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Pulverization And Auto-Genesis In Monsters III – Vampires and Slave Revolts

Mohammad Ali Rahebi & Ebrahim Zargari Marandi

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Vampire: Speciation As Immortality

Behold the vampire, with lowercase v, the successful speciation of the hermaphrodite, the sexual composite, the double-sexed. Silent, through the nocturnal mist, the vampire approaches. The neck, the victim's neck: flesh whole and unblemished. It is pierced, penetrated by the phallic teeth of the Vampire: new holes, a phallus penetrating orifices of its own making regardless of sex or gender: the vampire's teeth penetrate all. This is the vampire: walking womb, birthing its own immortality, birthing itself again and again. Cronos, Saturn is immortal, is time itself, consuming his begotten sons, absorbing their lives, their time.

Cronos is the progenitor of vampires' mode of reproduction even though he lacked the latter's internal engine of recreation/rebirth.

The vampire is the dream of the hermaphrodite, it is the hermaphrodite become productive, reproductive, a species onto itself. No longer the accident, impotent and monstrous, site of oracles, the hermaphrodite dreams the eternally reproducing bloodsucker, becomes *vamphyr*.

The vampire starts as a composite, as all our monsters do. A composite of the sexes, deterritorialized into their most basic functions. The womb-body and the phallus-fangs are both necessary organs/organizations and yet it is true that the vampire is mostly fangs and phallic invasion. In popular imagination, the vampire is seen from the outside, as a menace and a parasite, as necessarily

phallic and penetrating; it is seen on human terms, but on its own terms, it is just as much a womb, just as much a gestating process of the self.

The phallus escapes the genital organization to become piercing fangs, drawing the blood of all sexes while the body becomes womb entire, birthing the offspring that is the life of the vampire. A double function, a double sexuality that would approach asexual reproduction were it not for its parasitism on the blood of the human herds. Fresh blood is always welcome, for nothing comes from nothing and there is always a parasite and a host. That the vampire is two formed into ONE is much more evident in the East Asian variety. The Kyuketski's¹ head and neck, plus some entrails, detach themselves from the body at night and go hunting for blood, returning only at dawn. The piercing phallus-fang and the reproducing womb-body are the two functions of the vampire, the abstracted forms of a double sexuality.

In the Gothic-romantic novels of the Stoker tradition, the vampire is often also a composite of a couple, of lovers, heterosexual at first. Dracula is Vlad, joined to his bride even after her death; undead, he bridges the chasms of mortality and sexuality while Mina would finish her speciation only after the death and incorporation of her fiancé. Just as the dead Grandmother and the living Grandson are turned into one in a serial killer's attempt at becoming the Great Red Dragon², the vampire is also the composition of two individuals becoming a ONE. The vampire is at first the integration of a heterosexual couple, one alive, one dead, into an undead species of dual sexuality that is no longer bound by heteronormative sexuality or reproduction, free to choose men or women, as Dracula cavorts with Harker before setting his eyes on his fiancé.³

Now undead, now multi-sexed, post-sexual, the vampire's body is the crucible of its own creation, desiring itself through the blood of others. The Church is the natural enemy of the sexually "deviant" creature that is the *vamphyr*, taking measures to put it to rest in one

grave or another, one sex or another, one gender role or another. The stake through the heart that circulates the lifeblood is not nearly enough to exorcise the vampire without the coercive power of the cross that dictates its rule of the quartet, the grid-cross.

Having become a vampire, the composite possesses a new form of desire. Since the parasitic need of the vampire is for blood, which it attains through the phallus-fang, its desire becomes detached from the “victim’s” gender. Holes, interface sockets for the fangs are created, not found, not specialized. It is the sublimated craving for blood that is at the center of the vampire’s desire, for there is such a thing as vampiric desire. It does not, however, follow heteronormative delineations for it is of a different species from humanity. Each vampire is a species onto itself: there is no vampire-on-vampire sex.

Herodot’s Slave Revolt: Failed Individuation

There is a peculiar story among the classics, the story of the Scythians and their slaves narrated by Herodotus in the 4th book of his Histories. This is a story of an attempt at rebirth, of speciation, of monstrous auto-genesis; whether it ends with success or failure we shall see.

According to Herodotus, the Scythians leave their town to give chase to some foes and it will be 28 years before they will get back to their native country. In the meantime, their slaves mingle with the women, also left behind, and the result of this union is a new “generation of young men who, having learned the manner of their birth set themselves to oppose the Scythians as they were returning from the Medes”. What happens next is rather well-known: the Scythians fight these young men for some time but cannot gain the upper hand, and then one of the former lords of the town is struck by an idea, telling the others:

What a thing is this that we are doing, Scythians! We are fighting against our own slaves, and we are not only becoming

fewer in number ourselves by being slain in battle, but also we are killing them, and so we shall have fewer to rule over in future. Now therefore to me it seems good that we leave spears and bows and that each one take his horse-whip and so go up close to them: for so long as they saw us with arms in our hands, they thought themselves equal to us and of equal birth; but when they shall see that we have whips instead of arms, they will perceive that they are our slaves, and having acknowledged this they will not await our onset.

Herodotus, Histories Vol. IV

And this they do and the young men, the new generation, flee before the enemy who is now no longer the enemy but has become the “master”. This is a tale of a tragic failed attempt at rebirth, at genesis; the story of an individuation that, failing, collapses back onto the preexisting order of things.

