

## “The bitter wine of my life” Bitterness and tragicity in *The Blind Owl*

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Sadegh Hedayat’s masterpiece *The Blind Owl* (1936) is repeatedly called the greatest Iranian modern novel and one of the best literary productions of the twentieth century. Its contemporary modernist movements such as surrealism, symbolism and expressionism are the ones Hedayat had been familiar with and they become the medium via which his anonymous narrator communicates his story. Drawing upon Zhao Feng’s recent essay on surrealism and soteriological desire, this intervention suggests that surrealism for Hedayat in *The Blind Owl* does not play a soteriological role as it does for many surrealists, Andre Breton chief among them. Hedayat’s version seems much more extreme, cynical and tragic, delicately flavored with a persistent existential sense of *bitterness* which pervades the text.

**Keywords:** Sadegh Hedayat; *The Blind Owl*; existence; bitterness; tragic; surrealism; soteriology.

### 1. Preamble

Sadegh Hedayat (also Sādeq Hedāyat, صادق هدایت) is one of the first and most significant modernist figures in Persian literature. His magnum opus *The Blind Owl* (1936-37) or (1314-1315) *بوف کور* is frequently called the greatest Iranian modern novel and, following its translation into French and English in the 1950s, one of the best literary productions of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> It is, as many scholars have suggested, the first modernist novel in Persian literature and sets the standard for many novels to follow its vein. Scholars have identified symbolism, surrealism and expressionism as its dominant stylistic techniques (see, for instance, Yavari 2008; Katouzian 2012).<sup>2</sup> At the time of its

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<sup>1</sup> First translated into French by Roger Lescot in 1953 and into English by D. P. Costello in 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Various significant interpretations of *The Blind Owl* in particular and Hedayat’s fiction in general include Bashiri (1974), Shariatmadari (1975), Hillman (1978), Bashiri (1984), Katouzian (1991), Katouzian (1993), Tahbaz (1997), Katouzian (2007) and Rahbari (2017).

composition, Hedayat had presumably been familiar with these movements in art and literature, and had been trying to experiment with the corresponding techniques to possibly come up with an original account of a human existence piqued and bittered by various forms of predicament.

Scholars have tried to unearth the roots of Hedayat’s novel in western modernist movements (see, for instance, Mansouri-Zeyni 2013) as well as in eastern Persian myths and folkloric tales, and ancient philosophies/religions such as Zoroastrianism and Buddhism (see, for instance, Simidchieva 2003). They become the medium via which the anonymous narrator of *The Blind Owl* communicates his traumatic (un)lived experiences. Considering the fact that Hedayat seems to be experimenting with various perspectives and, as Nasrin Rahimieh puts, “longing for new art forms” (Rahimieh 1989: 16), I propose he is trying to offer an idiosyncratic, hard-boiled version of surrealism in what turns out to be a peculiar account of love and hate. Drawing upon Zhao F. Ng’s recent essay on surrealism and soteriological desire in the renowned *Literature and Theology* journal (2020), I argue that surrealism for Hedayat—at least in *The Blind Owl*, if not his other works of this nature, such as *Buried Alive* (زنده به گور) or *Three Drops of Blood* (سه قطره خون)—does not play a soteriological role as it does for many surrealists, Andre Breton chief among them. Hedayat’s version seems unique and one of a kind, a work which is much more extreme, cynical and tragic, delicately flavored, I suggest, with a persistent sense of existential bitterness. Hedayat is at pains to demonstrate the human predicament and tragicity via a bitterness which pervades his text.

## 2. *The Blind Owl*

*The Blind Owl* is generally regarded as a surrealist work (Shamissa 1993: 22), and although techniques pertaining to symbolism and expressionism are also discernible in the text, in this excursus we limit ourselves to this significant and central aspect of the novel. Before embarking upon the main discussion, a summary of this complicated surreal story seems helpful to freshen the mind of the reader about what happens in the course of the text. The novel is, typical of a surrealist work, narrated in a first-person perspective. The speaker is a lovelorn pen-case painter and the text is famously divided into two parts. The first section takes place in the present time [around 1935-36 (1314-15)] and centers on the sorrowful accounts of an agonized unnamed narrator who writes about his hopelessness while he tries to speak a sense of his “sore” or “scar” (زخم) into his “shadow” (سایه) (Hedayat 2013: 16; Hedayat 2004: 9-10). The shadow is in the shape of an owl (a sagacious as well as evil animal in many cultures) which devours everything he utters in words.

