The Esoteric, the Islamicate, and 20th Century World Literature

Kurosh Amoui Kalareh

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Social & Political Thought

York University, Toronto, Ontario

December 2022

© Kurosh Amoui Kalareh

Abstract

By exploring the intersections of the esoteric and the islamicate in a series of 20th century literary works from disparate global locations, this dissertation maps out a constellation of countercultural world literature as a model for further advancing the study of literature and esotericism in a planetary context. Chapters are focused on literary works of Iranian Sādeq Hedāyat (1903-1951), Argentine Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), and the cut-up collaborations of American William S. Burroughs (1914-1997) and British-Canadian Brion Gysin (1916-1986). Using the statement *writing is magic and labour*, I argue that these four authors yearned to attain 'magic' in their creative writing, while each had their own distinct definition and understanding of what this 'magic' would be. These definitions and understandings have been largely shaped by each author's particular encounters with esoteric and islamicate discourses; they are also products of their 'labour'—practices and strategies of writing and research affected by the social and political power dynamics of the fields of global cultural production and circulation.

Hedāyat's conception of magic, formed through encounters with European, Islamic, and Zoroastrian esoteric discourses, chiefly refers to practices and texts associated with the ancient magus (Zoroastrian priestly class) that through centuries of religious conflict have transfigured into something distant and incomprehensible. This magic becomes the subject of extensive folklore research for Hedāyat, and is further used and invoked in his works of fiction. For Borges, magic refers to the unexplainable quality of the aesthetic events that flees rational justification. His explorations in pantheism that expand to a range of esoteric currents such as Kabbalah and Gnosticism, find in the islamicate a culture that has grappled with questions on the nature of divinity and on writing being sacred and magical. In the cut-up collaborations of Burroughs-Gysin, the magic of writing is in the randomness of the process as well as the speech

act of language, while its labour is primarily dependent on using scissors instead of conventional instruments of writing. Inspired by the islamicate milieu of post-war Tangier, Burroughs-Gysin opened up new possibilities for writing and for human-machine collaborations that are still influencing the electronic literature of the 21st century.

Key words: Esotericism and Literature; Islam and Islamicate Cultures; World Literature and Comparative Literature.

Note on Translation and Transliteration

Passages translated from Farsi/Persian to English by the dissertation author are marked with A.T. (Author's Translation) in the footnotes.

Transliteration of Farsi/Persian names and phrases are based on *Iranian Studies* guidelines.

Acknowledgements

I must thank many people who encouraged and supported me during this academic and intellectual journey.

First, I would like to thank my PhD supervisor, Marcus Boon, without whom this project would not have materialized. Marcus' guidance and generous advice were invaluable in the process of researching and writing this dissertation. Next, I want to thank my dissertation committee, Walid El Khachab and Mehraneh Ebrahimi, whose thoughtful feedback and support strengthened my confidence in the approach I chose to take in my research. I warmly thank the defense committee who received this work in a most engaging manner: Jeffrey Einboden (Northern Illinois University), Susan Ingram, and Gamal Abdel-Shehid. I also thank Lily Cho and Philip Walsh for their role on the dissertation committee and their helpful advice in the early stages of this research.

I owe gratitude to numerous people at York University for all their academic and administrative support. Thanks to Judith Hawley, the Social & Political Thought graduate program assistant, and to the program's current and previous directors: David Cecchetto, Kamala Kempadoo, Eve Haque, and J.J. McMurtry. I also thank Nergis Canefe and Michael Zryd for their feedback on the proposal. I have been fortunate to learn from and work with many supportive professors at York: Marie-Christine Leps, Radhika Mongia, Richard Wellen, Mark Peacock, and Thomas Loebel. I am grateful to Keith O'Regan and Yasmina Jaksic for their help during the writing process of this dissertation.

I extend my gratitude to Oliver Lovesey, my MA supervisor at the University of British Columbia, and to David Lyon, my MA supervisor at Queen's University, both of whom were instrumental to my development as a scholar in Canadian academia. I also thank George

Grinnell, Martin Blum, Hussein Keshani, David Jefferess, Allison Hargreaves, James Miller, Sayeh Meisami, Ellen Goldberg, and many professors from my former graduate schools who helped me navigate the different sections of the human library.

At a 2014 graduate conference at the University of Toronto, Steven Engler introduced me to the *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism* and to works of Wouter Hanegraaff. Since then, I had the privilege of presenting parts of my research on several occasionas at the international conferences of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE), and its affiliated European Network for the Study of Islam and Esotericism (ENSIE). The conversations with scholars of this field have always fueled my passion for research, learning, and broadening the horizons of our thoughts. I thank Egil Asprem and Erik Davis for their helpful recommandations on my comprehensive exam reading list. I also extend my gratitude to Marco Pasi, Liana Saif, Manon Hedenborg White, Justine Bakker, Mark Sedgwick, Francesco Piraino, Earl Fontainelle, Mauricio Oviedo, Mariano Villalba, Léo Bernard, Georgia van Raalte, Mriganka Mukhopadhyay, and Tommy Cowan for their constructive and thoughtful comments on my work.

In many ways, the Canadian Comparative Literature Association/L'Association Canadienne de Littérature Comparée (CCLA/ACLC) has become a home academic community for me. I must thank members of the Post-Magical Realist Worlds Research Group at the CCLA/ACLC, and in particular Agata Mergler and Lee Campbell for their intellectual generosity. I also thank Doris Hambuch, Markus Reisenleitner, Joshua Synenko, Jeanne Mathieu-Lessard, Moira Marquis, and Ceyda Elgül for their inspiring discussions at various CCLA/ACLC events. As well, I am grateful to participants of Harvard's 2021 Institute for World

Literature (IWL), and to Elham Hosnieh and Raina Bhagat for their helpful comments on parts of this dissertation.

I had the privilege to discuss my work with several Farsi-speaking scholars to whom I owe great gratitude: Alireza Doostdar, Omid Azadibougar, Mostafa Abedinifard, Navid Naderi, Nima Behravan, Reyhaneh Zakeri, Golnaz Salehkarimi, Taymaz Azimi, Ata Heshmati, and Atefeh Ahmadi.

Finally, I dedicate this work to my mom, Tooran, and my dad, Teymour, who were respectively my first poetry and chess teachers; and to Mina Rajabi Paak, my partner, love of life and academic companion, without whose all-around care and support I could not overcome the challenges of living as an international graduate student in Canada.

I hope this dissertation, as a contribution to a corner of the library, can inspire future discussions and research on topics of literature and esotericism in global contexts.

Table of Contents

Abstract ..... **ii**

Note on Translation and Transliteration ..... **iv**

Acknowledgements ..... **v**

Table of Contents ..... **viii**

List of Figures ..... **x**

Preface: Snails & Snakes **1**

Introduction: The Esoteric, the Islamicate, and World Literature **10**

Writing is Magic and Labour 26

Chapter (1) Sādeq Hedāyat: Confessions of a Persian Opium Smoker **38**

I. A Dictionary of Superstition: Hedāyat and the Esoteric 48

II. *The Blind Owl* from Paris to Mumbai to Rey 62

III. Nimā, Hedāyat, and the Re-Enchantment of Storytelling 88

IV. Conclusion: Hedāyat's *Darkroom* 102

Chapter (2) Jorge Luis Borges: Reading the Aleph in Isfahan **106**

I. A Planetary Library: Goethe, Borges and World Literature 109

II. The Cult of Libraries: Borges and the Esoteric 133

III. 1001, 1002, 1003, …: Borges and the Islamicate 144

IV. Buenos Aires – Isfahan: Borges in Farsi 166

V. Conclusion: Back from Isfahan 174

Chapter (3) William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin: Operation Rewrite **179**

I. Hasan Sabbāh's Razor: Burroughs-Gysin and the Islamicate 201

II. 10001 Afsan: An Experiment with Cut-ups in Farsi 219

III. Conclusion: Tlön is Dada? 226

Conclusion: Reading the Alif in Cyberspace 231

Bibliography 246

Appendix A: Figures 273

Appendix B: Table of Content for *The Accident of Scissors Republics* 282

Appendix C: English Translation of "The Exordium of the Scissors Movement" 283

List of Figures

Figure 1: 72-square Sufi Chess board 273
Figure 2: Graffiti of Sādeq Hedāyat in Tehran (2016) 274
Figure 3: Graffiti of Sādeq Hedāyat in Tehran (2017) 275
Figure 4: Front cover of a 1966 edition of Neyrangestān 276
Figure 5: The Mumbai edition of The Blind Owl 277
Figure 6: Illustration by Witold Gordon in The Travels of Marco Polo 278
Figure 7: Dice and Hammer 279
Figure 8: DADA soulève TOUT 280
Figure 9: The five types of jinn from Alif the Unseen 281

Preface: Snails & Snakes

> The lips are locked, the heart full of secrets
> The lips are silent, the heart full of songs
> Whoever was taught secrets of the *Haqq*[1]
> They sealed and sew up its mouth
>
> —Rumi, *Mathnawi*[2]

> Of all the secrets, only an Aleph fell out and the rest, whatever said, was commentary on that Aleph, and that Aleph of course was not understood.
>
> —Shams, *Maqalat*[3]

> The faith of the world is like two dice of backgammon
> It's in your hand, but it's not in your hand
>
> —Anonymous Sufi[4]

"All great literature becomes children's literature," Jorge Luis Borges is thought to have said.[5] I wonder if all *great games* also become *children's games*; thus I begin with the story of a game.

A few years ago I decided to build a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) *Snakes and Ladders* board. I had just moved to Toronto and started at York University. My sister was living in town and I had a three-year-old nephew that I was lucky enough to spend time with every now and then. The idea was simple; I wanted to play *Snakes and Ladders* with my nephew. It was the first board game I played as a child, and it is the simplest one I have ever known. You only need to roll a

[1] Haqq: Arabic word, one of the ninety-nine names of Allah in Islam, meaning truth, right, or righteous. It is a significant term among the Sufis; for example it is said that Mansur Al-Hallaj (9th century Persian Sufi) was executed for saying "I am the *Haqq*" (which was considered heretical). Rumi's line here stresses duty of the Sufi to conceal esoteric secrets.

[2] A.T.: Rumi, *Mathnawi*, ed. Reynold A. Nicholson (Tehran: Hermes, 2011), 819-820.

[3] A.T.: Shams Tabrizi, *Maqalat*, ed. Jafar Modarres Sadeghi (Tehran: Markaz, 2007), 277.

[4] A.T.: The line is attributed to Muhammad ibn Mahmud Amuli (14th century).

[5] This expression by Borges has been numerously quoted in English without citing a source; for instance in Marina Warner's *Stranger Magic: Charmed States & the Arabian Nights* (London: Vintage Books, 2012).

die; the die tells you where to go and what to do. There is no decision-making in a game of *Snakes and Ladders*; no thinking or strategizing is necessary or even possible. So I thought I would play with my nephew and teach him what a die is and does, and in the long run this would help him with math and allow him to play other types of board games that involve dice and mathematical probability.

I looked up a few stores where I could purchase the game. All the *Snakes and Ladders* boards I found shared the same—to me—strange characteristic; the snakes were upside-down! The way the board was set up, if your piece landed on the tail of a snake, your punishment would be slipping down its body to the mouth, a few rows down the board. The version I used to play when growing up in Tehran was different; you get bitten by the snake, and the punishment would be ending up at its tail. The only explanation I could think of was that the designers and producers of the game in Toronto found the idea of getting bitten by a snake too scary for children, and hence decided to make the snakes upside-down so no one gets bitten, and players quite happily slip down the snake like a playground slide! So I decided to build my own board. Searching the Internet for models to print, I found Figure 1.

I cannot describe my astonishment when first seeing this image. On the top-left corner of the board, there is a description, a colonial mark of 'collecting the item' on the forehead of the board: "Philosophical game board used in India. The players advance from one numbered square to another by means of ladders from virtues to their rewards, and by means of snakes from vices to their punishments. [?] 1895." On each square of the board there is a number (from 1 to 72), and also two written expressions—one in Sanskrit alphabet, and one in Farsi/Persian. I could easily read the Farsi words and noticing how these expressions resembled Sufi concepts I knew through classical Persian poetry only added to my wonder. Most of them belong to the realm of

ethics: the snake of *regret* for instance brings one down to *jealousy*, while the ladder of *knowledge* takes one up to *the world of joy*. The middle column starts with the *material world* on the first row, and goes up to the *first sky* on the next row, to the *second sky* on the next, to… the *seventh sky* at the top row—which reminds one of the seven valleys that the birds take in search for Simurgh in Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*. Finally the figure of *Ganesha*, the Hindu deity, sits at the top of the board.

Encountering this board initiated a line of inquiry for me and upon further research I came across two articles by Andrew Topsfield.[6] Studying numerous existing *Snakes & Ladders*' boards in collections and museums in England and India in order to find the "origins" of the game and its variations, Topsfield notes: "Known by different regional names, the game was formerly played through-out much of North India as *gyan caupar* (chaupar of knowledge or gnosis) or *gyan bazi* (game of knowledge), in Nepal as *nagapasa* (snake-dice), and in Maharashtra as *moksapata* (cloth or board of liberation)." There exist three main sectarian types of the game: "Jain and Hindu, each with their own variants, and, more rarely, a Sufi Muslim version," with the Jains being "the most likely inventors and early promoters of the classic Snakes and Ladders game concept." The specific board demonstrated in Figure 1 is categorized by Topsfield as a "72-Square Hindu Board":

> This early- to mid-nineteenth-century paper board, probably from the Punjab or northern Rajasthan, was donated to the Pitt Rivers by the Oxford Indologist Friedrich Max Müller [editor-in-chief of the famous 50-volume English translations of *Sacred Books of the East*] in May 1895. […] While at least one

[6] Andrew Topsfield, "The Indian Game of Snakes and Ladders," *Artibus Asiae* 46.3 (1985): 203-226. Andrew Topsfield, "Snakes and Ladders in India: Some Further Discoveries," *Artibus Asiae* 66.1 (2006): 143-179. For a recent comprehensive study of *Snakes & Ladders* and its history look at: Jacob Schmidt-Madsen, "The Game of Knowledge: Playing at Spiritual Liberation in 18th and 19th Century Western India," PhD Dissertation, University of Copenhagen, 2019.

> other bilingual Hindi-Persian board is known that uses dual scripts for identical square-names, this board features a unique translation of the Hindu square-names in Sanskrit/Hindi into their approximate Islamic analogues in Persian/Arabic [they are all in Persian and not Arabic]. […] While this board was clearly made principally for Hindu use, it would also have been usable for play—perhaps even at the same time—by any Muslim free-thinking enough [!] to be unconcerned by a certain amount of Hindu imagery. It may therefore have been produced in some courtly or urbane social milieu in which Hindus and Muslims associated freely, such as a Hindu court with a complement of Muslim courtiers and officials and their ladies […].[7]

In addition to these bilingual versions, there is an exclusive Muslim variant—the "100-square Sufi board" that some (in Turkey for instance) attribute to Ibn Arabi, with number 100 hinting at 99 names of Allah. The existing 100-square boards are all in Farsi, and the game is known as *Shatranj al-Urafa* (شطرنج العرفاء)—"Chess of the Gnostics/Mystics," or as I prefer to call it in English, "Sufi Chess."

I pondered the use of "chess" (shatranj) in the naming of this game. The *Dehkhoda Farsi Dictionary* notes the famous (hi)story of chess: during the reign of the Sassanid King Anushiruwan (531-579 CE), the game of *chess* was brought from India to Persia. Bozorgmehr (the Grand Minister of the Court of Anushiruwan) then invents the game of *backgammon* in response and sends it to India. It is said that Persians found chess too rational a game and as such, incapable of imitating life; backgammon in contrast involves dice—and thus luck and chance—and is a more accurate mimic of life. The beauty and sweetness of this story supersedes

[7] Topsfield, "Snakes and Ladders in India: Some Further Discoveries," 147.

its historical accuracy. Similar (hi)stories or legends about *Snakes & Ladders* do not exist (for one reason the game is not as ancient as chess and backgammon, and is at most 300 years old); but there is in *Dehkhoda Dictionary* an entry on *Shatranj al-Urafa*: "A type of chess that the Sufis play; it has squares and on each square a high or low moral attribute and Sufi class [/degree /level] has been written. They play it with two players and one die. It starts from 'Zero of Nothingness' and ends at 'Union' or a similar word."[8]

According to *The Oxford History of Board Games*, "All games are customarily divided into three parts: those of pure chance, such as Snakes & Ladders; those of pure skill, such as Chess; and those of mixed chance and skill, such as Backgammon."[9] Consider this again: *Snakes & Ladders* is the archetype of pure chance board games; and *Chess* is the archetype of pure skill board games. Then there is *Sufi Chess*, which is a variation of *Snakes & Ladders* and thus a game of pure chance. Does the combination of "chess" and "sufi" suggest however that some form of "esoteric skill" is needed for a game of pure chance?

Snakes & Ladders turned into a children's game in England. The English version is "a degraded form of a game that is characteristically Asian, and evidently introduced by colonials returning from India, the jewel in the crown of the nineteenth century British Empire," reads *The Oxford History of Board Games*. "Many varieties of Snakes & Ladders were published from the turn of the twentieth century, but the end of Victoria's reign saw the gradual loss of moral exhortations, and the inter-war years the loss of Indian decorative motifs or, indeed, any reference at all to the jewel of the imperial crown."[10] The game is thus a curious case of colonial piracy that lost all its ethical and moral qualities, and has turned instead into a simple race game

[8] A.T.: *Dehkhoda Medium Dictionary*, ed. Jafar Shahidi (Tehran: Dehkhoda Lexicon Institute, 2007), 1803.
[9] David Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 19.
[10] Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games*, 91-93.

with the mere competitive goal of arriving at an end line—a fitting symbol of the capitalist endeavor in a globalized age. It is thus no surprise that the game is even used as an analogy for "asset management strategy development"[11] in the 21st century!

Sufi Chess however is not a race game nor a game of accumulating points; for one, the game does not end at the top-left square which has the highest numerical value, but instead at the top-middle square—the seventh sky. If one's piece passes/skips the seventh sky, then the snake of *Annihilation* at the top-left corner will bring the player down to square 51 which is the *Earth*. Thus there is the possibility that the game never ends, for players to constantly pass the seventh sky, and get annihilated and roll again, ad infinitum—think Ouroboros, the snake that eats its tail, an analogy of life and the cosmos.

Every game of Sufi Chess becomes a story, a narrative, a poem. The pieces—conceive of them as snails carrying a spiral-shaped shell—that gradually move across the board and land on words/concepts that speak of their past/present/future destinies. *Hatred* brings you down to *Greed*, *Faith* takes you up to *Good Reason*, and you pass neutral zones of *Actions*, *Singing*, *Wind*, or *Touch*. The purpose of the game, then, can be to determine the righteousness of the pieces/snails. The Sufi sits in front of the board and rolls the die; where his/her tongue is capable of lying, his/her hand is not. The sequence that the snail makes, through the will of the die, speaks of a truth. It is no accident that the verb *bākhtan* in Farsi means both "to play" and "to lose/to get defeated." When Saadi writes "Hermits played the chess of the path / Behold as you can't play like them," his line becomes a case of amphibology, as it also means "Hermits lost the chess of the path / Behold as you can't lose like them"—saluting a beautiful defeat. The Sufi does not play to win, but plays for truth and beauty.

[11] Melinda Hodkiewicz, "Designing SNAKES AND LADDERS: An Analogy for Asset Management Strategy Development," *Simulation & Gaming* 46.5 (2015): 455-470.

My interpretation of Sufi Chess is only partly based on my knowledge of Sufi poetry. I also take inspiration from a now nearly forgotten—but still with a sort of cult following—school or style of chess, known as *Romantic chess*, that elucidates the goal of Sufi Chess. Some (European historians) refer to the romantic chess as a period (1475 to 1880s) that was superseded by scientific and then hypermodern chess. As a style, it is characterized by attack-minded, exciting and unforeseen moves and combinations, frenetic sacrifices, and being focused on tactics (short-term maneuvering) rather than strategies (long-term planning). In romantic chess, winning is secondary to winning in style, and intuition is no less valuable than calculation. Contemporary chess with its use of massive data collections of games has further and further standardized and de-romanticized competitive matches. Looking a few decades back, however, one can see the likes of Mikhail Tal (1936-1992) who won the World Chess Championship in 1960—perhaps the last player with a romantic mindset to achieve the honor.

A story of Tal's can help us in understanding the romantic mindset of chess and of board games more broadly. When asked by a journalist whether extraneous thoughts ever enter his head while playing, Tal recalls a game of USSR Championships:

> We reached a very complicated position where I was intending to sacrifice a knight. The sacrifice was not altogether obvious, and there were a large number of possible variations, but when I conscientiously began to work through them, I found, to my horror, that nothing would come of it. Ideas piled up one after another. […] my head became filled with a completely chaotic pile of all sorts of moves, and the famous 'tree of variations,' from which the trainers recommend that you cut off the small branches, in this case spread with unbelievable rapidity. Then suddenly, for some reason, I remembered the classic couplet by Korney

> Ivanovich Chukovsky: 'Oh, what a difficult job it was / To drag out of the marsh the hippopotamus.' I don't know from what associations the hippopotamus got into the chessboard, but although the spectators were convinced that I was continuing to study the position, I, despite my humanitarian education, was trying at this time to work out: just how would you drag a hippopotamus out of the marsh? I remember how jacks figured in my thoughts, as well as levers, helicopters, and even a rope ladder. After lengthy consideration I admitted defeat as an engineer, and thought spitefully: 'Well, let it drown!' Suddenly the hippopotamus disappeared, went from the chessboard just as he had come on - of his own accord! Straight away the position did not appear to be so complicated. I somehow realized that it was not possible to calculate all the variations, and that the knight sacrifice was, by its very nature, purely intuitive. Since it promised an interesting game, I could not refrain from making it. The following day, it was with pleasure that I read in the paper how Mikhail Tal, after carefully thinking over the position for 40 minutes, made an accurately calculated piece sacrifice.[12]

Interestingly, Tal had an academic degree in literature, and his story is a great example of the romantic mindset, of trusting intuition over calculation in order to make the game more exciting, and to win in style. This mindset is natural to Sufi Chess where *will to beauty* supersedes *will to power*. "If we can do it [winning], wonderful. If not, then fail in the most beautiful way," said Jurgen Klopp before his Liverpool football team made a comeback against Barcelona in 2019.

Writing (especially poetry and creative writing) also plays out like a turn-based board game. To write down words and sentences is similar to moving a piece across a Sufi chessboard.

[12] Mikhail Tal, *Life & Games of Mikhail Tal*, ed. John Nunn (London: Everyman Chess, 1997), 34-5.

You select from a bag of words—the dictionary—and build sequences of words, sentences, and paragraphs. The possibilities of the order of words is infinite, and thus writing and poetry are infinite—a self-evident fact that not every user of writing is conscious of.

This is a dissertation about this other game—the game of writing—and how four authors, like four snails, played it in the context of the esoteric, the islamicate, and 20th century world literature.

Introduction: The Esoteric, the Islamicate, and World Literature

> The intellectual constructions of science constitute an unreal realm of artificial abstractions, which with their bony hand seek to grasp the blood-and-the-sap of true life without ever catching up with it. But here in life, in what for Plato was the play of shadows on the walls of the cave, genuine reality is pulsating; and the rest are derivatives of life, lifeless ghosts, and nothing else. How did this change [in the value of science] come about?
>
> —Max Weber, *Science as a Vocation*[1]

> If the Modern Technical Age is to remain human, it cannot overlook the trust that our ancestors have left with us. Our past cannot be mere matter for a more or less curious utilitarianism, like iron deposits, say, on the moon. Islamicate culture is supremely important because it represents the highest creative aspirations and achievements of millions of people. Whoever we are, the hopes, the triumphs, and the failures too of any human beings are properly of concern to us; in the moral economy of mankind they are also our own hopes and failures. In studying and sharing in them we know ourselves better, understand better who we truly have been and are, we human beings.
>
> —Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*[2]

> In any event, our philological home is the earth; it can no longer be the nation.
>
> —Erich Auerbach, "Philology and *Weltliteratur*"[3]

Over the last three decades, the academic "study of esotericism"[4] as a subfield of the study of religions has been a growing interdisciplinary research area within branches of humanities and

[1] Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 140-1.

[2] Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization; Volume 1: The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 99.

[3] Erich Auerbach, "Philology and Weltliteratur," in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 137.

[4] Although institutionally the field is still being referred to as the study of "Western" esotericism (in academic journals and conferences for example), there is an ongoing debate on dropping the Western adjective in the field's

social sciences such as history, art history, sociology, anthropology, and literature. The word "esotericism" here functions as a new, scholarly umbrella term that comprises diverse phenomena such as occultism, magic, witchcraft, alchemy, astrology, divination, Hermeticism, Gnosticism, Kabbalah, Sufism, mysticism, spiritualism, in addition to conspiracy theories and secret societies—ranging from ancient times to the contemporary era. Following Wouter J. Hanegraaff's influential scholarship as well as that of Kocku von Stuckrad and Jeffrey Kripal's, there is a general understanding of "esotericism" or "the esoteric" as a category of "rejected knowledge" that the Enlightenment regards as "irrational" and "superstitious," and what religious orthodoxies brand as "heresy" and "blasphemy." Esotericism is hence a constructed and invented "waste basket" excluded by the dominant discourses of the Enlightenment and the Protestant polemics (roughly from the 18th century onward) in order to set the identifying borders of "authentic" forms of reason and rationality and "valid" and "righteous" forms of religiosity. The focus of the academic study of esotericism is not on proving or falsifying the claims of esoteric discourses from an "insider's" point of view or within theological polemics, but rather to secularly and critically examine historical, social, and political power dynamics that have created and shaped discourses of esotericism, ones that have rejected and marginalized them as forms of otherness, counterculture, or heresy. In brief, this field of research defines its object of study as something that "(1) has been set apart by mainstream religious and intellectual culture as the

---

title. I believe using the "Western" adjective limits the scope of this field to Europe and North America, while esotericism is a broad and hybrid phenomenon geographically speaking, both in contemporary and historical contexts. For one thing, rejecting certain branches of knowledge as "superstitious" and "invalid" is now very much a planetary social fact that has got implemented through hegemonic globalization of the institution of the university throughout the 20th century. For histories of the study of (Western) esotericism look at Kocku von Stuckrad's *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (London: Equinox, 2005), Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke's *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), and Antoine Faivre's *Western Esotericism: A Concise History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010). For some of the recent developments and discussions of the field look at: Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Peter J. Forshaw, and Marco Pasi (eds.), *Hermes Explains: Thirty Questions About Western Esotericism* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), and Egil Asprem and Julian Strube (eds.), *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

'other' by which it defines its own identity, and (2) is characterized by a strong emphasis on specific worldviews and epistemologies that are at odds with normative post-Enlightenment intellectual culture."[5]

Within this framework, the study of esotericism and Islam/Islamic/islamicate is a new-born baby. Michael Muhammad Knight (2016), Matthew Melvin-Koushki (2017), Liana Saif (2019), and Mark Sedgwick (2019) have drawn preliminary maps for the study of "Magic in Islam," "Islamicate Occultism," "Islamicate Occult Sciences," and "Islamic Esotericism."[6] Still, as Melvin-Koushki points out, "several more decades of scholarship will be necessary to establish the basic contours of Islamicate occultism studies as a field."[7] This refers to an academic and critical study of the topic, as there are of course extensive writings of the Traditionalists—namely René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Henry Corbin, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr—on ésotérisme islamique and perennial philosophy.[8] Within the field of Islamic Studies in North America, the use of "esotericism/esoteric" as a helpful category has been largely dismissed. Though the scholarship on Sufism is abundant, Simon Sorgenfrei correctly refuses considering the two (i.e. esotericism and Sufism) equals.[9] An example of a comprehensive anthropological and ethnographical study of occult practices in contemporary Muslim societies is

[5] Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 13-14.

[6] Michael Muhammad Knight, *Magic in Islam* (New York: TarcherPerigee, 2016). Matthew Melvin-Koushki, "De-orienting the Study of Islamicate Occultism." *Arabica* 64.3-4 (2017): 287-295. Liana Saif, "What is Islamic Esotericism?" *Correspondences* 7.1 (2019): 1-59. Mark Sedgwick, "Islamic and Western Esotericism," *Correspondences* 7.1 (2019): 277-299. Most recently, based on papers presented at the 2017 conference on 'Islamic Occultism in Theory and Practice' held at the University of Oxford, the volume *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*, edited by Liana Saif, Francesca Leoni, Matthew Melvin-Koushki, and Farouk Yahya (Leiden: Brill, 2020), covers a wide range of topics on relations of islamicate and esotericism.

[7] Melvin-Koushki, "De-orienting the Study of Islamicate Occultism," 295.

[8] For a comprehensive and critical study of Traditionalism look at Mark Sedgwick's *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[9] Simon Sorgenfrei, "Hidden or Forbidden, Elected or Rejected: Sufism as 'Islamic Esotericism'?" *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 29.2 (2018): 145-165.

that of Alireza Doostdar's.[10] The rising interest in the topic will hopefully address both Islam's internal and local relationships with the esoteric, as well as the transmissions of esoteric trends between Islam and other religious traditions (not only Christianity and Judaism, but also Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and new religious movements).[11]

One aspect that makes an investigation into the relations of esotericism/esoteric and Islam/islamicate crucial and fascinating is the consideration of this subject matter within discourses of Orientalism and postcolonial studies. As noted, esotericism is considered a marginalized and downgraded 'other' form of knowledge that frames and defines the borders of reason and rationality; one through which other various forms of knowledge—via a process of othering and self-formation—have been excluded and labelled as superstitious and irrational. To some extent, Orientalism is also a process of othering and self-formation—as described in the scholarship of Edward Said and Bryan S. Turner.[12] Generally speaking, Orientalism has served the colonial, imperial European powers as a tool to identify the cultural and geopolitical borders of "the West" or "the Occident" (again, roughly from the 18th century onward). Within discourse of Orientalism, "the Orient" (while largely associated with Islam, Muslims, and Arabs) is mostly characterized as backward, superstitious and enchanted, irrational and despotic, in opposition to "the Occident" typified as progressive, disenchanted, rational, and democratic. This constructed dichotomy functions within a discursive mechanism of inclusion-exclusion: "the Occident" is that which is not "the Orient"; "the Occident" constructs and excludes "the Orient" as subordinate and inferior in order to posit itself as dominant and superior. Evidently, in some

[10] Alireza Doostdar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[11] For some of the recent developments on the topic look at: Mark Sedgwick and Francesco Piraino (eds.), *Esoteric Transfers and Constructions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

[12] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978). Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994). Bryan S. Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978). Bryan S. Turner, *Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism* (London: Routledge, 1994).

academic scholarships and public debates, Said's thesis in *Orientalism* has been reduced to the mere issue of stereotyping and misrepresentating "the Orient." For Said however, "Orientalism" is first and foremost a systematic and institutionalized tendency to gain mastery over "the Orient" as a geopolitical entity. It is a will to power, and a will to govern over "the Orient." Issues of misrepresentation and stereotyping are in effect *by-products* of this will to power. All cultures might misrepresent and stereotype each other in some fashion (whether as dominant or subordinate), but Orientalism is a systematic and institutionalized endeavor to research a rejected culture for the sake of a will to power over its territory and/or resources. The material embodiments of Orientalism are places like the British Library—with its massive archives of artifacts, manuscripts, and documents from the Orient—or University of London's famous School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)—with its motto: "knowledge is power" (not to mention all disciplines of *area studies* in the academia). The purpose of Orientalist scholarship is twofold: it helps governments to initiate social policies to rule over their colonies and/or to negotiate more profitable deals and trade agreements with countries from "the Orient," while it also locates the borders of the self ("Occident") and the other ("Orient") through discursive mechanism of inclusion-exclusion.

My theoretical understanding of the processes of othering and self-formation, and of mechanisms of inclusion-exclusion, is principally based on Michel Foucault's study of madness (*Folie et Déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, 1961) which has been overshadowed by his later scholarship.[13] For the young Foucault, reason and rationality, in order to set themselves up as legitimate discourses, initially defined and excluded madness and insanity—not only by inventing disciplinary and pathological frameworks of psychology and psychiatry (*non-material*

[13] Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

discourse), but also by turning lazar houses into mental asylums (*material* discourse). With respect to esotericism and rejected forms of knowledge, discourses created by dictionaries and encyclopaedias (for example Johann Jacob Brucker's *Historia critica philosophiae*, 1742-1744), in addition to the structure of the institution of the university and its divisions of knowledge and labour, are among the material and non-material embodiments of authoritative forces which decide upon what should count as valid and rational philosophy or science, and what should be considered superstitious pseudo-philosophy or pseudo-science.

Thus, in the context I have provided, one can hypothetically speak of two processes of othering and self-formation: one, a rejection of certain forms of knowledge as irrational and superstitious via the rising hegemony of the institution of the university; and two, institutionalizing Orientalism as a research career at the same institution around the same time. In both of these processes, the "other" is associated with the irrational and the enchanted. Additionally, one can trace romanticism as a movement, a tradition, a discourse, or a worldview that has embraced and welcomed these "others"—the esoteric and the orient—in order to challenge instrumental rationality in a sort of countercultural fashion. From this formulation comes one of the driving questions of this research: to what extent do discourses of esotericism and orientalism—as two forms or processes of othering/self-formation—relate to and intersect with each other, and moreover, how do each (or both at the same time) interact with romanticism.[14] Such an inquiry questions and challenges normative and hegemonic views on knowledge, religion, and culture, and attempts to understand the supposed "irrationality and superstition" of esotericism on its own terms.

[14] For a comprehensive study of Islam and romanticism from 1770s to 1860s look at: Jeffrey Einboden, *Islam and Romanticism: Muslim Currents from Goethe to Emerson* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2014).

While both Stuckrad and Hanegraaff emphasize the construction of esotericism as a category of rejected knowledge in the post-Enlightenment era, their takes on discursive dynamics and power relations involved in the process are different.[15] Hanegraaff examines "Western esotericism" primarily within the context of Christian Europe by reinforcing the Protestant versus Catholic polemics, while also paying particular attention to the role of the institution of the university and that of dictionaries and encyclopaedias in rejecting certain forms of knowledge. Stuckrad, on the other hand, states that the interactions of Christian currents with other religious traditions (chiefly Judaism and Islam) are as notable as the internal dynamics within Christianity itself. Assessing the construction of "a monolithic Christian occident" as a major obstacle in understanding European cultural history and the place of esotericism within it, Stuckrad suggests using "esoteric discourse in Western culture" or simply "the esoteric" (instead of "Western esotericism") as "an analytical framework that helps to identify genealogies of identities in a pluralistic competition of knowledge." His approach does not fundamentally contrast Hanegraaff's since they both employ historiographical discourse analysis as their chosen methodology; rather, new dimensions are added to the problematic when highlighting pluralistic and inter-religious elements embedded in the formation of esotericism.