The Scythians, according to Herodotus, physically mark their slaves. Thus the original slave is a body already monstrous and fragmented, rendered thus by the hot iron rods the Scythians use to blind and disfigure their slaves, marking their bodies as being of a different species. Yet the slave is placed in the order of things: the “slaves” and the “warriors”, two established species, two architecture of life. It is with the next generation that true monstrosity appears. A people without name, a generation born of slaves and “free” women⁴ and yet not blinded, not disfigured; not slaves but also not Scythian warriors.

So far, only an architecture of negatives, of not-things.

We are not told about their attempts at genesis, about whether or not they dreamed of, projected, a new body, but in the act of their opposition to the former masters there is a core of rebirth, of individuation, of identity in the making. It fails, however, as the new body being created collapses back into the dual structure of the world, into the preexisting order of things. The revolt remains a revolt, fails to become a revolution, to form a new whole, a ONE.

Yet the tale could also be read another way. The sons are the dream body of the slaves left alone to procreate with the women (who do not have a place, their role is in between, a threshold, neither Scythian warriors nor blind slaves): two monstrosities giving birth to a projected full body. The slave imagines and re-produces himself in the new body of a generation of Sons that will come to rise up and institute a new system, a new body-politic. This “generation of young men” is the unified projection and uniting image/body of the blind slaves, which will then have to be inscribed via the violence which is to be directed at the body of the Scythians, the previous order, the world as it exists.

Whether the sons fail or the fathers fail is of little consequence in the end, for the end is the collapse of the new individual, the full body. It is an ending akin to the final moments in Lovecraft’s tale of horror, *From Beyond*: the Scythians realize that the youth attacking them as a united and full body is merely the projection of the corporeality of the slaves which now dissimulate themselves to a mere interface that was there only to facilitate the emergence of these new generation. Just as the protagonist in *From Beyond*, the Scythians wise up to the real source of the projection, to the corporeal composition behind the unified image before them and turn to fight it with the appropriate weapon or strategy: if these are just phantoms formed by the slaves, then it is the slave in them that must be overcome. The whips cut through the gelatinous image of this generation to the slave within, pretending to be a mere threshold.

The new generation does not succeed in inscribing itself on the body of the Scythians and onto the social memory and so does not manage to lay claim to a proper name that would distinguish it and place it in the prehistory of Truth. No Truth emerges since they failed in the violent act that was to make of them a law and a truth outside time and inside memory.

Later we will see a successful instance of such inscription via violence when we look at the figure of the monstrous in the *Manga Berserk*. We will also analyze another architecture of auto-genesis in the form

of the Japanese genre of Mahou Shoujo or Magical Girl. An architecture of dual composites that transforms into an individual and a species, the Magical Girl is the genesis of the preteen girl.

1

The Kyuketski is a Japanese/Chinese folklore monster whose head, attached to entrails, detaches from the body at night to go hunting for blood, retiring to the body by day.

2

See Harris' Red Dragon, part of the Hannibal Lecter series.

3

See also Francis Ford Coppola's cinematic adaptation as well as the film Dracula Untold. The old Peter Cushing flicks also provide ample examples of this lovers' crucible.

4

Themselves a monstrosity, neither free nor blinded slaves...

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Hedayat: The Opium of Translation and Creating the Impossible Memory

Saleh Najafi

October 7th, 2020

I smoked my whole stock of opium¹, in the hope that the wonder-working drug would resolve the problems that vexed me, draw aside the curtain that hung before the eye of my mind and dispel my accumulation of distant, ashy memories. I attained the spiritual state for which I was waiting and that to a higher degree than I had anticipated. My thoughts acquired the subtlety and grandeur which only opium can confer and I sank into a condition between sleep and coma.

Sadeq Hedayat²

Recollection Goes Behind The Curtain

When the female narrator of Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983) reads the letters of his male friend to the viewer, she quotes her friend: "only one film had been capable of portraying impossible memory—insane memory: Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*." "Impossible memory?" "Insane memory"? In the rest of the letter she reads, these expressions (or concepts?) are not elaborated directly. Marker's other writings and works, even his remarkable essay on Hitchcock's masterpiece, also do not shed further light on this ambiguity. What does impossible memory mean? We have to search for clues to uncover its meaning. Is it a clue that Hitchcock decides to name the heroine of his movie Madeleine? At any rate, the word 'Madeleine' reminds us

of the decisive moment in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*: the madeleine cake triggers narrator's process of recollection. Can it be claimed that the main theme of Proust's novel is "impossible memory"? Marcel, the novel's narrator, speaks of the redemptive character of "involuntary memory. Is "involuntary memory" an oxymoron? Unintentional recollecting? Can these two expressions be considered equivalent? Perhaps in order to begin thinking about these questions, we should better explore the verbal aspect of memory. The verbs used for memory can be divided into two categories: remembering and recollecting.

