period of revision, a time of profound systemic transformations in all spheres of life. By the 10th c. Zoroastrianism – the core ideological principle of early medieval Persian culture – had given way to Islam.²⁸ Persian had indeed resurfaced as a literary language – but in Arabic writing. And – even as literature written in Persian was making a dramatic come-back – the pre-Islamic literary canon was being displaced by the Muslim-Arabic canon of the Abbasid caliphate. The “revival” of Persian literature was not a simple resuscitation of an already extant literary canon or corpus of definitive texts, but their “reincarnation” on a different plane. As the early New Persian poets endeavored to cast indigenous themes into new genre forms which had evolved in the multi-ethnic culture of caliphate, they laid the foundations of a new syncretic phenomenon, which later came to be known as Classical Persian literature.

Iranian writers and poets of the early 20th c., whose environment was increasingly shaped by the economic and social paradigms of European-style modernity, faced a similar task – the necessity to initiate a radical cultural reform, while preserving their cultural identity. Curiously, this process was again accompanied by two seemingly contradictory trends: by a neo-*šū‘ubi* interest in the Persian pre-Islamic heritage; and by a new revision of the literary canon, which entailed acculturation of genres and literary styles already established in the West. The priorities of this cultural reform may not have led directly to the rediscovery of “the mother of the wine” theme, but they were certainly amenable to its revival. It could have claimed Hedāyat’s attention for several reasons:

27 – Abū Nuwās was the most influential of the “modernists” (*muhaddaṣun*) or innovators in Abbasid poetry, who ridiculed the tendency of his contemporaries to emulate the ancient Bedouin *qaṣida*. He was master in many different styles, but excelled most in poems about wine and love (Nicholson, *A Literary History*, *cit.*, p. 286, 294). Rudaki laid the foundations of the Khorasanian panegyric, developed further by ‘Onṣori, Mo‘ezzi and Anvari (Rypka, “History of Persian Literature...”, *cit.*, p. 145). Manuĉehri is considered the inventor of the *mosammaṭ* stanzaic poem (or at least the poet who introduced it into Persian literary tradition), in which several of the wine myths are cast (Pagliaro and Bausani, *Storia della letteratura persiana*, *cit.*, p. 329; Clinton, *The Divan of Manuĉihri Damghani*, *cit.*, p. 151).

28 – On the importance of the religious canon as an organizing principle of medieval cultures see V. Braginskii, “Zonal’nye literaturnye obshtnosti na Vostoke v srednie veka” [The literary zones in the East during the Middle Ages], *Narody Azii i Afriki*, IV, (1986), p. 65-76.

1. *The antiquity and pre-Islamic origins of the wine-myth.* The "mother of the wine" theme is linked to both Zoroastrianism and ancient Iranian mythology. In Classical poetry it appears mostly in panegyrics composed on the occasion of the Zoroastrian fall festival Mehregān, which was celebrated at Muslim courts till the coming of the Mongols.²⁹ Its roots, however, run much deeper. As William Hanaway points out, the idea of "sacrificing" the grapes, the "daughters of the vine", should be viewed in the broader context of Indo-Iranian and Old World mythology.³⁰ Ritual dismemberment – its key component – plays a part in the cosmogonic myths and sacrificial rites of Zoroastrianism and Mithraism. In both of these Iranian religions the original creation was set in motion through a sacrifice, which also ensured the proliferation and diversification of life.³¹ Ritual dismemberment and the mingling of blood and wine feature also in the mythical cycle of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, celebrated with wild bacchanalias and poetic competitions.³² In the primal religions sacrifice was a means of regenera-

29 – Hanaway, "Blood and Wine...", *cit.*, p. 70.

30 – *Ibid.*

31 – *Ibid.*, p. 71. On Zoroastrianism and pre-Zoroastrian beliefs see also M. Boyce, *Zoroastrianism: Verovaniya i obyčaji*, Moscow, 1987, p. 12 (orig. edn. *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, London, 1979); C. Tokarev (ed.), *Mify narodov mira: Entsiklopediia* [Myths of the peoples of the world: Encyclopaedia], 2 vols., Moscow, 1980, vol. II, p. 578-579, *s.v.* «Haoma». On Mithra and Mithraism see Tokarev, *Mify narodov mira, cit.*, vol. II, p. 154-157, *s.v.* «Mithra». According to the pre-Zoroastrian beliefs of the ancient Iranians, the gods started the cycle of life by sacrificing the prototypes of all living things – by crushing the first plant, sacrificing the first bull and the first human. The liberated life-force of the sacrificial victims set the sun in motion; their semen fell on the earth and begat all other creatures. The bloody and bloodless ritual sacrifices performed by the priests reenacted the original sacrifice, and helped maintain and renew the cycle of existence and the order of the universe. In Zoroastrianism, whose founder opposed bloody sacrifices, the spilling of the first blood was blamed on the evil spirit Ahriman, but that primordial murder also resulted in the proliferation of life. Zoroastrian ritual maintained the bloodless sacrifice of crushing the haoma plant, the juice of which guaranteed immortality. Hanaway also notes that the sacrifice of a bull was central to the cosmogony and ritual practices of Mithraism, a religion of Iranian origin which became widespread throughout the Roman Empire. From the tail and blood of the primordial bull sacrificed by Mithra upon the creation of the world, sprang the first ear of grain and – significantly in our case – the grape vine.