While I will use the two terms "esotericism" and "the esoteric" (as categories of rejected knowledge) interchangeably throughout the dissertation, my choice of the term "Islamicate" is careful and specific. The two terms "Islamicate" (derived from Italianate) and "Islamdom" (derived from Christendom) are coined by the distinguished historian of Islam, Marshal G. S. Hodgson, as reflective of his general approach to the study of Islam and Islamic cultures. Hodgson is less concerned with Islam as a religion per se, but rather Islam as a civilization with

[15] Kocku von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

its distinctive culture. "Islamicate" then refers to the culture of those regions or geopolitical entities where throughout history Islam has played a significant and dominant role; in Hodgson's words: "Islamicate would refer not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims." "Islamdom," in addition, "is the society in which the Muslims and their faith are recognized as prevalent and socially dominant, in one sense or another—a society in which, of course, non-Muslims have always formed an integral, if subordinate, element, as have Jews in Christendom." Thus, "Islamdom" refers to "a complex of social relations" which in terms of territory is more or less well-defined; it shall be used for "the milieu of a whole society" and not simply for the body of all Muslims. In brief, "Islamdom" (a noun) is a society that carries a culture; that culture Hodgson calls "Islamicate" (an adjective). Hodgson further adds: "I thus restrict the term 'Islam' to the *religion* of the Muslims, not using that term for the far more general phenomena, the society of Islamdom and its Islamicate cultural traditions. […] The adjective 'Islamic', correspondingly, must be restricted to 'of or pertaining to' Islam *in proper, the religious, sense* […]."[16]

Hodgson's aptly coined terminology and his overall approach to the study of Islam stands in contrast to forms of Orientalist and Eurocentric research on Islam that tend to essentialize the religion and reduce it to this or that elemental belief, practice, text, or figure. Hodgson contextualizes his objects of study in terms of both *history* and *geography*, while rejecting any notion of a unified, coherent Islam or Orient that exists and opposes the West/Occident. "What has been felt as Islam […] considered historically, in all its ramifications and even in its most central implications, has of course varied enormously. The very comprehensiveness of the vision

[16] Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam Volume 1*, 58-59.

of islam as it is unfolded has insured that it can never be quite the same from one place or one time to another," writers Hodgson.[17] His scholarship hardly arises from a will to power over Islam or Orient; rather it reads like a humanist endeavor to comprehend the history of a remarkable culture in order to understand it on its own terms.

To further clarify the scope of the dissertation and my approach to 'the esoteric and the islamicate,' below are few points on what this research is not or does not intend to be:

(1) In contrast to the perennialist and traditionalist approaches, I do not work under the premise that there exists necessarily an esoteric aspect at the heart or core of Islam or any other religious tradition. Whether or not Islam as a religion has an esoteric essence is irrelevant in the context of this study. Intersections of the esoteric and the islamicate must be examined as *constructs* and not *essences*.

(2) This is not a study of Sufism. Sufism is not the esoteric aspect or current of Islam, though it is the dimension of the islamicate that has the most associations with the esoteric. If an idea or object is associated with Sufism, this does not necessarily mean that it belongs to the esoteric as well. Sufism could be immensely hierarchical and orthodox, and there are many aspects of Sufism that are exoteric and dominant.

(3) This is not a theological study and it does not have a religionist or sectarian agenda. I believe that the institution of the university, particularly within humanities and social sciences, must be a place for *critical* research, and I wholeheartedly respect Max Weber's emphasis on neutrality and impartiality of the researcher.

(4) The misrepresentation and stereotyping of Islam and Muslims (either in European and North American contexts, or elsewhere) are not the subject matter of this project. I am rather

[17] Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam; Volume 1*, 79.

interested in the power dynamics and social, cultural, and political contexts that have made certain representations possible. Whether or not any sort of representation corresponds with the "reality" of Islam is thus out of question.

Within the field of inquiry on the esoteric and the islamicate, various topics and objects of study can be defined: cultural products (books, works of art, games); policy documents and histories of government-funded institutions such as universities; independent groups and organizations; and rituals, practices, and beliefs. In other words, a 'cultural study' of the esoteric-islamicate can take shape, focused on modern and contemporary emanations of the subject; one that pays particular attention to transmissions and translations of the esoteric between the islamicate and other cultures in local and global contexts. The focus of the research in this dissertation is on works of literature and creative writing. It asks new questions about the relations between literature and esotericism via a specific focus on islamicate influences and expressions of selected works of world literature from 20th century.

In her recent article on the spiritualism of Arthur Conan Doyle, Christine Ferguson offers some notable remarks on the past and future of studying literature and esotericism. Using the phrase "the myth of critical silence," Ferguson points out:

> There are two commonly offered rationales for the inclusion of literature within esotericism studies: first, and largely uncontroversially, that this medium has proved central to the dissemination of hermetic, occult, and new religious ideas; the second, that the relationship between literature and esotericism has never adequately, or even at all, been considered by scholars—a claim that deserves closer scrutiny. […] For indeed, far from being a neglected, trivialized, maligned, or *occulted* concern within British literary criticism, those topics now garnered

> under the aegis of esotericism have received increasing attention since 1950s, and nowhere more so than in regard to the modernist canon. John Senior's *The Way Down and Out: The Occult in Symbolist Literature* (1959) is one of the first major studies on this topic; on its heels came important publications such as David R. Clark's 'Metaphors for Poetry: W. B. Yeats and the Occult' (1965), Robert Lee Wolff's *Strange Stories: Explorations in Victorian Fiction* (1971), Martha Banta's *Henry James and the Occult* (1972), George Mills Harper's [ed.] *Yeats and the Occult* (1975), Luanne Frank's edited collection, *Literature and the Occult: Essays in Comparative Literature* (1977), Peter B. Messent's similarly-titled *Literature of the Occult: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1981), all of which paved the way for a veritable explosion of occult-focused and modern literature-based criticism in the 1990s—the most important of these studies being Diana Barsham's *The Trial of Woman [: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society]* (1992), Leon Surette's *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and the Occult* (1993), and, with Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, *Literary Modernism and Occult Tradition* (1996). […] They grant esotericism-focused approaches to literature value precisely because they bring to light that which has hitherto—at least supposedly—been suppressed or marginalized.[18]

I can add to Ferguson's list Didier T. Jaén's *Borges' Esoteric Library: Metaphysics to Metafiction* (1992), and there are a few more monographs on Yeats and esotericism, such as

[18] Christine Ferguson, "Beyond Belief: Literature, Esotericism Studies, and the Challenges of Biographical Reading in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Land of Mist*," *Aries* (2021): 3-5.

William Gorski's *Yeats and Alchemy* (1996).[19] The canonical role of Yeats in this scholarship is remarkable, and as a respected winner of the Nobel Prize, he functions as a legitimizer that commands a serious consideration of the occult and the esoteric in literature. This is recently exemplified in Susan Johnston Graf's *Talking to the Gods: Occultism in the Work of W. B. Yeats, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and Dion Fortune* (2015), a study of four authors associated with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Furthermore, the last few years have been marked by publications intent on mapping out and setting the borders of the study of literature and esotericism in dialogue with the development of both fields of esotericism studies and literature studies. Aren Roukema's *Esotericism and Narrative: The Occult Fiction of Charles Williams* (2018), alongside two essay collections *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875-1947* (eds. Christine Ferguson and Andrew Radford, 2018) and *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature and Film* (eds. Tessel Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson, 2018) are among such recent scholarship.[20] Another notable work is Theodore Ziolkowski's *The Alchemist in Literature: From Dante to the Present* (2015) which is a historical genealogy of a single concept/figure that can inspire many future studies.[21]

I have two additional general methodological considerations for the dissertation, with one functioning on a micro level and one on a macro level. On the micro level, I engage with intertextual analysis; that is, to interpret a text, I read it alongside other texts that are in one way

[19] For a list on scholarship on Yeats and esotericism look at: William Gorski, "Yeats, William Butler," in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 1179-1181. See also: Margaret Mills Harper, "Yeats and the Occult," in *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, ed. Marjorie Howes and John Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[20] Among new studies on esotericism that have centered the literary in their analyses, Ferguson names Per Faxneld's *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), and Manon Hedenborg White's *The Eloquent Blood: The Goddess Babalon & the Construction of Femininities in Western Esotericism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[21] Also related are Alex Owen's *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), and Arthur Versluis' edited volume *Esotericism, Art, and Imagination* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2008).

or another associated with the text under study. Imagine an author's body of work as an atom with each text like an electron orbiting around a proton (i.e. the author). The atom will occasionally come into contact with other atoms (i.e. other authors and texts). The proton itself is not stable, like the biography of an author, and has no separate entity without the electrons around it. To study such atoms of literature, locating the electrons/texts takes precedence over fixating on the proton/biography. Authors die and protons decay, but electrons/texts live long in the library—albeit their distribution and categorization are affected by power dynamics as in all social fields.

How then can one examine the electrons/texts in relation to each other given the countless variations for connecting them? Zoom out and on the macro level, there exists the lens of "World Literature," the framework through which I examine literary texts. This time, think of a night sky full of stars where each star is an author. The sky is a map of world literature in different languages. Some stars are older than the rest, some are brighter, and some hardly noticeable. The size of this sky library gives you a headache. Literary theorists, like astronomers, have invented genres by drawing lines among the stars—sometimes out of intuition, sometimes out of geometric calculation—grouping them together and mapping constellations. Some—who extend the game of war to the library and exist everywhere on earth—have tried to replicate the nation-states' borders in the sky, aiming to expand "their very own national" borders. Some have looked for universal aesthetics (like Georg Lukács on the epic and the novel); some became curious about how stars of different languages are in dialogue (like dialogic imagination of Mikhail Bakhtin); some helped empower the Paris observatory (like Pascale Casanova's world republic); and some offered distant reading as opposed to close reading in order to understand the grand scale of literary system (like Franco Moretti's graphs, maps, and trees). Both the stars

and the astronomers are born and die, thus the mapping of sky library keeps evolving. The map never was and never will be a static image.

Following David Damrosch (2003), Djelal Kadir (2004), and Aamir Mufti (2016), I use the term "world literature" not as a *category* (referring to classics, or to texts of non-European languages) but as a *practice* of reading and writing in the sky library. For Damrosch, world literature is "a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material." A work enters into the realm of world literature when it circulates out into "a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin." Additionally, world literature is writing that gains in translation; "works of world literature take on a new life as they move into the world at large, and to understand this new life we need to look closely at the ways the work becomes reframed in its translations and in its new cultural contexts."[22] Kadir speaks of comparative literature likewise as a *practice* and not a subject, object, or problem[23] (after all the two, world and comparative literature, are practically one and the same discipline whose scope is to study literature in a planetary context, though the methods employed by their practitioners of course varies). Mufti emphasizes that world literature is "fundamentally a concept of exchange" that is inseparable from the globalization of capitalism, and is closely tied to orientalism since they both attempt to bridge the social distance "between the centers of the world system and its peripheries."[24] Mufti's bold critical evaluation of world literature is a reminder to take both Marx and Said with us when looking at the sky library. An

[22] David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 5-6 & 24.

[23] Djelal Kadir, "To World, to Globalize: World Literature's Crossroads," *Comparative Literature Studies* 41.1 (2004): 1-9.

[24] Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalism and World Literatures* (London: Harvard University Press, 2016), 20.

upcoming volume on *Islam and New Directions in World Literature*[25] indicates the wider emerging interest in the topic, and the different ways that Islam and world literature can be framed together in both modern and pre-modern contexts.

To investigate intersections of the esoteric and the islamicate in the context of the 20th century world literature, I am drawing a constellation comprised of four authors: Sādeq Hedāyat (1903-1951), Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), and the collaborative cut-up projects of William S. Burroughs (1914-1997) and Brion Gysin (1916-1986). This selection of authors was partially influenced by a desire to draw a diverse constellation, particularly with respect to language and geography, with Iranian Hedāyat writing in Persian/Farsi, Argentine Borges writing in Spanish, and the cut-ups of American Burroughs and British-Canadian Gysin written in English and partly in French. Yet the major criterion for this selection, one that made me confident that the constellation is not drawn mechanically but organically, concerns the *circulation* of these authors' texts—i.e. can they be considered world literature by virtue of traveling beyond their national borders and cultures of origin? Interestingly, all four authors have books that have been published in the United States by the same publishing house: Grove Press. Grove famously published Burroughs' ground-breaking *Naked Lunch* in 1959, and since then has continued publishing and republishing many of his other major works (notably *The Nova Trilogy*), in critical editions. The first U.S. edition of a book by Borges, *Ficciones* (containing two volumes of his short stories: "The Garden of Forking Paths" and "Artifices"), was published by Grove in 1962, and D. P. Costello's English translation of Hedāyat's *The Blind Owl*, formerly published in the U.K. by John Calder, was published in the U.S. by Grove in 1969. Gysin's posthumous 1986

[25] Sarah R. Bin Tyeer and Claire Gallien (eds.), *Islam and New Directions in World Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

novel *The Last Museum* is another title on this list, and it arguably marks the end of Grove's golden age of publishing unconventional avant-garde and counterculture literature.

In *Counterculture Colophon: Grove Press, the* Evergreen Review*, and the Incorporation of the Avant-Garde,* Loren Glass discusses how at the height of the paperback revolution, "Through close alliances with academics and translators across the country [U.S.], Grove helped popularize a concept of world literature in the late 1950s that centrally informed the political investments of the counterculture in the 1960s."[26] This is the period when Grove was run by Barnet Rosset as its president and owner from 1951 to 1986. Rosset, also the editor of the *Evergreen Review* (its inaugural issue appeared in 1957), paved the way for a literary scene that, courtesy of the rising hegemony of post-war American cultural production, aimed at expanding the borders of world literature—a mission that, after all, was in accordance with UNESCO's emphasis on global cultural exchange. Rosset was well-connected to several distinguished French publishing houses, such as Olympia and Gallimard, and in words of Glass, "With Paris as Rosset's primary resource, New York as his home base, and the booming American university population as his audience, his signal achievement […] would be to take the avant-garde into the mainstream, helping to usher in a cultural revolution whose consequences are with us still."[27]

While Grove is perhaps most well-known for its taste in avant-garde and counterculture literature (introducing authors such as Samuel Beckett, Henry Miller, and Jean Genet to American readers), they have also contributed to popularizing non-European and non-North American works of literatures—as evidenced for instance by their collaboration with Donald Keene in publishing anthologies of Japanese literature. Grove did not remain a static entity; their vision of literature and methods of administration arguably changed over time, particularly

[26] Loren Glass, *Counterculture Colophon: Grove Press, the* Evergreen Review*, and the Incorporation of the Avant-Garde* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 34.

[27] Glass, *Counterculture Colophon*, 34.

following Rosset's departure. As I will briefly discuss in the conclusion, the case of G. Willow Wilson as a 21st century author published by Grove embodies quite a different formulation of world and countercultural literature to that of Hedāyat, Borges, and Burroughs-Gysin. The invention of the Internet and the World Wide Web spoiled the intercontinental highway of Paris–New York that the Grove of the 1960s was heavily dependent on. For one thing, authors may now gain global recognition more easily without being first published in French.

This dissertation is not a study of Grove Press or the realm of cultural production at large, nor is it limited to those works of Hedāyat, Borges, Burroughs and Gysin that have been published by Grove. Nonetheless, the fact that all of these authors were published at some point by the same publisher—a publisher with a certain vision or mission for world and counterculture literatures—further demonstrates that the constellation here is not an arbitrary one, and that these authors are related to each other at the very materialistic levels of production and circulation. This establishes my starting point.

Writing is Magic and Labour

I argue that what brings into focus the described constellation—as a network of texts and social relations associated with particular 20th-century authors at the intersections of the esoteric and the islamicate—is the following statement: *writing is magic and labour*.

I propose that Hedāyat, Borges, and Burroughs-Gysin all yearned to attain 'magic' in their creative writing, though each had their own distinct definition and understanding of what exactly this 'magic' would be—definitions and understandings that have been shaped through particular esoteric and islamicate discourses they encountered. As for the term 'labour,' I am referring first and foremost to the authors' strategies of writing and research—their practices, in

other words, asking 'what did they do in order to attain the desired magic in their writings?' Yet labour also draws the attention to the political economy of literature, and to the broader field of global cultural production and circulation, with its multi-layered power dynamics. I posit that the 'writing is magic and labour' formula is an effective framework for studying esotericism and literature in general, and it can be applied to many other authors and constellations likewise. Below are some brief previews of the main discussions and arguments of each chapter.

Chapter (1) Sādeq Hedāyat: Confessions of a Persian Opium Smoker

In the case of Hedāyat, a Paris-Tehran-Mumbai movement in his career signifies a suspension between the local/national and the global/international; an effort to bridge continents of world literature during the interwar period. This map also recapitulates Hedāyat's encounter with the esoteric discourses of European, Islamic, and Zoroastrian traditions. Magic, for Hedāyat, chiefly refers to practices associated with the ancient magus—the Zoroastrian priestly class—that through centuries of human conflict have transfigured and declined into being distant, slippery, and incomprehensible. This magic, on the one hand, becomes a subject of secular study for Hedāyat, a theme for his research labour; and on the other hand, it is used, invoked and reincarnated, in some of his works of fiction as products of his writing labour. This is best exemplified in Hedāyat's employment of materials from his ethnographical collection of Iranian 'superstitious' beliefs entitled *Neyrangestān* (1933) when weaving his opium-induced magnum opus work of fiction *The Blind Owl* (1937). In Section I, I have mapped out the various dimensions of Hedāyat's interest in and research on esoteric ideas, materials, and practices, while my primary goal in Section II has been to offer a new interpretation of *The Blind Owl* in light of this engagement with esotericism.

Inspired by the poetry project of his contemporary Nimā Yushij, Hedāyat explored the connection between *afsāneh* (story/tale) and *afsun* (enchantment/incantation) in the tradition of Persian literature—which has parallels in Japanese folktales and European fantastic literature. Writing new *afsāns* (in the manner of *1000 Afsāns*—the lost Persianate predecessor of *1001 Nights*), Nimā and Hedāyat, in poetry and prose respectively, created canonical texts that, modernist and avant-garde in form, were committed to society at large. While Nimā yearned for more locality (marked by his portion of poetry in the Tabari language), Hedāyat yearned to be recognized in French, and from there to the world at large. Section III is an intertextual analysis of the projects of these two pioneers of modernist Farsi literature with an emphasis on their parallel understandings of the magic of storytelling. In the introduction to his Tabari poems in 1940 (just three years after the publication of *The Blind Owl*), Nimā neatly articulates this yearning for magic that, to a great extent, corresponds with Hedāyat's vision:

> If people have mixed their languages, I also mix mine, but I am eager to mix it with words that my tribe is forgetting. I have been careful to be in love with my magical [sehr-angiz] land, just like lovers in the old days. [I have been careful] not to harm like those sorcerers [jādu-garān], but to attract like those sorcerers.[28]

The two terms *sehr* (from Arabic sihr) and *jādu* (from old Persian) are, alongside *afsun*, the common and most accurate equivalents for *magic* in Farsi. Their connotations, however, similar to the connotations of *magic*, can go beyond the realm of esotericism and occultism and refer to the 'supernatural' or 'unexplainable' more generally. I have been considerate of these complexities throughout the dissertation when interpreting and contextualizing such terms. Still,

[28] A.T. Nima Yushij, *Roja: Tabari Poems of Nima Yushij*, ed. Sheragim Yushij (Tehran: Roshdieh, 2022), 14.

in the above-quoted passage from Nimā, *sehr* and *jādu* stand for the esoteric magic of writing that can harm people in the form of spell, and can attract readers in the form of poetry and prose.

The two periods of Hedāyat's career are distinguished by his shift from a right-wing Aryanist nationalism towards socialist and internationalist politics. Yet his critique of Islam and islamicate cultures, particularly in response to the growing hegemony of Iranian Twelver Shia discourses, remained constant throughout his body of work. In his posthumous text *The Pearl Cannon*, Hedāyat created a heteroglossic carnival of colonial relations through which he identified political Islam as yet another imperialist and oppressive force on the world map. Whereas *The Blind Owl* is an exploration inside of the memory and psyche of an archetypal individual drowned in the pharmakon of opium and of writing, *The Pearl Cannon* reveals a political economy of opium run by an imaginary "Islam Limited Company" as a tool of control, manipulation, and exploitation of the masses. His modernist decadence is thus not only a re-enchanted response to the dis-enchanted instrumental rationality of a globalized enlightenment; it is also a warning against horrors of an islamicate who deems 'everything permittable' for the sake of holding onto the flag of Islam as a monolithic state religion.

Hedāyat's Quranic references, abundant in *The Pearl Canon* and traceable in his other works, aim at ridiculing and satirizing the exoteric Islam and the opportunism and hypocrisy of certain Muslim classes—mainly the Twelver Shia clergies. Although Hedāyat had a secular education and intellectual mindset, his knowledge of Arabic and Quranic literature must not be underestimated; even a 2013 Farsi *Dictionary of Quranic Proverbs* published in the "Islamic Republic" of Iran cites some forbidden works of Hedāyat including *The Pearl Canon*. Still, Hedāyat did not seek out divine esotericism in the Quran; after all, it is the old peddler of *The Blind Owl*, a manifestation of the narrator's degrading dark side, who reads from the Quran in an

abject and frightening manner. Hedāyat collected the partly islamicate "superstitions" of Iranian folklore not to acclaim, worship, or practice them, but to understand them through "rational and scientific" methods, and to then manipulate them and give them new life in the form of a confessionary, romanticist, and modernist afsāneh in *The Blind Owl*.

Chapter (2) Jorge Luis Borges: Reading the Aleph in Isfahan

Borges' 'labour' of writing shares the same nature as Hedāyat's; they were both men of letters, engaged with non-religionist research on topics of religion and magic. Still, while Hedāyat was interested in ethnographical and anthropological field-work, Borges became a grand librarian—a living catalogue of the human library, and a planetary map of world literature. The term 'magic' for Borges refers chiefly to the unexplainable quality of aesthetic events—what makes a work of art beautiful and penetrating escapes all rational explanation. But while an aesthetic event itself is inexplicable, its consequences and footprints could be subject to rational investigation. *We do not know how the library of Babel came into being, but we can browse through its shelves and corridors, and draw its map*. Borges, in my view, is conscious of the generative and creative effects of writing and literature, and arguably his life-long project was to make literature more conscious and aware of its magical, generative, and creative powers. In reciting poetry and in speaking, Borges sees the 'speech act' of language as its magic/power, the Biblical "Let there be light," and the Quranic "kun fa-yakūnu" (Be, and it is). The sacredness of writing, on the other hand, has a distinctive history that Borges concisely reviews in his 1951 essay "On the Cult of Books" (Del culto de los libros). "A book, any book, is for us a sacred object," writes Borges, who then maps out a constellation of commentaries and doctrines for and against the sacredness of writing. The essay itself is a map of world literature that fundamentally concerns relations of

esotericism and literature, ranging from Pythagoras' abstention to write and Plato's account of the Egyptian Thoth against writing in *Phaedrus,* to Clement of Alexandria ("a man of pagan culture") whose distrust of writing derives from the Gospels: "To write all things in a book is to put a sword in the hands of a child." Borges claims that the end of 4th century, marked by St. Augustine's *Confessions*, "saw the beginning of the mental process that would culminate, after many generations, in the predominance of the written word over the spoken one, of the pen over the voice." He then writes a paragraph that is perhaps his most direct commentary on the Quran:

> That man [St. Augustine] passed directly from the written symbol to intuition, omitting sound; the strange art he initiated, the art of silent reading, would lead to marvelous consequences. It would lead, many years later, to the concept of the book as an end in itself, not as a means to an end. (This mystical concept [concepto místico], transferred to profane literature, would produce the unique destinies of Flaubert and Mallarmé, of Henry James and James Joyce.) Superimposed on the notion of a God who speaks with men in order to command them to do something or to forbid them to do something was that of the Absolute Book, of a Sacred Scripture. For Muslims, the Koran (also called 'The book,' *al-Kitab*) is not merely a work of God, like men's souls or the universe; it is one of the attributes of God, like His eternity or His rage. In chapter XIII we read that the original text, the Mother of the Book, is deposited in Heaven. Muhammad al-Ghazali, the Algazel of the scholastics, declared: 'The Koran is copied in a book, is pronounced with the tongue, is remembered in the heart and, even so, continues to persist in the center of God and is not altered by its passage through written pages and human understating.' George Sale observes that this uncreated Koran is

> nothing but its idea or Platonic archetype; it is likely that al-Ghazali used the idea of archetypes, communicated to Islam by the *Encyclopedia of the Brethren of Purity* and by Avicenna, to justify the notion of the Mother of the Book.[29]

Literature of the islamicate, such as the esoteric commentaries of the Brethren of Purity on the Quran, is part of Borges' unorganized cult of books that divinize the written word. He then writes about the Kabbalists who believed the universe was created by means of numbers and letters, and the Christians such as Francis Bacon and Thomas Browne who entertained the idea of two divine books, the Scripture and the Nature, and finishes the essay with Mallarmé and Léon Bloy:

> The world, according to Mallarmé, exists for a book; according to Bloy, we are the versicles or words or letters of a magic book, and that incessant book is the only thing in the world: more exactly, it is the world.[30]

The essay, arguably, becomes a commentary on or an interpretation of Borges' "The Library of Babel" (1941)—his most famous short story that is perhaps the mother of all Borges' writings, that contains everything else he wrote.

The chapter on Borges is one of the many possibilities of writing on his relations to the esoteric and the islamicate. Generally, there are two methods of textual analysis for such investigation: a distant reading, Library of Babel style, to map out the corpus; and a close reading, Aleph style, grasping a particular text and looking at it from different angles. My approach is somewhere between these two methods. I have mapped out, for instance, Borges' references to Attar (12th century Sufi Persian poet) on four occasions; then, I have read those four references together, leading me to recognize the seminal essay-fiction short story "The Approach

[29] Jorge Luis Borges, "On the Cult of Books," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 360.

[30] Borges, "On the Cult of Books," 362.

to Al-Mu'tasim" (1936) as Borges' variation of Attar's *Conference of the Birds*, and a polyphonic and polemical (pantheist vs. perennialist) interpretation of this classic Sufi text. I have also taken the opportunity to revisit Goethe's *West-East Divan* in Section I of this chapter in order to compare his encounter with Hafiz to that of Borges with Attar at the intersection of the esoteric and the islamicate, also with respect to their practices of world literature.

Borges matters to the study of islamicate esotericism on two grounds. There is first the matter of the reception of islamicate esotericism by Borges. Sections II and III of this chapter are efforts to situate islamicate esotericism within Borges' wider interest in esotericism, as well as his broader interest in islamicate culture. There are numerous intersections of the esoteric and the islamicate in Borges' body of work (starting with the 1935 short story "Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv"); additionally, there are works by Borges on non-islamicate esotericism (e.g. on Gnosticism and Kabbalah) and on non-esoteric islamicate (the most notable example being "Averroës's Search"). The second matter concerns receptions of Borges in the islamicate culture and the Muslim world. Section IV exclusively examines the influence of Borges on the Iranian literary field through the Farsi translations of his works as one example of such reception.

Chapter (3) William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin: Operation Rewrite

In the 1960s collaborations of Burroughs and Gysin known as the cut-ups—a multimedia project aiming to create new states of consciousness through the random rearrangement of words, images, and sounds—the 'labour' of writing is dependent upon using *scissors* rather than conventional instruments of writing, like a pen or typewriter. The cut-up method, in its extreme form, generates new writing based on rearranging and cutting through what has already been written. The 'magic' of the cut-up method has two dimensions. One dimension, analogous to

Borges', refers to the 'speech act' of language. "Words have a vitality of their own and you or anybody can make them gush into action," notes Gysin in their cut-up manifesto *The Third Mind* (1978).[31] The second dimension concerns the 'randomness' involved in the cut-ups, which are aesthetically and politically influenced by Tristan Tzara's Dada, reflecting a similar anxiety towards directions the human society has been taking (Dada in reaction to World War I, and cut-ups in the context of the Cold War). Like the cases of Hedāyat and Borges, Paris played a leading role in the circulation of Burroughs and Gysin's project as world literature. Still, with respect to the period they both spent in Tangier, Morocco in 1950s, their collaboration also has a foot in an islamicate milieu as well, to the extent that they attribute the genealogical roots of their cut-up method to Hassan Sabbāh (11th century leader of the Nizari Ismaili state).

My primary goal in this chapter is to showcase the ways in which the two blades of Burroughs-Gysin's cut-up scissors are Sabbāh and Tzara. The numerous references to Sabbāh in the writings of Burroughs and Gysin and in their collaborative work, seek to establish an islamicate lineage for the cut-ups; a lineage that is secretive, anti-authoritarian, guerrilla-style, and anarchist, and terrorizes normative linearity of language. In Section I, I have tried to historicize and demystify the figure of Sabbāh in order to demonstrate how Burroughs-Gysin's references to the mythology and history surrounding the leader of the "Assassins" indicate an appeal to islamicate traditions as legitimizers for their artistic and esoteric efforts. On the other hand, the Dadaist cut-up method, which serves as a direct response to the inadequacies of Surrealism in transcribing both the real world and the dream world, opens up unexplored spaces for new types of world literature that, echoing Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1940), diminish authorship in favor of curatorship. To further explore the possibilities of curating cut-

[31] Brion Gysin, "Cut-Ups Self-Explained," in William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), 34.

ups of world literature, I have been running a series of computer-assisted cut-up experiments in Farsi. A report on these experiments—as applications of the cut-up method in new contexts—is provided in Section II of this chapter, and an English translation of parts of this project is included in Appendices B and C.

The title of the chapter on Burroughs-Gysin, "Operation Rewrite," is derived from a section of Burroughs' cut-up novel *The Ticket that Exploded* (1962). It is a telling section and one of the strongest and most direct commentaries by Burroughs on language, his attempt to historicise the Biblical "In the beginning was the Word" [John 1:1]:

> […] The word is now a virus. The flu virus may once have been a healthy lung cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system. Modern man has lost the option of silence. Try halting your sub-vocal speech. Try to achieve even ten seconds of inner silence. You will encounter a resisting organism that *forces you to talk*. That organism is the word. In the beginning was the word. In the beginning of what exactly? The earliest artifacts date back about ten thousand years give a little take a little and 'recorded'—(or prerecorded) history about seven thousand years. The human race is said to have been on set for 500,000 years. That leaves 490,000 years unaccounted for. Modern man has advanced from the stone ax to nuclear weapons in ten thousand years. […] Perhaps the word itself is recent about ten thousand years old. What we call history is the history of the word. In the beginning of *that* history was the word.[32]

[32] William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded (The Restored Text)*, ed. Oliver Harris (New York: Grove Press, 2014), 56-57.

For Burroughs-Gysin, language in both its oral and written forms is a contagious disease (the virus allegory) that functions as an instrument of control, and it has been a source of soft power for dominant classes since the ancient times and continues to be so during the atomic age. The Burroughs-Gysin writing machine—the cut-up technique—yearns to resist the authority of language. To use the terminology of Peter Lamborn Wilson (Hakim Bey), cut-ups create "autonomous zones"—an influential concept of contemporary anarchist thought inspired likewise by the legend of Sabbāh.[33]

In his 1901 essay on "Magic," W. B. Yeats puts forward his definition of the term. Yeats' definition, particularly for its conception of 'minds flowing into one another,' resembles Burroughs and Gysin's "the third mind," referring to the collaborative and collective spirit of cut-up writing:

> I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of spirits, though I do now know what they are, in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed; and I believe in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early times, and been the foundations of nearly all magical practices. These doctrines are:
>
> (1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.

[33] "The medieval Assassins [Nizari Ismailis] founded a 'State' which consisted of a network of remote mountain valleys and castles, separated by thousands of miles, strategically invulnerable to invasion, connected by the information flow of secret agents, at war with all governments, and devoted only to knowledge. Modern technology, culminating in the spy satellite, makes this kind of *autonomy* a romantic dream. No more pirate islands! In the future the same technology—freed from all political control—could make possible an entire world of *autonomous zones*. But for now the concept remains precisely science fiction—pure speculation." Peter Lamborn Wilson [Hakim Bey], *T. A. Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2003), 96.

(2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.

(3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.[34]

The Nature that Yeats mentions here resonates with Spinoza's, a vision that is present in Borges' works as well; but neither Hedāyat nor Burroughs-Gysin share this monist Spinozism. For Hedāyat, 'death' becomes the only truth, and he is drawn to the dualism of Zoroastrian theology. For Burroughs-Gysin, truth is concealed in a gnostic manner that can be revealed only if so-called reality is properly cut. Still, when Yeats emphasizes the evocation of symbols as a means to cross borders of minds, his words are in harmony with the objectives of the cut-ups.

[34] W. B. Yeats, *Selected Criticism*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan, 1964), 80.

Chapter (1) Sādeq Hedāyat: Confessions of a Persian Opium Smoker

> If any system or philosophy has success in a certain part of the world, the philosophy of Iran and Iranian is fatalism, and honestly there is no way to choose otherwise.
>
> —Sādeq Hedāyat, *82 Letters to Hasan Shahid-Nouraie*[1]

> Only death does not lie.
>
> —Sādeq Hedāyat, *The Blind Owl*[2]

On two different occasions, December 2016 and December 2017, I went for a short trip to Tehran—mine and Sādeq Hedāyat's (1903, Tehran – 1951, Paris) hometown. These trips were not intended to serve as "field work" for my research, though acquiring books by and on Hedāyat in Farsi was obviously a part of my plan. On each trip I found graffiti of Hedāyat in the streets of Tehran: Figure 2 is from 2016, the portrait of Hedāyat on a small electrical substation near Fātemi Square, walking distance from *The Ministry of Interior*; Figure 3 is from 2017, the same portrait on a corner wall near Tajrish Square, walking distance from *Imāmzādeh Sāleh*—a Twelver Shia religious shrine. I was later told by my friends living in Tehran that similar graffiti exist across the city, both of Hedāyat and of other post-Hedāyat authors such as Gholām-Hossein Sāedi who also died in exile (1936, Tabriz – 1985, Paris). Still, those two instances alone had a strong impact on me. One of the pieces of graffiti was beside a giant building with a helipad on its top that symbolizes the state apparatus—the ministry for internal affairs that coordinates the bureaucratic network of public administration across all provinces; the other piece was beside a shrine that symbolizes the apparatus of religion—one of the numerous imāmzādehs across the

[1] A.T.: Sadegh Hedayat, *82 Letters to Hasan Shahid-Nouraie* (Paris: Ketab-e Cheshm-andaz, 2001), 101.

[2] Sadegh Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, trans. Naveed Noori (London: Iran Open Publishing Group, 2011), 61. All quoted passages from *The Blind Owl* are from Noori's translation. Note that D. P. Costello's translation (UK: John Calder, 1957; US: Grove, 1969) is the first and most famous translation in English, and there is also a translation by Iraj Bashiri (1st edition 1974, 3rd edition 2013). Noori's translation is the only one based on the Mumbai manuscript.

country as a place of worship, run by local donations and state funding. Together, they represent the theocratic regime of post-1979 revolution in Iran. Graffiti of a figure whose works have been largely banned in this regime is not a mere accident; it is rather a material embodiment of a still present countercultural phenomenon, and an animated resistance against a monolithic state religion.

Arguably no other contemporary Iranian author has been at the center of various literary, social, and political debates as much as Hedāyat has. His unforeseen and much-emphasized suicide in Paris in 1951, the peculiarity and sophistication of his 1937 novella *The Blind Owl* alongside its national and international receptions, the widespread censorship of his works especially after the 1979 revolution and, at the same time, the wide underground circulation of his writings, allowed Hedāyat to gain friends and enemies from different fractions of Iran's political spectrum. Generally speaking, he is saluted by nationalists and monarchists for his praise of pre-Islamic Zoroastrian Persia, but is also regarded as an eternal enemy of Islamicists for his caricature portrayal of Muslim clergies and Islamic customs. The socialist left owe him immensely because of the broadening horizons for new Farsi fiction (modernist in form, and in content committed to society at large), while they are cautious of his unresolved Aryanist anti-Semitism. Most Iranians still struggle with his suicidal legacy—"you'll commit suicide if you read him," they repeat—an understandable statement given *death* is the most consistent theme of his fiction. Beginning with a short piece entitled "Death" (1926) that he wrote in Belgium when he was 23 and called death "the panacea of all sorrow and despair,"[3] Hedāyat hardly has a short story (from a total of roughly 50 stories) that does not end with death. This strong death drive is one reason for his fascination with gothic, dark romantic and decedent literature like that of

[3] A.T.: Sadegh Hedayat, "Death," in *Sadegh Hedayat Complete Works, Volume I: The Short Stories*, ed. Jahangir Hedayat (London: Sadegh Hedayat Foundation, 2008), 548.

Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire, in addition to the existential nihilism of Franz Kafka and Jean-Paul Sartre.

The volumes of research and study in Farsi on Hedāyat's life and works, since shortly after his death till the present,[4] place him in the canon of modern Farsi literature; though, at the same time, he has been left out of the formal curriculum of schools and universities in Iran. One difficulty of writing on Hedāyat overall is dealing with this bulk of scholarship in addition to the relatively large collection of Hedāyat's own writings.[5] This difficulty bears more weight when writing on Hedāyat in English, since on the one hand only a fraction of his works have been translated into English, and on the other hand the scholarly literature on Hedāyat in English is relatively small and scattered. Despite these complexities, this chapter aims at offering a comprehensive survey of Hedāyat's network of texts in Farsi and English (and a bit of French), while building on this previous scholarship and situating his body of work within the frameworks of esotericism studies and of world and counterculture literatures.

My main objective in this chapter is to offer a fresh interpretation of *The Blind Owl*—Hedāyat's definite magnum opus—by bringing to light his largely unexplored relationship with esotericism, and by accentuating the intertextual relations of the novella to Hedāyat's folklore research on "magic" and "superstition." This investigation also explains Hedāyat's encounter with religion more generally, and with Islam and Zoroastrianism in particular, as the two clashing and complementary discourses are present in both his research and creative writing. Brushing the pages of *The Blind Owl* with his own handwriting and drawing, alongside ancient and modern "superstitious beliefs," Hedāyat then made a cosmopolitan and transnational gesture

[4] Two bibliographies of Hedayat exist in Farsi: Muhammad Golbon, *Bibliography of Sadegh Hedayat* (Tehran: Toos Publication, 1975); Nahid Habibi, *Bibliography of Sadegh Hedayat* (Tehran: Ghatreh, 2007).

[5] *Sadegh Hedayat Complete Works* (in Farsi) published by Sadegh Hedayat Foundation consists of 8 volumes and nearly 4000 pages. This collection does not include Hedayat's letters and correspondences which could be an additional volume.

by publishing the novella for the first time in Mumbai, India. Because of his suicide in Paris, he failed to see its French translation while alive. The processes of production, circulation, and translation of *The Blind Owl* inevitably constitute a map of world literature, one that fluctuates between the Global North and South, and between the center and periphery. The second objective of this chapter is to elucidate and further imagine this map that, generally speaking, has two axes: one axis expands geographically and concerns Hedāyat's engagement with European literatures in particular, in addition to Indian cultures and Japanese folk tales; the other axis travels historically and pertains to Hedāyat's re-visiting and re-thinking of Farsi and Persian literature and languages. Overall in Hedāyat's body of work and specifically in *The Blind Owl*, these two axes meet each other. His bringing together of Khayyām's fatalism and Kafka's nihilism in a surrealist dream-world has been somewhat overemphasized in the scholarship and public debates, but that is only one of the genealogies of *The Blind Owl*. Resonances of Poe's "William Wilson" and "Shadow—A Parable," and more significantly Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, pull Hedāyat's 1937 novella into the abyss of decadent, drug-infused literature of the Fin de siècle Paris where Poe and De Quincey had traveled through Baudelaire's English to French translations. Additionally, by choosing *owl* from all the animals of the Persianate fantastic literature—the bird that said "no" to hoopoe's call for searching the divine Simurgh—Hedāyat ignited an unprecedented solitary "conference of the birds" as if writing in prose a poetic afsāneh (fantasy) that explores the shadowed dark side of its subject—a degenerating opium smoker confessing his life story. This chapter will finally arrive at a discussion of Hedāyat's relationship with his contemporary Nimā Yushij (1897, Yush – 1960, Tehran)[6] whose poetry project—starting with *Afsāneh* (1923)—at least on a national level, was

[6] Born Ali Esfandiari, he chose "Nimā Youshij" as his pen name and is commonly referred to as "Nimā."

even more revolutionary, avant-garde, and influential than what Hedāyat did with the Farsi prose and fiction; yet Nimā never achieved the transnational and countercultural fame of Hedāyat.

With respect to the category of esotericism, I distinguish between two Hedāyats. There is first a Hedāyat who is a secular folklorist or anthropologist of religion. This Hedāyat, following the frameworks developed by European universities' traditions, has done research on "magic" and "superstition" as essential parts of any "systematic" or "scientific" study of cultures. The other Hedāyat is a creative writer who, based on such folklore research, has employed and juxtaposed esoteric motifs in his fiction. Through explaining the extent to which Hedāyat's folklore research concerns the study of esotericism, I will then dive into *The Blind Owl* to demonstrate how some significant and interpretative motifs within this novella—namely *shadow*, *double*, *mandrake*, and *owl*—are driven from Hedāyat's research on "superstitious beliefs." While references to mandrake hint at the narrator of *The Blind Owl* being a hermaphrodite, and the owl's laughter connotes a bad omen, it is through associating the concept of the shadow and double to *jinn* and to *div* (with "jinn" an intermediary being of the islamicate culture famous for its appearance in both the *Quran* and the *1001 Nights*, and "div" coming from Persian languages and Zoroastrianism as a manifestation of evil and Ahriman) where Hedāyat initiates a first-person stream-of-consciousness narrative where jinn/div as an otherness within the human mind takes over the very practice of *writing* itself. This unstable, insane, and magical quality of writing is further mirrored in the drug theme of the novella, opium in particular, which functions as a *pharmakon* for the narrator—a simultaneous poison and remedy. Concisely, I read *The Blind Owl* as an opium-driven narrative of the shadow/double/jinn/div and of the dark side of the personal and collective unconscious of Hedāyat and his society. It is a text immersed in uncanny characteristics, causing it, in its totality, to also becomes a pharmakon: due to its poisonous

quality, the text has been deemed "deviant" and "immoral" by the conservative public and religious authorities since its publication, while it also speaks of the truth of madness and degradation awaiting the future of its society.

Hedāyat was born in 1903 in Tehran to an upper-class family.[7] He went to St. Louis School in Tehran, a French Catholic school founded in 1862 by the Lazarists ("with the encouragement of the French minister to the Persian court, Joseph-Arthur Comte de Gobineau" who is most infamous for his Aryanist *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*)[8] that enrolled both Christian and Muslim students, and is credited for producing in Hedāyat and Nimā Yushij, the game-changers of modern Farsi prose and poetry. The teacher who influenced Hedāyat the most at St. Louis was Herman Rigter (b. 1882, Amsterdam), a priest who steered him towards European literature.[9] In 1925, courtesy of a state grant, Hedāyat went to Europe to pursue his education. He spent almost a year in Belgium studying engineering, and then went to France to study architecture.[10] In 1930, after four years of living in France, he came back to Iran without actually receiving a formal degree, though he had taken several steps to establish a writing career for himself.

Hedāyat was largely self-educated in literature and folklore studies, and while he was employed at a few white-collar governmental jobs in Iran between 1930 and 1950 (which he found quite alienating), he left behind an enormous bulk of writing in both fiction and non-

[7] Many members of Hedayat's extended family were state officials, political leaders, and army generals. Most significantly his brother-in-law Ali Razmārā was appointed as Iran's Prime Minister in 1950. Razmārā, while still in the office, was assassinated by *Fadāyān-e Islam* (a Shia fundamentalist group) in March 1951, one month prior to Hedayat's suicide.

[8] Djavad Hadidi, "France xv. French Schools in Persia," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, last modified December 30, 2012. According to M. F. Farzaneh, Hedayat was familiar with Gobineau's works (1816-1882), particularly his "Oriental Tales" and "Religions and Philosophies in Central Asia." M. F. Farzaneh, *Meetings with Sadeq Hedayat* (Tehran: Markaz Publishing Co., 2004), 82-3.

[9] Farzaneh, *Meetings with Sadeq Hedayat*, 328; and M. F. Farzaneh, *Sadegh Hedayat in the Spider Web* (Tehran: Markaz Publishing Co., 2017), 281.

[10] In 1928, Hedayat had an unsuccessful suicide attempt in Paris by trying to drown himself in the Marne River. Ismael Jamshidi, *Sadegh Hedayat's Suicide* (Tehran: Elm Publication, 2016), 52.

fiction. On the creative side of things, Hedāyat's works include four short novels or novellas (*Ms. Alaviyeh*, 1934; *The Blind Owl*, 1937; *Haji Agha*, 1946; and *The Pearl Cannon*, posthumous), four collections of short stories (*Buried Alive*, 1930; *Three Drops of Blood*, 1932; *Chiaroscuro* 1933; and *The Stray Dog*, 1942),[11] and several volumes of satirical pieces.[12] He translated more than a few works of European literature from French, most significantly the first Farsi translation of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, followed by his own comprehensive essay entitled "Kafka's Message" (1948).[13] His translation efforts extend to Middle Persian or Pahlavi language, and up to seven Zoroastrian texts that he converted into contemporary Farsi. His scholarly works comprise of essays (notably: "The Benefits of Vegetarianism," 1927; "Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyām" 1924, revised 1934) and studies in Iranian folklore.

In 1950, Hedāyat went back to Paris;[14] he was hoping to see the publication of Roger Lescot's French translation of *The Blind Owl* which he had approved in Tehran, but the proposed publisher was facing bankruptcy and merging at the time and the publication was suspended. In April 1951, Hedāyat committed suicide by gassing himself in a small rented apartment in Paris. He destroyed most of his unpublished and unfinished manuscripts a few days prior to his death.[15] He was buried in the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, and his suicide has since been a reason for his critics to accentuate the toxicity and deviance of his writings, particularly that of *The Blind Owl*. Lescot's French translation (*La Chouette aveugle*) was finally published in Paris in 1953 by

[11] A selection of 13 short stories of Hedayat are available in English: Sadegh Hedayat, *Three Drops of Blood*, trans. Deborah Miller Mostaghel (London: Oneworld Classics, 2008).

[12] Among his satirical works, one is available in English: Sadegh Hedayat, *The Myth of Creation: A Puppet Show in Three Acts*, trans. M. R. Ghanoonparvar (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1998).

[13] Besides Kafka (from whom Hedayat also translated: "Before the Law," "In the Penal Colony," "Jackals and Arabs," and "The Hunter Gracchus"), Hedayat translated short stories from French by: Alphonse de Lamartine, Arthur Schnitzler, Alexander Kielland, Anton Chekhov, Gaston Chérau, Arthur Christensen, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Roger Lescot.

[14] Farzaneh's account of this trip (in *Meetings with Sadeq Hedayat*) suggests that Hedayat had in advance planned it to possibly be his last trip with no return.

[15] Farzaneh, *Meetings with Sadeq Hedayat*, 282.

José Corti, two years after Hedāyat's death.[16] It was followed by the English translation of D. P. Costello (U.K. 1957 John Calder Publishers; U.S. 1969 Grove/Evergreen Black Cate). Presently, *The Blind Owl* has been translated into more than a dozen of languages,[17] leaving no hesitation in considering it a well-traveled work of world literature.

Recent academic studies on Hedāyat accentuate the division of two periods in his research and writing career.[18] I believe the distinct moment of this division is Hedāyat's 1937 trip to India—which also coincides with the publication of *The Blind Owl*—when visiting the Zoroastrian community of Parsis impacts his views on nationalism, and on culture and politics in general. The young Hedāyat is plainly sold out to the nation-building project of the first Pahlavi era (1925-1941), thirsty for an ancient lost and glorified wisdom of Aryan-Persians before the Muslim conquest of the 7th century (exemplified in three texts that Omid Azadibougar calls Hedāyat's "nationalist trio"—*Parvin, Sassan's Daughter*, 1931; "The Mongol Shadow," 1932; *Maziyar*, 1934). Yet Hedāyat gradually matured from this ideological right-wing nationalism. In the short story "The Patriot" (from *The Stray Dog*, 1942) which is a satire account of his trip to India, he associates nationalism with dictatorship of the first Pahlavi (Reza Shah), and he sarcastically predicts that opportunist nationalists will build a statue of him after his death, while also hinting that *The Blind Owl* is his souvenir from India in the manner of *Kelileh & Demneh* (translated from Sanskrit to Persian in the 6th century)[19] that will make his name immortal. In *The*

[16] André Breton said of it: "A masterpiece if there ever was one! A book that should find its place next to Nerval's *Aurélia*, Jensen's *Gradiva*, Hamsun's *Mysteries*, a book that takes part in the phosphorescences of Berkeley Square and the shudders of 'Nosferatu.'" Qtd. in Michael Beard, *Hedayat's Bind Owl as a Western Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 79.

[17] This includes Arabic, Chinese, Czech, Dutch, Estonian, Finnish, German, Japanese, Kurdish, Malayalam, Polish, Romanian, Spanish, and Turkish.

[18] In Farsi: Shahram Parastesh, *Narrative of Absolute Desolation: A Burdieuian Analysis of* The Blind Owl *within Iran's Literary Field* (Tehran: Saless Publication, 2014). In English: Omid Azadibougar, *World Literature and Hedayat's Poetics of Modernity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

[19] Also known as *Pancatantra* or *Bidpai*, the classic *Kelileh & Demneh* precedes *1000 Afsan* and *1001 Nights* as a grand collection of stories within stories, though its tales are primarily animal fables. The book's multiple variations

Pearl Cannon (his very last piece that he had left with few friends to publish it after his death), Hedāyat seems to have woken up in a grotesque carnival of world politics where phallic worship is associated with a military cannon that civilizations are fighting for possession of, and where all organized religions are systems of control and manipulation run by the ruling class. Azadibougar rightly points out that in *The Pearl Cannon*, Hedāyat's "thinking about violent encounter of different nations mutated into an acute consciousness of world history as a series of colonial relations," and calls the text "the great unread novel of modern Persian literature." The chaotic and satirical tone of *The Pearl Cannon*, in addition to its polyglossic and knotty language and above all, its irreverence to everyone and everything, has kept it—unsurprisingly—a text considered unworthy of serious study, with a reputation as a joking or heretical read.[20] *Haji Agha* and the short story "Tomorrow" (both from 1946) are clear indications of Hedāyat moving closer to the socialist Tudeh Party of Iran. *Haji Agha* is a literarily mediocre yet culturally significant novella that harshly criticizes the opportunism of the religious bourgeoisie,[21] while "Tomorrow" is about a workers' strike. Hedāyat's letters from Tehran to Paris (1946-1950) to his friend Shahid-Nouraie, and his recorded conversations with M. F. Farzaneh around the same period,[22] further demonstrate the transformation of his politics from right to left as well as his evolving

---

and translations are themselves fascinating instances of world literature in travel and circulation, and its influence on the literature of premodern islamicate and Persianate can only be overemphasized.

[20] Only an abridged version of *The Pearl Cannon* is available in English (trans. Iraj Bashiri, 1986). For a critical discussion of *The Pearl Cannon* look at: Azadibougar, *World Literature and Hedayat's Poetics of Modernity*, 126-37.

[21] Available in English: Sadegh Hedayat, *Haji Agha: Portrait of an Iranian Confidence Man*, trans. G. M. Wickens (Austin: University of Texas at Austin, 1979). This is an important but forgotten translation. Absent from the English scholarship on Hedayat, it was published by Center for Middle Eastern Studies of University of Texas at Austin in 1979, that is few months after the Iranian revolution. It is accompanied by an introduction (by Louis Beck) that is, in its own words, "anthropological in orientation in order to facilitate the book's use in social sciences. The introduction does not attempt to be a work of literary criticism." The reasons why and how *Haji Agha* made its way into area studies—and not comparative and world literature—is a question that demands further research.

[22] Farzaneh's book, *Meetings with Sadeq Hedayat*, is very much similar to Goethe's *Conversations with Eckermann* where the young Farzaneh narrates his numerous meetings with Hedayat during the last decade of the author's life, including his last few months in Paris. This book is also available in French under the title *Rencontres avec Sadegh Hedayat: le parcours d'une initiation* (Paris: José Corti, 1993).

mistrust of institutional Orientalism (especially that of the French). *The Blind Owl* is the moment of melancholia and collapse that occurs when Hedāyat's glorified past is destroyed, only to be replaced with the chaos and madness of his society's present and future. In a way, *The Blind Owl* and *The Pearl Canon* together represent the two axes of history and geography that I mentioned earlier. *The Blind Owl* travels inward into the historical unconscious of Iran (at intersections of Persianate, islamicate, and Indian cultures), digging for the roots of its failure and authoritarianism through a murderous love story. *The Pearl Canon*, on the other hand, is an alternative world history that imagines different colonialisms and imperialisms as human crimes in a world haunted by a superstitious military canon that is divine and worshipped.

The focus here on *The Blind Owl* is to show how Hedāyat's understanding of and approach to esotericism plays an active role in his most celebrated text—a text that has crossed the borders of its national culture, and is also part of Hedāyat's interactions with the islamicate. Although Azadibougar's most recent scholarship diverts the attention from *The Blind Owl* to the network of Hedāyat's other writings,[23] once the attention is directed towards this network, instances emerge that shed new light on the novella itself. Hedāyat's research on "magic" and "superstition" is one of the instances that offer a new perspective on *The Blind Owl*. Part of Hedāyat's 'labor' of writing *The Blind Owl* is his secular research on "superstitious" folklore, while the 'magic' of his writing involves invoking the enchantments of the past, both that of Zoroastrianism and Islam, impregnated with opium and psychoanalysis-inspired surrealism of the interwar period. Whether or not Hedāyat "believed" in the validity of certain esoteric

[23] Azadibougar criticizes the domination of studies of *The Blind Owl* in the scholarship on Hedayat, alongside biographile and psychological approaches that have portrayed a limited one-book figure of him. Reviewing the history of the French and English translations of *The Blind Owl* in the context of world literature, Azadibougar argues that the international reception and circulation of Hedayat has happened through a fixed and ready-made process of simplified categorization and labeling him as a "surrealist writer" and a "tragi-romantic author." He thus undertakes a comprehensive historical survey of Hedayat's body of work as a diverse network of fiction and non-fiction, while emphasizing Hedayat's transmutations throughout his writing career.

doctrines is not my questions here; I am emphasizing the social scientific nature of his folklore research to show why and how he approached "magic" and "superstition" as serious matters worthy of research and examination. For Hedāyat, "magic" and "superstition" are social facts that have real effects and dynamic powers—for instance, they hold the power to manipulate the masses—and can operate as a neglected but informative window to cultures' past and present. They have the capacity to affect the future as well, when old myths and incantations are reincarnated in new textual bodies. Incorporating such esoteric motifs in his modernist works of fiction thus becomes a sort of intertextual literary technique and a strategy of writing, and in *The Blind Owl* in particular it intensifies the uncanniness and madness of the narrative.

I. A Dictionary of Superstition: Hedāyat and the Esoteric

> His other book is an autobiography that covers from the day the pen of his father met the ink of his mother till his corpse was buried, and also on occult sciences and odd techniques and jinn possession and deceptive tools and call of stars and talismans and legerdemain and jafr [gematria] and sihr [magic] and simiya and kimiya and himiya and limiya[24] and properties of terrestrial and celestial objects.
>
> —Sādeq Hedāyat, *The Pearl Cannon*[25]

Most biographers and scholars of Hedāyat have paid little to no attention to his interest in esotericism, yet there are two (of very few) instances that are noteworthy to this discussion. Ismael Jamshidi, based on his conversations with one of Hedāyat's brothers, notes that during the period of attending St. Louis School (that is between the age of 15 and 23), Hedāyat used to

[24] Simiya, kimiya, himiya and limiya are some of the different branches of islamicate occult sciences. Kimiya equals alchemy, but for the rest there is no proper equivalent in English.

[25] A.T.: Sadegh Hedayat, "The Pearl Cannon," in *Sadegh Hedayat Complete Works, Volume VIII: Historical Satire*, ed. Jahangir Hedayat (London: Sadegh Hedayat Foundation, 2014), 111. The 'book' mentioned in the passage is fictional.

order expensive books from Paris on occult sciences, and at family gatherings he would unsuccessfully try to hypnotize kids/teens his age. This is also when he became a vegetarian—a habit he maintained from that moment forward.[26] The other instance is Farzaneh recalling that during one of their meetings (Hedāyat being 45 or 46 years old at the time), Farzaneh shows Hedāyat a stone marble with an engraved image of two women that he had found in his (Farzaneh's) basement. Hedāyat, after taking a close look at the object, identifies the image as Harut and Marut[27]—two angels associated with sorcery and witchcraft in the islamicate culture.[28] What happens between these two instances of Hedāyat's life is his evolving understanding of the esoteric: from the fascination of a teenager with impossible powers of the unseen, to the expert gesture of one who recognizes a folk magical object.

More significant than these biographical moments are research papers of Hedāyat's that directly pertain to the study of esotericism, beginning with his French article "La magie en Perse" (Magic in Persia).[29] Hedāyat wrote this 10-page piece when living in Belgium (before going to France), and it was published in the French periodical *Le Voile d'Isis* (The Veil of Isis). This occult journal, founded in Paris in 1890 by Gérard Encausse (a.k.a. Papus), is perhaps most well-known for René Guénon's long history of contributions starting in 1925, with Paul Chacornac being its editor (within few years Guénon became the journal's principal contributor until 1936 that the journal's name changed to *Études Traditionnelles*). Hedāyat's article was

[26] Jamshidi, *Sadegh Hedayat's Suicide*, 43-44.

[27] Harut and Marut are mentioned in the Quran (2:102): "[…] Solomon did not disbelieve, but the satans disbelieved, teaching people sorcery and that which was sent down to the two angels at Babylon, Harut and Marut […]." Translation from: *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: Harper One, 2015). Some philological studies suggest that the names Harut and Marut are of Zoroastrian origin. For more information look at: A. Shapur Shahbazi, "HĀRUT and MĀRUT," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, last modified March 20, 2012.

[28] Farzaneh, *Meetings with Sadeq Hedayat*, 140.

[29] This article and two short stories ("Sampingue" and "Lunatique") are the only published works of Hedayat that were originally written in French.

published in July 1926, during which period *Le Voile d'Isis* was heavily influenced by Guénon's rising Traditionalism.[30] In a postcard sent to Hedāyat in October 1926, Chacornac notifies him of the publication of Hedāyat's article (accompanied by three copies of the issue); Chacornac's formal tone suggests that they only know each other through Hedāyat sending them the article.[31] That Hedāyat knew of occult circles and publishers/publications in Paris before going there is interesting; yet we do not know if Chacornac and Hedāyat were in touch afterward or if they ever met. Hedāyat has only two other known French pieces (short stories "Sampingue" and "Lunatique"), and the direction of his aesthetics in writing and his approach to form indicates his attraction to the Surrealist movement of the time. He was in awe of Joyce's modernism, and *The Blind Owl* has been compared to Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) for their similar expressionist style.[32]

I must stress in the meantime that Hedāyat's approach to esotericism differs greatly from Guénon's. For one thing, Hedāyat was not a perennialist who would believe in the idea that "the world's major religions are linked to some form of overarching perennial doctrine."[33] This is most evident in his treatment of Islam and Zoroastrianism, and his efforts to distinguish their differences and to emphasize their influences on each other instead of looking for their "divine shared cores." On the other hand, Hedāyat might be considered a sort of traditionalist due to his interest in ancient Persia and Zoroastrianism, but unlike the Traditionalists like Guénon, Hedāyat did not have a religionist agenda, and did not "practice" any particular religion. His practice was to read and write, and in the final analysis he should be evaluated as a secular researcher of

[30] Jean-Pierre Laurant, "Papus," in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, 913-915; William Quinn, "Gu*é*non, Ren*é* Jean Marie Joseph," in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, 442-445.

[31] Sadegh Hedayat, *The Rare Works of Sadegh Hedayat*, ed. Jahangir Hedayat (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2017), 91-2.

[32] Manouchehr Mohandessi, "Hedayat and Rilke," *Comparative Literature* 23, no. 3 (1971): 209-216.

[33] Peter King, "Ren*é* Gu*é*non and Traditionalism," in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (London: Routledge, 2015), 308.

folklore and a modernist fiction writer for whom literature was an autonomous field of cultural production. Additionally, considering Guénon and Traditionalism's influences in Iran through the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy and the likes of Henry Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hedāyat was both intellectually and politically distinct from this current. In his letters to Shahid-Nouraie, Hedāyat expresses worries about the promotion of Islam in Iran, partly due to French Oriantalists' rising interest in Islamic philosophy and mysticism, but also because of the growing empowerment of Muslim clergies and Islamicists. These letters, alongside Farzaneh's conversations, show that Hedāyat had been in touch with Corbin in the late 1940s, and though he says nothing disrespectful about Corbin, he is overall pessimist and suspicious of such projects that seek to revive Sufism and Islamic mysticism. Among Hedāyat's commentaries on Sufism is a 1932 short story, "The Man Who Killed his Passions," where he values the heritage of Sufi poetry as an interesting and truthful speech, while he despises the hypocrisy of Sufi-dressed professors and clergies of his time.[34] The unique thing about Hedayat's modernism however, is neither his rejection of Islamic customs and embrace of Zoroastrian cultures, nor his Aryanist anti-Semitism (that without any hesitation must be condemned today); rather, it is his vision for studying "superstition" and fringe esoteric and occult materials in a systematic manner that distinguishes him from the rest of his Iranian contemporary authors.

Hedāyat's article on "Magic in Persia" begins with an annotated bibliography of a few Zoroastrian texts, and then moves on to discuss theological doctrines attributed to Zoroaster, including his response to the problem of evil through the concept of *Ahriman*—God's adversary in the Zoroastrian religion. Hedāyat uses the term "magic" (La Magie) as a diversion from Zoroaster's original teachings via the growing hegemony of the magus (Les Mages)—the

[34] Available in English: Sadegh Hedayat, "The Man Who Killed his Passions," in *Three Drops of Blood*, trans. Deborah Miller Mostaghel (London: Oneworld Classics, 2008), 85-97.

Zoroastrian priestly class. In the conclusion, Hedāyat argues that while nowadays we sarcastically laugh at the magical and occultist tendencies of the ancients, these theories and experiences were the science of their time, and have led to the progress of modern sciences like physics and chemistry. He further catalogues scientific developments in the fields of hypnotism and magnetism that illustrate the discovery of new mysteries that people of thousands of years ago already knew about through the realm of nature.[35] Although the article is now fairly outdated (as a study of Zoroastrianism), it documents Hedāyat's early research interests in magic and in Zoroastrianism that continued throughout his career. With respect to the former (i.e. magic), Hedāyat dedicated his time studying Iranian folklore; as for the latter (i.e. Zoroastrianism), he researched and translated Zoroastrian texts from Middle Persian. The Farsi translation of "Magic in Persia" (from French) was published in Iran in 1948; its translator is unknown, likely to be Hedāyat himself.

Hedāyat's approach to magic and esotericism evolved over the years and became part of his pioneering anthropological/ethnographical studies on Iranian folklore. In 1931 he published "General Scheme for Research on Folklore of a Region" (in Farsi and in Tehran). This comprehensive article is a guide or template for how to perform this type of folklore research and write effective ethnographies. He details the topics that an ethnographer needs to cover in addition to some principal methodological considerations. The economic life of a region, its food and clothes, its languages, literatures, and arts, as well as its ethical codes and family structure are some of the main areas that Hedāyat elaborates on in this general scheme, but he also dedicates two sections to religion and magic. The section on religion is entitled "Folk Religion: in Search for Divinity," while the section on magic is entitled "Mysterious Life: Folk Sorcery in

[35] Sadegh Hedayat, "La magie en Perse," in *Sadegh Hedayat Complete Works, Volume III: Studies in the Folklore of Iran*, ed. Jahangir Hedayat (London: Sadegh Hedayat Foundation, 2009), 371-85.

Search for Power." This distinction between religion and magic is of course typical of the sociological and anthropological studies of religion during the 19th and early 20th centuries (and is reflected in "Magic in Persia" as well). In the section on magic, Hedāyat further notes the research significance of talismans, magical objects, potions and medicine, animal possession, séance, jinn, divination, astrology, and dream interpretation. Later in the article, Hedāyat remarks that folklore research is no hobby and needs patience, investigation, precise thinking, and scientific knowledge, while emphasizing that "the first condition [of folklore research] is complete impartiality, since in folklore research there is no room for racial, ethical, linguistic, and religious prejudice; rather only the objective must be written down."[36] With such an approach, Hedāyat was one of the pioneers of ethnography and folklore research in Iran. Some post-Hedāyat fiction writers associated with the left, such as Jalāl Al-e Ahmad and Gholām-Hossein Sāedi, followed Hedāyat in writing ethnographies of small villages in Iran, with Sāedi being the most engaged with "magical superstition" of rural areas.

Neyrangestān, which is arguably Hedāyat's most engaging and lasting work of folklore research in Farsi, was published in Tehran in 1933. This 200-page book is a critical collection or dictionary of "superstitious" beliefs and rituals common among Iranian people, while also containing an account of some Zoroastrian festivals and carnivals like Nowruz (the spring equinox and the Persian/Zoroastrian New Year) that Hedāyat deems "good" and "honorable." The title of this volume is a deliberate one. "Neyrang" is a Farsi word (from nērang in Pahlavi/Middle Persian) that in contemporary usage connotes "trickery" and "deception," though its first meaning in the *Dehkhoda Dictionary* is "magic (sihr)," "enchantment (afsun)," and "talisman (telesm)." Elsewhere, in his most occult-themed short story "The Abu-Nasr Throne,"

[36] Hedayat, "General Scheme for Research on Folklore of a Region," in *Sadegh Hedayat Complete Works, Volume III: Studies in the Folklore of Iran*, 249.

Hedāyat himself uses the English word "incantation" as a proper equivalent for "neyrang."[37] In the Zoroastrian context, "nērang" signifies passages recited as words of power in religious rituals, and "neyrang-nāmeh" refers to texts that contain these incantations and spells.[38] "Neyrangestān" (nērang yaštan in Pahlavi) is one of these Pahlavi texts that Hedāyat named his book after it.[39] In the introduction, Hedāyat asserts that investigating folklore beliefs is not only of scientific and psychological importance, but it also sheds light on philosophical and historical issues that would help understanding the origins of customs, religions, and myths, as well as their transmissions between different cultures. He mentions researches of Ernst Haeckel and Edward Tylor and advocates for an evolutionist perspective that understands "superstition" (whether ancient or modern) as reminiscent of "primitive cultures" and their responses to the enigmas of nature.

The altered meaning of "neyrang" in Farsi from incantation/spell to trickery/deception reflects the rejection of Zoroastrian rituals in the islamicate cultures—once a legitimate practice turns into heretical fraud. Hedāyat seems well aware that to distinguish between the reality and the myth of Zoroastrian beliefs is no easy task due to this centuries-old process of rejection, in addition to obvious obstacles of the rarity of original manuscripts and the changes in alphabets of Iranian languages. His first objective is thus to collect as much data and information as possible from both written and oral cultures of Iran (many of them belonging to islamicate cultures), under thematic chapters such as "marriage," "pregnancy," "diseases," "dream," "death," "plants and seeds," "birds," "reptiles," etc.. Throughout, he makes no judgement of his own over any of

[37] Hedayat, "The Abu-Nasr Throne," in *Complete Works, Volume I: The Short Stories*, 311.

[38] Mary Boyce, "Pādyāb and Nērang: Two Pahlavi Terms Further Considered," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 54, n. 2 (1991): 284. Antonio Panaino, "MAGIC i. MAGICAL ELEMENTS IN THE AVESTA AND NĒRANG LITERATURE," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, last modified July 20, 2008.

[39] *Nirangestan (Manuscript T 58, with word-by-word translation into Persian)*, ed. Mahyar Nawabi and Kh. M. Jamasp (Shiraz: The Asia Institute of Pahlavi University, 1976).

the listed entries; as if saying: these are *objectively* a waste basket of superstition, and though most of them appear invalid to reason, they are social facts and valuable as knowledge that enables one to ask critical questions of them. The 2016 dictionary of *Folklore Beliefs of Iranian People* is 1200-pages and is the latest expansion of this kind of resource that Hedāyat started.

What matters the most about *Neyrangestān* here—and this is something that to the best of my knowledge no scholar or critic of Hedāyat (in Farsi or in other languages) has ever pointed out before, and hence it is a case of 'detective criticism' on my part—is Hedāyat's use of materials from *Neyrangestān* in *The Blind Owl*. These resource materials—most significantly on the "shadow" and the "double" that are associated with the "jinn" and the "div" in *Neyrangestān*—are no minor references in *The Blind Owl*; they are rather embedded at the very core of the story: first-person writing of a possessed, shadowed opium smoker. Reading *The Blind Owl* in the light/shadow of *Neyrangestān* is my main objective in the next section.

Hedāyat has used esoteric-related materials elsewhere in his fiction as well. In *The Pearl Cannon*, he occasionally shows off his knowledge of fringe terminology of islamicate occultism, and in "The Patriot" (where the protagonist is a caricature of Hedāyat himself), he quotes and agrees with Hermes Trismegistus that "whatever is to be found in the terrestrial world also exists in the celestial world."[40] "The Abu-Nasr Throne" (also from *The Stray Dog*, 1942) is the other notable piece: three European archeologists at an excavation site near the city of Shiraz find a mummy, and with it a piece of writing in Pahlavi language (rolled in a metal pipe, hung from the mummy's neck). One of the archeologists, Dr. Warner who is immersed in "reading strange and exotic books on magic and sorcery," dedicates weeks to decode the text which turns out to be a *neyrang*—instructions for a ritual to raise the mummy. Hedāyat's use of occult materials in this

[40] A.T.: Hedayat, "The Patriot," in *Sadegh Hedayat Complete Works, Volume I: The Short Stories*, 369.

story intensifies its gothic-horror atmosphere, while the story also accentuates the inability of researchers in deciphering ancient "magical" texts of dead languages. Similar themes appear in "Fire-Worshipper" (from *Buried Alive*, 1930), a short story about the conversion of a French Orientalist to Zoroastrianism after he observes exotic rituals and prayers conducted by two old men in Pahlavi language at the site of an ancient Zoroastrian necropolis and the Kaaba of Zoroaster. "I was amazed that after this length of time," says the protagonist, "in spite of the effort expended by the Muslims to destroy and overthrow this faith, this ancient religion still had followers who, secretly but in the open air, threw themselves to the ground before the fire!"[41]

Overall, Hedāyat dealt with three broad categories of esotericism: islamicate occultism, Zoroastrian materials, and European traditions. We know very little about the latter; his interest in hypnotism from his teenage years possibly means the books he was ordering from France at the time were on mesmerism and animal magnetism. Still, following European traditions, Hedāyat invested in "scientific" (anthropological/ethnographical) studies of religion and magic, while also educating himself in Freudian psychoanalysis under the influence of surrealism and modernism. With respect to islamicate occultism, Hedāyat expresses a wide and encyclopedic knowledge of islamicate occult sciences (ulum al-ghariba); yet, his approach to islamicate occultism is not much different from his treatment of Islamic orthodoxy—he despises them both as discourses of manipulation monopolized by the clergies. Hedāyat's most direct commentary on Muslim clergies and Islamic orthodoxy is a 1930 satirical piece, *The Islamic Mission to European Lands*—a story of a group of Muslim missionaries traveling to Europe to convert people to Islam. Like *The Pearl Canon*, Hedāyat left this piece unpublished, knowing its publication would cause uproar among the Islamicists. After all, it was in 1946 that Ahmad

[41] Sadegh Hedayat, "Fire-Worshipper," in *Three Drops of Blood*, trans. Deborah Miller Mostaghel (London: Oneworld Classics, 2008), 43.