The first attempt in the history of philosophy to conceptualize the distinction between these two aspects of memory was probably Plato's *Philebus*. In *Philebus*, Socrates accurately distinguishes memory from recollection for his interlocutor, Protarchus. Plato's Socrates states that in his view, "retention of perception" would be a good definition of memory, but this concept differs from 'recollection.' He states that, "when the mind (psyche) of itself, without sensory stimulation, recovers [or recaptures] as far as possible what it once underwent in conjunction with the body, we say it recollects." Socrates then says, when "the mind (psyche) regains memory of some sense-experience or piece of knowledge which it had lost," this process is called "recollection."³

This distinction becomes the basis for one of Søren Kierkegaard's nineteenth century books. In the preface to *Stages on Life's Way* (1845), Kierkegaard discusses the splendid difficulties of secrecy and extensively develops the distinction between 'remembrance' and 'recollection.' He uses the words 'erindre' (to remind or recollect) and 'huske' (to remember), but writes that these two terms are by no means the same. According to Kierkegaard, it cannot be said that a secret belongs to its bearer and therefore it cannot easily be claimed that a secret is transferrable; however, this is not the only difficulty of secrecy. This difficulty is not that the bearer of the secret must not betray it, but rather that the person who holds a secret has another responsibility: he must be careful not to forget it. Despite this

challenge, Kierkegaard posits that there is a worse situation, which he calls "incomplete recollection," or "to turn one's soul into a transit warehouse for damaged goods."⁴ In expanding on this, Kierkegaard makes use of an intriguing simile: if forgetting or unlearning (perhaps another distinction between forgetting and unlearning is necessary here) is a silk curtain drawn in front of a memory, recollection is the vestal virgin who goes behind the curtain. He states that, "behind the curtain is the forgetting again—if it is not a true recollection, for in that case the forgetting is excluded."⁵

Here we may talk about the dialectics of (true) recollection and forgetting. Every act of remembering is conditioned by forgetting some past elements. Thus, in many cases recollecting depends on unlearning some remembrances. It can even be suggested that sometimes recollecting is equivalent to creating memories that we fail to recall. Such is the reason that one of the main forms of human beings committing something to memory is writing (taking notes). As if fearing we will forget what we see, hear, or read, we employ a material instrument in order to register what we have seen, heard, or read and thus confer a material/verbal form to our fragile memories. However, writing produces something *new*. Accordingly, it may be claimed that writing is always accompanied by producing the past, a past which cannot be recalled, or as Proust put it, has no place in one's memory due to the general laws of habit always governing one's voluntary memory. In the deprived present moment, this is the source of the unhappiness of memory and obsessive attachment to the illusive happiness of a fake past. Recollection is the sole way of the realization of genuine contentment and in this sense, forgetting is a negative potentiality inserted in every attempt at true recollection.

Kierkegaard believes that recollection must be not only accurate, but also happy. Before bottling and sealing the memory, recollection must preserve the fragrance of the remembered experience. To explain the distinction between remembering and recollecting, Kierkegaard gives an example: one can remember every single detail

of an incident very well without recollecting it. He states that, “remembering is only a vanishing condition.”⁶ In his view, experience presents itself through memory in order to be sanctified by recollection. He claims that this distinction is evident in the difference between generations, and that,

*The old person loses memory, which as a rule is the first faculty to be lost. Yet the old person has something poetic about him; in the popular mind he is prophetic, inspired. But recollection is indeed his best power, his consolation, which consoles him with its poetic farsightedness. Childhood, on the other hand, has memory and quickness of apprehension to a high degree but does not have recollection at all.*⁷

Kierkegaard writes that, “what the child remembers the old person recollects,”⁸ but are there any ways to transpose or intermingle remembering and recollecting? Is “impossible memory” not in a sense the synthesis of these two experiences? Is writing not always an attempt to transform remembrances through past recollections? In this respect, writing is strangely linked to taking drugs. The dividing line that Kierkegaard fails to consider between childhood and old age, or only mentions through its absence, is youth. In this sense, youth is always defined by the experience of loss: the loss of childhood/innocence, the expectation of an unsettling future, the loss of youth. Writing and narcotics use are two sides of the same endeavor to (re)gain a linkage with time. The temporal coordinates of writing, regardless of the writer’s age, always constitute the experience of youth. If writing yearns to relive childhood, the use of narcotics reflects the possibility to experience old age via feeling its power and consolation. Therefore, it can be posited that writing and drugs always summon one another: writing is the ideal form of drug consumption and taking drugs is the material form of writing. Still, what does it mean to experience old age in one’s youth? It might be claimed that through experiences such as falling in love and gaining faith, which are linked in essence to the idea of youth, we face childish acts that age us prematurely.

Translation: The Intoxication Of Registering Impossible Memories

In his "Surrealism" essay (1929), Walter Benjamin introduces hashish eating, opium smoking and consumption of other narcotics as a way to access a sphere that he calls "profane illumination." Through this proposition, he thus enters the tradition of literary narcotic experts such as Baudelaire and Hermann Hesse. Benjamin's reflections on narcotics are in the framework of his lifelong attempt to elaborate the concept of experience and overcome 'the poverty of experience,' i.e. the main form of poverty in the modern world, particularly after the First World War. In his view, narcotics are able to make time and space inseparable. In this way, experiences become multi-layered and resonant; i.e. they allow us to live in more than one temporal sphere. Benjamin differentiates between "the most passionate investigation of the hashish trance" and "the profane illumination of thinking about the hashish trance."⁹ He describes "the reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the *flâneur*" as types of the illuminati akin to the "opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic," although he feels that the first group is more profane.¹⁰ In this sense, the use of narcotics is an attempt to unfold a space for experiencing profane illumination and writing is the most important instrument to register this experience. In this modern linkage between writing and opium in societies that experience modernity through its absence, modernization processes are inevitably achieved through translation. In this regard, translation always occurs in the dividing line, or intersection between, religious and profane illuminations. A translated text inevitably becomes like a sacred text for the translator, although the process of translation desecrates the source text in various ways and on different levels. The translator, whose status is constituted by the conjunction of all four figures of Benjamin's profane illumination, simultaneously engages in the experience of opium-induced dreaming and trance states. In the history of Persian literature, Sadeq Hedayat is the sum of all the aforementioned figures: he is both the

reader and the translator, the thinker and the dreamer, the ecstatic who constantly loiters, the 'flâneur' of Western texts akin to the 'flâneur' of streets...