32 – Dionysus is a Greek god of the procreative powers of the earth, god of plantlife and especially of the vine (see Tokarev, *Mify narodov mira, cit.*, vol. I, p. 380-381, *s.v.* «Dionis»). A deity of Eastern origins (Thracian and Lydian-Frigian) and a god of the untamed forces of nature, he was often juxtaposed to Apollo, the god of the arts. The myth of Dionysus bears a remote resemblance to the life-story of the narrator in the second part of *The Blind Owl*: namely, unusual birth; untimely death of a parent brought about by marital infidelity; abandonment and fostering of the child; capacity for physical transformations; madness; dismemberment; the presence of the snake as a twin symbol of sexuality and death. Thus Dionysus is an illegitimate son of Zeus, and his mother is annihilated before his birth through the jealous connivance of Zeus's wife Hera. The premature baby is carried to term sawn up in the thigh of his father, and is left in the care of Hermes. Hera continues to persecute Dionysus, sending madness upon him. After long wanderings which take him to India, he is cured by the goddess Rea who introduces him to her orgiastic mysteries. Dionysus has the ability to transform him-

tion and reinvigoration, of ensuring the continuous circulation of the life-force and the perpetual motion of the universe. Therefore, the ritual "dismemberment" of the grapes as the central passion of the "mother of the wine" theme offers a ready allegory for the regenerative processes taking place in Iranian literature in the early 20th c. The occurrence of the "blood and wine" motif in other Indo-European mythological traditions would have been an additional incentive for Hedāyat: as a modernist and "romantic nationalist" (Katouzian's term) he strongly emphasized the traits which ancient Iranians shared with other "Indo-European cultures", thus reinforcing the notion that the European path to modernization is not alien to Iranians.³³

2. *The place of the wine myth in Persian literary history.* The wine-myth is a recurring theme in Classical Persian literature, thus presenting a poignant example of Persian cultural continuity, and of the Persian literary revival.

Rudaki's poem, however, makes only a brief reference to the story about the sacrifice of the vine's daughter, before launching into a lengthy *vaṣf* of the wine. In Classical literature the "mother of the wine" theme is most fully developed in the wine-myths of Manuḡehri. There is no direct evidence that Hedāyat ever had an interest in the poetry of the Ghaznavid panegyrist: he wrote no articles on Manuḡehri and did not incorporate verses from Manuḡehri's poems in his own writings, as he has done on occasion with the poetry of Ḥāfez, Sa'ādi and Rumi. Yet there is circumstantial evidence that Hedāyat's attention might have been drawn to the Ghaznavid panegyrist around the time of *The Blind Owl's* composition, as shall be seen hereafter.

3. *Influence of Western scholarship on Hedāyat's choices as a critic and cultural reformer.* In the interwar period Manuḡehri was «the first and only one of the ancient Ghaznavid panegyric poets to be edited and intensively studied by a European orientalist», namely A. Biberstein-Kazimirski, who in 1886 published a French translation of Manuḡehri's *divān*, accompanied by an extensive introduc-

self into different beings, and sends madness and death by dismemberment to those who cross him. His revelries are attended by bacchantes, menads, and satyrs who drape snakes around their bodies, and – possessed by sacred madness – wreck everything along their way, and drink the blood of torn-up wild animals. Among the victims of Dionysus' wrath is the singer Orpheus, whose magical songs could tame wild beasts. Orpheus slighted the revelries of Dionysus and was dismembered by wild bacchantes, who threw his head and lyre in the sea.

33 – This tendency of Hedāyat's is clearly evident in his non-fiction, especially in cases which allowed him to draw parallels between Persian and European literary works. One such example is his work on Xayyām's quatrains (Šādeq Hedāyat, *Tarānehā-ye Xayyām*, Tehrān, 1963); another his article on *Vis o Rāmin* (Š. Hedāyat, "Čand noqte dar-bāre-ye *Vis o Rāmin*", in *Majmu'e-ye nevēstehā-ye parākande*, Tehrān, 1965, p. 486-523; first pub. 1945). In the latter Hedāyat not only repeats Minorsky's view about the intrinsic kinship between the ancient Persian epic and the medieval European romance *Tristan and Isolde*, but sees a definite affinity between the bold and open treatment of sexuality in Gorgāni's work, and D.H. Lawrence's controversial novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (*ibid.*, p. 487; see Simidchieva, "The River That Runs Through It...", *cit.*).

tory study.³⁴ The attention given to Manuĉehri by Western scholarship could not have escaped Hedāyat's notice, for he was very much concerned with European perceptions of Iranian culture and, in his non-fiction, often addressed and commented upon Persian literary phenomena which found resonance among European researchers. In addition to Biberstein-Kazimirsky's volume, an article on the poetry of Manuĉehri by the French folklorist Henri Massé appeared in print in 1934. During the 1930s Massé and Hedāyat were in personal contact due to their common interest in folklore. Massé made use of Hedāyat's work *Neyrangestān* (pub. 1933) in his own research on Iranian popular customs, and acknowledged Hedāyat's personal assistance with his field work in the preface of *Croyances et coutumes persanes suivies de contes et chansons populaires*, published in 1938 (one year after *The Blind Owl*).³⁵

4. *The Classical court poet as an antipode of the modernist writer.* Another reason for selecting the poetry of Manuĉehri is that – as a Ghaznavid panegyrist – he is the perfect foil for a modernist prose writer. For Iranian reformers and European orientalist alike Ghaznavid panegyrics exemplified all that was wrong with the classical Persian tradition. In addition, Manuĉehri was one of the poets most often emulated by the proponents of the Return movement.³⁶ Thus for Hedāyat and his contemporaries he represented not only the Classical tradition *per se*, but also the doomed 19th c. attempt at its resuscitation.