Kasravi—an influential historian and social reformist who had written critical and controversial treatises on Shiism, Bahaism, and Sufism—was assassinated by the Shia fundamentalist group Fadāyān-e Islam and was buried somewhere secret in fear of Islamicists' further actions.[42] If Hedāyat "chose" to die in Paris, it might have been a decision to keep his corpse and grave in peace and out of the reach of the Islamicists.

In fact, part of Hedāyat's countercultural legacy goes back to such pieces that harshly and viciously criticize the hypocrisy and opportunism of the religious class. In the records of his attention to the rise and empowerment of Islamicists also lies his prophecy: that if the Islamicists take over the state, chaos and madness would rule. Passages from *The Pearl Canon* for example read as if they are descriptions of a post-1979 Iran, or an Afghanistan under the Taliban's rule. When the new Portuguese Queen (Albuqerq Dokht)—who in possession of the canon has colonized Goa in India—decides to invade Iran, she is advised to convert from the canon-worship religion into Islam in order to ease the invasion. She converts and even makes a pilgrimage to Mecca. On her return to Goa, she establishes an Islamic fundamentalist government. She orders the people to convert to Islam and follow the Sharia law; otherwise they have to pay a levy. She bans the Latin alphabet, and orders "to close the dancing clubs, tear apart the paintings, break the statues, burn the musical instruments, throw the books in fire, and destroy the palaces and castles and public gardens and bars and universities and fire-temples and temples of canon-worship and churches which do not pay their levies, and instead to build mosques and imāmzādehs and hussainiyas and minarets and pillories and opium dens and […]."[43] On the radio, Mullahs non-stop preach the people in Arabic, and the "spellcaster" (doā-

[42] Mohammad Amini, "KASRAVI, AḤMAD ii. ASSASSINATION," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, last modified May 2, 2012. Hedayat writes about the strange, shocking, and suspicious news of Kasravi's assassination in a letter to Shahid-Nouraie in March 1946. Hedayat, *82 Letters to Hasan Shahid-Nouraie,* 55-56.

[43] A.T.: Hedayat, "The Pearl Cannon," 147.

nevis) and the "exorcist" (jinn-gir) are on high demands, and religious rituals are based on weeping and mourning and worship of the dead. The Queen also orders the cultivation and production of opium in Goa, offering it for free to her followers. The pairing of opium and islamicate occultism (spellcasting and exorcism) within few paragraphs of *The Pearl Canon*, hints at the same pairing in *The Blind Owl* where the narrator is consumed by opium and becomes "the old peddler"—who is described as having "two horseshoes, several different kinds of colored beads," and few other strange objects as wares. He also carries with him "a talisman wrapped around his bicep," and reads from the Quran on Thursday nights.[44] There are passages from *The Blind Owl* that further reflect the lost, confused, and infidel religiosity of its opium smoker narrator:

> Several days ago she [the nanny] brought me a prayer book that had a layer of dust on it—not only had I no use for a prayer book, but likewise no sort of rabble book, writing, or idea had any use for me. What use had I for their lies and nonsense, was not I, myself, the product of a long line of past generations and were not their inherited experiences found in me, was not the past in my being?—But none of this has ever had any effect on me: neither mosque, nor the call of the muezzin, nor ablutions and spitting, and bending over and standing upright before an almighty god with absolute power that one has to converse with in Arabic. Beforehand, when I was healthy, if I several times obligatorily went to the mosque and tried to harmonize my heart with those of others, inevitably my eyes would wonder and stare at the glazed tiles and the forms and patterns of the walls

[44] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 32. Of the references to esotericism in *The Blind Owl*, another one is noteworthy. When telling about his nanny, the narrator mentions that "She goes to the sorcerer, fortuneteller and the jam-zan [a kind of fortuneteller], begins the divination and confers with them about my situation," and that "Several days ago she brought me a prayer book" (p. 53). These references are not as focal or interpretative as shadow and double, but they certainly intensify the occult and mysterious sensation of the book.

> of the mosque, transporting me to the realm of pleasant dreams, and in this way I would find a means of escape for myself—During prayer I would close my eyes and hold my palms in front of my face—in this night that I had created for myself, like the words they unconsciously repeat while sleeping, I would pray, but the utterance of these words was not from deep within my heart, for I would much rather talk to a friend or an acquaintance than with God, with Almighty God! For God was too much for me.
>
> Whilst lying in a warm and damp bed, all of these issues were not worth more than a grain of barley to me, and at these times I did not want to know whether a God truly existed or if it was an object the rulers on earth have conceived to consolidate their divine station and ravage their subjects—to reflect the images on earth onto the sky—I only wanted to know whether or not I would make it through the night until the next morning—Confronted with death, I sensed how weak and childish were religion, faith and belief, almost a kind of diversion for healthy and fortunate persons—Confronted with the horrifying actuality of death and the suffering that I went through, all that they had inculcated in me about reward and punishment of the soul and the Day of Resurrection had become an insipid lie, and when confronted with the fear of death the prayers that they had taught me had not effect.[45]

Hedāyat's observations indicate that islamicate occultism was not as much of a "rejected" discourse in the early 20th century Iran; though it was marginal and non-normative, it still acted as an instrument of manipulation in the hands of the dominant and orthodox Islamic discourses.

[45] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 53-54.

This dynamic changed in the following decades; while Islamicists—through their seminaries (hawzas) and network of mosques—grew strong enough to establish a theocracy with the 1979 "Islamic" revolution, the hegemony of the institution of the university (beginning with the establishment of the University of Tehran as the country's first university in 1934) grew in strength as well, and with that, a secular and technocratic system of higher education was shaped that further marginalized "superstitious" and "invalid" forms of knowledge like islamicate occultism. The case of Iran is one example of the globalization of the rejection of esotericism and occultism through the modern institution of the university that dictated a categorization of branches of knowledge—different from that of the Islamic seminaries/hawzas—to the educated class. Hedāyat, in his folklore research, paved the way for secular and academic studies of cultures—the Institute for Social Studies and Researches (later the Faculty of Social Sciences) at the University of Tehran was established in 1958, while Hedāyat had published some of his independent research on folklore in early 1930s. On the other hand, Hedāyat did not hide his fears of the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism in his works of fiction during both his nationalist and internationalist periods (though out of the same fear he left controversial texts like *The Pearl Canon* and *The Islamic Mission to European Lands* unpublished). This is fear of an "opium Islam" that, if it needs to, would employ occultism as a powerful social tool in its favor, and leads to nothing other than degradation, corruption, and chaos. There is even the curious resonance between *The Pearl Canon*'s brief mention of an imaginary "Islam Limited Company" (in Al-Andalus)[46] and Burroughs' "Islam Incorporated" from *Naked Lunch*. In his letters Hedāyat goes as far to claim that Shia clergies are thieves who believe that "tout est permis" (everything is permitted).[47]

[46] Hedayat, "The Pearl Cannon," 82.

[47] Hedayat, *82 Letters to Hasan Shahid-Nouraie*, 90-91.

The third category of esotericism that Hedāyat engaged with (besides that of the islamicate and Europe) is Zoroastrianism. Hedāyat understood Zoroastrian traditions (including their texts, rituals, and places of worship) as discourses that had been bluntly rejected in Persia following the Muslim conquest of the 7th century, even though he was seemingly aware that the etymology of the word "magic" in Greek and Latin hints at the "othering" of Zoroastrianism even prior to the arrival of Islam. Whereas the young Hedāyat yearns for a revival of the lost ancient wisdom of Zoroastrianism as a counter-discourse to that of Islam (as in "Fire-Worshipper" for example), the late Hedāyat, after his trip to India, seemed disillusioned with such traditionalist and nostalgic endeavors and instead focused on scholarly and secular research on Zoroastrianism, becoming the first Iranian to translate Pahlavi manuscripts into Farsi. These translations are accompanied by critical introductions and extensive footnotes written by Hedāyat, while his selection of texts appears to be directed by Bahramgor Anklesaria—the Parsi scholar of Zoroastrianism in Mumbai who was Hedāyat's mentor in the Pahlavi language and who had previously translated most of these texts to English.

In translating and commenting on these Pahlavi texts, Hedāyat shows interest in a historiography of religious traditions, while also being attracted to the literary and aesthetic values of the texts. In the introduction to *Kār-nāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān* for example, Hedāyat labels the text a "Biographie romancée" and comments on its influence on the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi (early 11th century). His commentary on polemical texts such as *Gizistag Abālīš* and *Škand Gumānīg-Wīzār* however reflect an enthusiasm for questioning and challenging Islamic doctrines in particular as the discourse that has oppressed and rejected Zoroastrianism the most

over the centuries. The two apocalyptic texts of *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspig* and *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* as well further reflect this latter point.[48]

For the late Hedāyat, Zoroastrianism became a more historicized and demythologized phenomenon. Zoroastrianism is, in its totality, a "rejected" religious discourse (rejected to a certain extent by Greco-Roman cultures through associating the Zoroastrian *magus/magi* with *magic*, and then facing a wider and wilder rejection and demolition by the arrival of Islam); yet, Zoroastrianism is not entirely nor essentially an "esoteric" discourse; it has both exoteric and esoteric elements, and its exoticness diminishes when one looks closely at the remains of its material cultures—such as the Pahlavi texts—living in the margins. Nevertheless, and whether or not Hedāyat predicted their reception, his Pahlavi translations are representatives of a broader political current that seeks the "roots" of Iranian nationalism in the pre-Islam Zoroastrian Persia.

Meanwhile, Hedāyat's late fiction speaks of 'pasts' and 'futures' of madness and chaos—the psychic madness and opium-induced metamorphosis and degradation of *The Blind Owl*, and the chaotic circus of colonial and religious desiring-machines of *The Pearl Canon*. The 'present' though is *Haji Agha* and *Ms. Alaviyeh*—the former a socialist-realist account of the hypocrisy and pretense of the Muslim bourgeoisie, and the latter a satirical account of a Shia group on pilgrimage to Mashhad which, full of dialogues in the language of "lower classes," reads almost like a dictionary of swear words.

II. *The Blind Owl* from Paris to Mumbai to Rey

> I saw the angel of death at the crack of dawn
> Wearing no shoes, slipping away from Rey
>
> —Khaqani, *Divan*[49]

[48] For more information on Hedayat's Pahlavi translations look at: Touraj Daryaee, "HEDAYAT, SADEQ iv. TRANSLATIONS OF PAHLAVI TEXTS," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, last modified March 20, 2012.

The Blind Owl is a 150-page novella, the first-person, stream of consciousness narrative of an opium smoking painter living in the city of Rey (the oldest part what is now greater Tehran) who is writing the romantic and painful story of his life and his tragic love affair for his own shadow.[50] The book was first self-published in an edition of roughly 50 copies by Hedāyat himself during his short stay in Mumbai, India in 1937.[51] This edition is fully in Hedāyat's handwriting (plain and with no crossed out words or corrections), with his own cover design and drawings, stamped with the words: "Not for sale or publication in Iran." Scanned copies of the Mumbai manuscript in Hedāyat's handwriting are now easily accessible, and due to its precise paragraphing and specific use of punctuation marks, it definitely serves as the most authentic and reliable source to approach the novella. Unfortunately, the divisions of chapters and paragraphs

[49] A.T.: Khaqani, *Divan*, ed. Zia-al-Din Sajjadi (Tehran: Zavvar Publication, 2014), 444. The line is from a famous poem of Khaqani (12th century) describing the city of Rey where he visited during one of his journeys. Rey, also known as Rhages, is an ancient city now part of the Greater Tehran. It is the city where the story of *The Blind Owl* takes place.

[50] Because of its non-liner narrative, it is difficult to offer a plot of *The Blind Owl*. Here I quote Azadibougar's comprehensive summary of the story in length: "*The Blind Owl* is a first person monologue throughout and is made up of two parts. It opens on the narrator's complaints about the pain and suffering of life and the impossibility of communicating them to people, lest they laugh at you; as such, it establishes a dismal tone that continues to the end. Addicted to alcohol and narcotics, the narrator seems to be living in an alienated area near Tehran and repeatedly paints the exact same scene on pen cases. The scene involves two figures: an old man and a young woman who is offering him a flower. He recounts a mysterious event which, as he claims, has changed his life forever: by coincidence, he sees an ethereal woman who seems to have the features of the figure he has been routinely drawing on pen cases; he is obsessed with her memory and a while later she walks into his place, lies down on his bed and dies. Mesmerized by her eyes, he cuts the corpse into pieces, packs it into a suitcase and buries it in a cemetery nearby. Upon his return back home and high on opium, he is thrown into the world of the second part. In this part, the narrator (who may or may not be the very same narrator in the first part) is married to a woman he maltreats and names *lakkateh* ('bitch'), is addicted to opium and lives in a room from where he can see and hear shopkeepers and people in an alley which seems to be in a town. A misanthrope, just like the narrator of the first part, he constantly refers to people outside derogatorily as *rajjaleh* (connoting 'cheap, coward, compromising') and suspects that his wife is sleeping with others even though she refuses to go to bed with him. Throughout this part and in flashbacks to his past history we learn more about him. For instance: his mom was an Indian temple dancer, his dad and uncle competed with each other to marry her, he was raised by his aunt (*lakkateh*'s mom) and his childhood was far from pleasant. At the end, he kills his wife and realizes that he looks like, and that he actually is, the old man who was always sitting out in the street selling odd stuff. Afterwards, he wakes up from what seems to have been a long dream in a location which seems to be his place in the first part of the novel." Omid Azadibougar, *The Persian Novel: Ideology, Fiction and Form in the Periphery* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), 103-104.

[51] For details of Hedayat's trip to India in Farsi look at: Nadeem Akhtar, *Hedayat in India* (Tehran: Cheshmeh Publication, 2016), 23-25; and in English look at: Nadeem Akhtar, "HEDAYAT, SADEQ v. Hedayat in India," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, last modified March 12, 2015.

in the Mumbai manuscript have not been transcribed accurately in most of the later Farsi and English publications of *The Blind Owl*.[52] This is of particular importance for any interpretation of the book, since part of the text (the second half, except the last two pages) that comes inside quotation marks must be read as a separate discourse. Towards the end of first half, the narrator starts to smoke opium, and the second half is his opium-driven recollection of memories—both his personal memories, and a memory of the ancient city of Rey.

It is not clear when and where Hedāyat wrote *The Blind Owl*, though Farzaneh suggests that he had finished it during his first stay in Paris, and in Mumbai made only minor changes to the text.[53] Hedāyat's decision to publish *The Blind Owl* outside of Iran was in part a cosmopolitan gesture, but was also due to unpleasant circumstances. In 1936, after the publication of one of his satirical works (*Vagh Vagh Sahab*), Hedāyat was banned by the state to publish any of his creative works for five years.[54] This was one of the reasons for him to focus more on research projects and translations during this period, but also to take advantage of an opportunity offered by a friend (Shin Partow, the Iranian vice-consul in Mumbai) to travel to India. This turned out to be quite an intellectual adventure, an opportunity to study Zoroastrian Pahlavi texts among the Parsis, and to publish the very first copies of *The Blind Owl*. Hedāyat circulated most copies of this edition only among his friends, posting some of them directly from Mumbai.

In the aftermath of the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941 during the World War II, and the abdication of the erstwhile Reza Shah (replaced by his son Muhammad Reza), Iran experienced a period of more tolerant political environment (that only lasted till the 1953

[52] For more on the paragraphing and sectioning of *The Blind Owl* (as well as the history of its different editions) look at Naveed Noori's introduction to his English translation of the book.

[53] Farzaneh, *Meetings with Sadeq Hedayat*, 111 and 135.

[54] Shahram Parastesh, *Narrative of Absolute Desolation: A Burdieuian Analysis of* The Blind Owl *within Iran's Literary Field* (Tehran: Saless Publication, 2014), 243.

American-led coup d'état where the democratically elected prime minister Mosaddegh was overthrown). *The Blind Owl* got published in Tehran in 1941 in the format of a feuilleton and later as a typed book. After the 1979 revolution, the book (alongside most of Hedāyat's works, especially those that are hostile to Islam and Muslims) was categorically banned by the Islamic Republic due its "deviant" and "Westoxified"[55] content. Still, underground copies of *The Blind Owl* and other works of Hedāyat have been widely circulating in the post-1979 era, and numerous books and articles on Hedāyat (scholarly or otherwise) have been consistently published in Iran and abroad.

Notable interpretations and academic studies of *The Blind Owl* can fall into six general categories:

(1) Psychological approaches: Jalal Sattari (1998) reads *The Blind Owl* as a narrative of "complex" like that of Oedipus, and with Cyrus Shamissa's Jungian interpretation (2000) and Mohammad Sanati's Freudian interpretation (2001), this category has been one of the most influential. Given Hedāyat was himself well-read in Freudian psychoanalysis, and that in addition to works of Freud he was familiar in particular with Otto Rank's *The Double* (1914),[56] these psychological approaches are largely justified and facilitating. Still, analyzing every small detail of *The Blind Owl* based on a Jungian or Freudian system misses social and political contexts within which the book was written.

[55] "Westoxification" or "Occidentosis" is a term coined by the Heideggerian Iranian philosopher Ahmad Fardid in the 1950s, and was later famously popularized by Jalal Al-e Ahmad in his 1962 essay titled after the term. *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (2003) defines the term as "the fascination with and dependence upon the West to the detriment of traditional, historical, and cultural ties to Islam and Islamic world" (p. 337). While Al-e Ahmad's use of the term connotes an anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist stance, following the 1979 revolution the term has been widely used by Islamicists and traditionalists to denounce writers and intellectuals who express a conciliatory approach towards "the West." From this reactionary and ideological perspective, Hedāyat is one of the most "Westoxified" Iranian writers whose works promotes deviance from "the righteous path of Islam." An example of such rhetoric in Farsi is Muhammad Reza Sarshar's 2016 *The Secret of Sadegh Hedayat's Fame* which includes a chapter on Hedayat's Westoxification.

[56] Farzaneh, *Meetings with Sadeq Hedayat*, 258.

(2) Nationalist approaches: Mashallah Ajudani (2006) reads *The Blind Owl* alongside Hedāyat's nationalist pieces as a glorification of the lost pre-Islam Persia. This impactful reading is indifferent to transformations of Hedāyat's views on politics and history. *The Blind Owl* rather shows Hedāyat's disillusionment with nationalist ideologies, and it marks a shattering moment in his career where he begins to become conscious of nationalism as a mirage and a cover for the authoritarian nation-building project of the Pahlavi state. Homa Katouzian's extensive surveys of Hedāyat's works also fit best in this category.

(3) Critical sociological approaches: Jalal Al-e Ahmad's 1941 essay (published few months after Hedāyat's death) set the tone for Hedāyat's reception by the socialist left. Al-e Ahmad recognizes Hedāyat's body of work as "an accurate mirror of the social situation of Iran" during the 1930s and 1940s, while summarizing the grand meaning of *The Blind Owl* as "a battle and collation of ancient Aryan doubt, of Nirvana of Buddha, of Persian mysticism, of ascetic isolation of an Easterner, [and] of an Iranian, escaping inside all his/her memories."[57] Youssef Ishaghpur's (1991 French, 1994 Farsi) sees in *The Blind Owl* a synthesis of Khayyām's pessimism and the dark romanticism of Poe, Baudelaire, Nerval, and Rilke. Shahram Parastesh (2014) offers a Bourdieuian analysis that situates *The Blind Owl* within Iran's "field" of literature.

(4) Feminist approaches: Reza Baraheni (1995) points out the passivity of female characters in *The Blind Owl*, and Kara Abdolmaleki (2013) compares the female gaze of the novella to David Lynch's *Lost Highway*. Abbas Maroufi's 2002 Farsi novella *The Body of Farhad* is a re-telling of *The Blind Owl* in words of the ethereal woman (the main female

[57] A.T.: Jalal Al-e Ahmad, "Hedayat of *The Blind Owl*," in *Seven Articles* (Tehran: Majid Publication, 2007), 15 and 25.

character). A comprehensive study of gender and sexuality in Hedāyat's body of work is still to be done.

(5) World and Comparative Literature approaches: Michael Beard (1990) speaks of *The Blind Owl* as an "international" work, and a mirror through which "Western" culture sees itself transformed. Pascale Casanova has dedicated a few paragraphs to Hedāyat and *The Blind Owl* in her *The World Republic of Letters* (2004),[58] and Anastassiya Andrianova (2013) has offered a critical and inspiring study of English and French translations of *The Blind Owl* in light of the contemporary debates of world and comparative literature. The two comprehensive monographs of Omid Azadibougar (2014 & 2020) also belong to this category. Indian allusions in *The Blind Owl* are explored in details by Iraj Bashiri in an essay accompanying his English translation of the novella (2013).

(6) Art History approaches: Habib Ahmadzadeh tracks the influence of German expressionist cinema (namely *The Golem*, 1915; *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1920; and *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*, 1922) on Hedāyat's gothic-horror fiction including *The Blind Owl*. Siamak Zende-del (2018) compares the repeated archetypal scene/painting in *The Blind Owl* with illustrated versions of Khayyām's *Rubaiyat* in Farsi, the first of which is Hedāyat's critical edition of Khayyām (1935) accompanied by miniature paintings of André Sevruguin (aka Darvish).[59]

In what follows, I will build upon this scholarship first by showing the significance of reading *The Blind Owl* in light/shadow of *Neyrangestān*, and then through situating the novella

[58] Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 239. For a critical discussion on Casanova's approach look at: Azadibougar, *World Literature and Hedayat's Poetics of Modernity*, 68-9.

[59] Siamak Zende-del, "The Shadow of Khayyām's Rubaiyat on the Cover of Pen Case," *Transformations of Iran's Visual Arts: A Critical Study* (Tehran: Nazar Publication, 2018), 203-227.

in a context of European decadent drug literature in conversation with Persianate and islamicate fantastic literatures.

The Shadow is the Double is the Jinn is the Div is the Owl is 'Writing'

The Blind Owl starts off with a famous and touching paragraph describing an incomprehensible state that belongs to the realm of the supernatural:

> In life there are wounds that, like leprosy, silently scrape at and consume the soul, in solitude—This agony can not be revealed to anyone, because they generally tend to group this incomprehensible suffering with strange and otherwise rare events, and if one speaks or writes about it, then people, by way of popular perception and their own beliefs, receive it with a doubtful and mocking smile—because man has still found no cure for this and the only available medicine is amnesia by means of wine and artificial sleep brought on by opium [afion] and other narcotics.—But alas, the effects of these medicines are at best temporary and, instead of providing relief, after a while only add to the intensity of the pain—Will there be a day when someone discovers the secrets of these supernatural events, that reflection of the shadow of the soul that manifests itself between awakening and sleep, in a state of purgatory and unconsciousness?
>
> I am only going to relate one of these events which I myself experienced, and which moved me to such a degree that I shall never forget it […].[60]

In order to recount this event, the narrator must tell his life story and speak of his painting career in a fragmented and enigmatic manner. There is one scene that has haunts him in particular:

[60] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 3.

> […] what is strange, what is unbelievable, is that I do not know why, from the beginning, all the scenes of my paintings appeared exactly the same: I always painted a hunched-over old man […]—In front of him a damsel in a long black dress […]—had I seen this scene before or did it appear before me in a dream? I do not know. The only thing I am certain of is that I always ended up painting the same subject and the same scene, my hand involuntarily painted this scene […].[61]

Variations of this archetypal scene repeat throughout the narrative as a form of déjà vu, an emanation of the category of the *uncanny*—"that species of the frightening that," in words of Freud, "goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar."[62] As the narrator dives inside his memory and recollections of the past that go beyond his personal unconscious and speak of a collective unconscious (particularly with respect to the city of Rey), things once familiar and homely, including locations, people, and his understanding and image of self, become sources of angst and fear. The text is occupied with dreams, memories, and tomb and death, but also two particular emanations of the uncanny that play a vital role throughout—the *shadow* and the *double*.

Early on, the narrator explains that the reason for his writing is to get to know himself through his shadow:

> if now I have decided to write, it is only to introduce myself to my shadow—a bent shadow on the wall, and it is as if the more I write, it devours it with an even greater appetite—It is for him that I wish to carry out an experiment: to see if we

[61] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 5.

[62] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 124.

> can come to know each other better—because from the time that I cut myself off from others, I have wanted to know myself better.[63]

And few paragraphs later:

> I have to write down all of this to make sure I have not been in error myself, I have to explain all of this to my shadow that is cast on the wall.[64]

It is likely that Hedāyat had been familiar with Poe's "Shadow—A Parable" (From *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, 1840) which Baudelaire had translated into French (alongside "William Wilson" and other stories in *Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires*, 1857). The opening paragraph of Poe's short piece about the shadow resonates *The Blind Owl*'s narrator too in terms of its confessionary tone and direct style that warns readers of a horrifying tale that raises suspicion and doubt of the majority; a confession that though its narrator is dead and immersed amongst the shadows, the text in writing possesses a haunting quality:

> YE WHO READ are still among the living; but I who write shall have long since gone my way into the region of shadows. For indeed strange things shall happen, and secret things be known, and many centuries shall pass away, ere these memorials be seen of men. And, when seen, there will be some to disbelieve, and some to doubt, and yet a few who will find much to ponder upon in the characters here graven with a stylus of iron.

More significantly, it is a curious case whether or not Hedāyat was particularly familiar with C. G. Jung's formulation of the shadow prior to publication of the Mumbai edition of *The Blind Owl* (1937), since Jung's earliest writings on the subject are from his 1937 lectures delivered at Yale University, later published (1938 English, 1940 German) as *Psychology and*

[63] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 3-4.
[64] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 5.

Religion (Jung also later discusses the shadow in *Aion*—1951 German). Nevertheless, the resemblance of their comprehension and conception of the shadow is remarkable, and both might have been under Poe's influence in this regard.

Jung recognizes the shadow alongside "the anima" and "the animus" as the archetypes that have "the most frequent and the most disturbing influence on the ego," with the shadow being "the most accessible" of them and "the easiest to experience":

> By shadow I mean the 'negative' side of the personality, the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide, together with the insufficiently developed functions and the contents of the personal unconscious.[65]

Jung asserts that "Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is." Noting the emotional nature of the shadow and its relation to repressed tendencies, Jung adds:

> The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge, and it therefore, as a rule, meets with considerable resistance.[66]

Similarly in *The Blind Owl*, the shadow is a projection of the narrator's dark side that he is writing for in order to attain self-knowledge. In the first part of the novella, when the ethereal woman visits the narrator and lies in his bed and dies, the narrator notes that "now, here, in my room, she gave her life and shadow to me […]. Perhaps she also took my shadow […]."[67] It is as

[65] C. G. Jung, *The Essential Jung*, ed. Anthony Storr (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 87.
[66] Jung, *The Essential Jung*, 91.
[67] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 14.

if love purifies and eliminates his dark side, though only temporarily. There is no mention of the shadow since then, till the beginning of the second part of the text:

> Now I would like to squeeze the entirety of my life like a bunch of grapes in my hand, and to drip, drop by drop, its juice, nay, its wine […] into the parched throat of my shadow. […] I am in need, more than ever I am in need of connecting my thoughts to my imaginary being, my shadow—this sinister shadow that, in front of the light of the tallow-burner, is bent over on the wall, as if it is carefully reading and devouring that which I write—This shadow must surely understand more than I! I can only talk freely with my own shadow, it is he that induces me to talk, only he can know me, he surely must understand… As I squeeze, drop by drop, the juice, nay, the bitter wine of my life into parched throat of my shadow, I want to say to him, 'This is my life!'[68]

In the paragraph that follows—in contrast to the incident in the first part where the ethereal woman removes the narrator's shadow—the narrator mentions that he is scared of looking out the window and of looking at himself in the mirror, "for everywhere I see the multiplied shadows of myself."[69] Later, when he goes outside for a walk, he sees that "in front of the moonlight, my shadow would fall upon the wall, thick and enormous, but it was without a head—my shadow was headless—I had heard that if the shadow of a person cast upon a wall was headless they would die by the year's end."[70] Next, in a bathhouse inspecting his fragile shadow on the wall, he speculates that the shadow of other people who are strong and thick-necked would "cast larger and more colorfully […] and they left impressions for a time, while mine quickly became

[68] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 28.
[69] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 29.
[70] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 48.

erased."[71] Towards the end of the book, the last reference to shadow appears in a significant paragraph that serves as a clue in understanding not only the title of *The Blind Owl* (as it is the only instance where the word "owl" is used in the text) but also many of the text's twisted and complex knots and characters:

> In this room that, like a grave, was getting darker and smaller by the moment, the night had encircled me with its terrifying shadows. In front of the smoking tallow-burner, with my fur jacket and cloak that I had wrapped around me, and with the scarf that I wore, my motionless shadow was cast on the wall.—My shadow was cast on the wall with much more intensity and accuracy than my real body, my shadow had become more real than my being.—Perhaps the old peddler, the butcher, Nane-joon [his nanny/wet nurse] and that whore of a wife were all shadows of mine, shadows in the midst of which I was imprisoned. At this time I had become akin to an owl, but my wailings had become stuck in my throat and I spat them out in the form of blood clots, perhaps owls also have a disease whereby they think like me—My shadow on the wall had become just like an owl and, bend over, he carefully read my writings, surely he understood well, only he could understand. When I looked at my shadow from the corner of my eye, I would become scared.[72]

Thus, the narrator becomes one with his shadow and his dark side, and the "blind owl" is his bent shadow on the wall for whom he initially started to write. Whereas Jung indicates that "it is quite within the bounds of possibility for a man to recognize the relative evil of his nature, but it is a

[71] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 62.
[72] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 74-75.

rare and shattering experience for him to gaze into the face of absolute evil,"[73] the narrator of *The Blind Owl* becomes one with his shadow after gazing too long into the abyss.

In *Neyrangestān*, under the chapter on "Kids," Hedāyat asserts the folk belief regarding childhood epilepsy: "they believe the kid is exchanged with another kid, so they put makeup on the kid's face and leave him/her in corner of a ruin so whoever has exchanged the kids bring theirs back."[74] Here Hedāyat uses a word that can be translated to "shadowed" (sāye-zadeh in Farsi), and he footnotes on this word from *Anjoman-Ārā Dictionary* (a 19th century Farsi dictionary written by Hedāyat's grand grandfather): "Shadow is said to be name of a div, and jinn is also called shadow because the person who goes mad was described as if jinn has casted shadow upon him/her, that has possessed him/her, and that person is called shadowed [sāye-zadeh] or with-shadow [sāye-dār]."[75] Moreover, Hedāyat notes a short entry on "double" (ham-zād in Farsi) with a reference to a 17th century Farsi dictionary written in Hyderabad, India (*Borhān-e Ghāte*): "Double: it is said that when a child is born, a jinn is created with him/her and accompanies him/her. That jinn is called double."[76]

The key concept or theme in *The Blind Owl* that connects the dots on this etymological web is *madness*. The narrator of *The Blind Owl* occasionally describes himself as mad, insane, or a lunatic, and uses two common Farsi words for this purpose. One word is "majnun," derived from Arabic jinn referring to the lunatic as if he/she is possessed by jinn. The other word is "divāneh," from Persian div referring to the lunatic as if he/she acts like or is similar to div. That is to say, when it comes to an etymology of madness in Farsi, jinn and div are the same thing and

[73] Jung, *The Essential Jung,* 93.

[74] A.T.: Hedayat, "Neyrangestān," in *Sadegh Hedayat Complete Works, Volume III: Studies in the Folklore of Iran,* 28.

[75] A.T.: Hedayat, "Neyrangestān," 28.

[76] A.T.: Hedayat, "Neyrangestān," 26.

the supposed reason for madness in folklore. Hedāyat, based on his notes in *Neyrangestān*, connects the shadow to this jinn/div-driven madness of the narrator.

While the word "jinn" alone is not used in *The Blind Owl*, the word "div" is twice used at two defining moments of the text. The first one is at the very end of the first half of the story:

> It was the necessity to write that had become, for me, a kind of compulsory duty, I wanted to drag out this demon [div] that had been torturing my insides for some time now, I wanted to bring out my pent-up feelings on paper.[77]

The second instance of using div is at the very end of the second part of the story:

> I went in front of the mirror but I covered my face with my hands because of the intensity of the fear—I saw that I looked like, no, as a matter of fact I had become the old peddler. […] I was essentially thinking differently, feeling differently and I could not free myself from it—from the demon [div] that had awakened in me […]. I had become the old peddler.[78]

By putting these two moments in correspondence with one another and within the chronology of opium in the text, I infer that the narrator starts to smoke opium and to write in order to get rid of this div; but by the end, he becomes one with the div exactly through opium and writing.[79]

The old peddler is arguably the narrator's "double," and the only mention of the word "double" (ham-zād) in *The Blind Owl* is in relation to the shadow. Within the second part, when the narrator is recalling one of his childhood memories of the old peddler, he notes: "It seems that this individual has been involved with my life and I had seen him often—as if this shadow

[77] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 27.

[78] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 77.

[79] Associating writing to jinn (as an otherness within) is also reflected in two post-Hedayat Farsi novels: Bahram Sadeqi's *Malakut* (1961, English trans. 2012), and Hushang Golshiri's *Book of Jinn* (1998, English trans. 2019).

were my twin [double/ ham-zād] and situated in the narrow circle of my life."[80] The old peddler, sometimes represented as the butcher and sometimes as the narrator's father or uncle, is the narrator's double that he has a simultaneous love/hate relationship with, and what he finally becomes at the end. The old peddler as the narrator's double is the bodily manifestation of his shadow and his dark side, and exactly what the "blind owl" is.

When it comes to the notion of double, "William Wilson" (also from *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, and translated into French by Baudelaire) is the one Poe piece that *The Blind Owl* resonates with the most. Still, the relation of *The Blind Owl* to "William Wilson" is not a case of imitation or even intertextuality (contrary to the case of "Shadow—A Parable," as discussed earlier). Poe designed the "double" as a puzzle for literature to solve and to experiment with, and *The Blind Owl* is a variation of this puzzle. By putting the "double" piece on a new chessboard with a different arrangement than Poe's, brand new situations emerge. It is in fact Borges who in a 1978 lecture on "The Detective Story" credits Poe for the idea of literature "as an intellectual activity," and "as an operation of the mind, not the spirit"; in other words, this is literature of chess players, not the angels or demons. "Poe was a projector of multiple shadows," remarks Borges, "without whom cotemporary literature would not be what it is […], from whom derives the symbolism of Baudelaire, who was Poe's disciple and prayed to him every night."[81] The idea of literature as an intellectual activity for Poe is perhaps best formulated in his 1846 essay "The Philosophy of Composition" about the process of writing his famous poem "The Raven," but there exists other instances of such endeavours in his corpus of writing. In "The Fall of House of Usher" (again from *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* and translated by Baudelaire), where Poe twice mentions opium in passing, the peculiar spirit of the

[80] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 56.

[81] Jorge Luis Borges, "The Detective Story," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 492-93.

falling house is attributed by the narrator to a certain arrangement or combination of the particulars of the house.[82] In "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade" (an overlooked 1845 shorty story not translated by Baudelaire), Poe extends the possible variations of Sinbad's voyages from *1001 Nights*. "William Wilson" is hence a variation of the idea of *double* in literature, a puzzle that is incredibly attractive for creative writers as it can become a reflection or statement on the practice of writing itself (*Who is actually writing? The author or their double?*). Dostoevsky wrote his novel *The Double* (1846) few years after Poe's, though it did not turn out to be one of his masterpieces. Borges summons his double at least twice in "Borges and I" (from *The Maker*, 1960) and in "The Other" (from *The Book of Sand*, 1975). "I am not sure which of us it is that's writing this page," finishes Borges in "Borges and I."[83] In "The Other," an aged Borges meets his young self and they even discuss Dostoevsky's *The Double* in passing.[84] Burroughs as well had an obsession with doubles and alter-egos, perhaps even more extensively than the above authors, and his cut-up projects with Brion Gysin speak of a "third mind" as if it is the collective double of two (or more) collaborators. An anthology of the double in world literature (and also in cinema) is yet to be written, but what can be said of *The Blind Owl* here is that Hedāyat's novella has a special place in such a catalog because it offers a unique variation of the puzzle, one where double and shadow are associated organically together. Hedāyat was able to draw this association only by means of his folklore research reflected in certain entries of

[82] "What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there *are* combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression […]." Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," in *Poetry, Tales, & Selected Essays* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 317-18.