In "The Image of Proust", Benjamin emphasizes the connection between 'involuntary memory' and the act of writing. In his view, the linear time inherent in the experience of reading a text imposes a structure of linear interpretation of sorts on the reader; the traces of this structure can be seen in both the linearity of the sentence and the conventional perception of human experience as linear. This is precisely what Proust strives to challenge. Ironically, Benjamin describes Proust's writing as "the Penelope work of recollection" that is in fact "a Penelope work of forgetting."¹¹ In this respect, we may approach a general rule in modern writing which makes writing 'the machine of impossible memory' or 'insane memory.' Perhaps Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* can be read in this way, as it is a text that is not only written at the beginning of Iran's historical modernization project, but is also the *foundational* modern Farsi text.

Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* is an attempt to register "impossible memories," memories that no one either remembers or recalls, but are rather *produced* in the act of writing, induced by the opiate of a haunted writing possessed by the act of translation. In a sense, *The Blind Owl's* writing style is the impossible synthesis of the childhood and old age of Persian prose: it is an aging prose that has forgotten its own historical rhythms and childishly tries to create a new rhythm for itself. As it is old, it must inevitably recollect something that it does not remember. It is perhaps for this reason that the 'ethereal woman' and the 'bitch' overlap into one persona in *The Blind Owl*. This aged prose is supposed to animate a lost infancy, infancy in its strongest sense, in which 'infantilism' means 'the inability to speak.' Infancy is the essential element of any creative writing which comes into existence, insofar as it is writing and not a substitute for, or replica of, spoken words.

Opium: Enchantment Of The Distorted Time Of Writing

Near the end of *The Blind Owl*, the narrator talks about his attempt to recollect his childhood. Hedayat delicately makes use of ‘recollecting’ and ‘remembering.’ What relation exists between these two acts?

Sometimes we remember something: is this voluntary memory?

Sometimes we unintentionally recollect something: is this involuntary memory? Is it possible to remember something even though we cannot recollect it? The narrator says, “I used to wish to recall the time of my childhood but when it would *come* and I would experience it again it was as grim and painful as those days” (my emphasis).¹² What is notable is the use of the verb “come.” We can say that Hedayat did not structure his sentence according to the verbal phrase ellipsis: “I used to wish to recall the time of my childhood but when my childhood would come to my mind... it was as grim and painful as those days.” The tension here is between craving and memory: the narrator wishes to recall his childhood.

This means that he wants to refresh sweet and perhaps soothing memories, but what comes to his mind is grim and painful. There is a paradox in this tension. The narrator knows that his childhood was painful, so why does he wish to recall those days? Furthermore, if he remembers those days, why does he wish to recall them? One tries to recall what one does not remember. Thus, memory finds three dimensions in Farsi: remembering, recollecting and memorizing.

Understanding the temporal coordinates of *The Blind Owl* rests on detecting the relation between these three aspects of memory in the narrator’s world and their relation to his peculiar narrative—a narrative that might be interpreted as “impossible memory.”

Immediately after this recollection, the narrator expresses a strange tension between his memory and his craving: “my coughing, which sounded like that of the gaunt, black horses in front of the butcher’s shop.” Is this what the narrator recalls from his childhood? And “my spitting, and the fear lest the phlegm should someday reveal a streak of blood.” There is then a sentence describing this blood: “the tepid, salty liquid which rises from the depths of the body, the juice of life,

which we must vomit up in the end.” Next he says that, “and the continuous menace of death, which smashes forever the fabric of his mind and passes on was not without dread and fright.”¹³ The peculiarity of these images is completed with the peculiarity of the syntax: the continuous menace of death, which smashes ‘his’ mind and moves on. His? The narrator says this menace was not without dread and fright. Is it possible for a menace to not contain dread and fright? Is there a difference between dread and fright? Maybe. The English translator used the words “anxiety and fear.” I mention the ‘peculiarity of syntax’¹⁴ because the narrator’s second sentence, which starts with “coughing,” finds its verb very late, at the end of the original Farsi text. “Coughing which sounded like that of the black horses” is the first subject, “spitting” is the second subject and “fear” is the third subject. These three subjects are left without a verb at the end. The next sentence starts with “the continuous menace of death” and ends with “was not without dread and fright.” The reader can consider “was not” as the verb for all four subjects, but it is noteworthy that the English translator resolved this syntactic difficulty in Farsi at the beginning of the sentence: “Other things which brought their contribution of anxiety and fear were my coughing [...]; and the continuous menace of death [...].”¹⁵

This syntactic peculiarity of Hedayat’s sentences is linked to the narrator’s impossible memory. The coughing, spitting, blood and continuous menace of death are all subjects of the same sentence, whose conjunctions are loose. Hedayat’s odd and disorderly punctuation generates the sentence’s peculiarity.