اگر حالا تصمیم گرفتم که بنویسم، فقط برای این است که خودم را به سایه‌ام معرفی بکنم؛ سایه‌ای که روی دیوار خمیده و مثل این است که هر چه می‌نویسم، با اشتهای هر چه تمام‌تر می‌بلعد. برای اوست که می‌خواهم آزمایشی بکنم، ببینم شاید بتوانیم یکدیگر را بهتر بشناسیم. چون از زمانی که تمام روابط خودم را با دیگران آزمایشی بکنم، ببینم شاید بتوانیم یکدیگر را بهتر بشناسیم. (Hedayat 2004: 10-11) بریده‌ام، می‌خواهم خودم را بهتر بشناسم.

I have decided that I should write. That I should introduce myself to my shadow—the stooped shadow on the wall that voraciously swallows all that I put down. It is for him that I am making this experiment to see if we can know each other better. Since the time when I severed my ties with others, I want to know myself better (2013: 16).

The shadow is perhaps a part of the narrator's selfhood which is fallen apart and is somehow self-destructively eating itself from within (Bidgoli 2022: 874-875). This section reveals the narrator's love for an already dead, mysterious girl whom he first sees from afar in his room and one night, coming back home from his wanderings around the city, magically finds her behind the door. The man takes her into his room and the girl lies on his bed. Moments later the man finds out that the girl is dead. He tries to draw her eyes, with which he was infatuated the most, and then mutilates her body and puts them into a bag and goes to a cemetery; an old "rag-and-bone" man (پیرمرد قوزی، پیرمرد خنزرینزری) helps him with his carriage and takes him to the cemetery. While burying her, he finds an old jar in the grave. Back in his room, he figures out that the eyes painted on the jar mysteriously look like the eyes he had drawn from the girl's visage. The eyes would thus turn into a haunting gaze throughout the whole narrative.

The second longer part takes place in the distant past, probably in the middle ages, in old Persia and in the city of Rayy (today's Tehran). The narrator obviously undergoes a hallucinatory remembrance and/or imagination of things past under the influence of drug (opium and wine) after he lost the girl and was left only with two images of her two eyes: he has already drawn an image of her eyes when she was in his shabby, deathly room, and he has also fixated on another pair of these eyes painted on the jar he found in the cemetery. Despite being hallucinatory and/or imaginary, this plunging into the past reveals many aspects of the narrator's misery, which connects his current state to the unfortunate complexities and perversions of his predecessors. It becomes clearer in this section that Hedayat has gained help from Freud's ideas regarding the unconscious and the influence of the collective sorrows and agonies suffered by the previous generations and still found in the depths of the unconscious. In this section, we witness that the man's life and family are filled with incest and oedipal desires. His uncle is in love with his mother; the narrator himself loves his mother and hates his father and uncle; most importantly, the man falls in love with a prostitute and gets married to her. The

marriage is not however consummated due to the girl’s reproach. The narrator, similar to the first part, wanders around the city and tries to find and kill the supposed lovers of his wife. The old “rag-and-bone” man is a mysterious, hateful figure he repeatedly sees in both parts of the novel, especially in the second part, one who is probably among the girl’s lovers as well. Unable to kill the lover(s) and consummate the marriage, the man finally decides to kill his wife and free himself from the incestuous/adulterous binds he hates to struggle with. In the final moments of the story, it is revealed that the narrator sees himself in the mirror and finds out, to his disgust, that he looks like the rag-and-bone old man (Hedayat 2004: 119-120; Hedayat 2013: 66).

### 3. Bitterness and tragicality in *The Blind Owl*

Love is generally regarded as one of the main themes of the surrealist projects. Absolute and eternal love can be, as suggested by Breton, a solution to man’s various antinomies that can lead to salvation. As Zhao Feng suggests, Breton’s contempt for religion turns out to be paradoxical and includes “a gesture of faith” that tries to erase the old world and its God and introduce a “new earthly paradise” in an immanent ontology.

It is thus possible to sketch out the preliminary outlines of the trajectory of a certain soteriology here. The movement that is charted here is one that takes us from our phenomenological and existential encounters with absence, loss, and suffering, to a place of reconciliation that Breton names a ‘state of grace.’ Moving away from a conception of—and a life lived in—a form of love embedded within a lapsarian metaphysics of ‘sin’ and ‘evil’, toward that ‘state of grace’ in which love is presented as absolute plenitude, names the salvational arc from tragic necessity to spiritual reconciliation (Zhao 2020: 368).