[83] Jorge Luis Borges, "Borges and I," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 324.

[84] Borges, "The Other," in *Collected Fictions*, 414.

Neyrangestān that attribute both the shadow and the double to madness and lunacy caused by jinn or div.

The shared references of *The Blind Owl* and *Neyrangestān* are not sole instances in Hedāyat's body of work, and he had made such intertextual connections elsewhere as well. As I noted earlier, in "The Patriot" he hints at *The Blind Owl* as his souvenir from India; in "The Abu-Nasr Throne" he underlines the word "neyrang" as "incantation" and portrays how such magical spells are used in a ritual; and as Azadibougar points out, in "Misanthrope" (a satirical piece from *Vagh Vagh Sahab*, 1935) which is story of a character very similar to the narrator of *The Blind Owl*, Hedāyat uses the phrase "blind owl" as the only other instance of him using it.[85] This habit of referencing his own works in the margins as an intertextual technique of writing leaves little to no doubt that his formulation of shadow and double in *The Blind Owl* as manifestation of jinn/div is derived from his folklore research on superstition in *Neyrangestān*.

Mandrake, Gender, and Sexuality

The other shared reference between *The Blind Owl* and *Neyrangestān* is "mandrake" (mehr-e giyāh in Farsi, literally meaning love-herb) which overall stands as an allegory for libido and sexual desire,[86] which greatly complicates the gender dynamics of the novella. In *Neyrangestān*, under the chapter on "Plants and Seeds," Hedāyat dedicates an entry to mandrake with reference to two 17th century Farsi dictionaries (*Borhān-e Ghāte* and *Farhang-e Jahāngiri*):

[85] Azadibougar, *The Persian Novel*, 119-124.

[86] "Mandrake" (also known as Mandragora) has its own entry in Borges' *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, since it "shares certain characteristics with the creatures of the animal kingdom, for it shrieks when it is pulled from the ground; that scream has the ability to drive those who hear it mad." Borges notes that the German word for mandrake is "Alraune/Alruna," coming from "rune" which means "mystery" and "occult thing," and was later applied to the characters of the first Germanic alphabet. Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 129-30. For more on mandrake in English literature look at: Anthony John Carter, "Myths and Mandrakes," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 96, no. 3 (2003): 144-147.

> A plant similar to humankind, growing in China. It is upside-down, like its root is actually its hair. Its male and female [roots] embrace each other, holding their legs tight. It is said whoever digs it up will die within few days. The proper way of digging it up is to first excavate its surrounding soil, so it can be cut with minimum power. Then tie it with a rope, bind the rope to a greyhound, and leave a lure so the dog goes after it and cut the plant from its very root. That is why mandrake is also called *dog-dig* [sag-kan], while it is also known as *people-plant* [mardom-giyāh]. It is not possible to differentiate between its male and female. If a barren woman drinks cow's milk with mandrake, she would bear a child. If the mandrake was male, the child would be a male, and if it was female, the child would be a female.[87]

In a footnote to this entry, Hedāyat explains what he has provided is from the two mentioned dictionaries, but adds that "according to common belief, to carry mandrake brings good fortune."

There are three explicit references to mandrake in *The Blind Owl*, all at defining moments of the story. When the narrator sees the ethereal woman for the first time (through a hole in a wall), he describes how "She created an arousal in me like that which is derived from mandrake. […] as if she was the female mandrake that had just been torn from her lover's embrace."[88] The second reference occurs when the narrator embraces the dead body of the ethereal woman after she drinks from the poisonous wine: "We were conjoined like the male and female mandrake. In essence her body was like the body of a female mandrake that has been torn from her lover's embrace, carrying the same burning love as the mandrake."[89] Finally, at the very end of the

[87] A.T.: Hedayat, "Neyrangestān," 84.
[88] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 7.
[89] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 14.

second narrative where the narrator finally goes to bed with his wife (and ends up killing her), he says: "Without me realizing it, like a mandrake, she locked her legs behind my legs and her hands clasped the back of my neck."[90]

The mandrakes of *The Blind Owl* and *Neyrangestān* both have simultaneous fertile and fatal qualities (in *The Blind Owl* "love" and "death" become two sides of a same coin), and thus are a sort of pharmakon. Yet, more significantly is the hint of the plant being hermaphroditic, as noted in *Neyrangestān* ("It is not possible to differentiate between its male and female"). A remarkable point in Shamissa's interpretations of *The Blind Owl* that I find convincing based on my close readings of the text, is that all the male characters of the story are one character, and all the female characters are also one character, and these male and female characters are the masculine and feminine parts of the narrator.[91] In other words, they are all projections of the narrator's mind where the male and female characters become its masculine and feminine parts. By destroying the female part, the male part in effect kills his only remaining ray of light in life, and becomes one with his dark side.

The Blind Owl might read like a misogynist story on the surface, with passive and marginal female characters, and a wife/lover who is murdered twice. Still, the narrator's confessionary speech is not out of triumph, but out of guilt, regret, and degradation. Hedāyat is not saluting the misanthrope misogynist; rather, he is shaming misogyny particularly through associating it with the toxic masculinity of the butcher and the old peddler. In this sense, my reading of *The Blind Owl* objects earlier feminist readings of the text. I believe Hedāyat had actually been successful in showing the extent to which misogyny and toxic masculinity lead to degradation, desolation, and destruction.

[90] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 76.

[91] Cyrus Shamissa, *Story of a Ghost* (Tehran: Ferdos Publication, 2000), 27.

Opium, Painting, and Drug Literature

Although Hedāyat's infrequent use of cocaine and heroin (as well as his familiarity with opium) is documented by Farzaneh,[92] it is very unlikely for him to have written *The Blind Owl* on a drug.[93] The way in which the Mumbai manuscript is edited and organized demonstrates that the writer would have had to have been fully aware and conscious of the details and structure of his twisted narrative. In fact, Hedāyat's preciseness when transcribing the Mumbai edition proves him to be more sober than most of his later editors and translators who have arbitrarily ignored its specific paragraphing and sectioning. Still, to situate this book in a context of drug literature is not a detective work of checking whether or not he used any recreational substance when working on the novella. *The Blind Owl* is drug literature because its very form and structure is built around the confessions of a painter who smokes opium.

As I mentioned earlier, the chronology of references to opium in *The Blind Owl* largely corresponds to the text's main moments of transmission. In the opening paragraph, the narrator speaks of "amnesia by means of wine and artificial sleep brought on by opium and other narcotics" as the only available medicines for the pains of the human soul; alas their effects are temporary and "after a while only add to the intensity of the pain." Early on, he also mentions that after losing the ethereal woman, he "sought refuge in opium and wine," and "spent all of [his] time painting on pen case covers, drinking wine and smoking opium," while increasing his intake and becoming addicted.[94] Towards the end of first half, after he finishes painting a portrait of the ethereal woman, the narrator prepares his special brazier with its charcoals glowing,

[92] Farzaneh, *Meetings with Sadeq Hedayat*, 99 & 168.

[93] It is likely though that opium had been available in Mumbai at the time. Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1900) mentions opium and its transit in northern India several times in passing. Jeet Thayil's 2012 novel *Narcopolis*, set in 1970s Mumbai, is an interesting example of opium in literature.

[94] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 3-5 & 10.

smokes all the opium that is left, and enters into "a state of half sleep and half unconsciousness" where he feels a pressure and weight is lifted from his chest.[95] He wakes up from this into a new world, and begins to write what is the second half of *The Blind Owl*. In the last two pages, the narrator returns to world of the first half where he notices in the brazier in front of him "the flowers of fire had turned into cold ashes that could be blown away with a single breath." This is the fire he used to smoke all his opium and it is now gone; without any opium left, he feels again the heavy weight of a corpse on his chest.[96]

The second half of *The Blind Owl* thus reads as an essentially opium-driven narrative where opium functions like a dream-machine helping the narrator to view all his past life events in an unsorted and repetitive manner. Throughout this part (that comes inside quotation marks in the Mumbai edition, and is italicized in Noori's English translation), there are two instances where, at the beginning of subsections, the narrator refers to opium[97] as if repeatedly in front of his brazier; he falls half-asleep and wakes up and writes and falls half-asleep and wakes up and writes. The second of these two instances is perhaps his most intense description of the effects of opium—he feels like a sluggish vegetable, a plant's soul, hunched over his brazier like the old peddler:

> By the foot of the opium brazier, I dispersed all my grim thoughts amongst the magnificent and heavenly smoke. During this time my body was thinking, my body was dreaming, gliding, as if freed from the pollution and gravity of air, it was flying in a unknown world that was full of unknown colors and images—Opium had breathed into my frame a plant's soul, a sluggish plant's soul. I was

[95] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 25.
[96] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 78.
[97] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 55 & 63.

> traveling in a plant world—I had turned into a plant, but just as I was dozing in front of the leather sofre [ground-sheet] and brazier with a cloak over my shoulders, I do not know why I began thinking of the old peddler; he, too was hunched over his things in the same way and sat in the same manner that I did. This thought created a fright in me.[98]

Hedāyat's experimentation with opium in *The Blind Owl* is reflected in the structure of its narrative and the tone and music of its prose, in addition to the habits of its protagonist, unprecedented in Farsi/Persian literature. This is despite the fact that opium as a recreational drug had been no stranger to Farsi speaking poets especially since the 17th century onward, and to Iranian life in general from 1850 to 1955 when the country was a mass-producer of opium.[99] Yet, such a first-person confessional and modernist narrative that, in terms of its form and structure is organically bound to experiences of consuming recreational drugs, has its stronger foot in the drug literature of European languages, and particularly in opium-driven texts that start with Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821, revised 1856).[100] It is very likely that Hedāyat was familiar with De Quincey through Baudelaire's *Artificial Paradises* (Les Paradis artificiels, 1860) that features Baudelaire's selected French translation of De Quincey's monumental text.

Similar to the narrator of *The Blind Owl*, De Quincey likewise remarks that "It was not for the purpose of creating pleasure, but of mitigating pain in the severest degree, that I first

---

[98] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 63.

[99] On the history of opium in Iran look at: Rudolph P.Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History, 1500-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Ram Baruch Regavim, "The Most Sovereign of Masters: The History of Opium in Modern Iran, 1850-1955," PhD Dissertation (University of Pennsylvania, 2012).

[100] For more on the history of drug literature look at: Marcus Boon, *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs* (London: Harvard University Press, 2002).

began to use opium as an article of daily diet."[101] His confessions are also divided into two parts, "The Pleasures of Opium" and "The Pains of Opium"—a division that is transcribed in Baudelaire's translation as well. In both De Quincey's and Hedāyat's texts, opium functions as a "pharmakon"—that which in Jacques Derrida's analysis "will always be understood both as antidote *and* as poison."[102] In the section on "Pleasures," De Quincey writes about his first time taking opium at the recommendation of a college acquaintance in order to relieve his severe toothache:

> I took it [opium]: - and in an hour, oh! heavens! what a revulsion! what an upheaving, from its lowest depths, of the inner spirit! what an apocalypse of the world within me! That my pains had vanished, was now a trifle in my eyes: - this negative effect was swallowed up in the immensity of those positive effects which had opened before me - in the abyss of divine enjoyment thus suddenly revealed.[103]

Comparing this to a passage from *The Blind Owl* where the narrator remembers his first time using opium on a doctor's prescription is quite telling, particularly in terms of its tone and prose that resonates De Quincey's:

> Hakim-bashi [doctor] came with his three-fists-long beard and instructed me to smoke opium—what a priceless drug it was for my painful existence! When I smoked opium, my thoughts would become grand, pure, magical and soaring—I would traverse another realm, beyond the ordinary world. My thoughts and concerns would be freed from the bound of gravity and weight of earthly things

[101] Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (London: Penguin, 1988), 35.

[102] Jacques Derrida, "The Rhetoric of Drugs," in *High Culture: Reflections on Addiction and Modernity*, ed. Anna Alexander and Mark S. Roberts (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 25.

[103] De Quincey, *Confessions*, 71.

> and would soar towards the realm of tranquility and silence—it was as if they had placed me on the golden wings of a bat and I was traveling in a radiant and vacuous world, free of obstacles; so profound and pleasurable was this effect that it was more pleasurable than dying.[104]

Furthermore, towards the very end of his confessions and the section on "Pains," De Quincey elaborates on the relationship between opium and death which resembles the metamorphosis of *The Blind Owl*'s narrator, while also reflecting on the lasting influences of opium on dreams:

> Jeremy Taylor conjectures that it may be as painful to be born as to die: I think it probable: and, during the whole period of diminishing the opium, I had the torments of a man passing out of one mode of existence into another. The issue was not death, but a sort of physical regeneration: and I may add, that ever since, at intervals, I have had a restoration of more than youthful spirits, though under the pressure of difficulties, which, in a less happy state of mind, I should have called misfortunes.
>
> One memorial of my former condition still remains: my dreams are not yet perfectly calm: the dread swell and agitation of the storm have not wholly subsided: the legions that encamped in them are drawing off, but not all departed: my sleep is still tumultuous […].[105]

A few paragraphs beforehand, De Quincey put it plainly what the purpose of his confessions are:

> Not the opium-eater, but the opium, is the true hero of the tale; and the legitimate centre on which the interests revolves. The object was to display the marvellous

[104] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 51-2.
[105] De Quincey, *Confessions*, 115-6.

> agency of opium, whether for pleasure or for pain: if that is done, the action of the piece has closed.[106]

Now, is opium equally the true hero of Hedāyat's text?

Hedāyat uses two words when referring to opium in *The Blind Owl*. One is "afiun," the Arabic equivalent of English "opium" both sharing the same Greek root, and a familiar word in Turkish and Farsi standing for opium the drug. The second term is the Farsi word "taryāk" which, in its older usage, generally meant "antidote" (*Farhang-e Jahāngiri*, an early 17th century Farsi dictionary, notes that "in this age" taryāk means afiun/opium). To start to use taryāk/antidote for afiun/opium might be a case of reclamation on the part of recreational users to say: *this we use is an antidote, a medicine, it is no toxicant*; though the transition might have happened first at the level of medical discourse. Regardless, Hedāyat uses "afiun" three times in *The Blind Owl* (including the opening paragraph) where it appears to be referring to a more general category of opiates or narcotics.[107] "Taryāk" on the other hand is used fourteen times (the first four times of which comes alongside wine), and it refers exactly to opium the drug.

Consequently, in one instance, the narrator speaks of "the ethereal smoke of opium [taryāk]"; in another instance, early on when his beloved ethereal woman comes to his room for the first time, he describes her "as having stepped out of an opium[afiun]-laced paradise [dream]."[108] This connection between opium and his beloved woman—describing opium as ethereal, and describing the woman as if she comes out of an opium dream—accentuates the significance of opium in the narrative. Still, one can hardly say that opium is the "true hero" of

---

[106] De Quincey, *Confessions*, 114.

[107] The third instance is reflected in Noori's translation: "I smoked all the opium [taryāk] I had left so that this strange opiate [afiun] could scatter all the problems and veils that were covering my eyes […]." Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 25.

[108] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 25 & 7.

The Blind Owl; it is rather alongside the shadow (and its associates) one of the main ingredients of the text.

Opium/taryāk is associated to the narrator's other addictive habits as well, including painting. When starting to paint a portrait of the ethereal woman, he writes:

> […] in my brain, throw a glance at her, then close my eyes and place on paper the lines of her face that I chose so that, with my mind, I might find an opiate [taryāk/opium] for my tortured soul—In the end I took refuge in the motionless world of lines and shapes.[109]

This is a fairly revealing passage, considering that the Mumbai edition of *The Blind Owl* contains two drawings by Hedāyat: on the first page is a portrait of the ethereal woman on a vase, and on the last page is a blind owl drawn with a single line (see Figure 5). Hence, the text in its totality is arguably a metamorphosis and transfiguration of the first drawing into the one at the end: the ethereal, opium-dreamt woman gradually turns into a shadowed, bent old peddler.

The inquiry into opium I have conducted here can extend to the usage of wine in the text. This, on the one hand, will further highlight the matter of "pharmakon"[110] in *The Blind Owl*; on the other hand, we see that the connection that the narrator makes between opium and painting is

[109] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 15-6.

[110] In "Plato's Pharmacy" (1968), his close reading of Plato's *Phaedrus*, Derrida focuses on the Greek word "pharmakon" (and its derivatives such as pharmakos and pharmakeus) to showcase the ambivalent meaning of the term as well as its relation to writing and logos. It is an essay that itself could be of great interest to the study of esotericism especially for its treatment of the legend of Theuth/Thoth as "god-doctor-pharmacist-magician" that appears in Plato's text as "the inventor of number, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, of games involving draughts and dice—and especially writing." In Thoth, Derrida sees a god of *writing* who is also the god of *death*, who is also the god of *medicine* and *pharmakon*. In Derrida's analysis, *pharmakon* "can be—alternately or simultaneously—beneficent or maleficent. The *pharmakon* would be a *substance*—with all that that word can connote in terms of matter with occult virtues, cryptic depths refusing to submit their ambivalence to analysis, already paving the way for alchemy." Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

also made between wine and writing, thus all four become pharmakons for the pains of his soul—temporary remedies that in the long-term abysmally degrade him and his world.[111]

III. Nimā, Hedāyat, and the Re-Enchantment of Storytelling

> Fantasy-worship (afsāneh-parasti) is one of the major needs of the human soul.
>
> —Sādeq Hedāyat, "Introduction" to *Zand ī Wahman Yasn*[112]

> Go Hafiz! Do not recite *fesāneh* and do not blow *fosun*
> Of these *fesāneh* and *afsun* I remember a lot
>
> —Hafiz[113]

> Poetry is worship (ibādat). Expression of poetry is an act of worship. Not all people are worshippers and they shouldn't be.
>
> —Nimā Yushij, *Diaries*[114]

Between two great works of world literature, the Indian *Pancatantra/Bidpai/Kelileh&Demneh* and the islamicate *1001 Nights*, there is a lost book from the Persianate culture: *Hazār Afsān*, or *1000 Afsān*. The Farsi/Persian word "afsān" could simply mean "story" (thus *1000 Afsān* means one thousand stories). Yet the variations of the word (fesān, fesāneh, afsāneh, and owsāneh), and its close associations to fosun and afsun (meaning enchantment, magic, incantation, or neyrang), opens up an inquiry that enables a drawing of new intertextual lines between Nimā and Hedāyat as two founding figures of modernist Iranian Farsi literature. I see Nimā's *Afsāneh* (1923) and

[111] Babak Elahi (2012) has also listed "Poisonous Heirloom Wine," "Opium," and "Writing" as "the three main medications in Hedayat's literary pharmakon."

[112] A.T.: Sadegh Hedayat, "Zand ī Wahman Yasn," in *Sadegh Hedayat Complete Works, Volume VII: Translation from Pahlavi*, ed. Jahangir Hedayat (London: Sadegh Hedayat Foundation, 2012), 11.

[113] A.T.: Hafiz, *The Divan*, ed. Ghani and Ghazvini (Tehran: Jeyhoun, 2003), 35.

[114] A.T.: Nimā Youshij, *Diaries of Nimā Youshij*, ed. Sheragim Youshij (Tehran: Morvarid, 2017), 34.

Hedāyat's *The Blind Owl* (1937) alongside each other as two variations of a same story: a man enchanted by love and its stories, has gone mad. In both, storytelling becomes a sort of magic—a written incantation.

Afsāneh was Nimā's first step towards initiating a most avant-garde and revolutionary style of Farsi poetry—a departure from a millennium of classical Persian poetry based on strict quantitative metrical patterns and rigid symmetrical arrangements of verses. Nimā indeed excelled and further developed his asymmetrical new style in his later poetry, but still *Afsāneh*—now at the 100th anniversary of its first publication—stands as a distinctive moment of not only Nimā's career, but also the history of Farsi/Persian literature: a birthplace of a new literary modernity. Nimā's body of work, similar to Hedāyat's, is overall modernist in form, and committed to society at large in content; though Nimā certainly does not share Hedāyat's hostile Islamophobia, and his understanding of "poetry as worship" signifies his Sufi-poet attitude and practice. He was born in the small village of Yush in the jungles of northern Iran (Mazandaran province), into a noble family that could afford sending him to St. Louis School in Tehran where he was introduced to French language and literature. Whereas Hedāyat insisted on going to France in his youth, Nimā joined the socialist guerrilla groups of the north—the Jungle Movement—following the Soviet October Revolution. With the defeat of the Jungle Movement in 1922, Nimā went back to Tehran and wrote his *Afsāneh*.

Afsāneh is a long narrative poem of 127 stanzas with five lines each, accompanied by a two-page introduction ("To the Young Poet") and another short poem ("Ho Night!") that reads like a prologue to *Afsāneh*. In the introduction, Nimā emphasizes the theatrical capacities of his new construction. Apart from its first two stanzas, the rest of *Afsāneh* consists of dialogues

between the "Lover" (Āshegh) and the "Afsāneh." The opening stanza surely resonates the beginning of *The Blind Owl*:

> In the dark night, a divāneh[115] who
> Fell for an elusive colour,
> Sitting in a cold and lonely valley
> Like a gloomy plant's stem
> Tells a sorrowful story.[116]

The story is not an adventure, but rather lyrical and romanticized sentiments and feelings of the two characters in a timeless and placeless setting. While the Lover is a misanthrope like the narrator of *The Blind Owl,* it is very much a matter of interpretation what or who Afsāneh is.

Thinking through the word "Afsāneh" via *Hazār Afsān*, the literal meaning of the word would be: story, fable, legend, myth, tale, fiction. But "Afsāneh" is also a female name, and as a character in this theatrical poem, a personification of a female figure—a figure who is not the *particular* beloved of the "Lover" character, but the *universal* "Afsāneh," the mother of all stories of love beyond time and space, the story of stories. When the Lover asks Afsāneh who she is, she responds:

> "[…] I am an archaic existence,
> Called by the snared lonely.
> The old mother, frightens and terrifies children
> With my tale, in the dim night.
> I am a story, without a beginning or an end!"
> [Lover:] "You are a story?" [Afsāneh:] "… Yes, yes!

[115] Divāneh: lunatic, mad. The same word that appears in *The Blind Owl* as noted in earlier.

[116] A.T.: Nimā Youshij, "Afsāneh," in *Collected Poetry of Nimā Youshij*, ed. Abdol-Ali Azimi (Tehran: Niloufar, 2008), 41.

Story of a restless lover.

A hopeless, full of anguish

That in grief and vigil

Lived in sorrow and solitude.

[…]

I was once a little girl I

Was a darling charmer I

Filling the eyes with unrest

Was a sole enchantress (afsun-gar) I

Came sitting on a tomb[117]

"Afsāneh," I dare to say, is Scheherazade herself and her sister Dunyazad from *1001 Nights*, the female storyteller who is constantly delaying the will to power of the tyrant Shahryar by means of narrating endless stories within stories; she is the libido against the death drive. In his *Afsāneh*, Nimā has not only added an afsān to *1000 Afsān* and a new night to *1001 Nights*; he has also designed and re-imagined a novel template for future nights and afsāns, *The Blind Owl* being one of them where the ethereal woman is another face of "Afsāneh."

It is not accidental that "Afsāneh" describes herself as an enchantress (afsun-gar, someone who does afsun). The word afsun or fosun has been used three times in *Afsāneh*, the other two being: "With such enchanting (fosun-gar) images," the Lover describes Afsāneh; "Ho enchanting (fosun-kār) illustrator," Afsāneh later calls herself in third person.[118] There are in fact numerous occasions in centuries of Farsi/Persian poetry (from Firdusi to Rumi and Hafiz) where variations of the words afsāneh (story and fiction) and fosun (enchantment and magic) have

[117] A.T.: Nimā, "Afsāneh," 47.

[118] Nimā, "Afsāneh," 43 & 52.

come together in a poem and sometimes even in a single verse. This is partly due to the words' similar intonations, but more importantly they signify the correspondence of the two concepts—an imaginative story turns into a magical incantation.

In his late diaries post-1953 coup d'état, Nimā dedicates an entry to his thoughts on the two words afsāneh and afsun. "We believe that history is apart from story/afsāneh, but story/afsāneh is exactly history. Differentiating these two is only a result of our opinion. We call things that we know history, and usually label the things we don't know as story/afsāneh." He then turns to afsun: "Mazandaran [Nimā's birthplace] has been the center of magic [jādu]. [One] should pay attention to the word afsun. For example [it might derive from] 'ap-shun' [meaning] directed towards water. Afsun is not blown only 'on' the water. Afsun = apparently means 'like fluid water.' It flows with water, that is more fluid than anything."[119] Aside from this conscious association of afsāneh and afsun in Nimā's thought, this short entry from his diaries is additionally quite revealing for another reason. Discussing afsānehs of old religions, he notes how the oppressed divs/monsters of *Avesta* (the primary collection of Zoroastrian texts) are named after great people of Mazandaran. He then calls for further research on the subject, since "jinn has replaced div." Though Nimā is not commenting on *The Blind Owl* at all, his claim regarding the switch between jinn and div further proves my earlier point about the oneness of the two in Hedāyat's text. Div also brings us back to the opening line of *Afsāneh*; "In the dark night, a divāneh who […] Tells a sorrowful story"—a divāneh, telling a sorrowful story, like *The Blind Owl*, both texts being narratives of madness.

That Nimā has written no commentary on Hedāyat's *The Blind Owl* is rather curious. The only letter exchanged between them that has survived is one written by Nimā to Hedāyat dated

[119] A.T.: Nimā, *Diaries*, 36-37.

winter 1937. This is during Hedāyat's stay in India, around the time of the publication of *The Blind Owl* when Hedāyat was sending copies to Iran and elsewhere through mail. In this 17-page letter, Nimā extensively comments on a dozen of short stories by Hedāyat. Though there is a chance that Nimā had not read *The Blind Owl* at the time of writing the letter, it is likely that he left the topic for a face to face conversation, as he finishes the letter by saying:

> My dear friend! About your works, especially the subject of your thoughts in your works, there is a lot to say. I leave it for later. What you have done in prose, I have done in poetry of harsh and aborted words that I have domesticated with such labor. Many oppose my work, because this rotten wall [of classicism] is blocking the way, and the cockroaches are crawling up and squalling […].[120]

There are other noteworthy moments in the relationship between Nimā and Hedāyat. One of Hedāyat's earliest folklore research projects is a collection of children's songs and lullabies in Farsi entitled *Owsāneh* (1932)—with the word "owsāneh" being an archaic variation of "afsāneh." His supplementary research on the topic, *Folk Songs* (1939), was published in *Music* (Musighi) magazine during the period where he and Nimā were among its chief editors (this is only two years after their letter exchange). They both served on the executive committee of the first *Congress of Iranian Writers* in Tehran in 1946, as two representatives of the modernist fraction of Iran's literary field at the time. It is apparent that they had mutual respect for each other, and Nimā might have been an important factor in Hedāyat's turn to the Left after returning from India. Nimā's late diaries also include a few references to Hedāyat's death, and they read as if Hedāyat had played the role of Kirillov from Dostoevsky's *Devils*:

[120] A.T.: Nimā Youshij, *The Complete Collection of Nimā Youshij Letters*, ed. Sirus Taahbaaz (Tehran: Elmi, 1998), 598.

> Hedāyat was killed [driven to suicide] by his adorers (he had told me). Hedāyat was killed by [both] right and left political groups, and he had almost told me this as well. He said nothing [about it] himself and I also said nothing. For Hedāyat liked the thoughts of his nation.[121]

In his well-known essay "The Problem of Nimā Yushij" (from 1950s), Al-e Ahmad highlights the shared pessimism and romantic sorrow of Nimā and Hedāyat, seeing it as a response to the political suffocation of their historical period (marked by two coup d'états of 1921 and 1953, ruining hopes of achieving a stable constitutional democracy). He also points to Nimā's fascination with birds, and owls in particular, as the shared bird-character in works of Nimā and Hedāyat. "An Old Owl" (1941) is a short poem that Al-e Ahmad refers to; but the owl appears even in *Afsāneh* itself:

> [Lover:] "It was a happy story of heart,
> That came back home…"
> [Afsāneh:] "Ho Lover! It was owl-sounded,
> Known to ruins of heart."
> [Lover:] "Yes, Afsāneh! A sorrowful owl."[122]

On the other hand, Hedāyat's *Owsāneh* begins with an epigraph by Rumi, reiterating the association of afsāneh to ruins (with ruins being places where owls appear):

> Children bring afsānehs
> Such secret and advice mentioned in their afsānehs
> Seeking treasure in all ruins
> Writing humor in afsānehs[123]

[121] A.T.: Nimā, *Diaries*, 46.
[122] A.T.: Nimā, "Afsāneh," 51.

The owl appears in *Neyrangestān* again as part of "superstitious" beliefs. "Cry of owl is good fortune, and laughter of owl is bad fortune," writes Hedāyat in the chapter on "Birds."[124] Almost every use of laughter in *The Blind Owl* is associated with the old peddler, as if he is an owl bringing bad fortune with his dry and grating laugh.

Still, the most famous owl of Persian literature appears in Attar's monumental *The Conference of the Birds* (12th century) as a bird that rejects hoopoe's invitation to join the search for the divine Simurgh:

> The owl approached with his distracted [divāneh] air,
>
> Hooting: 'Abandoned ruins are my lair,
>
> Because, wherever mortals congregate,
>
> Strife flourishes and unforgiving hate;
>
> A tranquil mind is only to be found
>
> Away from men, in wild, deserted ground.
>
> These ruins are my melancholy pleasure,
>
> Not least because they harbour buried treasure.
>
> Love for such treasure has directed me
>
> To desolate, waste sites; in secrecy
>
> I hid my hopes that one fine day my foot
>
> Will stumble over unprotected loot.
>
> Love for the Simurgh is a childish story;

[123] A.T.: Rumi, qtd. in Hedayat, "Owsāneh," in *Sadegh Hedayat Complete Works, Volume III: Studies in the Folklore of Iran*, 141.

[124] A.T.: Hedayat, "Neyrangestān," 89.

My love is solely for gold's buried glory.'[125]

It is the old peddler of *The Blind Owl* who robs the vase of the ancient city of Rey at the very end, like an owl after a treasure.

The owl motif in Nimā and Hedāyat has one foot in the tradition of Persian Sufi literature, and one foot in the folk tales and afsānehs of Iranian culture. Whereas for Nimā the owl was one bird among the many birds he wrote poetry about (to name a few other: phoenix, rooster, raven, vulture, and most famously the fantastic amen-bird), Hedāyat dove deep into the abyss of the owl consciousness, and infused it with opium in his variation.

The association of afsāneh and afsun—what I would like to call the enchantment of storytelling—can be further traced in Nimā and Hedāyat's encounter with the Japanese folk tale *Urashima Tarō*. This tale exists in numerous variations in Japanese—a story of a fisherman who is carried beneath the sea by a female figure, and upon his return finds out that a long time has passed since he has been gone, and that all his family are dead now; he opens a box gifted to him by the female figure and suddenly gets old and the story ends. Hedāyat had translated this tale to Farsi (likely from French) under the title "Urashima" (1945). In Hedāyat's variation, when the female figure takes the fisherman under the sea, she looks him in the eyes and says a "marine enchantment (afsun-e daryāyi)."[126] Apart from this use of the word "afsun" in connection with sea and water (same connection that Nimā notes in his diaries), the ending of "Urashima" could be nicely read alongside *The Blind Owl*: turning into the old peddler by the end, the narrator of *The Blind Owl* becomes his old/aged self, just like Urashima the fisherman, not noticing the passing of time due to enchantment (and opium).

[125] Farid ud-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis (London: Penguin, 2011), 58-9.

[126] Sadegh Hedayat, "Urashima," in *Sadegh Hedayat Complete Works, Volume VI: Translations*, ed. Jahangir Hedayat (London: Sadegh Hedayat Foundation, 2011), 99.

Nimā's variation of *Urashima Tarō*, "Māneli" (1945), might be one of his most ambitious works of poetry. A long narrative poem in roughly 1000 lines (much more substantial than Hedāyat's 5-page text), "Māneli" is the product of a mature Nimā with an established style that has gone even further in breaking down the metrical patterns of rhythm and rhyme. Nimā uses the word afsun/fosun four times in "Māneli," while he uses the word afsāneh only once in the closing lines: "With every breath of his heart wanted to hear the story [afsāneh] of heavy sea."[127] His later prologue to "Māneli" is a confirmation of Nimā and Hedāyat's literary alliance, and an account of their parallel projects of a modernist literature in Farsi poetry and prose, with an eye on what can be learned from afsānehs of other cultures, creating new constellations on a map of world literature:

> I am not the first speaking of a Mermaid. Like no one is the first naming Simurgh and Homā. Only I wanted to give it flesh and skin with my imagination.
>
> I had prepared this story more or less before 1945. That is two or three years before the translation of "Urashima" by one of my friends [i. e. Hedāyat]. He liked every aspect of this story. I longed the story to have his name on it.
>
> Because his name was at stake, I have shown such finesse in the poems of this story. I have extensively edited the poems so the work turns out better and worthier.
>
> […] What concerns me the most, is the intellectual subject in this story. I am thinking about my commitment's ability in expressing this subject. In fact, this story in my opinion is a response to "Urashima" of that friend of mine [Hedāyat]

[127] A.T.: Nimā Youshij, "Māneli," in *Collected Poetry of Nimā Youshij*, ed. Abdol-Ali Azimi (Tehran: Niloufar, 2008), 400.

in terms of meaning. He who is not alive now, who has been the most prolific in the craft of writing among all my friends in this country.[128]

It is evident that Hedāyat's suicide in Paris had been quite touching for Nimā. Nimā himself passed away nine years later in 1960; he was initially buried in a small cemetery in Tehran, with his will to rest in his birthplace Yush finally realized in 1991. Today, between Yush and Paris lie two game-changers of Farsi poetry and prose during the first half of the 20th century whose reception of works greatly differs. Whereas Hedāyat sought an outward universality for his corpus by publishing in Mumbai and yearning to be translated into French, Nimā's universality is inward and local, best exemplified in a portion of his poems being written in Tabari language (one of the native languages of the northern Iran) which was his mother tongue. Hedāyat, growing up in Tehran, only knew Farsi, and he chose Pahlavi language as his archaic expertise later. Now two decades into the 21st century, Hedāyat's *The Blind Owl*, despite Islamicists' distaste, is available in fifteen languages; Nimā, on the other hand, is barely known or translated into any global language. One can blame the difficulty and complexity of Nimā's style (especially his approach to rhythm and rhyme) as a massive obstacle against translating him; still, answering why and how Nimā has not received his share in the map of world literature needs thorough research and further discussions.