5. *Textual evidence that the novel is a wine-myth.* However, the most significant evidence that the “mother of the wine” theme could have influenced Hedāyat, comes from the novel itself, for in many respects *The Blind Owl* is a wine-myth in its own right. The first clue to that is the important part wine plays in the plot.

A) The consistent references to wine – whether “inherited” (Part I) or “poisoned” (Part II) – have both an organizing function and a symbolic role in Hedāyat's narrative.

34 – Rypka, “History of Persian Literature...”, *cit.*, p. 177. See also A. Dè Biberstein-Kazimirsky (ed. and tr.), *Menouchehri: Poète persan du 11ème siècle de notre ère (du 5ème de l'hégire)*, Paris, 1886.

35 – See H. Massé, *Croyances et coutumes persanes suivies de contes et chansons populaires*, 1938, tr. by Ch. Messner as *Persian Beliefs and Customs*, New Haven, 1954, p. 1-3: «In the course of a subsequent sojourn I noted new trends among several Iranian intellectuals; these included the study of the country's ancient languages and the investigation of popular beliefs and customs. The results of these investigations were a few well-documented articles in newspapers and periodicals ... and the remarkable *Neyrangestan* by Sadegh Hedayat. The latter author deserves to be regarded as the pioneer in such studies through this collection of writings (which is almost impossible to find nowadays but which is used in the present work). ... I owe particular gratitude to the people whose competence and courtesy have helped me so effectively in my researches: in the first place the Messrs Dehkhoda, Hedayat and Said Nafisi, whose assistance was very considerable...».

36 – See Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry*, *cit.*, p. 29.

In Part I the “inherited wine” is an active agent of the plot structure: it seems to be the source of the mystical “inspiration” (*elhām*) which prompts the narrator to act at turning points of his life, and may well be the motive force behind the developments of the plot. Thus, *wine brings about the inception of the plot action*: the painter has his life-changing vision of the ethereal girl as he goes into his closet and reaches up for the bottle of inherited wine. *Wine leads up to the culmination of the plot* in Part I – the dismemberment of the ethereal girl – for she turns into a corpse after the narrator has poured a sip of his inherited wine between her lips. In both cases the painter never reaches for the wine through a conscious decision of his own, but acts as if in a trance, through a sudden “flash of inspiration” (*elhām*), which descends upon him as if from an outside source.³⁷ In both cases wine brings about a drastic change of direction in his thinking and approach to art.

In Part II wine is a passive narrative device. It is an icon of the ancestral past, and a poisonous reminder of the guilt which burdens the protagonist – his own guilt, and that of his parents. Wine is also an instrument of death through which the narrator can – if he so chooses – solve his existential dilemmas. Here to the qualifier “inherited (wine)” is added another one – “poisoned”. This wine, we are told, contains the venom of the Indian cobra which killed the narrator's father, and which is the only legacy left to him by his mother.³⁸ The poisonous admixture is emblematic of his ambiguous parentage; of the adultery committed by his unsuspecting mother with the twin brother of her husband; of the snake-bite which killed one of the two men – presumably the narrator's father – during the cobra trial between them. This poisonous wine is also the substance with which the writer intends to kill himself when the policemen come to arrest him,³⁹ or to murder his faithless wife.⁴⁰ Yet another reference to wine surfaces in this part of the novel, “the wine of Rey” from the song of the drunken policemen, which punctures the narrative of Part II in several strategic places. The mere mention of “the wine of Rey” fills the narrator with inexplicable dread,⁴¹ possibly because it serves as a reminder for his own bloody deed, the memory of which he seems to have repressed.

B) The novel can also be considered a *wine myth* because it is implicitly identified as such by the “writer”-narrator. Four times within the first four pages of Part II he compares the writing of his story to the squeezing of grapes, e.g.: «I wish now to squeeze out every drop of juice from my life as from a cluster of grapes and to pour the juice – the wine, rather – drop by drop, like water of Karbalā, down the parched throat of my shadow. All that I hope to do is to record on paper before I go the torments which have slowly wasted me away like gangrene or cancer

37 – See Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, *cit.*, p. 8, 24; see Hedāyat, *Buŕ-e kur*, *cit.*, p. 17, 32.

38 – Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, *cit.*, p. 62; see Hedāyat, *Buŕ-e kur*, *cit.*, p. 83.

39 – Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, *cit.*, p. 48, 49; see Hedāyat, *Buŕ-e kur*, *cit.*, p. 66, 67.

40 – Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, *cit.*, p. 120; see Hedāyat, *Buŕ-e kur*, *cit.*, p. 160.

41 – E.g., Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, *cit.*, p. 94, 128; see Hedāyat, *Buŕ-e kur*, *cit.*, p. 126.

narrator's mother Bugam Dasi, equating her life to a cluster of grapes and her legacy – to the poisonous wine which these grapes have yielded.⁴³

C) The possibility that *The Blind Owl* might be a peculiar literary "response" to the wine myths of Manučehri is further supported by a number of *situational and conceptual parallelisms, parallel action-sequences and character sketches* which appear both in *The Blind Owl* and the wine myths of Manučehri. It must be remembered that – in accordance with Hedāyat's recipe for the "recasting" of traditional motifs discussed above – the parallelisms can be noticed only if the particulars of their rendition is ignored, and the reader focuses on the underlying "skeletal traits" of the compared texts.

