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Hedayat, Sadegh



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Definition

This entry looks at the life and work of the Iranian pioneering modernist writer Sadegh Hedayat in the hope of finding out how the city, culture, and folklore influenced him and how he influenced them in turn. Hedayat's life and work was presumably not irrelevant to the city, and there is evidence to support that both himself and his writings are connected with different urban spaces – mainly Tehran, Isfahan, Paris – and cultures as well as with their political aspects. These connections are more salient in his realist and satirical works in which he takes critical perspectives on the city, mostly on its cultural, social, and political aspects. It turns out that Hedayat looked at culture, worldviews, beliefs, monuments, etc., with a skeptical and critical lens at the same time as he maintained his relation with them and was a part of them.

Introduction

Sadegh Hedayat (1903–1951), the Iranian short story writer, novelist, and translator, was born in Tehran into an aristocratic family. In 1909, he

began his elementary education at Elmiyeh School and later showed his abilities in composition. Then he moved to Dar ul-Funun school, and around 1916 he was reportedly diagnosed with an eye infection halting his education for about a year. He later began (1919 [1298]) and finished (1925 [1304]) his high school at a prestigious French school located in Tehran (St. Louis school), where he also taught Persian to a French priest (Hedayat 2017: 22) and became acquainted with French language, world literature (mostly French), and metaphysics (see Katouzian 1993b: 28–30), all becoming, perhaps, the bases for his later modernist orientations and the creation of many of his opaque and mysterious atmospheres, settings, and characters.

Soon after Reza Shah's ascending to the throne, Hedayat, along with a number of other Iranian students, was sent to study in Europe in 1926. This was the beginning of his direct exposure to different cities, peoples, and cultures. He stayed for some time in Belgium and then moved to France, where he also tried to commit suicide in a river in 1928, but was saved; he soon abandoned his studies in architecture and devoted himself to writing. In 1930, Hedayat returned to Tehran and began working in Bank-e-Melli which at the time was the central bank of Iran. It was around this time that he became a close friend of writers Bozorg Alavi, Masoud Farzad, and literary scholar Mojtaba Minovi.

Hedayat had previously published an essay in French "Le Magie en Perse" (1926), a short essay

“Death” (1928), a collection of Khayyam’s verses *Tarānehā-ye Khayyam* (1923), and two books *Man and Animal* (1924) and *The Benefits of Vegetarianism* (1927) in which he criticized people for their treatment of animals. Around 1931, he published “*Buried Alive*” – a short story collection – and *Parvin, the Sasanid Girl* – a historical play. He also published several short stories and translations in some collections and journals. In 1932, he traveled to Isfahan and published his travelogue *Isfahan, Nesf-e-Jahān (Isfahan, Half of the World)*, and the important short story collection *Seh Ghatreh Khoon (Three Drops of Blood)*.

From 1932 to 1936, Hedayat worked in several different jobs and published a short story collection “Chiaroscuro” (1933) and the satirical/comical collection of anecdotes *Vaq-vaq-Sahab (Mister Bow-wow)* with Masoud Farzad (1934). Hedayat also published another historical play, *Maziar*, this time in collaboration with Minovi. In 1936 (1315), he traveled to Bombay where he came to learn the ancient Persian language Pahlavi and published *The Blind Owl* in 50 handwritten copies and sent them to his close friends in Europe, chiefly among them was Mohammad-Ali Jamalzadeh, known as the father of modern story writing in Iran.

In 1937, Hedayat returned to Tehran, and from 1938 to 1941, he joined the Office of Music and the editorial staff of *Journal of Music* where he published a few of his Pahlavi translations and cultural and folkloric research. In 1941, he finally got a permanent job as a translator at the College of Fine Arts and published parts of *The Blind Owl* in the *Iran Magazine* (later the full novel was also published; see Hedayat 2017: 28–29). The following year, he published *The Stray Dog* collection, and until 1945, he worked with a few literary journals, published his other translations from Pahlavi language and the satirical novel *Haji Agha*.