The novel’s next paragraph breaks the narrative sequence. The narrator begins reflecting on the subject of ‘masks.’ The importance of this paragraph, this quasi-philosophical digression, lies in its unclear connection to the previous and next paragraphs. Hedayat writes:

Life as it proceeds reveals, coolly and dispassionately, what lies behind the mask that each man wears. It would seem that

*everyone possesses several faces. Some people use only one all the time, and it then, naturally, becomes soiled and wrinkled. These are the thrifty sort. Others look after their masks in the hope of passing them on to their descendants. Others again are constantly changing their faces. But all of them, when they reach old age, realize one day that the mask they are wearing is their last and that it will soon be worn out, and then, from behind the last mask, the real face appears.*¹⁶

Where does this reflection come from? What does this paragraph do near the end of Hedayat's novel? In fact, what is the theme of this reflection? Everyone wears a 'mask' that life has revealed to him or her. The second sentence further complicates Hedayat's/the narrator's point: "It would seem that everyone possesses several faces [not masks]" and then "some people use only one [mask] all the time." It seems that Hedayat uses the word "face" and "mask" interchangeably.¹⁷ Is he interested in the correlation between "face" and "mask"? There is a temporary answer to these questions: in a way, these sentences were Hedayat's/the narrator's 'memory.' As he tries to 'recall' the past differently from how he has 'memorized' it, he suddenly 'remembers' something else. From where? From other texts he has previously read and translated? Perhaps. Similar sentences to those in this paragraph can be found in the only novel by one of the greatest German poets, Rainer Maria Rilke. Rilke wrote the 1910 *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* while living in Paris. The book's form is similar to an interior monologue, related through its narrator, a twenty-eight year old young Danish man: "Did I say it before? I'm learning to see—yes, I'm making a start. I'm still not good at it. But I want to make the most of my time."¹⁸

Rilke's narrator wants to learn "to see" and one of the things he has learned is that there are more 'faces' than he previously thought: "For example, I've never actually wondered how many faces there are. There are a great many people, but there are even more faces because each person has several. There are those who wear one face for years on end."¹⁹ The last sentence in the original German is: "Da sind

Leute, die tragen ein Gesicht jahrelang,” which literally means “there are people who wear a face for years.” It is obvious that Rilke’s narrator uses a quite strange phrase. Expressions such as ‘wear a smile, frown, grin, etc.’ are common in English, for example: ‘his face wore a welcoming smile.’ If we follow this analogy, we can, for example, say: ‘She wore a very serious face.’ This phrase means that the woman in question had a very solemn countenance or visage, but this evident expression on her face does not show any sign of her interior state. In this sense, the meaning of ‘face’ is close to that of ‘mask.’ And here lies the affinity between “face” and “mask” in the above passage by Hedayat.

Rilke’s narrator continues:

Naturally, it starts to wear, it gets dirty, it breaks at the folds, it becomes stretched like gloves that are kept for travelling. These are thrifty, simple people; they don't change their faces, and never for once would they have them cleaned. It's good enough, they maintain, and who can convince them otherwise? Admittedly, since they have several faces, the question now arises: what do they do with the others? They save them. They'll do for the children. There have even been instances when dogs have gone out with them on. And why not? A face is a face.²⁰

It is clear that Hedayat had these sentences in mind when he wrote the aforementioned paragraph, but he did not translate them literally. Why? Because he paraphrased them? Because he used memories? Because he found the expression ‘wear a face’ strange? We do not know for sure, but I think one thing is certain: Hedayat was aware that the literal translation of Rilke’s sentence would implicitly signify the word ‘face’ (‘Gesicht’), meaning that, whatever face we wear is like a mask. Furthermore, is it possible for someone to not wear a face? This possibility is highly improbable in real life (except for Buster Keaton and Bresson’s models).

Rilke’s narrator describes the second group by stating that, “other

people change their faces one after the other with uncanny [unheimlich] speed and wear them out [aufsetze = put on].”²¹ A face is compared to a glove and uses the verb for putting on clothes; Rilke describes the face as wearable:

*At first it seems to them that they've enough to last them forever, but before they're even forty they're down to the last of them. Of course, there's a tragic side to it. They're not used to looking after faces; their last one wore through in a week and has holes in it and in many places it's as thin as paper; bit by bit the bottom layer, the non-face [Nichtgesicht], shows through and they go about wearing that.*²²

Following Rilke, Hedayat divides people into two groups. He calls the first group “thrifty” and describes the second group as those who are “constantly changing their faces.” However, Hedayat’s narrator draws a significantly different conclusion from that of Rilke’s: “But all of them, when they reach old age, realize one day that the mask they are wearing is their last and that it will soon be worn out, and then, from behind the last mask, the real face appears.”²³ For Hedayat’s narrator it is finally the real face that appears, whereas for Rilke’s narrator it is the bottom layer, “the non-face,” the face that is not a face, that finally shows through.²⁴

Now we can return to the question about this paragraph’s relation to those that proceed and succeed it, and more importantly to the novel as a whole. We might say that this paragraph is the “impossible memory” of Hedayat’s prose/syntax/narrative. In the same way the narrator of *The Blind Owl* attempts to reanimate parts of his ‘opiated’ memory, which come to life only with the aid of opium and are in turn distorted by its consumption, Hedayat’s prose also attempts to actualize a potential in the history of Persian prose that cannot be fulfilled without the enchantment of translation. As it passes through this filter (of enchanted translation), it becomes—in comparison to the so-called ‘neat prose’ of the thousand-year history of Persian writing—a distorted prose contaminated by syntactical perversion

and awkwardness. Similarly, the narrative of this first modern Persian novel takes place in a distorted temporal coordinates: its past is shaped by impossible memories, its present by opium fits and its future by already-realized nightmares.