The majority of Manučehri's wine-myths present the process of wine-making as a passion play of (presumed) sexual transgression, punishment and redemption. The principal characters are the vine-keeper and the grape-bunches – "the daughter(s) of the vine". Each poem sets the relationship between the grapes and the vine-keeper on a different basis, varying the psychological motivations for the murder.⁴⁴ These variations can be reduced to the following general outline (the added emphasis highlights situational details which have parallels in one or another of the three sub-plots of *The Blind Owl*):

– The daughter of the vine is *mysteriously impregnated* despite the vigilance of her keeper.

– For her presumed transgression she is *murdered and dismembered* by her guardian, who *discards the body-parts* and *imprisons the juice* in a vat. In some of the poems the grape juice is the child of the dismembered "daughter of the vine"; in others, it is her essence, her own "soul and blood."

– After an appointed time of internment, the vine-keeper opens the vat to check on his "prisoner". To his surprise the grape-juice is transformed into wine; *i.e.* the sacrificial victim *is reborn in a new* – higher and purer – *incarnation*.

This thematic blue-print anticipates key developments in *The Blind Owl*, split between the two main subplots (Part I and Part II) where they appear in a haphazard order:

– The *dismemberment of the corpse* of the ethereal girl (Part I) mirrors the dismemberment of the "daughter of the vine". Curiously, the anatomical survey of the remains (veins, sinews, bones), is found both in Hedāyat and in all relevant poems of Manučehri. In both cases the remains are discarded unceremoni-

42 – Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, cit., p. 49-50. The life-as-grapes image occurs also on p. 50, 51, 52; see Hedāyat, *Buŕ-e kur*, cit., p. 68, 69, 70, 71.

43 – Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, cit., p. 62; see Hedāyat, *Buŕ-e kur*, cit., p. 84.

44 – Incidentally, Hedāyat also casts his narrative "wine-myth" in multiple variants: the story of the painter and the ethereal girl in Part I, the story of the "writer" and the Bitch in Part II; and the story of the narrator's mother Bugam Dasi in Part II can all be seen as variations of "the mother of the wine" theme.

... the essence is extracted (as the grape-juice), or captured (as the magical glance of the ethereal girl).

– Both texts feature a *presumption of the female protagonist's sexual transgression*, which remains shrouded in ambiguity. Neither the daughter of the vine in Manučehri, nor the Bitch in Part II of the novel engage in a conjugal relationship; therefore, both should be virgins. However, both become pregnant. In both cases the paternity of the child is uncertain, and a supernatural intervention is implied. In Manučehri's wine-myths the pregnancy is beyond doubt. In Hedāyat's novel ambiguity envelops all aspects of the female's sexuality, including this one. Despite the rumour that the Bitch is pregnant, no child is produced. Supposedly, the baby was still-born,⁴⁵ but the narrative leaves open the possibility that the pregnancy might be a figment of the narrator's imagination. A hint of supernatural intervention is introduced through the reported claim of the Bitch that the baby was conceived at the baths, thus implying that it was fathered by a jin.⁴⁶ In Manučehri the supernatural character of the pregnancy is proven by the child's immortality, which absolves the "daughter of the vine" from guilt. In *The Blind Owl* the bizarre claim of supernatural paternity, reported by a troubled and unreliable narrator, only deepens the uncertainty, leaving no room for redemption.

– *The rebirth which follows the sacrifice* is a major point in all wine myths. In Manučehri the dismemberment of the "daughter of the vine" becomes a right-of-passage ordeal, which ensures her reincarnation as wine – a luminous substance, potent and free from impurities and blame. The narrative of *The Blind Owl* does not envisage the victim's triumphant rebirth, yet this idea is conveyed through structural means. The three principal characters of Part I – the artist, the ethereal girl and the old grave-digger – appear again in Part II, in another guise: as the "writer", the Bitch, and the old peddler. However, while the two male characters do not die and experience only a superficial change, the female character – the ethereal girl of Part I – undergoes the ordeals of death, dismemberment and internment, and emerges in Part II radically transformed, as the Bitch whose raw carnality is her most distinctive trait. Thus she is the only character in the novel to be reincarnated into an essentially different state of being, a distinction she shares with Manučehri's "daughter of the vine". The fundamental difference between the two texts lies in the direction which the transformation takes: while in the medieval wine-myths the sacrificial victim is always reincarnated from a lower to a higher state of being, from a blameworthy to a blameless moral status, in Hedāyat's novel the order seems to be reversed. This apparent departure from the established mythopoeic paradigm is at the heart of Hedāyat's "updated version" of the ancient myth, and comprises a crucial element in the allegorical interpretation of the novel, as would be seen later on.

45 – Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, cit., p. 124-126; see Hedāyat, *Buŕ-e kur*, cit., p. 166.

46 – Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, cit., p. 124; see Hedāyat, *Buŕ-e kur*, cit., p. 164. On the baths as a favourite haunt of the jinn, see Massé, *Croyances et coutumes persanes*, cit., p. 353.

In previous research the structure of Hedāyat's novel has been discussed in terms of historical time (as Part I and Part II have been variously situated in medieval and modern times); in terms of fantasy and reality; or as an experience in the "world beyond" and the "real world".⁴⁷ The present allegorical reading interprets its divisions in terms of style and approach to literary representation. The attribution of the various segments to the "real" or to the "ideal" world, which follows herewith, is based in part on the art-form (painting or writing) which is the narrator's main concern in his two guises, and on elements of the setting which place him either in the "real world" (the world inhabited by the "writer"), or the "ideal world" (the world inhabited by the artist and occasionally visited by the apparition of the ethereal girl from "the world of ideas" / *alam-e mesal*).⁴⁸

1. INTRODUCTION:

Focus on writing; Element of setting – the flickering lamp
*“Writer”?