In 1946, his short puppet-play *The Legend of Creation* was published in France, and in 1948, he wrote an introduction to a translation of Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony* by Hassan Qa’emian. Later in 1950, he translated Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* from French with Qa’emian, and then moved to

France in December 1950, in the hopes of finding a job and staying there (he received medical leave (citing psychosis) to go there (see Hedayat 2001: 199)). Four months later he committed suicide in his apartment in Paris. These obscure and dark months comprise Hedayat’s ultimate struggle with life and death, which ended with the latter winning. (His brother’s note on Hedayat’s last days entitled “The Last Novel” is a mixture of imagination and reality, and gives a few fine impressions on Hedayat’s suicide (Hedayat 2017: 125–139).)

Hedayat is said, by many, to be the greatest and most influential writer of contemporary Iran (e.g., Shayegan 1992: 407; Katouzian 2008). His life, works, and legacy have been continually studied and rethought by researchers; *The Blind Owl* (1936, first translated into French in 1953 and English in 1957) being his, and modern Iran’s, greatest modern work (see, among many, Mesbahipoor Iranian 1980: 95; Tahbaz 1997: 47). The significance of ancient and contemporary culture in his work has also been studied by a number of researchers. A look at his life as well as representations of the city and urban spaces can hint at Hedayat’s cultural split and his critical look, especially concerning his country and its people. I devote this entry to a few general remarks on Hedayat’s more notable works in relation to the city. Having in mind his unease regarding, among many things, the political oppression, censorship, superstition, a distorted culture, and the syncopated and forced social and political modernization of Iran in the early decades of 1300s (1920s–1940s), it seems that the city (in almost all its aspects) and Hedayat were inseparable.

The city – culture, society, folklore, religion, urban spaces, etc. – cannot be ignored when it comes to Hedayat who was a sympathetic, responsible, cautious, and sensitive figure (Shariatmadari 1975: 29–30) about his own society and perhaps even about the cosmopolis. The city is usually one of the main themes for modernists in general and surrealists and expressionists in particular. Jeremy Tambling points out that surrealism is (in)directly related to aspects of the city (see his entry on ► “[Surrealism](#)”) and Richard

Murphy (2006) also rightly asserts that the city becomes “a paradigm for the Expressionists’ experience of contemporary reality” (198). Hedayat early on came to know of the gross gaps between the culture, beliefs, and worldviews of his own people (which were, he thought, hollow, prejudiced and inked with ignorance, superstition, triviality, and obscenity) and that of the developing and modern countries in Europe as he was gradually internalizing surrealism and expressionism in the late 1920s and 1930s. The city, culture, society, and people were scarcely left out by him.

Tehran

Tehran has been the capital of Iran for the past 250 years. During Hedayat’s lifetime, Tehran’s population was estimated between 250,000 and 300,000 inhabitants (around 1938). The capital is located in the north of Iran, below the Alborz mountains, and has an irregular octagonal shape (Shahri 1992a: 13), surrounded by Semnan (east), Sari and Mazandaran (north), Qazvin and Markazi (west), and Qom (south). It originally had five main neighborhoods and 12 main gates surrounding it, and was located near the ancient city of Rey, which is referred to especially in the second section of Hedayat’s *The Blind Owl*.

Dar ul-Funun, where Hedayat is said to have studied for some time, was located in the Naserieh Street (today’s Naser Khosrow Street), between Shamsol-emareh and the Toop-khaneh square. It was one of Amir Kabir’s (Iran’s well-known prime minister at the time of Naser-u-din Shah Qajar) epoch-making reforms (Shahri 1992a: 37) with many well-known alumni (later the school was turned into a college with such alumni as Ali-Akbar Deh-Khoda, Mojtaba Minovi, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, and many others). The school was famous for providing modern languages, sciences, and other fields of study and was mainly preserved for children of politicians and the affluent people (37–41). Hedayat studied there when it was a high school until he was diagnosed with an eye infection that halted his studies, he went to St. Louis high school the next year. St. Louis was

one of the best schools in Tehran with regard to its teachers and educational excellence. Hedayat excelled there, especially with regard to his exposure to French language, literature, and metaphysics.