In the case of Hedayat and *The Blind Owl*, however, especially with the final return to the present in the second part of the novel, there is no reconciliation, no “state of grace.” Rather than a sense of unity and reconciliation, Hedayat’s novel offers a continual sense of detachment and distance. If there is to be “an hour of love” which brings the subject and object into a “continued, perfect coincidence” (Andre Breton, *Mad Love* 1987, qtd in Zhao 2020: 11-12), it only momentarily and partially happens in the climax of the *first* part of the novel between the man and the *corpse* of the girl (one can wonder if it is a face-to-face encounter with death itself). The trajectory Hedayat charts seems to me a movement back and forth from a bitter tragicality to a tragic bitterness, or from bitterness, suffering and loss to the (absurd?) repetition and intensification of bitterness, suffering and loss, stressed and aggravated even further, with no end, disappointing the narrator even about death as a possible finality; in between lies an evanescent, dreamlike *glimpse* of love perceived in the magical eyes of the beloved which is soon

vanished with her grotesque, unexpected death. This perpetual, ever increasing ontological darkness and tragic pain, I suggest, is conveyed through the phenomenological gustatory imagery of bitterness that the narrator repeatedly tastes in his beloved, her shadows/lovers,<sup>3</sup> and in himself as well.

As mentioned earlier, one of the central themes of a surrealist project is undoubtedly love. In *The Blind Owl*, the hallucinatory and vertiginous narrative mainly revolves around the narrator's rapacious desire for an angelic/sluttish woman. This unfulfilled and unrequited love traumatizes the whole narrative and is the wound or "sore" or "زخم" about which the narrator is (fated?) to write, not to merely say it to others—because it is useless as he thinks there is a "frightful chasm" (Hedayat 2013: 16) or "ورطه‌ی هولناک" (2004: 10) between him and others—but to *satiat*e his shadow, "to introduce" himself to himself, to come to know himself before his death (Hedayat 2013: 16-17). It seems that it is the desire for the "attractive malice" of that strange and inscrutable girl that has provided him with this extremely *bitter* experience, which gives way to a bitter sense of selfhood as well (if the man can really be said to possess a sense of selfhood at all):

در این دنیای پست پر از فقر و مسکنت، برای نخستین بار گمان کردم که در زندگی من یک شعاع آفتاب درخشید؛ اما افسوس، این شعاع آفتاب نبود، بلکه فقط یک پرتو گذرنده، یک ستاره‌ی پرنده بود که به صورت یک زن یا فرشته به من تجلی کرد و در روشنایی آن یک لحظه، فقط یک ثانیه، همه بدبختی‌های زندگی خودم را دیدم و به عظمت و شکوه آن پی بردم، بعد از این پرتو در گرداب تاریکی که باید ناپدید بشود دوباره ناپدید شد. نه، نتوانستم این پرتو گذرنده را برای خودم نگه دارم. (Hedayat 2004: 11).

I thought in this base world, full of poverty and misery, for the first time in my life, a ray of sunshine shone on my life. But alas, instead of a sunbeam it was a transient beam, a shooting star that appeared to me in the likeness of a woman or an angel. In the light of that moment that lasted about a second, I witnessed all my life's misfortunes, and discovered their magnitude and grandeur. Then that beam of light disappeared into the dark abyss for which it was destined. No. I could not keep that transient beam for myself (Hedayat 2013: 17).

This tragicality of desire and love in Hedayat's novel can be traced via a pervasive sense of existential bitterness that the author inculcates in the text. I suggest that the existential recurrence of bitterness—bitter love or desire (and later, in the second part of the novel, a desirable bitterness)—can give us a clue to trace this tragicality in *The Owl*. Much has been written on this novel, perhaps more than many works in Persian literature, but nobody to my knowledge has offered a suitable treatment of this idea

<sup>3</sup> The girl's little brother is another one in whom the narrator feels this bitterness: in one of his encounters with the kid, the narrator says "I kissed him on his open lips, which resembled my wife's; his lips tasted like the bitter end of a cucumber, acrid. Probably the whore's lips, too, taste the same" (46). This encounter with the kid and his bitterness recurs later on.

yet. This, I argue, is an existential tragic bitterness and bitter tragicity that can be termed *Hedayatesque* in nature, and the narrator seems to be hovering in the interstices.