Vegetable Becoming: A Getaway For Failed Aspirations

“I leaned over her in order to see her more plainly. Her eyes were closed. However much I might gaze at her face, she still seemed infinitely remote from me. All at once I felt that I *had* no knowledge of the secrets of her heart and that no bond *existed* between us” (my emphasis).²⁵

The (Farsi) reader of *The Blind Owl* comes across some errors, or rather some syntactic perplexities. However, the above case has a unique feature that might help us understand the tension that somehow ‘distorts’ the novel’s temporal coordinates. There is a small yet important error in Hedayat’s/the narrator’s sentence, the corrected Farsi version of which translates as: “All at once I felt that I have no knowledge of the secrets of her heart and that no bond exists between us.” The problem here is that Hedayat followed a double standard (in adopting both Farsi and German and/or English syntax) in the construction of this sentence. It can be guessed that this double standard is caused by the unconscious tension inherent in a writer who has dealt with European texts for years. The comparison between the two translations sheds light on this point. If we follow English syntax rules for the translation of the above Farsi quotation, it would result in a strange and odd sentence. Hedayat’s syntactic slippage, if we are justified in using such an expression, confronts the reader with the (im)possible conjunction of two temporal coordinates: past (had) and present (have). Should we take this slippage and the consequent conjunction seriously? Consider the narrator’s following sentences: “I felt that I had become a child again. At this very moment as I write I experience those sensations. They

belong, all of them, to the present. They are not an element of the past.”²⁶

The narrator of *The Blind Owl* utilizes the opium of writing to distort the temporal coordinates of the subject/agent of the narrative; while writing, he feels that he is experiencing the sensations that he is narrating, sensations which either supposedly, or as a general rule, belong to the past, but which the writer/narrator experiences as belonging “to the present.” The narrator delivers a hypothesis/theory for this too: “A story is only an escape for frustrated aspirations, for aspirations which the story-teller conceives in accordance with a limited stock of spiritual resources inherited from previous generations.”²⁷ This hypothesis/theory, which reminds us of Freud’s theory about the relation between dreams and repressed desires, somewhat explains the conjunction between present and past verbs in the afore-mentioned sentence. If we look more closely, the sentence “a story is only an escape for frustrated aspirations” is also ambiguous: does it mean “an escape for frustrated aspirations”? It seems that this sentence is also a translation from a European sentence. Are frustrated aspirations confined and in need of escape? Hedayat probably thought about the *satisfaction* of repressed desires (or frustrated aspirations), not an *escape*.

Another clue to help us to understand this point is the kinship between words and pictures in the narrative. (Perhaps it might be claimed that through imagery, pictures always have an opiate effect on words—i.e. on the main constitutive elements of the text). It is remarkable that the narrator of *The Blind Owl* is a painter: “Had I seen the subject of this picture at some time in the past or had it been revealed to me in a dream? I do not know. What I do know is that whenever I sat down to paint I reproduced the same design, the same subject. My hand independently of my will always depicted the same scene.”²⁸ The narrator describes a hand that automatically paints the same scene over and over again; it is obvious that there is a kind of ‘repetition compulsion’ at work here, a ‘scene’ which the narrator is not certain if he has seen it in reality (wakefulness) or if it was

revealed to him in a dream. Putting these two points together, we can assert that Hedayat is talking about traumatic shock. It is evident that trauma has a shared feature with the Kantian ‘Thing-in-itself’, i.e. an inaccessible reality that always eludes the subject’s grasp and remains *outside* the narrative. On the other hand, trauma functions as a ‘something here in me’, which, as Slavoj Žižek explains in *Less Than Nothing* (2012), “distorts and disturbs my perspective on reality, twisting it in a particular way.” The classic example of this shock is of a brutally raped and humiliated person; not only can this person not directly recall the rape scene, but the repressed memory of the rape also distorts their approach to reality, i.e. it makes them oversensitive to some aspects, but not others, of that unbearable reality.²⁹ The contrast proposed by Žižek between trauma and the ‘Thing-in-itself’ appears here: trauma both functions *inside* the narrative and simultaneously distorts and constitutes it.

Understanding this point depends on another conception concisely suggested by Freud in his description of the relationship between trauma and repetition: “what one is not able to remember, one is condemned to repeat.”³⁰ According to Freud’s definition, trauma is something one cannot remember, i.e. one cannot make it part of one’s symbolic narrative. In other words, trauma is the part of the narrative that is *not* narrated. Trauma repeats itself and haunts the person who tries to recollect it. In *On Belief* (2001), Žižek connects this notion to Nietzsche’s ‘Eternal Recurrence of the Same’ and writes “what repeats itself is the very failure, impossibility even, to repeat/recollect the trauma properly.”³¹