Another aspect of the city worth mentioning is the Pearl Cannon, a monumental cannon which had absorbed many superstitious beliefs among the populace (this cannon was moved around the middle of the Pahlavi period). It was named “Pearl” Cannon due to a pearl necklace that hung from its barrel. Jaffar Shahri describes it as follows:

(The Pearl Cannon) was a grand, bronze cannon set on its two wheels upon a platform and was located in today’s Ark square, across the Ministry of Information [People would] resort to it, walk under it in the hopes of luck, sit on its barrel and glide... (1992b: 364)

The Cannon, we are told, was made during the reign of Fat’h-Ali Shah Qajar and was not used for firing at all (364). Hedayat’s satire *The Pearl Cannon* (more precisely *The Morvari Cannon*) uses this monument highly symbolically. It can be read as a phallic object as well as representative of power or totality.

Another significant aspect of Tehran with regard to Hedayat was its cafés and teashops. People had a long history of gathering in teashops and cafés to spend their time, playing games, smoking cigars and drugs (mostly opium), drinking, and so on (see for instance Shahri 1992a: 64, 270). It was Hedayat who used cafés not just for leisure but for other purposes such as meetings, working on essays and stories with his close friends. With Hedayat, cafés and teashops were later adopted for different utilities.

The people of Tehran were said to be (perhaps, to some extent, still are!) too hedonistic, carefree, and superficially jovial and shallow (Shahri 1992b: 383), those who used every opportunity to waste their time playing games of cards, using drugs, drinking, and smoking cigars and water pipes (hookah) excessively. Hedayat did not like extreme and obscene behaviors in people and criticized them in many of his works (parts of *The Blind Owl* include resentful remarks about those who are empty of essence and pursue carnal

desires). Hedayat usually maintained his distance from these people, although some of these vagrants loved him (an interesting anecdote about one such occasion with a promiscuous rabble in one of Hedayat's café sittings is famous (see Katira'i 1971: 336–339).)

Hedayat valued his country, its cities and culture (especially Tehran), and the Persian language. He is said to have been a nostalgic person, one who lamented his country's obscurity and misfortunes and longed for its lost values (the early Hedayat more precisely). Even so, he hated the claustrophobic atmosphere of Tehran and Iran, especially in his later years when life was becoming unbearable for him. Thus, he later preferred Paris not just for its urbanity or niceties, or more bearable atmosphere but more importantly for its freedom and openness. This was the reason for his decision to leave for Paris, where he might avoid suicide (Katouzian 2008: 6). He would want to breathe freely for a while in his remaining years (see Katira'i 1971: 289–290), but circumstances went against his will.

Rab'eh Literary Circle

Beginning in 1930, shortly after his return from Paris, Hedayat befriended Minovi, Alavi, and Farzad. They were all educated, high minded literary and scholarly figures. These four men were the earliest Iranian modernists who were more or less familiar with the movement and its developments in the west. A few years after 1930, these four modernists formed a more organized and maverick literary circle and rather accidentally adopted the title known as "Rab'eh" (a made-up Arabic word for "four" or "foursome," then used derogatorily), as an opposition to the classicist, conformist, and conservative circle known as "Sab'eh" (consisting of seven famous poets and writers).

The Sab'eh group – chief among them such poets as Mohammad Taghi Bahar and Badi-u-Zaman Foruzanfar and Sa'id Nafissi – were considered veteran classicists who dominated the literary scenes and valued classical literature, preventing innovations and creations which

radically departed from the classics. Hedayat and his friends highly advocated and longed for a break with the past and emphasis on creativity and innovation, and this was the main root of their drastic oppositions to the Sab'eh figures. A number of anecdotes in *Mister Bow-wow* satirize this prevalent attitude of the time.

Hedayat is said to have been the "center" of the Rab'eh literary circle (Shariatmadari 1975: 32–33). Like the Bloomsbury Group in England, the Rab'eh circle was not established for the mere sake of friendship, entertainments, or get-togethers – though these were among their purposes – but more seriously for the sake of working "as a team" (Hedayat 2011). It should be noted, after all, that there was no strict officiality with the title "Rab'eh": Hedayat himself was against any political or social categorization or orientation and would smile at the title "Rab'eh" (see Tahbaz 1997: 29–31). Prior to any such formalities, the members were more importantly comrades cooperating, exchanging ideas, and trying to contribute defamiliarized, new literature.