2. PART I: Ideal World

Focus on painting – perhaps as an emblem of all art; Element of setting – the charcoal burner

*Artist

*Old grave-digger

*Ethereal Girl

3. PART II: Real World

Focus on writing; Element of setting – the flickering lamp

*“Writer”

*Old peddler

*The Bitch

et.al.

4. EPILOGUE:

Element of setting – the charcoal burner

*Artist?

*Old grave-digger?

47 – For temporal explanations of the novel's structure see, e.g., E. Daniel, "History as a Theme in *The Blind Owl*", in Hillmann, *Hedayat's The Blind Owl*, cit.; H. Kamshad, *Modern Persian Prose Literature*, Cambridge, UK, 1966; H. Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat*, cit. On the structure of the novel interpreted in terms of fantasy and reality see Beard, *Hedayat's Blind Owl*, cit. The latter also notes that Part I of the novel is written according to the conventions of courtly love. Ishaqpour ("At the Tomb of Sadeq Hedayat", cit.) sees Part I as taking place in "the World Beyond" (*alam-e gayb*), and Part II in the real world.

48 – The segments taking place in the "ideal world" are written in italics, while question marks represent the ambiguous identity of the characters.

As the ethereal girl dies in Part I and emerges in Part II as the Bitch, the narrative seems to suggest her descend from an "ideal" (for lack of a better word) into the material world; from a world of platonic adoration to a world of pathological sexual obsessions. Within the parable on cultural reform this curve of descent exemplifies the historical development of Persian literature, its radical transition from a traditional to a modern frame of reference, from an emblematic to a realistic mode of artistic representation. Seen from the perspective of artistic representation rather than ethics, the "reincarnation" of the chaste ethereal girl (*doxtar-e asiri*) into a lascivious «genuine woman» (*zan-e tamām 'ayyār*)⁴⁹ signals the transition of Persian literature to a higher plain of artistic sophistication (at least in the view of the reformers), and greater relevance to real-life concerns.

The interlocking pattern of the novel's structure has yet another curious part to play in the allegorical reading of *The Blind Owl*. As mentioned earlier, the narrator seems to change guises from one to another structural segment of the composition: in two segments (1 and 3: the Introduction and Part II) he seems to speak as the "writer", while in Part I and in the open-ended Epilogue (2 and 4) he appears as the painter. Since the two artistic personalities are motivated to create, respectively, by platonic love and repressed sexual desire, the narrator of the story seems caught in a creative cycle of classical inspiration alternating with Freudian sublimation. The open-ended Epilogue suggests that the cycle can start all over again, that it is in perpetual motion, and neither inspiration nor sublimation is the final word on the origins of the creative impulse.



The allegorical significance of *The Blind Owl* – and the usefulness of the wine-myth in legitimizing the idea of literary reform – can be seen more clearly through a close comparison of Hedāyat's novel with one of Manuḥehri's poems, *mosammaṭ* 1 (poem 58), starting with the *beyt* «*Xizid-o xaz arid ke hengām-e xazān ast...*». The comparison also illustrates the "recasting" of traditional motifs through the creative re-interpretation of a few select elements.

Manuḥehri's *mosammaṭ* has three sections: 1) a long description of the autumn garden; 2) a narrative of the wine-myth; and 3) a praise of the patron, Sultan Mas'ud of Ghazna. Uncharacteristically, a principal character of the narrative section – the vine keeper (along with his vine) – is introduced in the first stanza of the descriptive section. Thus the description of the fall fruits and flowers is "framed" by, and structurally incorporated into, the wine myth – we get, as it were, a view of the fall garden through the eyes of the *dehqān*:

Rise and bring out the sable furs, for autumn is here / A cool wind is blowing from X'ārazm // See the vine leaves on the branches of the vines / They look like a dyer's smock. // *The dehqān is biting the tip of his*

49 – Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, cit., p. 114; see Hedāyat, *Buḥ-e kur*, cit., p. 153.

finger in amazement/ because in the meadow and in the garden not (a single) rose or pomegranate blossom remains.⁵⁰

The *dehqān*'s gesture of amazement is the first clue which connects this poem to *The Blind Owl*. The posture of the *dehqān* contemplating his garden conjures the painter's vision of the bent old man staring in amazement at the flower offered to him by the ethereal girl. In my previous allegorical reading of the novel, the old man figured as the poet-traditionist contemplating the classical poetic ideal (*kalām-e bekr*) across the stream of time.⁵¹ His gesture of puzzlement was interpreted as a gesture of helplessness and embarrassment, a sign of his creative impotence in perpetuating the ideal, of his inability to pluck the flower offered to him across the time divide.