In order to fully grasp the relation between trauma and repetition, we should perhaps turn to the most radical reading of the concept of repetition in the history of philosophy. In *Repetition*, Søren Kierkegaard, under the pseudonym Constantine Constantius, states that, “repetition and recollection are the same movement, only in opposite directions.”³² He defines recollection as what is repeated backwards and repetition as what is recollected forwards; repetition

means recollecting an event forward. In this sense, repetition is generally a tragic attempt at recollecting something that by definition we are unable to recall, which perhaps results in a comic ending. Repetition and recollection both strive to establish a link between the past and the present. Trauma is a past that is repeated like a present wound and thereby what is not remembered is paradoxically recollected, i.e. repeated forwards. Trauma is, therefore, the impossible synthesis of recollection and repetition: the repetition of negative recollection. It is noteworthy that from Kierkegaard to Fernando Pessoa, one of the most complete manifestations of modern writing under a pseudonym constantly tries to recall a past that comes to recollection through the act of not-remembering. In this regard, writing is an opiate machine that operates by unintentionally remembering an incident from the past in order to, using Freud's memorable expression, 'work through' the trauma. This 'working-through' neither forgets nor treats the wound, but is rather a kind of tarrying with it in order to create a new thing/rhythm.

The Blind Owl is the 'working-through' process of historical trauma through words. The reader, alongside the narrator of this first Persian novel, 'recollects forwards'; the reader lives the rhythms that he or she would have never experienced without *The Blind Owl*. *The Blind Owl* is the translation of a wound that is not possible to narrate/recollect through traditional rhythms; thus Hedayat was compelled to repeat the impossibility of its recollection. What is the source of this wound? The confrontation with the fulfilled desire of modernization before material conditions were primed for the emergence and comprehension of that desire. Hedayat experiences this confrontation by trying to read/translate/comprehend European texts; each text intensifies the wound and thus Hedayat's prose becomes haunted, opiated and distorted from the inside out. Syntactic ambiguities and semantic perplexities are the result of this repetition and working-through of a collective-personal/political-literary trauma. The narrator of *The Blind Owl* embodies this wound and prepares the ground for an unprecedented event in Iranian

thinking. Ironically, this preparation occurs (within the narrative) “beside the opium brazier”:

I was sitting beside my opium brazier. All my dark thoughts had dissolved and vanished in the subtle heavenly smoke. My body was meditating, my body was dreaming and gliding through space. It seemed to have been released from the burden and contamination of the lower air and to be soaring in an unknown world of strange colors and shapes. The opium had breathed its vegetable soul, its sluggish, vegetable soul, into my frame, and I lived and moved in a world of vegetable existence; I had become vegetable...³³

This ‘becoming vegetable’ is both the climax of profane illumination par excellence and the extension of an experience that has never transcended the boundary of animal/human perceptions; moreover, it both indicates the phenomenological relationship between writing and vegetable existence and the relation of writing to opium. He or she who writes minimalizes and then subtracts their animal movements. He or she undergoes the experience of vegetable becoming. In this process, the body confronts not with its own omission, but the parts of it that have been excluded from the age-old dichotomy of animal existence and human life. In the narrative of *The Blind Owl*, the body becomes a machine with a vegetable soul into which opium is blown. The narrator talks about the body’s meditating/dreaming, which is the origin of the real and autonomous existence of the body in the history of a culture that has never placed any value on the body’s intellectual-spiritual status. Yet this is the beginning of a process which modern Persian prose continues—or denies in various ways—through the repetition of the moment in which the wound was inflicted upon the body of Iranian thinking. Hedayat talks about a kind of ‘vegetable becoming’ that is rendered possible only in literature and through opium consumption in narrative space. This is the escape that Hedayat’s prose portrays, in his *peculiar* words, “an escape for frustrated aspirations,” for desires whose moment of fulfillment has not yet arrived and may never

come; or more accurately, desires that are prematurely realized via consuming the opium of translation before the body is capable of bearing them. A body whose organs are not fully developed, but is nevertheless capable of meditating and dreaming. It is in these very circumstances of struggle that the narrator, for some reason unknown to him, recalls “the old odds-and-ends man,” the night hag of denial who dissipates and squanders the potentials of the invention hidden in the practice of repetition:

I [...] looked down at myself. My clothes were torn and soiled from top to bottom with congealed blood. Two blister-flies were circling about me, and tiny white maggots were wriggling on my coat. And on my chest I felt the weight of a woman’s dead body ...³⁴

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1

“*Teryak* which is now used in Farsi instead of *afyūn* [opium] is a Greek word meaning antidote... *Teryagh* or *deryagh* is the Arabic form of *teryak* meaning again antidote... In

Greek, *theriakos*, which came to all the European languages, is the combination of several drugs used for the treatment of animal bites, especially snake-bite” (Ebrahim Pourdavoud, *Hormazd Nameh*, 1952, 107-108). The French word ‘*mélasse*’ is a thick dark juice obtained by boiling sugar cane or the sugar from sugar beet in sugar refinery factories. It is called ‘treacle’ in English. In the mid-fourteenth century, treacle was a medicinal compound and antidote. The root of this word was ‘*triacle*’ in Old French, which originated from the Latin ‘*theriaca*’ and Greek ‘*theriake*’ (*antidotus*) used as an antidote for poisonous wild animals. ‘*Theriakos*’ was an adjective in Greek for beasts or wild animals (*therion*). Treacle in the sense of molasses was first recorded in English at

the end of the seventeenth century, probably because molasses was used as a laxative or for disguising the bad taste of medicines. From 1771 onwards, it has also been used in the sense of anything too sweet or sentimental.