Back to the main point of this section, a vital question can be raised. Is an afsāneh, in general, a tale *about* magic and enchantment, or is it *in itself* a form of magic and enchantment? I believe that for both Nimā and Hedāyat the answer pertains to the latter, that afsāneh and afsun *can* become one and the same thing. Afsāneh and afsun are both modes of utterance. They can be written down for future generations and add to the human library; they can be said aloud; they

[128] A.T.: Nimā, "Māneli," 361.

can be blown on and towards water and wind; they can manipulate—for the good or the bad—the minds of people for centuries. That for Nimā "poetry is worship" means extra care in selection and treatment of words. He certainly was more conservative towards the religious aspect of his poems. He never pranked the sacred, while Hedāyat even wrote a puppet show, *The Afsāneh of Creation* (1930), mimicking the Abrahamic narratives of creation. He induced his masterpieces with opium—a substance that, according to the drug expert William Burroughs, can never be sacred:

> All the hallucinogen drugs are considered sacred by those who use them—there are Peyote Cults and Banisteriopsis Cults, Hashish Cults and Mushroom Cults—'the Sacred Mushrooms of Mexico enable a man to see God'—but no one ever suggested that junk is sacred. There are no opium cults. Opium is profane and quantitative like money.[129]

Is *The Blind Owl* an afsāneh/afsun then? For this, I shall attempt a risky speculation on the etymology of fantasy/fantasia/fantastic. This is an essential inquiry since on one of the rare occasions Hedāyat himself made some commentary on *The Blind Owl*, in a 1937 letter from Mumbai to his close friend Mojtaba Minavi, Hedāyat uses the French word "Fantaisie" explaining his novella:

> You again mentioned *The Blind Owl*, and that opium and eye-glasses and tobacco didn't exist at that time; but this is not a historical matter, it's a historical 'Fantaisie' that the person [narrator] has deemed through 'Instinct dissimulation or simulation' and writes his actual life as 'Romancée' and is in no way a real history. To go sleep in sleep is a common expression, it means dying peacefully;

[129] William S. Burroughs, "Desposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness," in *Naked Lunch (The Restored Text)*, ed. James Grauerholz and Barry Miles (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 201.

> 'This throat that I was for myself' [quoting page 113 of the Mumbai manuscript]. This person hears his own voice in his throat; from this voice he realizes the truth and proof of his existence. At that time he has been nothing more than a throat; he made 'abstraction' from the rest of 'Phénomènes' of his life.[130]

Hedāyat puts fantaisie/fantasy in contrast to the historical, similar to Nimā's formulation of afsāneh in his diaries. It appears that for Hedāyat, fantaisie/fantasy is quite a fit equivalent for afsāneh.

Hedāyat uses the word "afsāneh" twice in *The Blind Owl*. "Are not all these stories [afsāneh] relevant to my life […]?";[131] and few pages later:

> Perhaps the actions, thoughts, wishes and habits of the peoples of the past that had been transferred to later generations via these stories [matal = folk tale] were one of the necessities of life. For thousands of years they have spoken of these same things, performed these same sexual acts, have had these same childish worries—is not the entirety of life one absurd story, one unbelievable and foolish tale [matal]? Am I not writing my own fable [afsāneh] and tale?[132]

The word afsun is also used in the text six times, the first three of which when describing the eyes of the ethereal woman (similar to its use in Hedāyat's "Urashima" in association with eyes). The next two come at the end of the first half of the text, when the narrator sits down and smokes all the opium he has; "afsun-āmiz" and "afsun-gar" (both meaning enchanting) are among the words he uses to describe his opium state of being.[133] The last use of afsun again reminds of Urashima's enchantment to live a double life in his imagination:

---

[130] Sadegh Hedayat, *Letters of Sadegh Hedayat*, ed. Muhammad Baharlou (Tehran: Oja, 1995), 192.
[131] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 35.
[132] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 41.
[133] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 25.

> I remembered my own long-forgotten days, but all these remembrances had magically [afsun-mānand = like afsun] become distanced from me and those memories now had a separate life of their own, while I was but an unfortunate and distant witness and I felt that a deep whirlpool had been formed between myself and them […].[134]

Thus, on the one hand, Hedāyat labels *The Blind Owl* as fantaisie/fantasy; on the other hand, the text of *The Blind Owl* calls itself an afsāneh, while associating afsun to the ethereal woman's eyes, to opium, and to recollection of memories.

Known in most European languages, the word fantasy (also phantasy in English) is derived from Latin phantasia and Greek φαντασία, "a making visible." *Oxford English Dictionary* adds:

> The senses of φαντασία from which the senses of the word in the modern languages are developed are: 1. appearance, in late Greek especially spectral apparition, phantom (so Latin phantasia in Vulgate); 2. the mental process or faculty of sensuous perception; 3. the faculty of imagination.

The Persian "afsāneh" and Latin/Greek "fantasy" might have developed separately or might have influenced each other; nevertheless, their range of meanings and connotations overlap to a large extent, especially when it comes to "imagination." They also have a quite similar intonation, with letters *f*, *n*, and *s* reappearing in both.

It is a task for linguists to figure out the extent to which afsāneh and fantasy could be related historically. Yet, what strikes me as interesting is that both refer to a genre of literature as well. A predecessor to *1001 Nights*, in the lost *1000 Afsan* the genre gets its Persian name:

[134] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 45.

afsāneh as a folk tale that generates a collective imagination, and has inspired two founders of Iranian literary modernism to dig forgotten ruins of their culture in order to write down new afsānehs. There is then the term "fantastic literature" that amid all its slippery connotations, is picked up by Borges to identify the genre/category of his most astounding story, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1940). Later in Chapter 3, I will further analyze this story as a significant intersection of the esoteric and the islamicate in Borges' mapping of world literature in conversation with Surrealism and Dadaism.

IV. Conclusion: Hedāyat's *Darkroom*

> We have all come out of Hedāyat's *Darkroom*.
>
> —Mahmoud Dowlatabadi[135]

> Why does the noble science of history repeat? Because the impudence and baseness and slackness and assholeness of humans repeat. Animals don't worship idols, don't bully, and don't honor their filth thus they don't have history. The pages of human history have been written with blood […].
>
> —Sādeq Hedāyat, *The Pearl Cannon*[136]

Mahmoud Dowlatabadi (b. 1940) saying that his generation of post-Hedāyat writers have all come out of Hedāyat's *Darkroom* is remarkable. Referring to Hedāyat's short story "Darkroom" (first published in 1942, a year after the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran), Dowlatabadi understands the text as a metaphor for a pessimist, fatalist, and regressive existential angst, experienced by subjects (or rather intellectuals) from the periphery and the colonized who might

[135] Iran Art, "Sadegh Hedayat according to Mahmoud Dowlatabadi," published April 9, 2019.
[136] A.T.: Hedayat, "The Pearl Cannon," 131.

dream of a nostalgic time in the past, while being paralyzed against their present moment.[137] "Darkroom" narrates story of a man who has sought refuge from society in a self-designed darkroom. The narrator, upon meeting the strange man who is the actual protagonist of the story, is invited to spend the night over at his place and to visit the darkroom firsthand. During the night, they indulge in a conversation about what this darkroom is. In one of his lengthy monologues, the protagonist notes:

> I wanted to dive—like winter creatures—into a hole, float into my own darkness and fortify in myself. Cause like in a darkroom where photo appears on glass, things delicate and hidden within humankind smother and die due to running around in life and tumult and lighting; they appear to humankind only in darkness and silence. This darkness was within me; unduly I was trying to resolve it; my regret is why I followed others for a while. Now I know that the most valuable part of me has been this darkness, this silence. This darkness is within the nature of any creature; it appears to us only in isolation and in return towards ourselves, when we withdraw from the phenomenal world. But all people try to escape from this darkness and isolation, close their ears to the sound of death, and fade and destroy their characters within the tumult and uproar of life. That the Sufis say: "the light of truth shall illuminate in me"; vice versa, I wait the landing of the Ahriman [the Evil], I want to wake up in me just the way I am.[138]

It is as if the owl from *The Conference of the Birds* is talking back to hoopoe, refusing the offered light of divinity. The narrator later responds back to the owl-like protagonist, saying:

---

[137] Ali Kalirad (2015) offers a comparative study of Hedayat's "Darkroom" and the Turkish writer Sait Faik Abasıyanık's short story "A Dot on the Map" (1952) in terms of their common themes of periphery and marginality.

[138] A.T.: Hedayat, "Darkroom," in *Sadegh Hedayat Complete Works, Volume I: The Short Stories*, 350.

> The state that you are searching for, is similar to the state of embryo inside mother's womb: that inside the soft and warm red walls has bended on itself, without any endeavor, struggle and flattery, slowly sucking its mother's blood, and all its desires and needs are automatically fulfilled. This is the very nostalgia of a lost paradise that exists in the bottom of each human's existence, one lives inside oneself and within oneself; perhaps it's a kind of freewill death?[139]

The morning after, when the narrator wakes up (he had slept in another room), he goes and finds the protagonist in his "darkroom," lying dead on the bed, positioned like a "child in mother's womb."

The protagonist of "Darkroom" alongside the narrator of Hedāyat's 1928 short story "Buried Alive"[140] are arguably the most similar characters to the narrator of *The Blind Owl* in terms of their tone and writing style as well as worldview and perspective—the misanthrope prototype in other words. Since Hedāyat's death, it has been a popular belief to associate this character to Hedāyat himself. Al-e Ahmad for instance wrote few months after his death that Hedāyat "has played the role of the protagonist of 'Darkroom' in real life," and that he "had committed suicide ever since he wrote 'Darkroom' and he was finished ever since he finished *The Blind Owl*."[141] This judgement of Al-e Ahmad seems now unfair—Hedāyat remained productive in research and translation, and also created in *The Pearl Canon* an experimental polyglot carnival of world history that is still to be read and studied.

Whatever one's judgment of Hedāyat's life, death, and body of work, he was indeed aware of the strength of occult and esoteric materials, and how their employment could empower

[139] A.T.: Hedayat, "Darkroom," 353.

[140] Available in English: Hedayat, "Buried Alive," in *Three Drops of Blood*, 99-115.

[141] A.T.: Al-e Ahmad, "Hedayat of *The Blind Owl*," 11-12.

his writings to have a strong and lasting influence on his readers. The magic of his writing, as I tried to show here, is greatly indebted to his secular research on the folklore of superstition.

Chapter (2) Jorge Luis Borges: Reading the Aleph in Isfahan

> And he slept one night, overwhelmed and oppressed, under a fig tree in his garden, and saw in his sleep a person dripping wet who took from his mouth a golden coin and said to him, 'Verily thy fortune is in Persia, in Isfahan: therefore seek it and repair to it.'
>
> —Borges, *The Story of the Two Dreamers*[1]

> It's been few years now since Borges has passed away and is not with us anymore; and I think about my memory of meeting him for the first and last time: in 1975, Borges came to the University of Oklahoma in Norman for a couple of lectures, with [Norman Thomas] di Giovanni accompanying him. Borges talked about South American literature for two hours. In his talk, he also referred to the present book [*The Book of Imaginary Beings*]. I became fascinated by this book, but could not find it in the library of the University of Oklahoma. Years later, in Isfahan—my hometown—I found the book by chance through a friend. Borges had apparently hinted at me to translate this book. By all means, I accepted his invitation…
>
> —Ahmad Okhovat, "Preface" to Farsi translation of *The Book of Imaginary Beings*[2]

In the later parts of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi tells a story about Ahmad Mir-Alāi, the first (and most prolific) translator of Borges into Farsi. The fragment reads like a short story based on historical accounts presented to the readers in a literary format. Perhaps "Ahmad's Inquisition in Translation" would be a fit Borgesian title for it:

> In the mid-nineties, in an effort to reach out to Europe, a number of Western intellectuals were invited to Iran. Paul Ricoeur came for a series of lectures. He gave three talks; for every one of them, audience spilled out into the hall and

[1] This piece is Borges' re-telling or variation of "The Ruined Man Who Became Rich Again through a Dream" from "Night 351" of R. F. Burton's translation of *1001 Nights* (the tale is also included in other translations, for instance that of John Payne). Interestingly, Borges has changed the location of Baghdad to Isfahan in his own variation, and it appears to be the only instance that he has made a reference to Isfahan in his body of work. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Story of the Two Dreamers," in *Collected Fictions*, 56.

[2] A.T.: Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, trans. Ahmad Okhovat (Tehran: Arast, 1994), 12.

stairs. Some time afterward, V. S. Naipaul came to Iran. In Isfahan, he was taken around by a well-known translator and publisher, Ahmad Mir-Alāi. I can still see Mir-Alāi in his bookshop in Isfahan, which had become a place for intellectuals and writers to gather and talk. He was a pale man; his skin seemed oddly faded. He was pudgy and wore round-rimmed brown glasses. Somehow, the combination of paleness and pudginess made you trust him and want to share your stories with him. He had a sharp wit and was the kind of man who seemed to listen and empathize. This came partly from the fact that, unlike his more militant friends, he was not a confrontational person. I could call him a victim because he was not political—he was caught in the cross fire and at times had to take radical political stances despite his nature. He had excellent taste in his translations, choosing Naipaul and Kundera and a host of other writers.

A few months after Naipaul left Iran, Mir-Alāi's body was found in a street, near a stream. He had left the house in the morning and had not returned. Late that night, his family was informed of his death. A small bottle of vodka was found in his pocket. Vodka had been spilled all over his shirtfront in an attempt to make it look as if Mir-Alāi, in the middle of the day, had gone off on a drunken binge and had a heart attack in the middle of the street. No one believed the story. A big bruise had been found on his chest and the mark of an injection on his arm. He had been interrogated and either accidentally or deliberately killed by his interrogators.[3]

[3] Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York: Random House, 2003), 309-10.

I will come back to this story towards the end of this chapter. In order to arrive at "Ahmad's Inquisition in Translation," I will start with a comparison of Goethe and Borges with respect to their comprehension and practice of world literature, arguing that Borges elevates Goethe's project of *Weltliteratur* by imagining the human library as a *planetary* entity—as opposed to Goethe's *regionalist* version. Next, I will investigate Borges' engagement with the esoteric and with the islamicate, partly in regards to the concept or philosophy of *pantheism* as a major intersection of the esoteric-islamicate in his corpus of writing. Speaking of Borges as a South American polyglot with Jewish roots, who has a fluctuating relationship with the European culture and is suspended between the *center* and the *periphery*, I argue that on the one hand his "Orient" is a playful *construct* that questions and challenges the dominant institutional Orientalist tendency of "will to power/govern," and that on the other hand his approach to esotericism is secular and non-religionist mainly due to his initiation to the topic by means of encyclopaedias and dictionaries. These characteristics of Borges' body of work enhance the horizons of world literature at three levels. First, on a political level, they reject nationalism, and cultural and imperial colonialism; second, on an aesthetic level, they encourage literary reincarnations of the *old* into the *new* while traveling between different languages and translations; and third, on a theological and philosophical level, they open up spaces for discussion on the topics of "high truth" and "high seriousness" (to use Matthew Arnold's terms). *What is the nature of divinity and of evil?*—is a focal question that Borges explores in most of his esoteric-islamicate pieces, while he is fascinated with digging into the "waste basket" of "rejected knowledge" in both European and non-European texts and languages. In the post-Hedāyat context of Farsi literature, these Borgesian themes and techniques inspired a generation

of writers and translators on the periphery—the Isfahan School—with whom I will end this chapter.

I. A Planetary Library: Goethe, Borges and World Literature

> Poetry if you would know,
> To its country you must go;
> If the poet you would know,
> To the poet's country go.
>
> —Goethe, *West-East Divan*[4]

> Attar passed the seven cities of love,
> In its first street we are still lost.
>
> —(attributed to) Rumi[5]

It appears to be a 21st century custom to begin the conversation around world literature with Goethe—to whom the term (*Weltliteratur* in German) owes its greatest debt.[6] I have though another reason to spend some time with this German icon here, and that is to ask a particular comparatist question: to what extent can Borges' reading of Attar's *Conference of the Birds* be comparable to Goethe's encounter with Hafiz?—since with Attar and Hafiz we are speaking of classical Persian poetry with strong Sufi themes, in other words a potential intersection of the islamicate and the esoteric. There is in the meantime a growing interest in situating Borges within a context of world literature following David Damrosch's formulation of the term as literature that gains in translation. Such is Dominique Jullien's *Borges, Buddhism and World Literature* (2019) that briefly touches on Goethe as well, arguing that "Borges intuited world

[4] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *West-East Divan: The Poems, with "Notes and Essays": Goethe's Intercultural Dialogues*, trans. Martin Bidney (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 175.

[5] A.T..

[6] Examples of beginning the discussion on world literature with Goethe are: David Damrosch (2003), John Pizer (2012), and Adam Kirsch (2016).

literature as a network of circulating forms—although obviously with a much broader, less Eurocentric reach, reflecting the hundred years of ever-increasing globalization elapsed since Goethe first envisioned *Weltliteratur*."[7] Still, the connections between the topic—Borges, Goethe, and world literature—to the islamicate and the esoteric have remained overlooked.

Goethe's famous but not fully-developed formulation of a *theory* for Weltliteratur appears in his recorded conversations with J. P. Eckermann during the last decade of the poet's life:

> I am more and more convinced, that poetry is the universal possession of [hu]mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times […]. But, really, we Germans are very likely to fall too easily into this pedantic conceit, when we do not look beyond the narrow circle that surrounds us. I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.[8]

This much quoted fragment, exciting as it is, has overshadowed another text of Goethe that concerns world literature: *West-East Divan* (*West-östlicher Divan* in German). First published in 1819, with a second expanded edition in 1827 (interestingly the same year that the Weltliteratur conversation is recorded), this text is Goethe's primal *practice* of world literature in extensive length,[9] and it may prove to be a much better threshold to enter Goethe's realm of Weltliteratur than a few paragraphs in the middle of a conversation!

---

[7] Dominique Jullien, *Borges, Buddhism and World Literature: A Morphology of Renunciation Tales* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 11.

[8] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann (1823-1832)*, trans. John Oxenford (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 133.

[9] "Most of the poetry, 240 pages in the first edition […], was composed in the short space between spring 1814 and autumn 1815. Yet right up to its publication in 1819, Goethe kept writing an even longer prose segment, *Noten und*

The reason for overlooking *West-East Divan* in English seems obvious. Goethe's extensive "Notes and Essays for a Better Understanding of the *West-East Divan*" had not been available in English until 2010 and Martin Bidney's complete translation of the *Divan*. Yet according to Bidney, even in the German-speaking world the first edition of *Divan* had not sold out after a century. The reasons behind the dismal reception of *Divan* needs further research; in the meantime, I dare to offer a reading of the neglected "Notes and Essay" in order to elucidate Goethe's understanding of the "Orient" so as to compare it with that of Borges.

Goethe begins "Notes and Essay" by noting how different he is treating his *West-East Divan* project, and that its exotic quality needs explanation and context:

> I sent the writings of my early years into the world without a preface, without even indicating what they were intended for. I did that because I trusted that the nation would sooner or later make use of what I had offered. […] But this time I would like to see to it that noting should stop my little book from making a good immediate impression. So I decided to clarify, explain, and illustrate […] what would help readers attain immediate comprehension, even if they had little familiarity with the Orient.[10]

Goethe likes to be regarded "as a traveler who will be worth hearing if he eagerly assimilates the ways of life of a strange country, tries to appropriate its forms of speech, and learns how to share views and comprehend customs"; and that this traveler "takes on the role of a merchant who displays his goods appealingly and tries in many ways to make them pleasing."[11] This figuration reminds one of Walt Disney's *Aladdin* (1992) and its opening scene where similarly a

---

Abhandlungen, to follow the poems, under the original title 'Besserem Verständnis' ('for better understanding')." Irmgard Wagner, "*West-östlicher Divan* and Other Late Poetry," in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 241.

[10] Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 175.

[11] Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 175-6.

traveler/merchant is trying to sell a "magic lamp" to the audience, and in order to attract them and convince them to buy the lamp starts to tell a story which turns out to be the movie itself—a *1001 Nights* style of storytelling. We later find out where the primeval inspiration is coming from for Goethe: travel memoirs of Europeans who had visited the "Orient," and Marco Polo in particular, "he who had seen all this and more," who "travels to the most distant East, showing us the most exotic situations, whose nearly fairytale-like appearance induces wonder and astonishment."[12] While Goethe's starting point is this romantic exoticism, he does not stop there and seeks to travel to the "Orient" through "Oriental poetry" and not just via European travel memoirs. Here he naturally enters the realm of translation—a topic he briefly examines towards the end of *Divan*.

Overall in "Notes and Essays" Goethe is taking a *historicist* approach in order to contextualize his poetry in *Divan* in relation to the history of "Oriental poetry" in general and Classical Persian poetry specifically. His history of "Oriental poetry" begins with the Bible and the Old Testament as "the most ancient collection" that "belongs to the realm of poetry."[13] We then read about *mu'allaqat*, seven pre-Islam Arabic poems written in golden letters and hung on the gates of the temple in Mecca. In Goethe's account, Muhammad threw over this literary culture "a somber religious veil that was to shroud any prospect of purer developments."[14] In the section on Muhammad, Goethe first differentiates a *prophet* from a *poet*; the former's speech is "monotonous," the latter's "manifold." He then writes of his experience with the Quran: "whenever I approach it, repels me always anew, but then attracts me, astonishes me, and in the end elicits my admiration." Here he quotes Jacobus Golius (from Sale/Arnold translation of the

[12] Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 221 & 258.

[13] Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 176-77. Note that Goethe included some of his previously unpublished studies on the Old Testament towards the end of "Notes and Essays."

[14] Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 178.

Quran), and his agreement with the passage further manifests in his historicist approach: "The main purpose of the Quran seems to have been to unite the adherents of the three different religions ['idolators, Jews, and Christians'] that were prominent in the populous Arabia of that time." Goethe also repeats words of unnamed "astute minds" who claim that "if God had not been pleased to reveal His will at once through Muhammad […], the Arabs would gradually have reached this level [of poetry] by themselves—even a higher one—and would have developed purer concepts in a pure language"; while his final assessment of the Quran is that "this book will remain highly effective to all eternity insofar as it was designed to be thoroughly practical and to suit the needs of a nation that bases its fame on ancient traditions and adherers to inherited customs."[15]

This manner of characterizing "nations" continues throughout "Notes and Essays." Next are the Persians whose poetry initially prompted Goethe to write a Divan. The largest portion of "Notes and Essays" is dedicated to Persian poetry over a period of 500 years between 11th century and 16th century. Still, Goethe begins with pre-Islam Persians and Zoroaster, since he believes "a certain core quality of the nation always survives in its character." He speaks of Zoroaster as "apparently the first to transform the noble, pure natural religion into an elaborate cult"—a religion "we have come to owe much […] and that in it lay the possibility of a higher culture which has spread over the western parts of the eastern world."[16] After brief discussion on politics and forms of governance in the "Ancient Orient," Goethe arrives at Mahmud of Ghazna, the first ruler/king of the (Persianate) Ghaznavid dynasty at the beginning of 11th century. Goethe recognizes Mahmud as "the founder of Persian poetry and higher culture" since he respected and funded poets: "He [Mahmud] felt strongly that the fairest ground for religion was to be found in

[15] Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 191-2.
[16] Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 184-6.

nationality. This rests upon poetry, which transmits to us the most ancient history in wondrous images." Fascinated with the position of *poet-prince*—an editor-in-chief who appointed by the king is supposed to "test, judge, and encourage poets to compose in ways suited to each one's talent"—Goethe believes great poetry cannot be produced out of nothing and it takes certain material conditions to create an environment within which a good poet (or a group of good poets) flourishes.[17] His fascination with this reasonable but exaggerated picture is not unexpected, as it might be the utopian dream of any poet to live and work under a ruler who appreciates poetry.[18] After all, he met with Napoleon twice in 1808.[19] Goethe then commits to providing a survey of "seven poets who Persians consider the best,"[20] and while his familiarity with the subject matter at hand is impressive—covering social and political contexts in addition to technicalities of poetry along the way—some of his general conclusions, specifically his discussion around "despotism," tend to be unpromising.

At the heart of Goethe's analysis of the history of "Oriental poetry" is the notion of "Geist": "The most outstanding characteristic of oriental poetry is what we Germans call *Geist* [spirit], the predominance of superior guidance. It unifies all other qualities, without any of them standing out by asserting a particular prerogative."[21] Footprints of German Idealism are of course traceable here, as well as throughout Goethe's body of work, but what are the consequences of

[17] Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 195-7.

[18] This structure at the court has been continuously carried out as a literary *tradition* with material aspects and implications throughout the history of Persianate (or Farsi-speaking) dynasties. Within this structure, the ruler and the poet seek recognition from each other, and there had been instances of each refusing to recognize the other. Part of the history of Farsi poetry is a genealogy of this power dynamic between the ruler and the poet. Note, for instance, that during the last 20 years, Iran's current Leader has been holding an annual poetry night in the manner of Mahmud's initiative. He listens and comments on poems (selected prior to the meeting by the poet-prince) and at the end offers some closing remarks.

[19] Ritchie Robertson, *Goethe: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 81-2.

[20] This includes Firdusi (d. 1030), Anvari (d. 1152), Nizami (d. 1180), Rumi (d. 1262), Saadi (d. 1291), Hafiz (d. 1389), and Jami (d. 1494).The source of this selection is not clear.

[21] Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 208.

this Geist-driven perspective of Goethe in the context of *Divan*? At this point in "Notes and Essays" he asks a comparatist question and steps into a tricky realm; what is the fundamental difference between "[our] Occident" and "[their] Orient"? He disclaims *religion* or *mysticism* as the answer; the former (religion) "coincides more or less with our own beliefs, with our conceptions," while the latter (mysticism) possesses "a deep and thoroughgoing seriousness, comparable to ours."[22] It is remarkable that Goethe sees a "serious mysticism" in "Oriental poetry," yet overall he expresses only the slightest interest in approaching this mysticism (or forms of the esoteric), the only instance being his discussion on the practice of *fāl* (that I will cover shortly).

What is then the answer to the "Occident vs. Orient" question? Goethe strongly believes it to be "despotism": "what never will enter the mind of an Occidental is spiritual and physical submissiveness to one's master and overlord, which is derived from time immemorial when kings took the place of God."[23] In other words, what makes Goethe's "Orient" inferior to "his own European culture" is this notion of despotism. The problem with this Geist-driven rhetoric of despotism is its *essentialism*: a form of forcing a diverse discourse into a solid kernel. It is one thing that Goethe identifies despotism as the fundamental difference between "Occident" and "Orient"; it is another thing that he is initially looking for some sort of fundamental, essentialist difference. The latter precedes the former, and it is Goethe's question at first that is misleading. Despotism might or might not be the answer; the problem lies in the formulation of the question.

Goethe might not be the first European to identify "despotism" as the primary and essential characteristic of "the Orient," but being a contemporary of Silvestre de Sacy ("the first

[22] Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 211-2.
[23] Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 212.

modern and institutional European Orientalist" in Edward Said's assessment),[24] Goethe's views certainly further legitimized this characterization. Influenced by Goethe's view for instance are the founding fathers of German sociology—Marx[25] and Weber in particular. They were driven to study "the Orient" in order to find out why "the West" had "advanced" to a capitalist mode of production and "the Orient" remained "backward." For Marx and Weber, "the Orient" lacks *something* that "the Occident" has; the task is to identify that *something,* and democracy (vs. despotism) became the accepted answer as that *something*.[26] As Bryan S. Turner also points out, an end to this problematic discourse of Orientalism is possible through dismissing the whole idea of "the uniqueness of the West" and introducing new analytical categories; though he carefully adds that "this reconstitution of knowledge can only take place in the context of major shifts in political relations between Orient and Occident, because the transformation of discourse also requires a transformation of power."[27]

Among rare pieces on "Goethe and Orientalism" in English is a lecture/essay by David Bell where he tries to prove Goethe innocent of the "Anglo-American" critique of Orientalism, arguing that Goethe's goal in the *Divan* is not "to present the 'real' Orient as if it were some objectively existing entity," but rather to create "a superficial image projected on to the Orient," a process of "Orientalizing the Orient for the purpose of assimilating it to Western ways of thinking," adding that "Neither the *Divan* nor the ['Notes and Essays'] mean to present an

[24] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 18.

[25] When discussing "Asiatic economic system" in his 1853 analyses of British rule in India, Marx uses "Oriental despotism" as a take it for granted conception and even quotes a poem from Goethe's *Divan*. Said, *Orientalism,* 153-4.

[26] "The orientalist view of Asiatic society can be encapsulated in the notion that the social structure of the oriental world was characterized by the absence of a civil society, that is, by the absence of a network of institutions mediating between the individual and the state. It was this social absence which [according to orientalist view] created the conditions for oriental despotism in which the individual was permanently exposed to the arbitrary rule of the despot." Bryan S. Turner, *Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism* (London: Routledge, 1994), 22-23. Also look at Turner (1978).

[27] Turner, *Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism*, 35.

objective representation of the Orient as it 'really' is or was."[28] Whereas Bell might be correct about the poetry section of *Divan*, the "Notes and Essays" clearly speak of "Orient" and "Occident" as "real" geopolitical borders out there, with a certain history and a literary history in particular. Evidence of "the Orient's realness" for Goethe lies in the way he treats Marco Polo's travel memoirs, for example. This is in contrast to Borges who is self-conscious of his "Orient" being a constructed, imaginative one. For Borges, even the Marco Polo account is imagined and constructed, a representation in other words. Although Goethe reassures his readers about his "good intentions" behind writing the *Divan*, he sounds regionalist when praising "pilgrims and crusaders" for their "religious enthusiasm and their strong, untiring opposition to Eastern intrusion" that protected and preserved "European cultural conditions."[29] Goethe distances himself from religious and national frameworks of literature, but at best stops at a sort of Eurocentric cosmopolitanism.

Though the *Divan* arguably remains Eurocentric specifically with respect to the despotism problematic, it takes a significant step towards crossing the borders of national literatures and thinking through literature on a planetary scale. Alongside Goethe's conception of Weltliteratur (noted in the Eckermann conversations), *Divan* is also an effort to move away from a nationalist framework of literature to a cosmopolitan one. In its entrirety, the *Divan* can be seen as a game in the manner of chess, where the Poet of the Poets of Germany sits in front of the Poet of the Poets of Persia, each representing a constructed "Occident" and "Orient," two ambassadors or two tourists who, by the recognition of others, exceed the expectations of the game of poetry. It is a very ambitious gesture on Goethe's part, as if he is standing tall, calling

[28] David Bell, "Goethe's Orientalism," in *Goethe and the English-Speaking World: Essays from the Cambridge Symposium for His 250th Anniversary*, ed. Nicholas Boyle and John Guthrie (Rochester: Camden House, 2002).
[29] Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 258.

for the next phase of literature: *Weltliteratur! Let the languages talk to each other, through their greatest works, on a planetary context!*

The only mystical or esoteric issue that Goethe touches in "Notes and Essays" is *fāl*—the practice of opening a special book like *Hafiz's Divan* at random. Like Burroughs and Gysin's cut-up method, *fāl* is a strategy of reading/writing based on principles of randomness and chance in order to steer intuition and will into a text; an outcome of treating the book as a living entity, as something that has a life/being beyond mere visual symbols and alphabets. The practice of randomly opening *Hafiz's Divan* is still commonplace among Farsi-speaking communities and regions, and sometimes takes on the form of a collective ritual, for example each year at the *Yalda Night* (the winter solstice, the longest night of a solar year and a remainder of Zoroastrian calendars/traditions) when families and friends get together and eat, each person takes a *fāl* from *Hafiz's Divan* and reads it aloud to the group. One of my pictures from Tehran in 1990s is an example of how common it was to see someone on the street selling *fāl*, picked up by a little bird from a pile of folded papers, on each one a *ghazal* by Hafiz. The bird would select a poem that had the potential to speak to you. Not aware of the bird version, Goethe offers a readable account of *fāl* in the "Bibliomancy" section of "Notes and Essay":

> A person trapped every day in gloom and looking for a brighter future grasps eagerly at chance happenings for any kind of prophetic intimation. Indecisive, he finds rescue in a resolve to submit to the dictate of the drawn lot. Of this kind is the widely used oracle in which you pose a question to some prominent book by inserting a needle between its pages. Reopening the volume, you faithfully scrutinize the passage marked. In earlier years I was closely acquainted with people who in this way confidently sought advice from the Bible, the *Treasure*

> *Casket*, or similar edifying books and thus often found consolation, even support for their whole life. In the Orient we also find this habitual practice. It is called *fal*. Hafiz received such an honor immediately after his death. When the orthodox did not want to have him buried ceremonially, people inquired directly of his poems. When the marked passage mentioned the tomb the pilgrims were going to venerate one day, they concluded that he had to be buried honorably. I also allude to this custom and hope that the same honor may be bestowed on my little book.[30]

There are a few points I want to highlight in this passage. Goethe first notes *bibliomancy* as an equivalent of *fāl* and a more familiar variation of the practice. His tone resembles Theodor Adorno's exerts on occultism as he sees bibliomancy/fāl as an activity for helpless, alienated subjects. It appears irrational to Goethe to seek life advice in this manner. But when he arrives at Hafiz, he notices a poetic gesture in *fāl*: "Hafiz received such an honor" that people take *fāl* with his *Divan*, an honor exclusive to the Poet of Poets of Persia, and Goethe wishes his own *West-East Divan* to be treated the same.

Goethe's suspicion of the religious or mystical aspects of the practice of *fāl* while reinforcing its poetic significance results in the recognition of a *gaming* dimension in *fāl*. Shortly after the "Bibliomancy" section, Goethe reminds his readers of a "still secret method of communicating through codes: […] if two individuals agree on a book whose page and line numbers they will refer to in their letters, the sender can be sure the recipient will readily detect the meaning." He thus makes up a scenario in which two lovers apply this method Hafiz's poems in order to confess their feelings: "In this way songs are composed, with thoughts most beautifully expressed."[31] Still, Goethe is less interested in the random composition of a poem; he

[30] Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 228-9.
[31] Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 232.

desires a rational, chess-style variation that involves "choice," not a Sufi-chess variation that is all determined by dice with no room for self-conscious choices.

Goethe in fact refers to chess in "Notes and Essays," though only in passing. He is familiar with the (hi)story of chess; Persians ordered "the fables of Bidpai and the game of chess to be brought from India at enormous expense" in the 6th century.[32] Yet his evaluation of chess in connection with "Persian worldly wisdom" is that it is "perfectly suited to kill all poetical sensibility." Goethe was seemingly unfamiliar with either Sufi-chess or backgammon, and this limited his analysis of games and poetry. Nevertheless, references to *Bidpai* alongside chess—as the other souvenir from India—are noteworthy: "They [Persians] assigned the fables of Bidpai the highest value, though in doing so they were already destroying a future poetry at its very foundation."[33] Goethe does not explain how praising *Bidpai* led to destruction of a future poetry, and only makes a brief note on Attar's *Conference of the Birds* as "the most beautiful example" of the "copies, imitations, and continuations" of *Bidpai* in Farsi.[34]

I started this section with a question: to what extent is Borges' reading of Attar's *Conference of the Birds* comparable to Goethe's encounter with Haifz? This questions leads to some general observations about Goethe: 1) Goethe is practicing world literature in his *Divan* project as a step towards going beyond borders of national literatures. Translation, and one's approach to translation, plays a significant role in this approach; 2) Goethe finds the mysticism of the "Orient" a serious phenomenon and not a mere superstition, though he does not commit to exploring it further. Still, he is inspired by the practice of *fāl* for literary—and not religious or mystical—tasks and purposes; 3) Goethe takes a historicist approach to poetry in particular, and

[32] Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 209.
[33] Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 189-90.
[34] Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 228.

literature more broadly; 4) there is the problematic of "Occidental vs. Oriental" where Goethe takes an essentialist approach through searching for the "Geist" of nations.