The setting which Manuĉehri's poem adds to the sketchy picture of the painter's vision does not contradict this interpretation, but rather adds to it significant background details. Thus in the poem the *dehqān* is surveying a fall garden, which has lost its attraction. His surprise arises from its barrenness and lack of vigour – the rose and the pomegranate blossom are Classical floral icons of springtime freshness. In the second stanza Manuĉehri compares the fall garden to a plucked peacock, whose glorious plumage cannot be restored unless by the coming of a new spring:

The peacock of spring had its tail plucked out/ its feathers cut off and discarded into a corner // Content (to leave it in) its sorry state, (the revelers) abandoned it, wounded, amidst the garden / no one would come to visit it, to chat and laugh // No one would restore to it its ornate feathers/ until the passage of the month of Āzar (mid-December) and the onset of torment (āzār).⁵²

On the textual level, the *dehqān* of Manuĉehri and the bent old man in the Painter's vision are linked by the slender thread of a single gesture. The allegorical bridge between the two vignettes is supplied by the cultural context. In the modernist discourse on cultural reform – as well as in Classical Persian poetics – garden imagery often denotes poetic originality and innovation. Thus the modern poet Ahmad Šāmlu suggests that traditional poetry originates in the «arid elevations of [the poet's] imagination»,⁵³ implicitly juxtaposing the lush garden imagery of the typical *qaṣida* to the conventionality of its form and the barren-

ness of its message. In Classical letters the association of poetry with gardens is established even on the theoretical level. One the earliest and most influential Persian-language treatises on poetic eloquence, Rašid al-Din Vaṭvāt's *Hadāyeq al-sehr fi daqāyeq al-šer* (12th c. CE), bears the title *Gardens of Magic in the Intricacies of Poetry*.⁵⁴ With that in mind, and given the background which Manuĉehri's poem provides, we may venture the guess that the old man in the painter's vision is contemplating the poetic ideal from within the waning garden of classical eloquence frequented by the poets of the Return movement and by the traditionists of Hedāyat's own time.

It is interesting to note that in Manuĉehri's poem the vigor and freshness of the garden is restored not through the passage of time, but through an active human agency; not through a simple change of seasons, but through the act of the sacrifice. It occurs not in the spring, as the "peacock stanza" leads us to expect, but in midwinter. The overture to that miracle is the martyrdom of the grapes (the implied torment? / *āzār*), dramatized in the narrative section of the poem. Its plot enfolds as follows:

Summary of Manuĉehri's *mosammaṭ* 1:

The *dehqān* goes into his vineyard one morning and discovers that all the daughters of the vine are pregnant. He has been their custodian since birth, nourishing them and vigilantly guarding their chastity and good name.⁵⁵ Yet, despite all his efforts, apparently a stranger has seen, defiled and corrupted his charges. It falls to the *dehqān*, as their custodian, to expiate their sin and to obliterate all traces of their moral decay. So, not inflamed by passion, but in the line of duty, as it were, he kills the daughters of the vine, dismembers their bodies, and imprisons their "blood and soul" in a vat to prevent their further corruption. After the appointed time of solitary confinement he goes to check on his prisoners. As he opens the sealed vat, the *dehqān* is greeted by a riot of spring flowers – more fragrant roses and jasmine than he has ever seen in a garden. The martyred "daughters of the vine" have risen to life again as lucid, uncontaminated, blameless wine. Its fragrance resurrects – in mid-winter – the vigour of the spring garden.

This particular variant of the wine-myth has a number of parallels with Part I of *The Blind Owl*:

54 – See N. Chalisova, "Rashid ad-Din Varvat i ego traktat 'Sady volshebstva v tonkostyakh poezii'" [Rashid ad-Din Varvat and his treatise 'Gardens of magic in the intricacies of poetry'], in Rashid ad-Din Vaṭvāt, *Sady volshebstva v tonkostyakh poezii: Hada' iq as-sihr fi daqa' iq ash-shi'r* [Gardens of magic in the intricacies of poetry: *Hadā' iq al-sihr fi daqā' iq al-šer*], tr. and com. N. Chalisova, Moscow, 1985, p. 9-82, p. 56-69.

55 – Manuĉehri Dāmġāni, *Divān-e ostād Manuĉehri Dāmġāni: bā havāsi-o ta' liqāt-o tarājem-e ahvāl-o fahāres-o loḡat-nāme-o moqābele-ye beyt-e nosxe-ye xaṭṭi-o ĉāpi*, ed. M. Dabir-Siyāqi, 2nd edn., Tehrān, 1959, p. 149, st. 11, ll. 1923-25: «As soon as your mother said that she has given birth / I started taking care of you (I embarked on guarding you / *az baḥr-e šomā man be negāhdāšt fetādām*) // I put a lock on the door of your garden / I did not open your door for weeks / I never allowed anyone to go near the likes of you / I thought you would grow up of good reputation and good behaviour...».

50 – This translation of the poem is a modification of Jerome Clinton's and William Hanaway's versions.

51 – The running water of a stream is used as a symbol for the passage of time not only in the Classical Greek tradition, but also by Persian Classical poets like Ḥāfez (see, e.g., J. Meisami, "The World's Pleasance: Hafiz's Allegorical Gardens", *Comparative Criticism*, 5 (1983), p. 153-185, p. 154).

52 – Note the violence of the imagery in this stanza, uncannily mirrored in the destruction of the ethereal girl's body in the novel.

53 – «The subject of classical [Persian] poetry/ did not concern the living./ In the arid elevations of his imagination/ the poet spoke of none other than wine and the beloved...» (Ahmad Šāmlu, *Havā-ye tāze*, quot. in Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat, cit.*, p. 8, and p. 275, n. 11).

1) In both cases *the female victim is a passive participant in the plot*, observed only from the perspective of the male protagonist. She is seen, but not heard: she never utters a word, never answers back, never reacts, and suffers her fate mutely. (That is not necessarily the case in the other wine myths of Manuĉehri, nor in Part II of the novel).