Hedayat and World Literature

Hedayat was familiar with classical (mostly Persian) as well as modern literature. He was also evidently knowledgeable of early-twentieth-century modernism. It is indicated that he was well-versed in French language and literature, and knew enough English as well. He would even read, for instance, such modernists as John Dos Passos (Hedayat 2001: 62) and James Joyce (68), as he says in letters to his close friend Hassan Shahid Nura'i; many of his own works are clearly surrealistic and expressionistic in style and content (e.g., *The Blind Owl* or *Three Drops of Blood*).

There is also evidence that Hedayat was under the influence of Ferdowsi, Sadi, Hafiz, Khayyam (all of whom had lasting influence on European literature as well), and Goethe, Dostoevsky, Baudelaire, Freud, Camus, Sartre, Kafka, and Rilke. The grossest influences seemingly came from the surrealism and expressionism of the latter two figures. Manouchehr Mohandessi, half a century

ago, exposed us to a few passages of *The Blind Owl* and their affinities with Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), affinities that cannot be said to be plagiarism as the subject matter of one greatly differs from the other, yet they hint at Hedayat's significant receptions. There are, moreover, salient existentialist and psychological aspects in Hedayat's works as well. In his work there also appears, directly or indirectly, names of philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Khayyam, Montaigne, Pascal, Descartes, Spinoza, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus. He sometimes directly refers to them or their works, and occasionally evokes their works through his expressions and language.

Hedayat and the City

The relationship between Hedayat and the city can be discussed roughly in terms of two periods: the early Hedayat and the late Hedayat. It must be noted that there is much overlapping because Hedayat's career had many ups and downs and he underwent many changes of perspective and interests. He was said to be more positive for some time after his acquaintance with the Rab'eh people and for some time after Reza Shah's dethronement, but these periods did not last long.

The early period (1926–1935), comprises the still young and perhaps hopeful Hedayat (though "hopeful" seems a somewhat unfit word to ascribe to him), and the later period (1935–1951) comprises the darker Hedayat who is much more restless, depressed, and agonized (see for instance Katira'i 1971: 266–270). Homa Katouzian describes him as suffering from "personal tragedy, the social isolation and the universal alienation" (2008: 7). It is still noteworthy and ironic that a few of Hedayat's famous works were written in his early period. They include short stories such as "Buried Alive," "Davud the Hunchback," "Abji Khanoum," and the romantic short story "Maudlin," all of which appear to have been under the influence of the unknown complications surrounding his unsuccessful suicide attempt in 1928. But these are not among his realistic, critical, and satirical writings (see Katouzian 2008:

6–11), which have more relevance to ideas concerning the city.

For the early Hedayat, despite his ever-present pessimism and feelings of melancholia, one can refer to his search for meaning in romantic nationalism and the beginning of his deep inquiry into folklore, ancient Iranian civilization, culture, and literature (his important travelogue belongs to this period), while the late Hedayat is a deeply depressed figure with advanced melancholia and disillusionment; in his late period we have sharp realism, pungent satirical writings, and bitter social, political, and cultural critiques which culminate in his later works "Haji Agha" and *The Pearl Cannon*. Even so, his café discussions and activities with the then expanded circle (added to it were Hassan Shahid Nura'i, Hassan Qa'emian, Sadegh Chubak, Parviz Natel-Khanlari, and a few others) were not abandoned until his last couple of years.