How does Borges compare to Goethe with respect to these four points? 1) Borges is involved in a similar practice of world literature; thinking of literature as a game and world literature as a set of gaming practices in a planetary context where languages talk to each other and gain in translation. Yet, while Goethe is stuck in a sort of cosmopolitanism or cultural regionalism, Borges—as a subject in exile with no single or particular cultural home—takes his analysis one step further. For Borges, the whole world is arguably a place of exile. In terms of his approach to translation,[35] Borges challenges the validity of *originality* and "definitive" text. All texts are drafts and no one draft is intrinsically superior to other drafts. Thus, a translation is not *necessarily* inferior to its original since they are both drafts;[36] 2) Borges additionally finds the mysticism of the Orient a serious phenomenon, though he does not use generalized terms like "Oriental mysticism." Unlike Goethe, Borges attempts to explore and understand esoteric texts and discourses, particularly that of Gnosticism and Kabbalah, and to a lesser extent, the esoteric of the islamicate culture. Similar to Goethe, he is inspired by the esoteric for literary purposes, but also seeks answers to his philosophical and theological questions in addition to offering some historical and secular analyses of esotericism in general; 3) histories of poetry and literature are constructed categorizations for Borges. Art and poetry happen in time, but can also transcend time since they carry on their aesthetic value. History is not time; it is a construct and a representation. Time is our substance, and poetry happens in time and not in history. For Goethe,

[35] On the topic of Borges and translation see Kristal (2002) and Waisman (2005).

[36] "To assume that every recombination of elements is necessarily inferior to its original form is to assume that draft nine is necessarily inferior to draft H—for there can only be drafts. The concept of the 'definitive text' corresponds only to religion or exhaustion. The superstition about the inferiority of translations—coined by the well-known Italian adage—is the result of absentmindedness. There is no good text that does not seem invariable and definitive if we have turned to it a sufficient number of times." Jorge Luis Borges, "The Homeric Versions," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 69.

good poetry is produced in a rich cultural sphere; for Borges, good poetry can happen in any space/time: "poetry is a mysterious chess" (Ajedrez misterioso la poesía)[37] and its mechanisms are unknown or at least unexplainable; 4) for Borges, "Occident" and "Orient" are generalized constructs, and he also does not use any Geist-driven approach when speaking of nations of past and present.

I have identified four major moments in Borges' works where he discusses Attar and *Conference of the Birds*: one within his series of studies on Dante Alighieri; one the essay on Edward FitzGerald; one a short story, "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim"; and last but not least,"The Simurgh" entry in *The Book of Imaginary Beings*. I will discuss them here one by one.

The story of Borges and Dante's *The Divine Comedy* is one of the most fascinating in regards to world literature as a translationary practice. He offers an account of this in a 1977 lecture on the subject:

> Chance—except that there is no chance: what we call chance is our ignorance of the complex machinery of causality—led me to discover three small volumes in the Mitchell Bookstore [...], the *Inferno*, the *Purgatorio*, and the *Paradiso* […]. One the left was the Italian text, and on the right a literal [English] translation. I devise this modus operandi: I first read a verse, a tercet, in English prose; then I read the verse in Italian; and so on through to the end of the canto. Then I read the whole canto in English, and finally in Italian. […] I have read the *Commedia* many times. The truth is that I don't know Italian. I only know the Italian Dante taught me […].[38]

[37] Jorge Luis Borges, "Prologue" to "The Self and the Other," in *Selected Poems*, ed. Alexander Coleman (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 149.

[38] Jorge Luis Borges, "The Divine Comedy," in *Seven Nights*, trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions, 1984), 8-9.

Suggesting an elegant method to *practice* world literature, Borges perceives translation as a first and necessary step to approach a foreign text, though not a sufficient one; the bilingual edition allows him to take one step further (and he would have been happy to see the Penguin edition of his *Selected Poem*s is a bilingual Spanish/English one).

Self-educated in *Commedia*, Borges published his *Nine Dantesque Essays* (Nueve ensayos dantescos, originally from 1945-1951) in a separate volume in 1982—to no other book or author has he dedicated this much attention. He begins the "Prologue" to these essays with a note on *1001 Nights*: "Imagine, in an Oriental library, a panel painted many centuries ago. It may be Arabic, and we are told that all the legends of *The Thousand and One Nights* are represented on its surface." This is an orient of the human library that Borges refers to, though there is also a sense of an "aleph" (one point in space that contains all points) in this comparison between *1001 Nights* and *Commedia*:

> […] we go deeper into the carved surface we understand that there is nothing on earth that is not there. What was, is, and shall be, the history of past and future, the things I have had and those I will have, all of it awaits as somewhere in this serene labyrinth… I have fantasized a magical work, a panel that is also a microcosm: Dante's poem is that panel whose edges enclose the universe.[39]

"The Simurgh and the Eagle" is an essay in this volume that touches on Attar. Borges is looking for examples of a notion or concept of "a being composed of other beings" in literature. One is in Canto XVIII of the *Paradiso*: an eagle that is "composed of thousands of just kings. An unmistakable symbol of Empire, it speaks with a single voice, and says 'I' rather than 'we.'" The other one is the Simurgh from *Conference of the Birds*. Offering some details about Attar's life

[39] Borges, "Prologue" to "Nine Dantesque Essays," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 267.

and body of work, Borges provides a synopsis of the story and the figure of Simurgh: "In the Simurgh are the thirty birds and in each bird is the Simurgh." He then arrives at two observations, the first being about the narration technique: "The pilgrims go forth in search of an unknown goal; this goal, which will be revealed only at the end, must arouse wonder and not be or appear to be merely added on. The author finds his way out of this difficulty with classical elegance; adroitly, the searchers are what they seek." The second observation, the main argument of the essay, is a comparison between Eagle and Simurgh:

> The disparity between Eagle and the Simurgh is no less obvious than their resemblance. The Eagle is merely implausible; the Simurgh, impossible. The individuals who make up the Eagle are not list in it […]; the birds that gaze upon the Simurgh are at the same time the Simurgh. The Eagle is a transitory symbol, as were the letters before it; those who form its shape with their bodies do not cease to be who they are: the ubiquitous Simurgh is inextricable. Behind the Eagle is the personal God of Israel and Rome; behind the magical Simurgh is pantheism.[40]

Note the difference here with Goethe's historicist methodology. Borges takes one abstract idea, in this case "a being composed of other beings," and compares two particular emanations of it. This particular comparison then arrives at a general conclusion: the theological foundations of these two classic works of literature, with "pantheism" being the focal concept that Borges revisits numerous times throughout his body of work.

The second instance of Borges discussing Attar is "The Enigma of Edward FitzGerald" (El enigma de Edward FitzGerald, 1951). This essay is primarily about Omar Khayyām, his

[40] Borges, "The Simurgh and the Eagle," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 296-97.

Rubaiyat, and its FitzGerald English translation. Borges notes that in addition to *Rubaiyat*, FitzGerald also worked on the first Farsi to English translation of *Conference of the Birds*: "that mystical epic about the birds who are searching for their king, the Simurgh, and who finally reach his palace beyond the seven seas, and discover that they are the Simurgh, that the Simurgh is each one and all of them." This piece on Attar reads much like a footnote, but Borges returns to discuss pantheism in more detail. Echoing critics who believe FitzGerald's *Rubaiyat* is in fact "an English poem with Persian allusions," he then offers his own metaphysical speculation of this collaboration (between FitzGerald and Khayyām). The final passage of the essay is quite illuminating regarding Borges' faith in the possibilities that translation can create:

> The case invites speculations of a metaphysical nature. Omar [Khayyām] professed (we know) the Platonic and Pythagorean doctrine of the soul's passage through many bodies; centuries later, his own soul perhaps was reincarnated in England to fulfill, in a remote Germanic language streaked with Latin, the literary destiny that had been suppressed by mathematics in Nishapur. Isaac Luria the Lion taught that the soul of a dead man can enter an unfortunate soul to nourish or instruct it; perhaps, around 1857, Omar's soul took up residence in FitzGerald's. In the *Rubaiyat* we read that the history of the universe is a spectacle that God conceives, stages, and watches; that notion (whose technical name is pantheism) would allow us to believe that the Englishman could have recreated the Persian because both were, in essence, God or the momentary faces of God. More believable and no less marvelous than these speculations of a supernatural kind is the supposition of a benevolent coincidence. Clouds sometimes form the shapes of mountains or lions; similarly, the unhappiness of Edward FitzGerald and a

> manuscript of yellow paper and purple letters, forgotten on a shelf of the Bodleian at Oxford, formed, for our benefit, the poem. All collaboration is mysterious. That of the Englishman and the Persian was even more so, for the two were quite different, and perhaps in life might not have been friends; death and vicissitudes and time led one to know the other and make them into a single poet.[41]

That Borges included this essay in his *A Personal Anthology* (Antología Personal, 1961) makes it even more significant. This idea of literary reincarnation is not a random or passing speculation that Borges plays with. What he identifies as pantheism in Khayyām and Attar (both from the city of Nishapur, Attar was born around 15 years after Khayyām died), he also traces in Gnosticism, Kabbalah, Spinoza, and Swedenborg. As a poet or an artist, he is less concerned with proving the doctrines of this or that theological system, but he is indeed fascinated with their application in literature. If A is true (e.g. pantheism), then what would B (conditioned by A) look like? This is why I think the best commentary on Borges' FitzGerald essay is his short story "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" that also ends with Isaac Luria's Kabbalistic conceptions, with Attar being the main component of the story.

"The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" (El acercamiento a Almotásim) was first published in Borges' 1936 essay book *A History of Eternity* (Historia de la eternidad), later included in his 1941 book of short stories *The Garden of Forking Paths* (El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan). It is a classic case of a Borgesian essay-fiction, but also a primary example of Borges' ability to incorporate esoteric and islamicate motifs in an organic manner. On the whole, the text is a hoax review of an imaginary novel made up by Borges: *The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim* by a Bombay

[41] Borges, "The Enigma of Edward FitzGerald," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 368.

attorney named Mir Bahadur Ali.[42] The plot of the novel is, in short, a law student in Bombay who has renounced the Islamic faith, finds himself at the center of a street battle between Muslims and Hindus. In daze, he kills (or thinks he has killed) a Hindu and thus escapes the scene. He adventures across India and searches for Al-Mu'tasim, a divine figure, by locating "reflections" that its soul has left in others. He eventually gets closer, until the voice of Al-Mu'tasim from behind a curtain calls him to enter. He steps into the room, and the novel ends. If *The Blind Owl* is a story of descending the spiral of divine/evil, "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim"—like *Conference of the Birds*—is a story of ascending the spiral.[43]

Early on, Borges notes that past critics of this novel have detected "the dual, and implausible" influence of Wilkie Collins and Attar, and have pointed out its "detective mechanism" and "mystical undercurrents"—a hint of what Borges' own text is: a detective mystical essay-fiction. Borges, in the uniform of a critic, compares two editions of the novel: a first 1932 original edition, and a second 1934 illustrated edition entitled *The Conversation with*

[42] On "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" being a hoax, Borges notes (in 1970): "written in 1935, [it] is both a hoax *and* a pseudo-essay. It purported to be a review of a book published originally in Bombay three years earlier. I endowed its fake second edition with a real publisher […] and a preface by a real writer […]. But the author and the book are entirely my own invention. I gave the plot and details of some chapters—borrowing from Kipling and working in the twelfth-century Persian mystic Farid ud-Din Attar—and then carefully pointed out its shortcomings. The story appeared the next year in a volume of my essays, *A History of Eternity*, buried at the back of the book together with an article on the 'Art of Insult.' Those who read 'The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim' took it at face value, and one of my friends even ordered a copy from London. It was not until 1942 that I openly published it as a short story in my first story collection [..]. Perhaps I have been unfair to this story; it now seems to me to foreshadow and even to set the pattern for those tales that were somehow awaiting me, and upon which my reputation as a storyteller was to be based." Emir Rodriguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978), 265.

[43] I should note my amazement when first reading "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" and noticing some of its uncanny resemblances to Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*, both texts first published in 1936. Bahadur and the protagonist of his novel are from Bombay, the city where Hedayat completed and published the manuscript of *The Blind Owl*, while Borges also mentions Benares, a city that plays a significant role in Hedayat's text. In Borges' story, the protagonist arrives at top of a tower "which has a pitch-black hole in the center," and meets "a filthy man squatting in the moonlight, pouring forth a vigorous stream of urine" who confides to the protagonist that it is his professions to steal a gold teeth from the Parsees—or Parsis, the Zoroastrian community of India. He disappears the next morning, having stolen some of the protagonist's belongings. Reading this, I could not help but to think of the character of old peddler in *The Blind Owl*. Borges also notes in the story that the person immediately preceding Al-Mu'tasim at the end of the novel is "a Persian bookseller." Nevertheless, this resemblance is a speculation and there is no evidence that Hedayat and Borges have been aware of each other's works.

the Man Called Al-Mu'tasim: A Game with Shifting Mirrors (that includes an appendix detailing the fundamental differences between the two editions). Borges claims he had access only to the second edition, while he suspects that the first edition is "greatly superior." Through comparing the two editions like a critic/detective, Borges arrives at two distinct theologies. One, as represented in the second edition (its plot and ending I provided above), suggests "a single, unitary God who molds himself to the dissimilarities of humankind." The other one, which Borges finds more appealing and exciting, is "the idea that the Almighty is also in search of Someone, and that Someone, in search of a yet superior (or perhaps simply necessary, albeit equal) Someone, and so on, to the End—or better yet, the Endlessness—of Time. Or perhaps cyclically." Stated differently:

> In the 1932 version of the novel, the supernatural notes are few and far between; 'the man called Al-Mu'tasim' has his touch of symbolism, but he possesses idiosyncratic personal traits as well. Unfortunately, that commendable literary practice was not to be followed in the second edition. In the 1934 version […] the novel sinks into allegory: Al-Mu'tasim is an emblem of God, and the detailed itineraries of the hero are somehow the progress of the soul in its ascent to mystical plenitude. […] In the 1932 version of the novel, the fact that the object of the pilgrimage was himself a pilgrim cleverly justified the difficulty of finding al-Mu'tasim; in the 1934 edition, that fact leads to the extravagant theology I have described.[44]

[44] Borges, "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim," in *Collected Fictions,* 85-6.

Borges is thus suggesting two possible and quite different readings of *Conference of the Birds*: a monotheist (or more exactly a perennialist) one that he rejects, and a pantheist one that he embraces.

At the end of Borges' text, Attar reappears. "The points of congruence between Bahadur's novel and Farid al-din Attar's classic *Conference of the Birds* meet with no less mysterious praise of London, and even Allahabad and Calcutta," notes Borges. An extensive footnote then finishes the story, where Borges offers a detailed account of the plot of *Conference of the Birds*, adding that "The parallels between this poem and Mir Bahadur Ali's novel are not overdone," and mentioning Plotinus who likewise "remarks upon a paradisal extension of the principle of identity: 'Everything in the intelligible heavens is everywhere. Any thing is all things. The sun is all stars, and each star is all stars and the sun.'" Yet most thrilling is the last sentence of the text (before the footnote) where the connection to "The Enigma of Edward FitzGerald" is made, as Borges offers his final analysis of the novel and its sources of inspiration: "I myself, in all humility, would point out a distant, possible precursor: the Kabbalist Isaac Luria, who in Jerusalem, in the sixteen century, revealed that the soul of an ancestor or teacher may enter into the soul of an unhappy or unfortunate man, to comfort or instruct him. That type of metempsychosis is called *ibbur*."[45]

I reckon that "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" is Borges' attempt in retelling and rewriting *Conference of the Birds*. He desires the kind of collaboration that FitzGerald and Khayyām had, a possible "ibbur"—a reincarnation of Attar's soul in him and his story. The dense symbolism of the allegory of Simurgh indeed opens up different readings, but what seems most appealing to Borges is a pantheist interpretation where Simurgh is not necessarily Allah or

[45] Borges, "Approach to Al-Mu'tasim," 86.

the God of Abrahamic religions, but rather an emanation of the divine that is itself searching for other divinities. Through a commentary on a novel that has not been written but has two different versions, Borges opposes a *pantheist* interpretation of Simurgh to a *perennialist* interpretation and shows sympathy for the former.

Note that Attar's *Conference of the Birds* is not the only version of the story/allegory, though it is definitely the most famous one.[46] The Arabic phrase, mantiq al-tayr, appears in the Quran in the chapter "The Ants" (27:16): "Solomon inherited from David and said,[47] 'O mankind, we have been taught the language of the birds [mantiq al-tayr].'"[48] Between the Quran and Attar, there exist several versions of this allegory in Farsi and Arabic; what Attar did was sum up all the previous efforts in an extensive, majestic volume, hoping it would stand the test of time. I doubt Borges had been aware of all of these versions, nor does it seem he had read Attar's text (around 4700 lines of poetry) in full since he only mentions the overall plot of the story and its ending with no remarks on the numerous fables or mini-stories that appear throughout the text. Still, what Borges does and achieves in "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" is a *practice* in world literature through reinforcing the dynamic forces of literature and translation, and a juxtaposition of past texts; *Conference of the Birds* takes a new and beautiful life and form in Borges' essay-fiction. He does not seem to be afraid or embarrassed of copying, since every text

[46] Notable are Farsi poems by Sanai (d. 1135) and Khaqani (d. 1195), Avicenna's Arabic treatise *Recital of the Bird* (translated to Farsi by Suhrawardi), and Suhrawardi's own Farsi treatise *The Chant of Simurgh*. For detailed records of these versions look at Shafiei Kadkani's edition of *Conference of the Birds* (2015).

[47] Attar's *Conference of the Birds* actually begins with a reference to Solomon: "Dear hoopoe, welcome! You will be our guide; / It was on you King Solomon relied / To carry secret messages between / His court and distant Sheba's lovely queen." Farid ud-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis (London: Penguin, 2011), 39. Note the character of Hoopoe is similar to that of Hermes in Greek mythology.

[48] The commentary of *The Study Quran* on this verse reads as a perennialist one: "The idea of the 'language of the birds' became an important idea in Sufi thought, often symbolizing higher states of consciousness that enable one to understand the deeper significance of things beyond their outward appearances. Some Sufis have interpreted this phrase to mean not only knowledge of an esoteric character in general, but more specifically knowledge of the inner meaning of other religions." *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: Harper One, 2015), 931.

is a copy, a cut-up, or an intertextual product. Meanwhile, he has a sarcastic message for Orientalists. By writing a serious and detailed review on a novel from India that does not exist, and publishing it first in an essay book, he is perhaps making a point: the so-called "Orient" being carefully and seriously studied could be nothing but a work of imagination, a product or a section of the human library. This way he disenchants the Orient of Orientalism, and invites the reader to think through theological questions regarding the nature and quality of divinity. As he notes in the essay on FitzGerald, "every educated man[/woman] is a theologian, and faith is not a requisite."[49] Borges, in his relation to Attar, is less interested in doing what Goethe did with Hafiz (to desire the status of poet of poets), but is rather looking to do what Joyce did with Homer (to blow a new life in an old text).

The secondary literatures on "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" further accentuate its significance as an essay-fiction with mystical undertones. Among Borges' biographers, Edwin Williamson identifies the story among Borges' works as the first appearance of "a pantheist insight into the oneness of the universe thanks to the immanence of the divine in each creature," and concludes that the story's ending serves "as a mystical theory of writing leading to a kind of all-embracing Aleph symbolized in the pantheist Simurgh."[50] Emir Rodriguez Monegal emphasizes the story being a hoax, but also the fact that it is Borges' first experiment in his invented essay-fiction genre where instead of retelling a story, he offers a critique of it. "The narrative discourse was submerged, masked under the critical discourse. Fiction became truth because what was invented was not the fact that the story may have happened […] but that the story pre-existed its telling."[51]

[49] Borges, "Enigma of FitzGerald," 367.
[50] Edwin Williamson, *Borges, a Life,* (New York: Viking, 2004), 179-81.
[51] Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography*, 265.

Among the scholarly literature on Borges and esotericism, that of Jaime Alazraki (1988) and Didier T. Jaén (1992) are noteworthy with respect to their discussions of "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim." Alazraki identifies the concept of "ibbur" as principally a "dreadful form of exile" and an example of doctrines of "the transmigration of the soul" that Borges has employed—one that covers "the revelations of theology into nuances of the fantastic." When discussing the Attar parable however, his analysis tends to perennialism—that all religious traditions at core share a single truth manifested in different ways:

> The story may be read as a Sufistic experience, as an expression of Kabbalistic *Ibbur*, and also as a narrative translation of Hindu Atman. […] It could be argued that once one mystic system is presented, the others are essentially implied in it. In our case Hindu *Atman*, Sufism […] and the *Ibbur* of the Kabbalah are different manifestations of a same attempt: to feel the presence of the Godhead in such a way that God becomes the center and the circumference […].[52]

This attempt of situating God as "the center and the circumference" is one that Borges plainly rejects in opposition to the pantheist or gnostic idea of the Almighty also being in search of someone in an endless spiral. This is nicely pointed out by Jaén who reads "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" as the most representative example of "metafiction" among Borges' stories playing with a "centerless center":

> The story also offers a mythical way of expressing an idea that is central […] to twentieth-century literature. Man in search of a self discovers that the self is nowhere to be found, or is only a mirror-like image produced by a set of circumstances reflecting each other. […] As in other stories ('Tlön, [Uqbar, Orbis

[52] Jaime Alazraki, *Borges and the Kabbalah: And Other Essays on His Fiction and Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 25.

> Tertius,]' 'The Circular Ruins'), there seems to be no fixed point, no final center, yet the student retains his own concrete self (which is not concrete) to find a final center (which is no center). The 'ascent' of the hero traces a dialectical process of self-discovery (or self-formation) through a series of mutual reflections. At the end, we are left in this dialectical hesitation, with the intuition of a centerless center.[53]

II. The Cult of Libraries: Borges and the Esoteric

> To indicate more clearly the difference between a poet and a prophet, I would say: both are seized and enkindled by one god, but the poet expends the enjoyable gift bestowed upon him in order to produce pleasure, to attain honor, or at least a comfortable life, by what he produces. He neglects all other purposes, seeking to be versatile, and to prove himself unconfined in his convictions and artistic production. In contrast, the prophet has one purpose in mind, and to attain it he uses the simplest means. He wants to proclaim some teaching and to gather people around it, as one would rally them round a banner. To achieve this it is only requisite that the world believe. The prophet must therefore become and remain monotonous. For one does not believe in the manifold, one discerns it.
>
> —Goethe, *West-East Divan*[54]

The Rough Guide to Cult Fiction quotes Borges' entry entitled "The Blind Visionary," saying "I am neither a thinker nor a moraliser. Simply a man of words who reflects in his writing his own confusion and the respectable system of confusions we call philosophy."[55] This sounds like an honest and convincing self-assessment; Borges often writes of his perplexities with some—at

[53] Didier T. Jaén, *Borges' Esoteric Library: Metaphysics to Metafiction* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1992), 73.

[54] Goethe, *West-East Divan*, 190-91.

[55] *The Rough Guide to Cult Fiction*, ed. Paul Simpson, Michaela Bushell, and Helen Rodiss (London: Haymarket Customer Publishing, 2005), 29.

times—neglected or rejected philosophical/theological questions that he has been attracted to. He is a great example of what Goethe calls a "poet" in contrast to a "prophet." The polyphonic nature of Borges' works makes it difficult, even impossible, to portray a single unified Borgesian system or worldview, as he constantly acts like a curious child writing about his wonders and astonishments—what in Aristotelian terms is the first step of philosophy.

In the previous section I noted that Borges' encounter with Attar is closely tied to his interest in doctrines of pantheism as a way of understanding the nature of the divine and evil. Now this interest in pantheism, as Jaén has correctly and comprehensively mapped out, is further reflected in Borges' encounter with the esoteric in general including Gnosticism and Kabbalah (Jaén extends this list to Buddhism, Neo-Platonism, Sufism, and also Spinoza, Schopenhauer, and Swedenborg, arguing that "Borges' interest in esoteric and philosophical doctrines was directly related to an interest in renovating fiction"[56]). What I am particularly emphasizing in this section is Borges' initiation into esotericism through encyclopaedias and dictionaries—that is, products of the institution of the university and not the religion apparatus. While Borges was a close friend and chessmate (chess-comrade) of Xul Solar,[57] there is no record of Borges being a member of a cult, a secret society, or a new religious movement.[58] Due to this manner of initiation, Borges writes on esotericism like a secular, unbiased, and non-sectarian scholar without a religionist agenda; he is neither a prophet nor a follower, but a poet for whom literature and writing are supreme forms of magic—a magic whose object is to create beauty, not a will to power.

[56] Jaén, *Borges' Esoteric Library*, 13.

[57] Xul Solar (Alejandro Schulz, 1887-1963) had reportedly met with Aleister Crowley and even painted a portrait of him.

[58] "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and "The Congress" are examples of Borges playing with themes of secret societies (in the former story he even names Xul Solar).

The best place to begin this topic is a piece by the young Borges from his 1932 essay book *Discussion* (Discusión): "A Defense of Basilides the False" (Una vindicación del falso Basílides) which was actually first published in *La Prensa* under the title "A Defense of the Gnostics" (Una vindicación de los gnósticos) alongside its twin essay "A Defense of the Kabbalah" (Una vindicación de la cábala). The two demonstrate Borges' early interest in topics of esotericism. Borges starts "A Defense of Basilides the False" with the story of his initiation into Gnosticism:

> In about 1905 [at the age of 6], I knew that the omniscient pages (*A* to *All*) of the first volume of […] *Hispano-American Encyclopedic Dictionary* contained a small and alarming drawing of a sort of king, with the profiled head of a rooster, a virile torso with open arms brandishing a shield and a whip, and the rest merely a coiled tail, which served as a throne. In about 1916, I read an obscure passage in [Francisco de] Quevedo: 'There was the accursed Basilides the heresiarch […].' In about 1923, in Geneva [Switzerland], I came across some heresiological book in German, and I realized that the fateful drawing represented a certain miscellaneous god that was horribly worshiped by the very same Basilides. I also learned what desperate and admirable men the Gnostics were, and I began to study their passionate speculations. Later I was able to investigate the scholarly books of [George Robert Stowe] Mead […] and Wolfgang Schultz […], and the articles by Wilhelm Bousset in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.[59]

There is also a hint here about Borges' fascination with writing an encyclopaedia of imaginary beings, but the essays move on to discuss theological doctrines around the problem of evil.

[59] Borges, "A Defense of Basilides the False," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 65.

"What is important is what is common to these narratives [of Basilides' doctrines]: our rash or guilty improvisation out of unproductive matter by a deficient divinity," notes Borges,

> It is a quite resolution of the problem of evil by means of a hypothetical insertion of a gradual series of divinities between the no less hypothetical God and reality. In the system under examination [Gnosticism], these derivations of God dwindle and weaken the further they are removed from God, finally reaching the bottom with the abominable powers who scratched out mankind from base matter.[60]

Whether or not Borges believed such doctrines to be true (either through reason or by means of faith or spiritual experience) is not my concern here. I am instead interested in exploring the application of these doctrines to literature.

Borges has a method or strategy to move from the particular to the universal that I briefly mentioned in the previous section: let's assume that A is true (e.g. the doctrine of a deficient divinity), then how would B (a character, a situation, a place, a book) look like when conditioned by A? It is similar to Lewis Carroll's method in *Through the Looking-Glass*; if Alice goes inside a mirror, then what would her world look like? This analytical/logical strategy is further emphasized in Guillermo Martínez's study of Borges and mathematics:

> When Borges writes, he typically accumulates examples, analogies, related stories, and variations of whatever he has decided to narrate. In this way, the main fiction he develops is at once specific and general, and his texts sound as if the specific example carries within it and permanently alludes to a universal form. Mathematics proceeds in the same way. When mathematicians study an example, a particular case, they examine it in the hope of discovering in it a more

[60] Borges, "A Defense of Basilides the False," 67.

> widespread, general feature, which they might abstract into a theorem. Borges, mathematicians like to believe, writes exactly as they would write if they were put to the test: with a proud Platonism, as if there existed a heaven made up of perfect fictions and a precise notion of truth for literature.[61]

"The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" is one example where the idea of a deficient divinity searching for a higher one is explored through a conditional scenario. The final paragraph of "A Defense of Basilides the False" is another example of applying this conditional "what if" scenario, this time to a historical narrative that could have potentially changed what counts as canonical literature:

> In the first centuries of our era, the Gnostics disputed with the Christians. They were annihilated, but we can imagine their possible victory. Had Alexandria triumphed and not Rome, the bizarre and confused stories that I have summarized would be coherent, majestic, and ordinary. Lines such as Novalis' 'Life is a sickness of the spirit,' or Rimbaud's despairing 'True life is absent; we are not in the world,' would fulminate from the canonical books. […] In any case, what better gift can we hope for than to be insignificant? What greater glory for a God than to be absolved of the world?[62]

Borges arguably created a version of this gnostic world in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1941) by means of describing the contents of an imaginary encyclopedia. He sharply argues here that Gnosticism disappeared not because it was false or wrong, but because it was defeated politically and militaristically; it became rejected knowledge defeated by geopolitical power. He takes "the rejected" seriously and humbly wishes to remain insignificant thus closer to the divine.

---

[61] Guillermo Martínez, *Borges and Mathematics*, trans. Andrea G. Labinger (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2012), 21. For more on Borges and mathematics see Merrell (1991) and Bloch (2008).

[62] Borges, "A Defense of Basilides the False," 68.

The twin essay "A Defense of the Kabbalah" shares a similar scholarly and secular vision. Here Borges clarifies that his intention is not to defend the doctrine of Kabbalah, but rather the "hermeneutical or cryptographic procedures" that lead to it, including: "the vertical reading of sacred texts, the reading referred to as *boustrophedon* (one line from left to right, the following line from right to left), the methodical substitution of certain letters of the alphabet for others, the sum of the numerical value of the letters, etc.." He then adds, and this is important, that "To ridicule such operations is simple; I prefer to attempt to understand them."[63] Elsewhere, in a conversion with Alazraki, Borges explains the reasons for his attraction to Kabbalah:

> To begin with, all things Jewish have always fascinated me […].[64]And then, since I have not been able to believe in a personal God, the idea of a vast and impersonal God, the *En-Sof* of the Kabbalah, has always fascinated me. Later on, I have found the same, well, in Spinoza, and in pantheism in general, and also in Schopenhauer […]. There is, in addition, a more circumstantial factor. The first book I read in German […] around 1916, was [Gustav] Meyrink's novel, *Der Golem* [The Golem].[65]

In a 1977 lecture on Kabbalah, Borges revisits the topic and clearly outlines how his fascination with Kabbalah is linked to his interest in Gnosticism: "I suspect that their [the Kabbalists'] modus operandi was indebted to a desire to incorporate Gnostic thought into Jewish mysticism"; "the Kabbalists were influenced by the Gnostics and that, in order to link everything to the

[63] Borges, "A Defense of the Kabbalah," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 83.

[64] Borges' mother (Leonor Acevedo) was a Catholic, and his father (Jorge Guillermo Borges) was an agnostic (his father's mother was a Protestant who knew the Bible by heart in English). Famously, in his 1934 essay "I, a Jew," Borges points out that "Acevedo" (his last name from his mother's side) indicates that his ancestors were Spanish Jews that moved to Portugal during the Spanish Inquisition and then came to South America early 18th century. According to Williamson, Borges was baptised at the catholic church of San Nicolás de Bari in Buenos Aires on June 20, 1900.

[65] Alazraki, *Borges and the Kabbalah*, 6.

Hebrew tradition, they sought this strange system of deciphering letters."[66] This lecture effectively serves as a synthesis of his two defenses/vindications from 1932,[67] and is also key in understanding many of his literary pieces that reflect upon the doctrine of deficient divinity:

> I am not dealing with a museum piece from the history of philosophy. I believe the system has an application: it can serve as a means of thinking, of trying to understand the universe. The Gnostics preceded the Kabbalists by many centuries. They had a similar system which postulated an indeterminate god. From that god […] emanates another god […] and from that emanation another, and from that another. There is a tower of emanations […]. When we reach the final emanation, where the divine part has been reduced to almost zero, we find the god called Jehovah, who created this world. Why did He create this world so full of errors, so full of horror, so full of sins, so full of physical pain, so full of guilt, so full of crime? Because the Divinity had diminished itself until it reached Jehovah, who created this fallible world.[68]

Borges claims that the Gnostics and the Kabbalists resolved the problem of evil's existence in the same way, "by declaring that the universe is the work of a deficient Divinity, one whose fraction of Divinity approaches zero, of a god who is not *the* God. Of a god who is a distant descendant of God." Borges certainly did not believe in a world where nothing is true and

---

[66] Borges, "The Kabbalah," in *Seven Nights*, 97 & 100.

[67] Borges had delivered a different version of this essay earlier in 1970. A translation of the 1970 piece is included in Alazraki's *Borges and the Kabbalah* (who believes it is more intimate and focused than the 1977 version). There also Borges discusses the connection between Kabbalah and Gnosticism: "It is reasonable to think that Gnostics and Neo-Platonists were not ignored by the first Kabbalists who opted, naturally, for seeking and finding Jewish sources in the Bible and reading it in that peculiar way I have mentioned. […] the Kabbalists thought that their doctrines of Neoplatonic or Gnostic origins were already in the Scripture. I have discussed this question with Scholem who, perhaps through sheer courtesy, approved this conjecture that the doctrine preceded the method. […] The method was adopted so that the doctrine would remain within the confines of Jewish tradition" (p. 58).

[68] Borges, "The Kabbalah," in *Seven Nights*, 101.

everything is permitted. "In each one of us there is a particle of divinity."[69] Divinity reaches *almost* zero in the material world, not *absolute* zero.

The secondary literature on Borges and Kabbalah is substantive. Saúl Sosnowski for instance argues that in Borges "the Kabbalist and the poet meet at the focal point of their search: language."[70] Alazraki—a student of Gershom Scholem—argues that "the Kabbalistic texture of Borges' narrative adds to their manifold complexity and to their richness of meaning."[71] Discussing the mutual respect that Borges and Scholem had for each other,[72] Alazraki notes that Borges' initiation into Kabbalah was—similar to his initiation into Gnosticism—through the library: a translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and also *Encyclopedia Britannica*.[73] Edna Aizenberg has written extensively on Judaic strands in Borges' life and work including his relationship with Israel.[74] In agreement with Harold Bloom, Aizenberg (1990) identifies Borges' interest in the linguistic-textual traditions of Judaism, including Kabbalah, as an alternative to the

[69] Borges, "The Kabbalah," in *Seven Nights*, 103 & 106.

[70] Saúl Sosnowski, "The God's Script: A Kabbalistic Quest," *Modern Fiction Studies* 19, no. 3 (1973): 384.

[71] "He [Borges] seems to be saying: If man, powerless to solve the labyrinths of the gods, is left with the choice of weaving and deciphering his own, let us—at least—devise them as close as possible to the divine model, let us write a secular text in the manner that the holy one was fashioned. […] Like the Kabbalah, which has generated a whole literature out of the Scripture, Borges implies—in praxis—that to write new literature is to read the old one anew." Alazraki, *Borges and the Kabbalah*, 50-51.

[72] According to Alazraki, Borges met Scholem on two occasions in Israel in 1969 and 1971—the latter when traveling to receive the Jerusalem Prize. He quotes Borges saying: "I consider Scholem a friend of mine and I think he considers me his friend, although we must have seen each other no more than eight hours in our lifetime." On the other side of the relationship, Aizenberg (2014) quotes Scholem on his opinion on Borges: "Borges is a writer of considerable power of imagination and does not claim to represent historical reality, but rather an insight into what the kabbalists might have stood for in his own imagination."

[73] Alazraki identifies Borges' 1926 essay "A History of Angels" as his first exploration of Kabbalah. However, Borges' 1922 essay "The Nothingness of Personality" precedes the other essay where he quotes and discusses "the Kabbalist and astrologer Agrippa of Nettesheim." Borges, "The Nothingness of Personality," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 5.

