Afterword: Sadeq Hedayat and the 'American' School of Persian Studies

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In January 1991, commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the death of Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1951) and the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Hedayat's *Buf-e Kur* [The Blind Owl], upwards of thirty Persian literature *amateurs* gathered at The University of Texas at Austin to participate in a conference called "Sadeq Hedayat and Persian Literature." These Hedayat Conference participants comprised three generations of Iranian academics and a spectrum of critical orientations from traditionalist to modernist and from philological to feminist. They represented specific expertise in Cinema, Comparative Literature, English Literature, Folklore, Literary History, Linguistics, Orientalist Persian Studies, Psychology, Sociology, World Literature, and Women's Studies. They had come (at mostly their own expense) from Tehran, London, Oxford, Alberta, Portland (Oregon), Los Angeles, Tucson, Salt Lake City, Washington, D.C., and New York. They presented and discussed sixteen papers on such topics as Hedayat's folkloristic writing (Mahmoud Omidsalar), Hedayat's Iranophile intellectualism (Jalal Matini), writing as therapy in *The Blind Owl* (M.R. Ghanoonparvar), *The Blind Owl* as an artistic manifesto (Hamid Daneshshahi), and the Iranian roots of Hedayat's popularity (L.P. Alishan). Nasser Ovissi's contribution was a painting called "The Faces of Sadeq Hedayat," while Dariush Dolatshahi performed a Hedayatesque monologue as a conference entertainment.

The very fact of such a gathering involving such disparate origins, orientations and perspectives intimates Hedayat's special place in the minds and hearts of many educated Iranians and the special importance and relevance which his work would appear to hold for critics and scholars in a wide range of disciplines. Few other Iranian literary figures or subjects might attract such a disparate group of experts.

Furthermore, this Hedayat issue of *Iran Nameh*, only the second issue in the journal's ten-year history to focus exclusively on a post-fourteenth century Iranian literary figure, emphatically reinforces the twin suppositions of Hedayat's preeminence as the best known, most discussed, and most controversial Persian literary artist since the *ghazal* poet Hafez (c.1320-c.1390) and of his *chef d'oeuvre* *The Blind Owl* (1941) as the most discussed and influential Persian prose work since *Golestam* [(The) Rose Garden] (1258) by Sa'di (c.1215-c.1290).

This Hedayat issue of *Iran Nameh*, to which this essay serves as a tangential "Afterword," has brought together half of the papers from the 1991 Hedayat Conference—those by Mashallah Ajjoudani, Michael Beard, Simin Karimi, Homa Katouzian, Hamid Naficy, Azar Nafisi, and Nasrin Rahimieh, along with a new paper by conference participant M. Razin, and reviews by conference participants Aziz Attai-Langroudi, William Hanaway, Abbas Milani, and Kazem Tehrani. The volume also features Youssef Ishaghpour's essay called "At the Grave of Sadeq Hedayat."

For the most part and in comparison with Hedayat Studies to date in
Iran and Europe, the genesis of and the bulk of the writing in this volume may stand as a statement of a relatively new cluster of attitudes and approaches toward the critical appreciation of Persian literature. For lack of a better designation, the phrase 'American School' might serve to describe this emerging perspective, seen mainly in English and Persian writings published in North America. In its cursory review of America-based Hedayat Studies, encompassing translations of Persian Iranian short stories and novels and the publication of critical writing on twentieth-century Persian literature, this "Afterword" suggests the range and characteristics of this 'American School.'