2) The two *male protagonists have parallel roles* with regard to the victims: both are their custodians, and not husbands or lovers. Unlike Part II of the novel, or some of the other wine myths of Manuĉehri, jealousy is not a factor in the murder. Indeed, Hedāyat's painter does declare his love for the ethereal girl, but his passion is strictly platonic – he desires no physical contact with this angelic creature.⁵⁶ He takes on the role of her guardian from the moment she comes to his doorstep: his first duty is to protect her – in life and in death – from the defiling glances of strangers.⁵⁷ The significance of a full male gaze on an unprotected female face in an Islamic cultural context is made clear by a reference to the poem – there it is equated with possession.⁵⁸ The gaze of the artist upon the reclining ethereal girl as he paints her portrait has a similar effect: through his glance he captures her features in his art, and comes into the possession of her “essence.”⁵⁹

3) The similarities in the role of the two male protagonists extend to the central act of the two narratives: *the sacrifice*. Both men gaze long upon their victims, draw a knife, cut their throats, dismember their bodies, and pack them in a receptacle (a wicker basket / a suitcase) which they proceed to carry away.⁶⁰

56 – See Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, cit., p. 11-13: «Her beauty was extraordinary. She reminded me of a vision seen in an opium dream. She aroused in me a heat of passion like that which is kindled by the mandrake root... At no time did I desire to touch her. The invisible rays which emanated from our bodies and mingled together were sufficient contact... [It] was not possible that she should be connected in any way with things of this world: ... This girl, this angel, was for me a source of wonder and ineffable revelation. Her being was subtle and intangible. She aroused in me a feeling of adoration»; see Hedāyat, *Buĉ-e kur*, cit., p. 24-25.

57 – Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, cit., p. 13: «I was sure that beneath the glance of a stranger, of an ordinary man, she would have withered and crumpled». Ivi, p. 28: «But she – never, never must any ordinary person, anyone but me, look upon her dead body. She had come to my room and surrendered her cold body and her shadow to me in order that no one else should see her, in order that she should not be defiled by a stranger's glance»; see Hedāyat, *Buĉ-e kur*, cit., p. 25 and p. 43.

58 – Manuĉehri, *Divān-e ostād Manuĉehri Dāmġāni*, cit., p. 149, st. 10, ll. 1920-21: «He said: What has happened to you, girls? Who has seen your faces, you of the curtain? // And who has dragged you out of the house, you of the curtain? And who has torn the God-given curtain (the hymen) that is on you?...».

59 – Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, cit., p. 27: «But 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 the rats of the grave. Henceforth she was in my power and I had ceased to be her creature. I could see her eyes whenever I felt inclined to do so»; see Hedāyat, *Buĉ-e kur*, cit., p. 41.

60 – See, e.g., in Manuĉehri, *Divān-e ostād Manuĉehri Dāmġāni*, cit., p. 150, st. 14, ll. 1932-34: «The *dehqān* comes in and looks at them for a long time / draws out a sharp blade and cuts

4) In both cases care is taken to *preserve the victim's "essence"* but their *dead bodies are seen as dispensable mass of assorted tissues* – a sense conveyed through the “anatomical survey” of sinews, veins and bones in both works.⁶¹

5) Both *protagonists show no remorse or guilt* for their deed. The *dehqān* is unconcerned with the legalities of spilling the blood of his charges, because the traditional ethos requires the guardian of the sinners to eradicate the moral decay to which they have succumbed.⁶² The artist of Hedāyat shows no remorse for the dismemberment of the ethereal girl either, because after the departure of her spirit, her body is, to him, nothing more than a heap of decomposing flesh.

Most important for the allegorical reading of *The Blind Owl* is the significance of the sacrifice itself, which becomes clearer through the comparative reading with Manuĉehri's *mosammaġ*. The final stanzas of the poem's narrative segment establish a connection between the sacrifice and the rebirth of the grapes, and emphasize the redemptive, purifying, regenerative function of the ritual. The idea of renewal and rejuvenation is conveyed through the introduction of spring garden imagery at the end of the narrative section, in a vignette which matches and counterbalances the *dehqān's* view of the fall garden at the beginning of the descriptive section.⁶³ His soliloquy, addressed to the daughters of the vine, reaf-

their throats // then he puts them into a wicker basket / and presses down those which stick out // then takes it on his back and loads it on». Compare with Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, cit., p. 28-29: «This time I did not hesitate. I took a bone-handled knife that I kept in the closet beside my room and began by cutting open with great care the dress of fine black material which swathed her like a spider's web. ... Then I severed the head. Drops of cold clotted blood trickled from her neck. Next I amputated the arms and the legs. I neatly fitted the trunk along with the head and the limbs into the suitcase and covered the whole with her dress... I locked the case and put the key into my pocket. When I had finished I drew a deep breath of relief and tried the weight of the suitcase. It was heavy»; see Hedāyat, *Buĉ-e kur*, cit., p. 43-44.

61 – Manuĉehri, *Divān-e ostād Manuĉehri Dāmġāni*, cit., p. 151, st. 15-16, ll. 1935-1940: «Then he throws them into a wine-press / he kicks their backs twenty-thousand times // Cuts their sinews, tears out their bones / breaks in their backs, heads and sides. // He does not let them out for a night and a day / until the blood drains completely from their bodies. // Then he takes their sinews and bones / and throws them away entirely unconcerned with what happens to them // He seizes their blood and their soul / and closes them in a dungeon». Compare with Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, cit., p. 23: «But her body was lying there, inanimate and still. Her soft, relaxed muscles, her veins and sinews and bones were awaiting burial, a dainty meal for the worms and rats of the grave»; see Hedāyat, *Buĉ-e kur*, cit., p. 35-36.