2

Sadeq Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, trans. by D.P. Costello (New York: Grove Press, 1957), 34. Hedayat's novel *The Blind Owl* was first published in Farsi in 1937. All quotations in this article are taken from the 1957 English translation by Desmond Patrick Costello, except those translated by the editors.

3

Plato, *Philebus*, trans. by J.C.B. Gosling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 4a–c.

4

Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 23.

5

Ibid.

6

Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, 9.

7

Ibid.

8

Ibid.

9

Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz, (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 190.

10

Ibid.

11

Walter Benjamin, "The Image of Proust," in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 202.

12

Literal translation by the editors from: Sadeq Hedayat, *Büfe kür [The Blind Owl]*, (Esfahan: Sadeq Hedayat Publishing, 2004), 93.

13

Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 78.

14

The peculiarity of the syntax is much more evident in the original Farsi text of *The Blind Owl* (translator's note).

15

Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 78.

16

Ibid.

17

"We have to play a hundred tricks all day long and wear a couple of masks on our faces. While we are not happy, we have to laugh." (Houshang Golshiri, *Ra'i's Lost Lamb*, 1977: 141). In this sentence, the word mask is used figuratively as a facial expression that does not show someone's true inward state; in short: 'a deceptive look.'

18

Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. by William Needham, (Wolf Pup Books, 2013), 2.

19

Ibid.

20

Ibid.

21

Ibid.

22

Ibid.

23

Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 78.

24

After this reflection, Rilke's narrator recounts a painful memory about a woman at the corner of rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs, who was bent forward with her head in her hands and wholly immersed in herself. The street was empty and the narrator feared that the sound of his footsteps might disturb the woman. Despite his caution, the woman was startled out of this condition "too quickly, too violently, so that her face was left in her two hands." In this memory, Rilke takes the analogy between face and mask

to an extreme: "I could see it lying there, the hollowness of its shape. It cost me an indescribable effort to keep looking at those hands and not at what they'd torn away from. I dreaded seeing the inside of a face, but I was much more afraid of the exposed rawness of the head without a face" (Rilke, *Notebooks*, 2). It is noteworthy that the English translator of *The Blind Owl* accurately translated Hedayat's words as mask and face: "Life as it proceeds reveals, coolly and dispassionately, what lies behind the mask that each man wears." The English translator made a small change/correction in Hedayat's text: in Farsi the narrator says "life reveals each man's mask to himself", but the English translator wrote that life "reveals [...] what lies behind the mask that each man wears." Ironically, if we consider this paragraph as the free translation or paraphrasing of Rilke's novel, Hedayat added the first sentence. Moreover, when we compare the two texts more closely, we realize that in *The Blind Owl* the narrator divides people into three groups: 1) the thrifty ones who use only one of their masks; 2) the ones who pass their masks on to their descendants; and 3) the ones who constantly change their faces and realize they have used their last mask when they reach old age. Of course we can mention a small error in Hedayat's translation: Rilke says that the thrifty people who only use one of their faces save the rest of them for their children.

25

Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 18.

26

Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 53.

27

Hedayat, *Büf-e kūr*, 65 (trans. editors).

28

Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 9.

29

Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 535-536.

30

Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 37.

31

Ibid.

32

Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1941) 33.

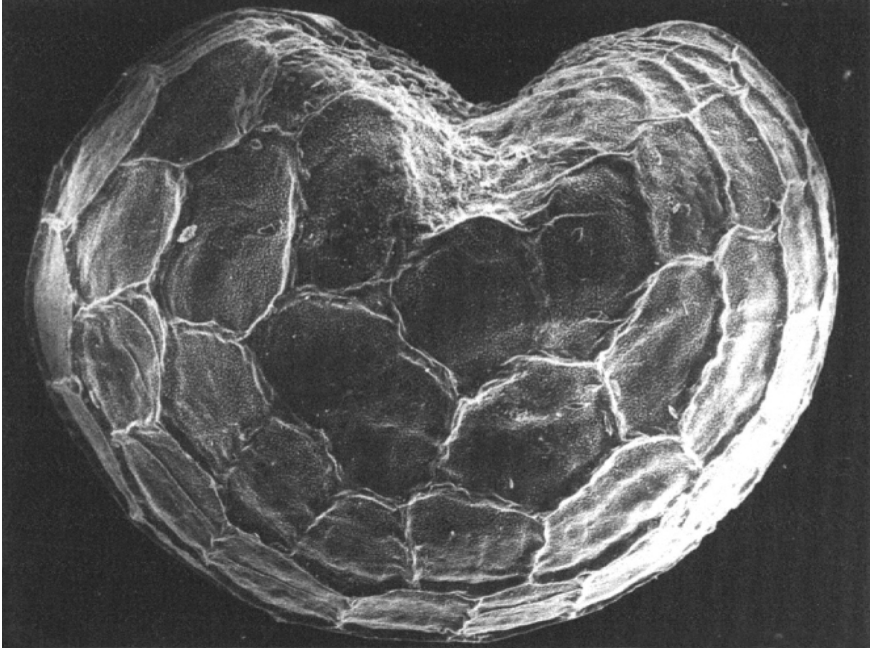
33

Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 80.

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Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 98.

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Seed of *papaver somniferum*, from *Poppy: The Genus Papaver*, ed. Jenő Bernath, CRC Press, 1999, page 71.