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The most popular Persian literary medium in twentieth-century Iran has been the short story. Before this century, Persian verse had reigned almost supreme in the Iranian literary arena. Then, because modernist Persian poetry represented a threat to traditional poetic practice and taste, it has had almost as many detractors as supporters throughout most of the century, while traditional(ist) verse did not continue to spark the imagination of most post-World War II readers. As for the Iranian novel, mostly because of the availability of Western novels in Persian translation, it began only in The Islamic Republican Era (1979-) to attract a substantial Iranian readership. But the Iranian short story, suitable for publication in newspapers and magazines, as well as in collections, became an accepted form by mid-century. The first Persian short story to achieve popularity and notoriety was "Persian Is (as Sweet as) Sugar" (1921/2) by the prominent expatriate writer Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh (b.1892). However, the leading figure in Persian short fiction turned out to be Sadeq Hedayat, who published four collections of short stories between 1930 and 1942: Buried Alive (1930), Three Drops of Blood (1932), Chiaroscuro (1933), and The Stray Dog (1942), along with the separately printed Madamé 'Alaviyeh (1933), a volume of satirical narratives co-authored with Mas'ud Farzad called Mr. Bow Wow (1933), and scattered short stories, most of which appeared in the posthumous volume called Scattered Writings of Sadeq Hedayat (1955, 1971). The chief short story writers from the 1940s, Sadeq Chubak (b. 1916) and Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923-1969), and their successors in the 1950s and after, starting with Gholamhosayn Sa'edi (1935/6-1985) and Hushang Golshiri (b.1937), almost uniformly pay lip service to Hedayat as having influenced the development of their own techniques and styles, while critics have routinely evaluated short fiction after Hedayat using his achievements as a yardstick. Much representative shorter Persian fiction is available in English translation, chiefly in the following publications:


Golestan, Hushang Golshiri, Sadeq Hedayat, M.A. Jamalzadeh, Nasim Khaksar, Ahmad Mahmud, Jamal Mirsadeqi, Shahnunsh Parsipur, Moniru Ravanipur, Bahram Sadeqi, Gholamhosayn Sa’edi, Goli Taraqi, Feraydun Tonokaboni, and several others.

The list reveals that Hedayat is one of only seven Iranian authors featured to date in separate anthologies of English translations, although Gholamhosayn Sa’edi, and not Hedayat, is the only Iranian short story writer whose stories in translation have appeared under the aegis of a major trade publisher. The list further shows that every anthology of Iranian short stories by multiple authors, except naturally for one anthology of women’s stories, includes at least one Hedayat story. The list implies Hedayat’s continuing role as a model, foil, and competitor for Iranian short story writers coming after him.

But Hedayat casts an equally pervasive shadow over Iranian novel-writing. His *The Blind Owl*, distributed in a small, private printing in 1937 and published in Tehran in 1941, was the first critically significant Iranian novel, a species and medium which did not reach maturity until the 1960s. The development of the Iranian novel from Al-e Ahmad’s *The School Principal* (1958) to Hushang Golshiri’s *Prince Ehtejab* (1969) owed much to the inspiration of *The Blind Owl* for then younger writers in the generation(s) after Hedayat. Iranian novels began to compete for readers with translations of Western fiction in the 1980s, when several novelists were making a living from their craft, an unprecedented situation in Persian literature. Regardless, even in novels of the 1990s, for example Shahrnush Parsipur’s *Women without Men* (1990), readers can discern the presence of *The Blind Owl* as a literary forebear.

English translations of the following Persian Iranian novels are available:


This list shows that The Blind Owl was the first Persian Iranian novel to appear in an English version. Actually, five or six English translations of it exist in manuscript, but only two have been published (D.P. Costello's listed above and Iraj Bashiri's, privately published in two versions, neither attracting critical attention or approval). Moreover, The Blind Owl remains the only Iran-produced Persian novel in translation marketed by a commercial publisher, thus relatively available to the general English-speaking reading public. (Because Taghi Modarressi's The Book of Absent People and The Pilgrim's Rules of Etiquette first appeared in English, they have not figured in the foregoing list). Other Persian novels in English translation have the imprints of small Iranian-American and academic presses, which cater to libraries and deal through mail orders with mostly Iranian-American customers.

As for critical writing on Hedayat in English, it probably exceeds that on any other Iranian author. A Saturday Review piece by William Kay Archer in December 1958 first drew attention to the then recently published English translation of The Blind Owl. Eight years later the first significant study of Hedayat in English appeared in the second half of Hasan Kamshad's Modern Persian Prose Literature (1966). In some respects, this special Hedayat issue of Iran Nameh traces itself back to Kamshad and to several articles in Iran in the 1950s, among them Al-e Ahmad's "The Hedayat of The Blind Owl" (1951).