The urban space, culture, and Hedayat are at times interwoven. He was familiar with his surroundings and was simultaneously under direct influence of (mostly ancient Iranian) culture early on in his writing career. He is said to be one of the first Iranian researchers to have delved deep into Iran's ancient and modern culture and folklore. First indicated in his *Neyrangestan* (ca. 1933), he exposes us to a range of idioms, proverbs, (fairy)tales, myths, traditional, religious and local superstitions, habits, beliefs, and orientations (Hedayat 1933, 1999: 9–17). Later on, he expands the work to include other tales, mythic and folkloric beliefs, and narratives, and these are all packed into a single book edited and published after his death by his nephew Jahangir Hedayat (1999). As such, Hedayat received and researched the culture and background of his people and country (still not to say of Europe) to a great extent. The cities of Tehran (mainly), Isfahan, Shiraz, and also Paris (to a lesser extent) are unique points of reference.

Hedayat is said to have stayed in Shiraz for some time after traveling to Isfahan (Hedayat 2017: 16). His short story "Dash Akol" (Hedayat 2008: 75–84) is a tragic narrative set in Shiraz and briefly refers to some features, beliefs, and traditions of that city and Iran more generally. Equally

importantly is “Don Juan-e Karaj” (one of the stories in *The Stray Dog* collection); Hedayat’s anonymous narrator talks about his recent trip to Karaj – the northwestern suburb of Tehran, today itself the center of Alborz province. While it is mainly a story of love affairs, promiscuity, and interpersonal relations, we also read about a few of Karaj’s qualities such as its inns, cafés, and local people as well as the surrounding nature.

In many of his realistic and/or satirical short stories and novels (especially in *Madam Alavieh* “Alavieh Khanoum,” *Haji Agha*, and his satire *The Morvari Cannon*), Hedayat takes a highly critical, at times darkly comic, approach. There are many political innuendos, satirical passages, and cultural and social critiques in these writings, his novel *Haji Agha* and satire *The Morvari Cannon* being among the best. Instead of trying to provide theories of reform, Hedayat takes on critical and satirical standpoints. He depicts, most importantly, the dark sides of politicians and conservatives. He also satirizes people, their derogatory and even obscene usage of Persian language, their ignorance, superstitions, and other naked aspects of their lives. Hedayat’s street language in these tales, sometimes infused with structural and syntactic errors, has been criticized by some readers, but it is apparent that he adopts this perspective on purpose. The deeply colloquial language seen in some of his realist/satirical stories – a language that makes a well-crafted and loyal translation of these works almost impossible – graphically demonstrates prevalent conditions and circumstances of the laymen, the difficulties of their lives (perhaps the outcome of their own ignorance or obscenity) as significant aspects of the civil life of Tehran.

Having received such influences, how could Hedayat have influenced the city and the culture of his people? There are monographs and theses by Iranian students and researchers which reveal a range of cultural, literary, and even linguistic/lingual innovations and influences of Hedayat (see Amir-Arjmand 2017; Muallemi 2008). He is also known as the earliest practitioner of café sittings in its modern sense, a cultural and literary activity he set up in Tehran and continued in the second half of his life. According to his biography and his

friends’ and researchers’ indications, Hedayat spent around 5 to 6 years of his life abroad (half of this in the French cities of Reims, Besancon, and mostly Paris), but during this short time abroad (especially 1927–1929), he imported a literary/cultural activity (café sitting) from Paris to Tehran that proved important both in his own time and for the later generations. He spent most of his life in Tehran and was deeply in touch with it and influenced by that city which was (and still is) the heart of Iran. In a short series of notes on Hedayat’s café spots in Tehran during 1941–1950, we gain a sense of many cafés and their backgrounds and features – Jaleh, Ferdowsi, Continental, la Mascotte, Behjat-abad teashop (Ghahveh-Khaneh Behjat-Abad), etc. – and other interesting anecdotes (Katira’i 1971: 333–348). We are told about both jokes and serious literary occasions, of games and music (most importantly of the Kamancheh, an Iranian musical instrument), of coining (sometimes comic) words and expressions by Hedayat, and so on. But even though people of that time paid little attention to these activities, Hedayat’s legacy had a lasting influence on the later Iranian literati. Even today, such gatherings are still popular in Tehran and other cities, especially among students of art and literature.