62 – Manuĉehri, *Divān-e ostād Manuĉehri Dāmġāni*, cit., p. 151, st. 16, ll. 1939-40: «...He seizes their blood and their soul / and closes them in a dungeon / Three months exactly he makes no mention of them / knowing that a man cannot be blamed (arrested) for that blood (*dānad ke bedān xun nabovad mard gereftār*)».

63 – Manuĉehri, *Divān-e ostād Manuĉehri Dāmġāni*, cit., p. 151, st. 17, ll. 1941-43: «One day he gets up quickly, glad, happy and smiling / goes forth and takes off the seal from the prison door // When he looks in the prison and his prisoners / (his face) lights up (in a smile) as if from a hundred candles and lamps. // He sees so many rose blooms and jasmīn blossoms / as he has never seen in a gardenful of roses and jasmīn (*gol binad ĉandān-o saman binad ĉandān / ĉandān ke be golzār nadidast-o be samanzār*)».

firm the outcome of the sacrifice: the grizzly ordeal, which the victims have undergone, has not only purified them and freed them from blame, but has made them nobler, fresher, more vigorous and more powerful than ever.⁶⁴

From the perspective of these statements, the dismemberment of the ethereal girl in *The Blind Owl* – the most ideologically charged part of the novel – can be seen in a new light. In my initial reading of the novel based on internal evidence alone, the dismemberment of the ethereal girl and her burial in an unmarked grave seemed like a deliberate destruction and obliteration of the classical ideal and its traditional canon.⁶⁵ However, with the added perspective of Manučeḥri's poem, the destruction of the perfect, yet decaying, "compromised" form seems more like a ritual act intended to liberate the life-force within, which it holds captive.⁶⁶ In other words the destruction and burial of the poetic ideal is meant to ensure continuity through change; it entails a sacrifice of the form which would induce a new reincarnation of the spirit.

Hedāyat's *The Blind Owl* holds many interpretative possibilities. Its hypothetical indebtedness to the wine myths of Manučeḥri places this modernist novel in a very long chain of literary reinterpretations of an ancient Iranian theme, leading back to the dawn of Classical Persian literature. Through the ancient parable of sacrifice and rebirth, Hedāyat draws on tradition to argue for the necessity of change, and to legitimize the radical reforms of modernity. In addition, the historical record of the wine myth in Persian literature serves as a reminder that innovation is not necessarily a "clean break" with tradition, nor is the adoption of "alien" trends a departure from the methods of cultural syncretism, through which Persian literature – and indeed any viable national literature – periodically reinvents itself.

And if doubts still linger regarding Hedāyat's views on the literary legacy of Persia, they can, perhaps, be dispelled through a look in the mirror of his narrative. In principle the sentiments expressed by a literary personage should not be

64 – Manučeḥri, *Divān-e ostād Manučeḥri Dāmḡāni*, cit., p. 151-52, st. 18-19, ll. 1944-49: «He said 'I murdered you in such a manner / I immured you in a vat and abandoned you there // I made a seal of fresh water and clay, / I closed the opening of the vat with it and rested assured, / I drew a line in the clay with my finger and said (to myself), that by God, from now on you will not have any more suitors. // Today, in the vat, you are better than ever, / better than ever and free from vice, more alive than ever and more powerful than ever, more exalted than ever and better-natured than ever. / By God, you are much fresher and newer than ever / from now on I would not torment you any more».

65 – See the burial scene in Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, cit., p. 36: «When the trench was filled in I trampled the earth firm, brought a number of vines of blue, scentless morning glory and set them in the ground above her grave. Then I collected sand and pebbles and scattered them around in order to obliterate the traces of the burial so completely that nobody should be able to tell that it had ever taken place. I performed this task so well, that I myself was unable to distinguish her grave from the surrounding ground»; see Hedāyat, *Buḡ-e kur*, cit., p. 52.

66 – A hint of this sentiment is encoded in the text as well. See Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, cit., p. 22-23: «Her fragile, short-lived spirit, which had no affinity with the world of earthly creatures, had silently departed from under the black dress, from the body which had tormented it, and had gone wondering in the world of shadows...»; see Hedāyat, *Buḡ-e kur*, cit., p. 35.

mistaken for the sentiments of the author (in this case these are the thoughts of the "writer" of Part II, who is considering both his reflection in the mirror, and the writing which reflects his life). Yet we should not dismiss that possibility entirely either, for at some level any work of art reflects the vision of its creator. All the more so when these sentiments corroborate the textual evidence of the novel, which suggests that the writer who gave to modernism an Iranian face, did so by imprinting on it the features of the Persian cultural heritage:

*Were not the substance and expressions of my face the result of ... my ancestors' temptations, lusts and despairs? And I who was the custodian of the heritage, did I not, through some mad, ludicrous feeling, consider it my duty, whether I liked it or not, to preserve this stock of facial expressions? Probably my face would be released from this responsibility and would assume its own natural expression only at the moment of my death... But even then would not the expressions which had been incised on my face by a sardonic resolve leave their traces behind, too deeply engraved to be effaced?*⁶⁷

67 – Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*, cit., p. 118-119; see Hedāyat, *Buḡ-e kur*, cit., p. 157.