Here follows a list of major critical writing on Hedayat in English, not including the many articles on modernist Persian literature in general which naturally deal with Hedayat, among other major figures:


"The Hierarchy of the Arts in The Blind Owl." Iranian Studies
Arguably the chief event in Hedayat studies in the two decades after the 1957 publication of the English translation of The Blind Owl, Kamshad's Modern Persian Prose Literature put Hedayat into the context of modern Persian prose writing in Iran, asserted his preeminence, and offered readers a tentative paradigm for the study of Hedayat's career. Kamshad saw that career as having these five stages: early years (1923-1930), creative period (1930-1937), barren period (1937-1941), period of high hopes (1941-1947), and aftermath (1947-1951). Kamshad also highlighted approaches to the study of the enigmatic Blind Owl and staked out the position that readers should submit to its atmosphere and mystery and not endeavor to analyze it as in the case of more straightforward fictions. At the same time, Kamshad pointed to other critical approaches, among them, echoing Al-e Ahmad, foreign inspiration, specifically The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge (1910) by Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926).

Mohandessi's 1971 article on the subject called "Hedayat and Rilke" was conclusive in its demonstration of Hedayat's debt to Rilke and particularly important in that it appeared in a mainstream academic journal, rather than in an Iranian studies publication. In other words, its publication in Comparative Literature implied that academic readers in the English-speaking world should have read or should read The Blind Owl.

Hedayat's The Blind Owl Forty Years After (1979) took up
interpretation of The Blind Owl through a comprehensive, multifaceted approach to analysis. Besides a translation of Al-e Ahmad’s "The Hedayat of The Blind Owl" (1951), Forty Years After contains essays on the book’s title, Hindu imagery, history as a theme in the novel, Khayyamic echoes, possible Buddhist influences, a Jungian analysis, Oedipal features, affinities with Nerval, Kafka, Poe, and the Surrealists, and the conflict among the narrator, the odds-and-ends man, and the wife. The book suggested that literary critical inquiry henceforth needed grounding anew in the facts of the text rather than further impressionistic speculation, cultural appreciation, or personal reaction, which constituted critical directions which much writing on the subject in Iran had taken.

Earlier, also with an eye to Mohandessi’s seminal essay on literary influences in The Blind Owl, Michael Beard had completed a doctoral dissertation called "Sadeq Hedayat’s The Blind Owl and the West: A Study in the Transmission of Genre" (Indiana University, 1974). This work marked the beginning of a series of significant articles during the 1970s and 1980s and a definitive monograph in 1990 called Hedayat’s Blind Owl as a Western Novel. In that book, Beard paradoxically suggests salient aspects of Hedayat’s genius through a scrutiny of certain and likely foreign literary sources of inspiration and analogues. His final chapter called "Prolegomenon to The Blind Owl as an Eastern Novel" reminds readers that adequate critical appreciation of The Blind Owl as an Iranian literary masterpiece is still a long way off.

Specifics of the appreciation of The Blind Owl as an Iranian masterpiece have obviously attracted critical attention. For example, in "Hedayat’s The Blind Owl: An Autobiographical Nightmare" (1989, Iranshenasi), Michael Hillmann pursues one line of speculation and inquiry through the assertion that the book may reveal its secrets to readers if they approach it as autobiography, as Hedayat’s use of metaphor and mask in relating the true story of his interior, mental life. Hardly grounded in conclusive textual evidence, Hillmann’s argument nevertheless at least reminds Hedayat readers that Western distinctions between fact and fiction may not hold in Persian literature, even modernist, Western-inspired prose fiction, and that Hedayat drew on his personal experiences, external and interior (including his reading), for his narratives, even if they turn out as artifacts far from everyday life owing to his self-censorship and unique personality and creative imagination.