Hedayat also had a deep concern about folkloric culture and literature. He meticulously researched the origins of folkloric studies (Hedayat 2000: 495–540) and imported that line of research to his own country (first with *Neyrangestan*). He believed that humanities as “best masterpieces” – in a range of areas such as fine arts, literature, philosophy, and religion – have their basic roots in folklore and folkloric literature and culture (Hedayat 2000: 496). These traditions are responsible for revealing many aspects of the people and the city life of a nation. Hedayat thought that, as a great part of this has been forgotten and eliminated, there was a risk of losing the remaining bodies of folkloric knowledge, especially in ancient nations such as Iran. He saw them as worthy of attention and as valuable sources of Iran’s identity (503). Hedayat was perhaps the first to set this standard and this significant concern among Iranians, having them value their nation and guard its folkloric (and

thus cultural and literary) legacies and ultimately its identity.

Hedayat: An Escapist or a Flaneur?

Instead of being an escapist who would want to avoid the city and all its contradictions, obscenities, and misfortunes, Hedayat can be said to have held a few features of the flaneur: the one who would like to roam the city, observe and experience the beauties and vulgarities of his surroundings, while looking for a way to expose himself (and us) to them. If he was sometimes a flaneur, he is a special version of it, perhaps a critical-minded flaneur and not a carefree or vagrant one. As we know, he maintained a critical look on the city and later depicts and satirizes its obscenities and dark sides in his realistic and satirical works (e.g., *Haji Agha*, *The Morvari Cannon*).

In a recently published book, we read about Hedayat and his brother Issa in Paris – who was by then a military student in France – as they roamed the city and its surroundings, visiting various cultural and historical places (Hedayat 2017: 97–117). He is said to have stayed in Cachan commune in Paris. As Jahangir Hedayat tells us, the two brothers had plans for 36 days in 1927: sight-seeing, parties, tours, café sittings, cinemas, and clubs were among the activities despite their tight budget. This is perhaps the peak of the early Hedayat's reception of influences from a significant city like Paris.

Further, as mentioned earlier, we also read about Hedayat's roaming Tehran from alley to alley, street to street, and café to café. He was mainly known as an introverted figure who preferred indirect contacts, but we are also certain that he was by no means a purely solitary, misanthropic, and home-staying person. He would always keep in touch with his friends, with the city, its urban spaces, and its people with observing eyes. The early Hedayat perhaps found console in the city, as well as in art.

But the late Hedayat's sense of absurdity and melancholic disappointment seems very evasive. It can be speculated that little by little he underwent national/universal, personal/social,

cultural/political, ontological/epistemological, or psychological turmoil; but as his narrator in *Buried Alive* says, "nobody has understood what's wrong with me. They've all been fooled!" (2008, 103) and perhaps these are Hedayat's own words to us! Moreover, his avoidance of political parties (such as the communist Tudeh party which Alavi served as a member) marks not his conservatism but rather his complete hopelessness and disappointment (see, e.g., Katira'i 1971: 335). But at least, the late Hedayat seemingly felt (though only partial) console in art more than the city; when he roamed Paris in the last few months of his life, he mainly had nostalgic feelings about its past, the time he had studied there in the late 1920s. It was only art which now seemed at least a way of discharging parts of his unknown and unknowable impostume from time to time. His *The Blind Owl* magically contains many distinct descriptions that match the late Hedayat.

In his last months, however, Hedayat is said to have destroyed some of his incomplete writings. It is suggested that he later even lost that positive sense on art as well. His suicide in this sense does not seem very surprising. The fact is that almost nobody could know him; he was really ahead of his time.

A Few Remarks on *The Blind Owl*

It is impossible to write on Hedayat and not say something about the fantastic world of his undeniable masterpiece (I will discuss this work in relation to the city in a separate entry). Although it is not exactly clear when he wrote *The Blind Owl*, according to Bozorg Alavi's memoir Hedayat had already finished this novel before traveling to India in 1936 (Alavi 1998: 182). The idea of the book and its production probably go back to a few years before this publication in Bombay (he published it there while he was temporarily banned by censorship, probably being the first to have been censored in the history of Iran), perhaps some time after he had written his other psycho-fictions such as *Buried Alive* and *Three Drops of Blood*.