Bitterness is a frequent motif and a (rather absurdly) repetitive and recurrent sensation in the novel. Highlighting this existential bitterness might reveal parts of Hedayat’s general treatment of desire in mankind and connect the dots to hint at an important aspect of his narrator’s predicament and tragicity. The word bitterness appears nine times in the course of a rather short novel (I have used Iraj Bashiri’s 2013 English translation). This gustatory imagery is usually connected with the sensation, the taste and the remembrance/recollection of the beloved (who is the central object of desire) and its recurrence drastically increases as we proceed to the final pages and the final climax [we have five usages from page 60 to page 65 in English translation (on pages 106, 108 and 114 in the original Persian text)]. The accelerating recurrence of this imagery does not seem accidental. And bitterness seems not irrelevant to the word “desire” (میل), itself appearing in the text seventeen times, the word “existence” (وجود) occurring twelve times<sup>4</sup> and the word “being” (هستی) also occurring at least nine times, in its impersonal sense similar to “existence.”

During the narrative, bitterness is hardly ever dissociated from the beloved and the man’s being/selfhood which is overwhelmed with an insane desire for her. It seems that there is an existential impact on the narrator himself as he identifies his “entire being” with this grotesque desire, which is in turn closely connected to bitterness. The “bitter wine of [the narrator’s] life” [2013: 33; شراب تلخ (Hedayat 2004: 48)] comes to be suggestive of how his “entire being” allegorized as love is tied up with tragicity. The idea of the tragic, for Hedayat, seems to entail a sense of continual “missing the mark,” so to speak, or failure—which is of a certain magnitude, at least for the subject—in achieving that which is desired, ending in predicament and psychological collapse. The odds become even more tragic when we come to know that the subject of failure deterministically inherits his tragic condition and predicament from distant pasts (as symbolized in the old jar and the mysterious gaze).

Before the germination of the desire for the girl, only painting would console the narrator, while after the encounter with the girl, he sees painting as a “ridiculous amusement” [Hedayat 2013: 17; شغل مضحک نقاشی (Hedayat 2004: 12)]. But his desire and love turn out to be almost equally fruitless as the man achieves the ethereal girl only when she is dead [which is the culmination of part one (Hedayat 2013: 23-25)] and consummates with the sluttish girl only when he kills her [which finalizes part two (2013: 65-66)]. During these two narratives, bitterness plays an important role, almost flavoring the

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<sup>4</sup> The word “nonexistence” also appears two times throughout the text.

narrative and accompanying the narrator anytime he feels the vicinity of the girl or her shadows or when he remembers them (e.g. 61) and anytime he actually embraces or kisses the girl (e.g. 63 and 65).

Earlier in the novel, the initial general sensation is mentioned via the narrator's first encounter with a static image of an angelic girl and an old man (perhaps his alter ego or his repulsive and bitter sense of selfhood). The dreamlike image is connected with the lips (more frequently used) and the eyes (equally frequent) of the girl, the man feeling a strange sense of attraction to those parts of her:

دختر درست در مقابل من واقع شده بود، ولی به نظر می‌آمد که هیچ متوجه اطراف خودش نمی‌شد. نگاه می‌کرد بی آن که نگاه کرده باشد؛ لبخند مدهوشانه و بی اراده‌ای کنار لبش خشک شده بود، مثل این که به فکر شخص غایبی بوده باشد.

از آن جا بود که چشم‌های مهیب افسونگر، چشم‌هایی که مثل این بود که به انسان سرزنش تلخی می‌زند، چشم‌های مضطرب، متعجب و تهدیدکننده و وعده دهنده‌ی او را دیدم و پرتو زندگی من روی این گودی‌های (Hedayat 2004: 15) براق پرمعنی، ممزوج و در ته آن غرق شد.

Although the girl was standing exactly opposite me, she was not paying any attention to what was happening around her. She was looking without seeing anything. An unconscious, involuntary smile had dried to the corner of her lips; it seemed as though she was thinking of an absent person. It was from the stool that I saw her dreadful charming eyes, eyes that, at the same time, were enchanting and reproachful. It was to the shining and dreadful balls of those worried, threatening and inviting eyes that my single beam of life was attracted, and it was to the depth of those same eyes that my life was drawn and in them was annihilated (Hedayat 2013: 19).

The description clearly indicates the first germination of desire in the man. The “unconscious, involuntary smile” and the sense of loss which it signifies “as though she was thinking of an absent person” precede the “reproachful”<sup>5</sup> abyss into which the man soon finds himself fallen (“it was to the depth of those same eyes that my life was drawn and in them was annihilated”). His desire and the gravitational force of the girl (mostly her eyes and lips) would later on unite him with her, or would rather collapse him into her. In the first part, the man's tragic desire unites him with the dead body of the girl, only to taste the deathly bitterness in her mouth once and for all: “Her mouth was acrid and somewhat bitter; it tasted like the bitter end of a cucumber” [2013: 23; طعم ته خیار را (2004: 26) می‌داد]; in the second part, the desirable bitterness [i.e. the “stub-end of a cucumber” (2013: 60-65)] drives the man to the slut and eventually collapses him into her, their bodies being “welded together” [2004: گوشت تن ما را به هم لحیم کرده بودند; 65]. In the final pages of the novel, I must repeat, the man tastes and feels this bitterness much more frequently [“the bitter end of a cucumber” (46, 60), “the

<sup>5</sup> It is also interesting that the word “reproach” (with its derivatives and as a verb as well) occurs six times in relation to the girl and her uncanny charm.

mildly bitter taste of cucumber” (61), “the mildly bitter taste of the stem end of a cucumber” (63), “her mouth tasted acrid like the bitter end of a cucumber” (65)].