As for another avenue of dealing critically with Hedayat’s fiction in Iranian terms, Homa Katouzian’s Sadeq Hedayat: The Life and Literature of an Iranian Writer (1991), a culmination of earlier essays dealing with psychology and Hedayat narratives, gives readers a feel for how The Blind Owl and earlier "psycho-fictions" relate to Hedayat’s personality. Katouzian’s book, in addition, is the first to present a relatively detailed biographical sketch of the writer.

Katouzian’s approach and views appear in this issue of Iran Nameh in the essay called "Hedayat’s Psycho-fictions," as do Michael Beard’s in "The Lantern of Imagination in Hedayat’s Works." Along with them are Simin Karimi’s "Language and Style in Hedayat’s Fiction," Nasrin Rahimieh’s "Hedayat’s Metamorphosis of Kafka’s Metamorphosis," Hamid Naficy’s "Dash
Akol and the _Luti_ Film Genre," Mashallah Ajoudani’s "Nationalism and Hedayat," and Azar Nafisi’s "The Problem of The Blind Owl." Collectively, the bulk of these articles and other writings in the foregoing lists may signal the development in Persian literature study of an ‘American’ orientation or school, which would appear to exhibit at least six characteristics.

First is the importance which some America-based Persianists and such publishers as Three Continents Press, Mazda Publishers, and Mage Publishers give to literary translation, implying their sense of the significance of Persian literature as a window into Iranian culture, which translations can provide for English-speaking readers in societies which routinely demonstrate inadequate understanding and appreciation of Iranian culture. Prominent among doctoral dissertation projects in North American university programs in Persian studies are literary translations with critical introductions. Teacher-scholars willingly undertake translations of short stories and novels, the while knowing that the circulation of the finished products may not extend beyond academic library shelves and book collections of readers who know Persian. But that may strike them as good enough for the time being, insofar as academically oriented readers who do not know Persian can avail themselves of such translations and thereby begin to influence changes in attitudes among other academics, students, and acquaintances.

A second feature of Persian literature study in North America is the tendency in writing on Persian literature in the States toward a discipline-oriented focus. Whether writers choose to ground their analyses in anthropology, linguistics, a specific literary critical approach, psychology, or sociology, they would seem to avoid the generalized approaches of many critics and scholars in Iran and Europe who come to a text with knowledge of Persian, language history, literary history, and major antecedent texts, but without an emphasis of a specific disciplinary approach or terminology. Only a trained literary critic also familiar with cinema could write Michael Beard’s "The Lantern of Imagination in the Works of Hedayat." Only a trained film expert could write Hamid Naficy’s "Dash Akol and the _Luti_ film Genre." A linguist’s expertise was needed for Simin Karimi’s "The Language and Style of Hedayat’s Works," while comparative literature interests are palatable in Nasrin Rahimieh’s "The Metamorphosis of Kafka’s _Metamorphosis_" and Azar Nafisi’s "The Problem of The Blind Owl." The bringing together of such discrete disciplinary perspectives was a deliberate organizational and thematic strategy at the 1991 Hedayat Conference. Although the combination of the varied perspectives may not lead to a seamless critical discussion or publication, a consistent critical and scholarly rigor may ensue in tune with North American emphasis of specialization in critical inquiries in general.

As a third arguable characteristic of American Persian studies, one might point to this anthologizing of various discipline-specific perspectives. Examples prior to this special _Iran Nameh_ volume and after _Hedayat’s_ _The Blind Owl_ Forty Years After (1978), include: _Literature and Society in Iran_ (1982), _The Sociology of the Iranian Writer_ (1985), _Nimeye Digar-Special Issue_
on Simin Daneshvar (1988), Forough Farrokhzad A Quarter-Century Later (1988), Iran Nameh-Special Issue on Malek al-Sho’ara Bahar (1987), and Iranshenasi-Special Issue on Parvin E’tesami (1989). In Europe and Iran, this has not been a tradition with respect to modernist literature, except in Ali Dehbashi’s admirable work on Sadeq Chubak, Nima Yushij, Sohrab Sepehri, et al. But even there Dehbashi does not consciously endeavor to provide multidisciplinary treatments.