The Blind Owl is mainly read as a surrealist work (Katouzian 1993a, b; Shamissa 1993: 22) and sometimes as an expressionist one (Katouzian 2008: 10), and it is certain that both techniques are actively endorsed and incorporated. The novel is narrated in a first-person perspective and consists of two parts, the first shorter part happening in the present and the second – seemingly being a drug-induced hallucinatory recollection – in the far past (the middle ages). Its main theme can be said to be a romantic loss, and its lovelorn narrator tries to communicate it as a trauma, or sore, or “wound,” even though it is vain, as he thinks, to say something about these wounds to others (Hedayat 1936: 9).

He thus writes for his shadow (the owl) who devours his words. Perhaps this is the restless part of himself which needs to be nourished via something (maybe art?). The nightmarish and surrealist/expressionist sublimity that we witness in this work can also be regarded as one way to depict the sense of loss and absurdity of the modern subject as well as what he witnessed in modern Iran. Even so, Hedayat did not perhaps really overcome that sense; it was arguably a nostalgia or a romantic sense of duality or contradiction between a harsh reality and a desirable truth that could hardly be overcome through something such as art. For him, to draw upon William Butler Yeats, things had already (perhaps irreparably for the late Hedayat) fallen apart.

Hedayat’s *The Blind Owl* and a few of his other stories such as *Buried Alive* or “*Davud the Hunchback*” or *Three Drops of Blind* are famously called psycho-fictions by Katouzian. Although these are different from psychological novels in many respects, Katouzian has defined features such as lack of a certain setting (time and place) and a clear-cut plot, an abundance of subjective (psychological) descriptions often aligned with traces of depression and solitude. They are narratives of “insufferable fear without clear reason. . . sin without Sinai. . . punishment without crime” (Katouzian 2008: 11). These fictions have several other unique aspects as well. They are usually traumatic recollections or dark narratives of cruxes or splits, stories of loss, of bitter internal monologues – sometimes with traces of the stream

of consciousness with its illogical sentence-structure and syntax – and epiphanic tragicality and mortality. Hedayat’s psycho-fictions are sometimes reminiscent of negative modes of Proustian remembrances, not exalting but deathly and dark. *The Blind Owl* has many affinities with some of other (post)modernist works, for instance with some of Maurice Blanchot’s works, especially with *Death Sentence*; both of them can be considered as narratives of the loss of self as a result of the loss of the other.

Having put many of his protagonists in claustrophobic agonies or unending searches for something to cling to, perhaps the most salient characteristic of Hedayat’s writings – especially his *Owl* – is their unfathomable tragicality; it is definitely not simply a tragic sensation of life but, as Katouzian rightly suggests, “life as tragedy” (Katouzian 1993a: 88). Hedayat depicts his central and anonymous narrators imprisoned in tragic labyrinths, as disillusioned wayfarers or wanderers ripped apart between belonging and unbelonging, between the self and the other.

If we take for granted some of the remarks of the narrator of *The Blind Owl* as Hedayat’s own philosophical meditations on his being-in-the-world, we might be able to suggest that he saw himself incompatible with being and life (1957: 78). He was unable to make sense of what seemed to him too nonsensical and essentially empty. Hedayat perhaps saw life as a deathly void in which he could not locate himself; those majorities who could bear this void were actually voids themselves or what he called “*rajjaleh*” (or rabble: superficial, carefree, hedonist, and carnal people, perhaps somehow akin to the Arnoldian “*philistine*”). His wanderings, time spent seeking shelter in cafés with his friends were all influential and had lasting effects on later generations of Iranian writers, but they seemed to himself absurd and pointless, only forced dangling by the rope of life, an unbearable thrownness into being. At one point, Hedayat’s narrator mentions that it is the nothingness after his death that played the role of hope for him to temporarily tolerate being, and that the very thought of being and living and anything like “*life*” frightens him (1957: 78). It was probably in the hopeless hope – and what a

contradiction we have here! – of that nothingness that Hedayat tried to kill life and finally committed suicide.

Cross-References

► Benjamin, Surrealism, and Paris

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