Whether life’s bitterness is tragic or life’s tragedy is bitter remains equivocal throughout the novel, though there is little doubt that Hedayat is trying to explore both of these standpoints. I suggest the man falls in an abyss between an unfulfillable, bitter desire (exemplified in the first shorter section of the novel) and a desirable bitterness (exemplified in the second longer section of the novel), neither of which appears to have necessarily or clearly preceded the other. Both parts of the novel seem to be a trial to come to terms with this split that has struck and bittered the man’s sense of selfhood. The novel’s first section happens in the present and the second section is a drug-induced hallucinatory recollection of a distant past which itself ends with a return to the present. In an alternative way, we can thereby see that this perspective on the narrative constructively parallels the man’s attempt to capture and totalize a picture of *truth* in the first part with the derailment of that picture by the bitter *reality* of the second part, thus undoing the entire narration and leaving the process absurdly fruitless, somehow anticipating Albert Camus’s argument in 1942 and what he articulates regarding human existence and predicament in *Le mythe de Sisyphe: Essai sur l’absurde* (*The Myth of Sisyphus*).

#### 4. By way of conclusion

If life for Hedayat’s narrator is bitter and tragic, neither love nor possibly art can play the soteriological role of a savior: they seem to be only furthering this pain qua bitterness. The narrator finds his art “ridiculous” after seeing the ethereal girl, but he also finds love tragically unattainable (perhaps only attainable in death?); later on he finds it only intensifying his predicament, and finally he tries to end it but fails as he sees his selfhood and his existence too bitterly persistent, “welded” to desire and eros. Through love/art, one is only repeatedly reminded of the same predicament and tragic condition, it seems, or is somehow given more deepened and persisting senses of bitterness through exploring/imagining its ontological varieties and possibilities. Neither death nor suicide seems to be the solution, and when in the second part Hedayat’s narrator kills the other and frees himself from her chainlike embrace, he looks at *himself* in the mirror (an iconic moment of looking into one’s selfhood) and surprisingly sees that he identically looks like one of the slut’s shadows/lovers [“the old rag and bone man” پیرمرد خنزرپنزی (Hedayat 2004: 119)], recapturing/eternalizing bitterness in himself once again [“the bitter end of a cucumber” (Hedayat 2013: 65-66) طعم کونه‌ی خیار تلخ (Hedayat 2004: 114) or دهنش طعم کونه‌ی خیار می‌داد و گس مزه بود (118)], similar to the bitterness that he tasted in the girl’s deathlike bosom at the end of the first part and the slut’s and her brother’s mouths and lips in the second part (65 and 63 respectively).



In the final analysis, it seems that it is this absurd persistence and eternal continuity and repetition of “being” which is infinitely tragic and bitter in *The Owl*, arguably in Hedayat’s writings in general. This sense of absurdity and inevitability of being was seemingly sutured to the zeitgeist of the time, as first proposed by the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas in his early 1935 essay “On Escape” and more fully developed in his *Existence and Existents* (1978) written during World War II and published in 1948.<sup>6</sup> Hedayat’s narrative refers to this persistence of “being” as tragic and delicately flavors it with an existential bitterness. Excruciated by this absurd persistence, the only dim hope for Hedayat’s narrator—if there is anything hopeful in the man—can be the “utter nothingness” after his death (Hedayat 2013: 32; امید نیستی پس از مرگ; Hedayat 2004: 94), which can possibly eliminate that absurd persistence. If, and only if, there is to be any kind of transcendence or salvation, it is through a transmigration to *absolute* nothingness, saving the self from the inescapability of being which is fallen into the abyss between a bitter tragicality and a tragic bitterness. For the narrator, in the end, that transmigration does not happen and he is left in the abysmal bitterness that flavors the human condition as tragicality and despair.

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<sup>6</sup> Levinas discusses this fundamental, ground-zero sense of existence—from which there is no escape—as the *il y a* or *there is*.

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