Moreover, and fourthly, as some of the titles in the previous paragraph suggest, American Persian Studies has focussed special and characteristic attention on women as writers and as critics on women’s studies issues since the mid-1970s. Nearly half of the formal participants (speakers, chairs, and discussants) at the 1991 Hedayat conference were women. Parenthetically, Hedayat’s The Blind Owl, not to mention other narratives of his, is an interesting text in terms of this new balance because women therein, even if a man’s depiction of women or merely feminine dimensions of a male narrator, are special because they are not subordinate and submissive to men.

Fifth, American Persian Studies would appear in general to pay no special lip service or respect to classical or traditional Persian literature merely because of its classical status. Rather, a premise of the ‘American’ school would appear to be that each generation of scholars, critics, and readers should freshly engage works of the past which need to prove themselves generation by generation as having aesthetic appeal and human relevance. The facts that Persian departments at Iranian universities have never offered courses in modernist Persian literature in a comprehensive or systematic way and that Persian programs at European universities would not appear to acknowledge the possibility that twentieth-century Persian literature might be as rich and varied as that in any other period of Persian literature highlight a perhaps distinctively ‘American’ attitude toward past and present in this regard.

Finally, and sixth, in American Persian Studies, no special reverence toward the literary artist comes, as it were, with the territory. Critics deal routinely with writers not as a special class of human on a pedestal, but as human beings like other human beings with special skills at writing. Masallah Ajoudani’s “Nationalism and Sadeq Hedayat” presents the brilliant prose artist as the racist nationalist he was without diminishing his significance in the arena of creative writing. Straightforward and unvarnished biographical writing in America, from the short blurbs in Stories from Iran (1991) to articles and monographs on Al-e Ahmad, Forough Farrokhzad, and Nima Yushij, happens infrequently elsewhere.

All of this neither says nor suggests that Persian Studies scholarship and criticism elsewhere do not have more value than America-based writing in general or that Hedayat studies owe as much to America-based work as to work in Iran or in Europe. Although now in the States, Mohammad Ja’far Mahjoub was in Europe when he wrote a review article in Kelab-e Djom’eh-ha (Fall 1987) taking the Mazda edition of Hedayat’s Pearl Cannon (1989) to task for serious shortcomings in textual criticism, reminding America-based scholars that solid
expertise in textual criticism is not a matter of personal preference and taste or familiarity with the Persian language even as a mother tongue. In this volume, Youssef Ishaghpour's "At The Grave of Sadeq Hedayat" clearly represents the thoughtfulness and breadth of vision associated with the Iranian-European tradition of Persian literature study. M.F. Farzaneh's *Acquaintance with Sadeq Hedayat* (Paris, 1985) is as important a book on Hedayat to appear in years. Farzaneh's *A Critique of The Blind Owl, with a Complete Text of Buried Alive and The Blind Owl* (1991) is another most useful book. In Iran, Mohammad Golbon's *Bibliography of Sadeq Hedayat* (1977) set a standard which bibliographical work outside of Iran could do well to emulate. But as this Hedayat issue of *Iran Nameh* implies, the die is cast for Persian literature study to reflect, alongside other approaches, discipline-based premises, including women's studies, and multidisciplinary analyses, and to engage texts and issues on their own terms without a priori assumptions.

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Final and primary thanks naturally go to Hedayat Conference participants. Besides those named in various contexts above, Katayoun Beglari, Derayeh Derakhshesh, Farzaneh Milani, Malekeh Taleghani, and, especially, Ehsan Yarshater played important and appreciated parts in the conference.

The list of multidisciplinary conferences and publications on Persian literary figures continues to grow. Mahmoud Dowlatabadi's *Klidar*, Parvin E'tesami's poetry, Forough Farrokhzad and her poetry, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, Nezami's poetry, and Nima Yushij and his poetry have received such attention to date. Contributors to this special Hedayat issue of *Iran Nameh* should take some satisfaction in recognizing their collaborative effort as a significant addition to the list through their multifaceted contributions to the understanding and appreciation of a great twentieth-century writer.