[74] On the contradictions between some of Borges' pieces around 1969-70 dealing with Israel, Aizenberg (1984) writes: "on the one hand, Borges was genuinely fired by the sight of a new nation being created by the People of the Book, on the Land of the Bible, in the reborn language of Scripture. On the other hand, his regard for Jews was based to a great extent on their diasporic experience, out of which had come those things he liked most about them: internationalism, linguistic pluralism, and intellectual pre-eminence. The thought that Israel might eradicate these almost archetypal Jewish characteristics and make the Jew a man like the others, nationalistic, monolingual and hence intellectually impoverished, did not sit well with Borges. That is why, despite his backing of the state and his satisfaction at seeing it, he did not, and still does not [in 1984], consider himself a Zionist."

dominant Greek-inspired models that consider writing inferior to oral speech. In her latest thoughts on the subject (2015), Aizenberg invites to consider Borges a Christian Kabbalist; "a latter-day incarnation of Hebraists who used Jewish mysticism in syncretic form to break molds." She adds—in slight contrast with her earlier scholarships reinforcing Borges' Jewish roots—that "Borges' kabbalism is not just a Jewishly-rooted phenomenon, but a heterodox maneuver, filtered through non-Jewish sources, themselves already 'impure.'" Additionally, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* has a special issue on Borges and the Jewish Question from 2014. In its introduction, David N. Myers describes Borges as "the most Jewish of non-Jewish writers of the twentieth century," and Elliot Wolfson's article from the volume analyzes three specific themes in Borges' works influenced by Kabbalah: the image of the dream, the symbolic nature of the real, and the linear circularity of time.

It is interesting to note that in the nearly 300 entries of the 2005 *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, roughly 50 entries have been discussed by Borges—sometimes there is just a reference or two (e.g. C. G. Jung), but in other cases, Borges thoroughly explores the subject in multiple essays, lectures, short stories or poems (e.g. Swedenborg). If still alive, he could have contributed to some of these entries in the dictionary, or even write a book review on it. All in all, it is indeed necessary that any future edition of this dictionary contains an entry on Borges, as his body of work itself resembles a dictionary of esotericism in many ways. Besides, Borges has a planetary understanding of the topic and not just a regionalist one, as he does not approach it as an exclusively "Western" phenomenon. His planetary approach to rejected or imaginary knowledge is arguably best reflected in *The Book of Imaginary Beings* as an encyclopaedia that includes islamicate entries regarding Buraq, Jinn, and Simurgh.

There is in the meantime one aspect of Borges' work related to the esoteric that bears a totally different quality; it is where Borges the librarian dresses up as a magician and recites poetry as magic. This romantic approach to poetry is most clearly and beautifully inserted in the 1969 "Prologue" to his favorite book of poetry *The Self and the Other* (El otro, el mismo, 1964):

> The roots of language are irrational and of a magical nature. The Dane who pronounced the name of Thor or the Saxon who uttered the name of Thunor did not know whether these words represented the god of thunder or the rumble that is heard after the lightning flash. Poetry wants to return to that ancient magic. Without fixed rules, it makes its way in a hesitant, daring way, as if moving in darkness. Poetry is a mysterious chess, whose chessboard and whose pieces change as in a dream and over which I shall be gazing after I am dead.[75]

Borges' grasp of poetry as magic might go back as early as his childhood, when during one his father's literary gatherings, he hears Evaristo Carriego reciting a poem that leaves the young Borges astonished: "I didn't understand any of it, but poetry was revealed to me, because I saw that words were not just a means of communication, they also contained a sort of magic."[76]

Following James Frazer, Borges elsewhere defines *magic* in terms of causality, as a relationship due to accidents. Yet unlike Frazer, he does not think of magic as "spurious," "fallacious," "false," and "abortive."[77] Borges avoids ridiculing magic; he rather tries to

[75] Borges, *Selected Poems*, 149.

[76] Qtd. in Williamson, *Borges, a Life*, 42.

[77] Frazer writes: "If we analyse the principles of thought on which magic is based, they will probably be found to resolve themselves into two: first, that like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause; and, second, that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed. The former principle may be called the Law of Similarity, the latter the Law of Contact or Contagion. From the first of these principles, namely the Law of Similarity, the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it: from the second he infers that whatever he does to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact, whether it formed part of his body or not. […] In short, magic is a spurious system of natural law as well as a fallacious guide of conduct; it is a false science as

understand its logic and to get inspiration from it for his artistic endeavors. In his 1932 essay "Narrative Art and Magic," Borges directly attacks Frazer and his theorization of magic:

> This ancient procedure, or ambition [magic], has been reduced by Frazer to a convenient general law; the law of sympathy, which assumes that 'things act on each other at a distance' through a secret sympathy, either because their form is similar (imitative or homeopathic magic) or because of a previous physical contact (contagious magic). […] I think, however, […] that magic is the crown or nightmare of the law of cause and effect, not its contradiction. Miracles are no less strange in this universe than in that of astronomers. It is ruled by all the laws of nature as well as those of imagination. To the superstitious, there is a necessary link not only between a gunshot and a corpse but between a corpse and a tortured wax image or the prophetic smashing of a mirror or spilled salt or thirteen ominous people around a table.

And in the end of essay, he accentuates the significance of this magic for literature:

> I have described two causal procedures: the natural or incessant result of endless, uncontrollable causes and effects; and magic, in which every lucid and determined detail is a prophecy. In the novel [genre], I think that the only possible integrity lies in the latter. Let the former be left to psychological simulations.[78]

This understanding of magic—that is, the magic of poetry, and the magic of accidents/prophecies in fiction—should not get mixed up with the category of "rejected knowledge" that is labelled as the esoteric or esotericism. In the context of art, literature, and poetry, Borges is using the word *magic* to refer to aesthetic events and their unexplainable

---

well as an abortive art." Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion* (London: Wordsworth, 1993), 11.

[78] Borges, "Narrative Art and Magic," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 80-2.

qualities. “The aesthetic event is something as evident, as immediate, as indefinable as love, the taste of fruit, of water. We feel poetry as we feel the closeness of a woman, or as we feel a mountain or a bay”; “poetry is not the books in the library […]. Poetry is the encounter of the reader with the book, the discovery of the book.”[79] In other words, Borges describes poetry as magic in order to accentuate the inexpressible and uncanny quality of the aesthetic event that accompanies a poem, a quality inherent to both the moment of writing a poem and reading it. A beautiful poem or work of art can create aesthetic events as many times as it is read or encountered. Like a mysterious chessboard in a dream whose pieces change again and again, infinitely: 1001 times, 1002 times, 1003 times…

III. 1001, 1002, 1003, …: Borges and the Islamicate

> ‘This?’ I asked, showing him a work whose pages were covered with abstruse letters. And William said, ‘No, that’s Arabic, idiot! Bacon was right: the scholar’s first duty is to learn languages!’
> ‘But you don’t know Arabic, either!’ I replied, irked, to which William answered, ‘At least I understand when it is Arabic!’
>
> —Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*[80]

Borges’ interest in esotericism—one that summons a will to beauty and not a will to power—is similarly reflected in his approach to the islamicate. His version of the “Orient” is rather a section of the human world-library, not a borderline on the world-map. Here I will first examine Borges’ reception of *1001 Nights,* including his critique of the superficial readings of it by people like Thomas Carlyle. This critique, I argue, has broader implications reflecting the post-

[79] Borges, “Poetry,” in *Seven Nights*, 80-1.
[80] Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Warner Books, 1986), 213.

colonial and humanist force behind Borges that challenges cultural and imperial colonialisms, a force that goes hand in hand with his rejection of nationalism.

The secondary literature on Borges and islamicate is limited and unpromising, though it appears that there has been a rising interest in the subject matter at the turn of the century. Erika Spivakovsky's (1968) is the first scholarly article on the subject that engages primarily with "Averroës's Search." Djelal Kadir's (1973) is a focused comparative study of Borges and Al-Ghazali (1058-1111)—whose theological doctrines on the Quran are discussed in Borges' 1951 essay "On the Cult of Books." Giovanna de Garayale's (1978)—the first book-length study of the topic—seems outdated because it speaks of Sufism as a unified, coherent, ahistorical and static doctrine. Nada Elia's (1998) is a close reading of two short stories ("The Aleph" and "The Zahir"), arguing that Borges makes "a playful, literary use of his knowledge of Islamic mysticism." Luce López-Baralt's book chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Jorge Luis Borges* (2013) on "Islamic themes" is the most comprehensive survey of the subject in English. López-Baralt claims that Borges' knowledge of Arabic language was "more than he openly admitted, and certainly much more than his critics have so far presumed." Although this piece nicely situates the overlooked islamicate aspect within the canon of scholarship on Borges, its conclusion is misleading and exaggerating: "The Argentine master managed to 'mirror' the Eastern literature which he read with such scholarly passion that the mysterious 'Oriental' world *ultra auroram* finally became his own. We might go still further: Borges, truly 'enlightened,' became one with the Orient."[81] This rhetoric of "mastery over the Orient" belongs to the discourse of Orientalism and does not exist in Borges' works (as I discussed earlier specifically with respect to "Averroës's Search").

[81] Luce López-Baralt, "Islamic themes," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jorge Luis Borges*, ed. Edwin Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 79.

In contrast to López-Baralt, Ian Almond (2007) believes Borges "belongs to an Orientalist tradition [alongside Nietzsche, Rushdie, Žižek, and French poststructuralists] in all the positive and negative senses that Said has applied to the word," and that "the sedimentation of Borges' different responses to Islam offers a slightly simplistic model for the progression of Western responses to Islam and Islamic cultures."[82] Almond's analysis reduces Said's critique of Orientalism to a mere issue of representation—unfortunately a common error in contemporary academia. His reason to label Borges an Orientalist is not that he traces a will to power/govern over the Orient in Borges, but that he finds common Orientalist imagery and motifs ("emirs, viziers, deserts, scimitars, turbans and camels") in Borges' texts. Almond must be reminded that Orientalism is not exoticism, and one simply cannot label a text Orientalist because it contains a camel in a desert—which is exactly Borges' point when calling for the Argentines to be like Muhammad. If anything, it is Almond's scholarship that is Orientalist (and religionist) since he appears to believe in a "true or real Orient or Islam" that exists in the world, one that has been misrepresented or stereotyped by Borges and others, and he is the authority with the power to identify this misrepresentation. Almond's analysis of Borges only sharpens the aggressive, constructed dichotomy of "West vs. East."[83] There exists however a different approach to Borges in relation to the esoteric-islamicate, taken by post-Sādeq Hedāyat writers in Iran.

The mathematical imagination of Borges is well-known largely due to his fame and the canonical status of "The Library of Babel" (1941) as a story about limits (or limitlessness) of

[82] Ian Almond, *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 67 & 89.

[83] In disagreement with Almond, Jullien (2019) writes: "What seems clear is that Borges' dialogue with Eastern philosophy and Renunciation narratives, undertaken 'from the edge of the West' and from a culture entangled in its own postcolonial negotiations, hardly fits the Orientalist model originally described by Said. […] the multiplicity and mobility of references Borges accumulates in his writings on the Renunciation story sets in creative motion the very postulate of a fixed Western center on which Orientalism relies. Reimagined by a writer uniquely positioned at the margins of both East and West […] the paradigm no longer follows a simple one-directional movement from East to West, but rather becomes multidirectional, envisioning stories that branch off one another in a potentially infinite maze-like shape."

infinity; yet his interest in mathematical and philosophical understandings of *infinity* and *eternity* dataes back at least to his 1929 essay "The Perpetual Race of Achilles and the Tortoise," and later in "The Doctrine of Cycles" (1936)—where he disapproves of Nietzsche's Eternal Return/Recurrence—and also "A History of Eternity" (1936) and "Circular Time" (1941). Now, his interest in islamicate has a strong connection to his curiosity about infinity and eternity through the significance of number 1001 in the title and structure of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*—a book that Borges ranks above all the products of the islamicate culture since it never ends; stories within stories giving birth to countless new stories.[84] In a 1977 lecture on "The Thousand and One Nights," Borges notes:

> I want to pause over the title [*1001 Nights*]. It is one of the most beautiful in the world […]. I think it lies in the fact that for us the word *thousand* is almost synonymous with *infinite*. To say *a thousand nights* is to say infinite nights, countless nights, endless nights. To say *a thousand and one nights* is to add one to infinity. […] The idea of infinity is consubstantial with *The Thousand and One Nights*.[85]

And later he adds:

> In the title *The Thousand and One Nights* there is something very important: the suggestion of an infinite book. It practically is. The Arabs say that no one can read *The Thousand and One Nights* to the end. Not for reasons of boredom: one feels the book is infinite. At home I have the seventeen volumes of Burton's version. I know I'll never read all of them, but I know that there the nights are

[84] *1001 Nights* is a great example of the effectiveness of the term "Islamicate." It is neither an "Islamic" text, nor a text of "Muslim" writers, but it certainly is a product of the islamicate culture, created in dialogue with other adjacent cultures (like the Persianate or the Indian), while the history of its translations and travels is itself a story of world literature.

[85] Borges, "The Thousand and One Nights," in *Seven Nights*, 45-6.

> waiting for me; that my life may be wretched but the seventeen volumes will be there; there will be that species of eternity, *The Thousand and One Nights* of the Orient.[86]

Allusions to *1001 Nights* in relation to eternity and infinity appear in Borges' works of fiction as well. The narrator in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (a short story with strong esoteric motifs and references to Gnosticism and the Rosy Cross), upon finding the *Vol. XI* of *A First Encyclopedia of Tlön* says:

> […] this is the story not of my emotions but of Uqbar and Tlön and Orbis Tertius. On one particular Islamic night, which is called the Night of Nights, the secret portals of the heavens open wide and the water in the water jars is sweeter than on other nights; if those gates had opened as I sat there, I would not have felt what I was feeling that evening. The book was written in English, and it consisted of 1001 pages.[87]

In "The Garden of Forking Paths," a story with labyrinthine metaphors, a found letter reads:

> I had wondered how a book could be infinite. The only way I could surmise was that it be a cyclical, or circular, volume, a volume whose last page would be identical to the first, so that one might go on indefinitely. I also recalled that night at the center of the *1001 Nights*, when the queen Scheherazade (through some magical distractedness on the part of the copyist) begins to retell, verbatim, the story of the 1001 Nights, with the risk of returning once again to the night on which she is telling it—and so on, *ad infinitum*.[88]

[86] Borges, "The Thousand and One Nights," in *Seven Nights*, 50.
[87] Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in *Collected Fictions*, 71.
[88] Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," in *Collected Fictions*, 125.

This idea of an infinite book is most directly addressed in one of Borges' late short stories, "The Book of Sand" (El libro de arena, 1975). There, a man who sells Bibles (later revealed to be a Presbyterian) enters the narrator's house, and after finding out that the narrator already possesses several English and Latin copies of the Bible, claims that he can show him "a sacred text" that he came byi n northern India. When the narrator opens the book at random, he notices Arabic numerals at the upper corner of each page: "I was struck by an odd fact: the even-numbered page would carry the number 40,514, let us say, while the odd-numbered page that followed it would be 999. I turned the page; the next page bore an eight-digit number." The seller then asks the narrator to find the first page, but "It was impossible: several pages always lay between the cover and my hand. It was as though they grew from the very book." The same thing happens when he tries to find the last page: "The number of pages in this book is literally infinite. No page is the first page; no page is the last. I don't know why they're numbered in this arbitrary way, but perhaps it's to give one to understand that the terms of an infinite series can be numbered any way whatever." The seller also claims that the book is called "the Book of Sand because neither sand nor this book has a beginning or an end." The narrator then trades a "Wyclif's black-letter Bible" for the Book of Sand; "I thought of putting the Book of Sand in the space left by the Wyclif, but I chose at last to hide it behind some imperfect volumes of the *Thousand and One Nights*." How fascinated is Borges with the infinity of *1001 Nights* that his protagonist hides an infinite book behind its volumes! Yet, the narrator later gets weary and anxious by the presence of the Book of Sand in his house; he finds it "monstrous" and "a nightmare thing, an obscene thing, and that it defiled and corrupted reality." He goes on to hide the book in the damp shelves of the basement of the National Library, and since then refuses "even to walk down the street the

library's on."[89] It is quite likely that Borges knew the Arabic word for geomancy (arguably the most common method of divination in the islamicate culture) is "raml" which literary means "sand," thus the story's infinite Book of Sand is a book of geomancy, divination, and perhaps black magic.

References to *1001 Nights* appear in Borges' essays as well. There is, of course, his 1936 essay "The Translators of *The Thousand and One Nights*"—a comprehensive, critical survey of the English, French, German, and Spanish translations of the book.[90] In "Literary Pleasure" (La fruición literaria, 1927), Borges calls *1001 Nights* "the first serial novel ever written" and lists the book among "the greatest literary joys" he has experienced.[91] In "When Fiction Lives in Fiction" (Cuando la ficción vive en la ficción, 1939), he discusses, unsurprisingly, the tale in the middle of *1001 Nights* that is the story of the King and Scheherazade themselves.[92] Now the crucial question is: what does Borges's fascination with *1001 Nights* mean, and what are its broader social and political implications?

I shall turn back to where I started: the lecture on "The Thousand and One Nights" (from 1977, a year before the publication of Said's *Orientalism* and Turner's *Marx and the End of Orientalism*). There, the main question Borges tries to answer by means of analyzing *1001 Nights* is: what are the East and the West (or the Orient and the Occident)? Although Borges, in his typical humbleness, first claims that he does not know the answer and suggests that "we must

[89] Borges, "The Book of Sand," in *Collected Fictions*, 480-3.

[90] In the 1977 lecture on "The Thousand and One Nights," Borges speaks of the book's translations: "*The Thousand and One Nights* has not died. The infinite time of the thousand and one nights continues its course. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the book was translated […]. The *Nights* will have other translators, and each translator will create a different version of the book. We may almost speak of the many books titled *The Thousand and One Nights*: two in French, by Galland and Mardrus; three in English, by Burton, Lane, and Paine; three in German, by Henning, Littmann, and Weil; one in Spanish, by Cansinos-Asséns. Each of these books is different, because *The Thousand and One Nights* keeps growing or recreating itself."

[91] Borges, "Literary Pleasure," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 28.

[92] Borges, "When Fiction Lives in Fiction," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 160-61.

settle for approximations" on what East and West are, goes on to provide some interesting responses to his original proposed question. "Western culture is not pure in the sense that it exists entirely because of Western efforts," notes Borges, and that with the first European (French) translation of *1001 Nights* in 1704 and through the Romantic movement, "the Orient richly entered the consciousness of Europe," adding that "the Romantic movement begins at that moment when someone, in Normandy or in Paris, reads *The Thousand and One Nights*." Rejecting the geographical approaches to define the Orient and Occident, Borges notes that "Hearing the word *Orient*, I think we all think, first of all, of the Islamic Orient, and by extension to the Orient of northern Indian." This estimation of the imaginary borders of the "Orient" matches that of Said; still, Borges further clarifies his perspective in a passage that serves as a keystone in grasping his understanding of the "Orient":

> How does one define the Orient (not the real Orient, which does not exist)? I would say that the notions of East and West are generalizations, but that no individual can feel himself to be Oriental. I suppose that a man feels himself to be Persian or Hindu or Malaysian, but not Oriental. In the same way, no one feels himself to be Latin American: we feel ourselves to be Argentines or Chileans. It doesn't matter; the concept [Orient/Oriental] does not exist.[93]

Thus Borges, unlike Orientalist scholars, does not think of the "Orient" as a real geopolitical entity with observable material borders that should be subjected to domination and exploitation. For him, there is no "real Orient" that one can point to on a map; "Orient" is an imaginary world that the Europeans discovered through texts such as *1001 Nights*, and by calling East and West "generalizations," he is suggesting an understanding of the terms as constructs. In other words,

[93] Borges, "The Thousand and One Nights," in *Seven Nights*, 51.

his interest in the "Orient" is an aesthetic one, as he notes earlier in the lecture that "we must not renounce the word *Orient*, a word so beautiful, for within it, by happy chance, is word *oro*, gold. In the word *Orient* we feel the word *oro*, for when the sun rises we see a sky of gold." This aesthetic, imaginary, and constructed world of the "Orient" has been a source of inspiration for him to tell new stories in new ways. Because of that, he is more of a Modernist than a Romantic—there is no desire for or nostalgia of a lost past in Borges; he consistently looks ahead in his literary experiments, all the while having one foot in the diverse literary traditions of planet earth.

Borges' implicit critique of the discourses on Orientalism is occasionally directed at superficial readings of texts like *1001 Nights*. The most distinct example of this critique is "Brodie's Report" (El informe de Brodie), a short story from 1970. The bulk of this story is an ethnography of an imaginary tribe, "the Yahoo."[94] It reads like a typical 18th or 19th century ethnography where the observer describes the "barbarity" of this "savage" and "uncivilized" tribe. However, as the narrator explains in the first few paragraphs of the story, the manuscript of this ethnography has been found inside of a volume of Lane's translation of *1001 Nights*. The ethnographer (David Brodie, "a Scottish missionary, born in Aberdeen, who preached Christianity throughout central Africa and later in certain parts of the jungles of Brazil") has also filled the margins of *1001 Nights* with "additions, question marks, and sometimes corrections." In words of the narrator, "From those marginalia, one might almost conclude that the reader of the volume was less interested in Scheherazade's wondrous tales than in the customs of Islam." Thus, the message of the story sounds direct: the person who reads the *1001 Nights* at a superficial level in order to learn about the "customs of Islam" or the "real Orient" could be the

[94] In his "Foreword" to the volume (that has the same title, *Brodie's Report*) Borges notes that the "paternity" of this story "can be traced to Lemuel Gulliver's last voyage" (where he faces the Yahoos).

same person who preaches Christianity across the world, or who writes racist ethnographies of the "savages" and the "uncivilized"—the figure of "Orientalist scholar of the empire" in other words. Brodie's ethnography even ends with a message to the Queen: "I hope Her Majesty's government will not turn deaf ear to the remedy this report has the temerity to suggest."[95] The story then can be read as a harsh critique of imperialism and colonialism as well; a concrete example of post-colonial Borges.[96]

A similar instance of an encounter with *1001 Nights* is traceable in Borges' views on Thomas Carlyle. Borges begins his prologue to Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History*[97] by noting Carlyle's experience with *1001 Nights*: "the narrations struck him as 'obvious lies' […]. His reading led him to meditate on the bucolic tribes of Arabia who obscurely idolized wells and stars until a red-bearded man awoke them with the tremendous news that there is no god but God and drove them into a battle that has not yet ended." Carlyle's approach is an example of analyzing the imaginary "Orient" of *1001 Nights* for the sake of understanding (what an Orientalist believes to be) the "real Orient"—an approach that does not appeal to Borges at all. With this introduction, and in line with Bertrand Russell's critique of Carlyle in "The Ancestry of Fascism" (1935),[98] Borges gets into the main problematic of Carlyle's book—its Fascist and Nazi tendencies. The result is a political and one of the most passionate paragraphs in Borges' body of work:

---

[95] Borges, "Brodie's Report," in *Collected Fictions*, 402 & 408.

[96] On the topic of Borges and postcolonialism including an analysis of "Brodie's Report" look at Fiddian (2017). An older and less exciting work is Kushigian (1991).

[97] This prologue is actually on both Carlyle's book and Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Representative Men*, thus a comparative study where Borges harshly criticises the former and then honors the latter. Borges, "Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History* Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men*," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 413-18.

[98] Bertrand Russell, "The Ancestry of Fascism," in *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays* (London: Routledge, 2004), 53-71.

> Nazism (insofar as it is not merely the expression of certain racial vanities we all darkly possess, especially the blockheads and thugs among us) is a reedition of the wraths of the Scottish Carlyle, who, in 1843, wrote that democracy is the despair of not finding heroes to lead us. In 1870, he celebrated the victory of 'noble, patient, deep, pious and solid Germany' over 'vapouring, vainglorious, gesticulating, quarrelsome, restless and over-sensitive France.' He praised the Middle Ages, denounced parliamentary windbags, and defended the memory of the god Thor, William the Bastard, Knox, Cromwell, Fredrick II, the taciturn Dr. Francia, and Napoleon; he was pleased that every community had its barracks and its jail; he yearned for a world that was not 'chaos equipped with ballot urns'; he thought about hatred; he thought about the death penalty; he abhorred the abolition of slavery; he proposed that statues—'horrendous bronze solecisms'—be converted into useful bronze bathtubs; he declared that a tortured Jew is preferable to a millionaire Jew; he said that any society that is neither dead nor rushing toward death is a hierarchy; he defended Bismarck, and venerated, and may have invented, the Germanic Race. Those who feel in need of further pronouncements by Carlyle—I have barely begun to glean them here—may examine *Past and Present* (1843) and the tumultuous *Latter-Day Pamphlets* of the year 1850. In the present book [*On Heroes*] they abound, particularly in the final lecture, which, with arguments that are worthy of a South American dictator, defends the dissolution of the English Parliament by Cromwell's musketeers.[99]

[99] Borges, "Thomas Carlyle," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 415.

I should be clear that neither Borges nor I are suggesting that superficial, Orientalist readings of *1001 Nights* are essentially or necessarily Fascist or Nazi in nature; but in the case of Carlyle the two are intertwined. It is more accurate to say that the inability to appreciate or understand fiction is a characteristic of an authoritarian personality.

Throughout his life and work, Borges actively vocalized his protest of different forms of Nationalism including Fascism and Nazism—though he never had an appetite for Marxism and Communism, and may be best described as an elitist conservative-liberal suspicious of social change. His constant opposition to Peronism and Argentine Nationalism is well-noted in his various biographies. For instance, in 1971 he called Perón's regime "our vernacular imitation of fascism."[100] In addition, particularly around the World War II era, his "Notes on Germany & the War" showcase an extreme sensibility and anxiety around the polarizing politics of the time. In 1937, reviewing an infamous anti-Semitic German children book, he writes: "I don't know if the world can do without German civilization, but I do know that its corruption by the teachings of hatred is a crime."[101] In 1938, discussing a new edition of a *History of German Literature* under the Third Reich, he notes: "we feel devastated by its [Germany's] chaotic descent into darkness […]. I find it normal for the Germans to reject the treaty of Versailles […] to detest the Republic […] to support with fervor a man who promises to defend their honor. I find it insane to sacrifice to that honor their culture, their past, and their honesty, and to perfect the criminal arts of barbarians."[102] In 1939: "It is easy to prove that an immediate (and even instantaneous) effect of this much-desired war has been the extinction or abolishment of all intellectual processes," and

[100] Qtd. in Williamson, *Borges, a Life*, 409.
[101] Borges, "A Pedagogy of Hatred," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 200.
[102] Borges, "A Disturbing Exposition," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 201.

that "I hope the years will bring us the auspicious annihilation of Adolf Hitler."[103] In 1940: "The Hitlerist is always a spiteful man, and a secret and sometimes public worshiper of criminal 'vivacity' and cruelty. He is, thanks to a poverty of imagination, a man who believes that the future cannot be different from the present […]."[104] In 1941: "(if the traitors and Jews don't disrupt him [Hitler]) we will enjoy all the benefits of torture, sodomy, rape, and mass executions."[105] And again, in 1941:

> [Herbert George] Wells, incredibly, is not a Nazi. Incredibly, because nearly all my contemporaries are, although they either deny it or don't know it. Since 1925, no writer has failed to claim that the inevitable and trivial fact of having been born in a certain country and of belonging to a certain race (or mixture of races) is a singular privilege and an effective talisman. […] I remember, during the Spanish Civil War, certain impenetrable discussions. Some declared themselves Republicans; others, Nationalists; others, Marxists; yet all, in a lexicon of a *Gauleiter*, spoke of the Race and of the People. Even the men of the hammer and the sickle turned out to be racists… I also remember with some amazement a certain assembly that was convoked to condemn anti-Semitism. For various reasons, I am not an anti-Semite; the principal one is that I find the difference between Jews and non-Jews generally insignificant, and sometimes illusory or imperceptible. No one, that day, wanted to share my opinion; they all swore that a German Jew was vastly different from a German. In vain I reminded them that Adolf Hitler said the same thing; in vain I suggested that an assembly against

[103] Borges, "An Essay on Neutrality," in *Selected Non-Fictions,* 202-3.
[104] Borges, "Definition of a Germanophile," in *Selected Non-Fictions,* 205.
[105] Borges, "1941," in *Selected Non-Fictions,* 206.

> racism should not tolerate the doctrine of a Chosen People; in vain I quoted the wise words of Mark Twine: 'I have no race prejudices… All that I care to know is that a [wo]man is a human being—that is enough for me; he can't be any worse.'[106]

These writings from the WWII period (only a fragment of them I provided here), also shed new light on Borges' "The Library of Babel" written around the same time. The anxiety and chaos in the Library, when it is announced that it contains all the books including "The Vindications" (books of prophecies of every person in the universe that also hold the arcana for men's futures), when:

> Thousands of greedy individuals abandoned their sweet native hexagons and rushed downstairs, upstairs, spurred by the vain desire to find their Vindication. These pilgrims squabbled in the narrow corridors, muttered dark imprecations, strangled one another on the divine staircases, threw deceiving volumes down ventilations shafts, were themselves hurled to their deaths by men of distant regions. Others went insane…[107]

This chaos in the library is indeed a reflection of the unsettling events of the WWII period that Borges was sensibly following.[108]

In 1951, Borges delivers a lecture in Buenos Aires that is now of canonical status for study of world/comparative literature in English, "The Argentine Writer and Tradition" (El

[106] Borges, "Two Books," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 207-8.

[107] Borges, "The Library of Babel," in *Collected Fictions*, 115.

[108] "*Deutsches Requiem*" is arguably the most direct story of Borges on the WWII and Germany. About this story he writes in the "Afterword" to *The Aleph*: "During the last war, no one could have wished more earnestly than I for Germany's defeat; no one could have felt more strongly than I the tragedy of Germany's fate; '*Deutsches Requiem*' is an attempt to understand that fate, which our own 'Germanophiles' (who know nothing of Germany) neither wept over nor even suspected."

escritor argentine y la tradición). Speaking against Argentine literature limiting itself in Argentine local color, Borges refers to the Quran to explain his point:

> Gibbon [in *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*] observes that in the Arab book *par excellence*, the Koran, there are no camels; I believe that if there were ever any doubt as to the authenticity of the Koran, this lack of camels would suffice to prove that it is Arab. It was written by Muhammad, and Muhammad, as an Arab, had no reason to know that camels were particularly Arab; they were, for him, a part of reality, and he had no reason to single them out, while the first thing a forger, a tourist, or an Arab nationalist would do is bring on the camels, whole caravans of camels on every page; but Muhammad, as an Arab, was unconcerned; he knew he could be Arab without camels. I believe that we Argentines can be like Muhammad; we can believe in the possibility of being Argentine without abounding in local color.[109]

But Gibbon was wrong and there are actually six different words in the Quran referring to different kind of camels (such as male-camel, female-camel, and thirsty-camel). Still, Borges' point regarding the functions of local color in literature is valid; it is not the presence or absence of camels (as an example of local color) that makes a text local to the Arab culture.

Borges does not claim to have authority over the islamicate culture and is fully aware of his limited knowledge of it—a point most evident in "Averroës' Search" (La busca de Averroes, from *The Aleph*). By telling a story of Averroës, Borges enters a dialogic debate on Aristotle's *Poetics* and the Arabic commentaries on it, as well as theological (partly Platonic) discussions on the Quran. The ending of the story is a clear indication of how Borges' goal in his islamicate

[109] Borges, "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 423-4.

narratives is *not* to gain mastery over the islamicate culture; but is rather a confession of his own inadequacy to fully comprehend a figure like Averroës:

> In the preceding tale, I have tried to narrate the process of failure, the process of defeat. […] I felt that Averroës, trying to imagine what a play is without ever having suspected what a theater is, was no more absurd than I, trying to imagine Averroës yet with no more material than a few snatches from Renan, Lane, and Asín Palacios. I felt, on the last page, that my story was a symbol of the man I had been as I was writing it, and that in order to write that story I had had to be that man, and that in order to be that man I had had to write that story, and so on, *ad infinitum*. (And just when I stop believing in him, 'Averroës' disappears.)[110]

By writing on Averroës, Borges confesses that he is actually writing about himself. That is to say: do not expect to comprehend Averroës through this story; it tells the reader more about Borges than Averroës. It is not the material to learn about a "real Orient" (which does not exist).[111]

Borges' first attempt at incorporating islamicate elements into a work of fiction is "Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv" (El tintorero enmascarado Hákim de Merv) from his first collection of short stories *A Universal History of Iniquity* (Historia universal de la infamia, 1935). The stories in this volume span a wide range of space/time from 19th century America and Victorian England, to China, Japan, and 8th century Merv. They are—as the word "universal" in the title suggests—practices of world literature, but also, a set of experiments in form to open up new horizons within the short story genre, as well as techniques of narration and gathering source materials. In the "Preface" to its 1954 edition, upon re-reading what he had written two

[110] Borges, "Averroës' Search," in *Collected Fictions*, 241.

[111] For a Kabbalistic reading of "Averroës' Search" (Averroës as an imperfect Golem created by Borges) look at Manguel (2010).

decades earlier, Borges calls the volume "the irresponsible sport of a shy sort of man who could not bring himself to write short stories, and so amused himself by changing and distorting (sometimes without aesthetic justification) the stories of other men."[112] His first islamicate piece, "Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv" contains references to esotericism—particularly to Gnosticism—which are completely absent from the rest of volume's stories. This short story follows the life and death of Al-Moqanna, a fringe historical figure and a self-proclaimed prophet from the 8th century Khorasan, Persia. When discussing the theological doctrines of Al-Moqanna, Borges notes:

> So long as their words do not altogether contravene orthodox belief, confidential friends of God are tolerated by Islam, however indiscreet or threatening to that religion they may be. The Prophet [Al-Moqanna] would perhaps not have spurned the advantages of that neglect, but his followers, his victories, and the public wrath of the caliph […] forced him into heresy. It was that dissent that ruined him, though first it led him to set down the articles of a personal religion (a personal religion that bore the clear influence of gnostic forebears).[113]

Like the Gnostics,[114] Al-Moqanna was also defeated politically and materialistically. Had he succeeded, he would not have remained a fringe figure but instead would have become a part of the canon of Islamic history and theology. Borges also makes the connection between the

[112] Borges, *Collected Fictions*, 4.

[113] Borges, "Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv," in *Collected Fictions*, 43.

[114] A statement that Borges notes when discussing some Gnostic doctrines of Al-Moqanna ("The earth we inhabit is an error, and incompetent parody. Mirrors and paternity are abominable because they multiply and affirm it") also appears in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" in a variation ("For one of those gnostics [of Uqbar], the visible universe was an illusion or, more precisely, a sophism. Mirrors and fatherhood are hateful because they multiply and proclaim it").

pantheist/gnostic characteristics of Al-Moqanna's doctrines and the number 999, getting playful with the infinity of 1000 and 1001: 999 is almost infinite, not absolute infinite.[115]

The Aleph (El Aleph, 1949) is a volume of short stories that, alongside "Averroës' Search," contains some of the most significant islamicate stories of Borges, including "The Zahir" and "The Aleph." Borges begins "Ibn-Hakam al-Bokhari, Murdered in His Labyrinth" (Abenjacán el Bojarí, muerto en su laberinto) with an epigraph from the Quran ("… is the likeness of the spider who buildeth her a house" [29:41]), and within its detective plot plays with the Quranic spiderweb metaphor to express how "There's no need to build a labyrinth when the entire universe is one."[116] The same message appears in "The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths" (Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos), a fable where the king of Babylonia's man-made labyrinth loses to the God-made labyrinth of the king of Arabia (which is actually a desert). Borges starts the fable with the phrase "Allah's knowledge is greater" (pero Alá sabe más) and finishes with "Glory to Him who does not die" (La gloria sea con aquel que no muere), expressing his respect for "Oriental" tales.[117]

"The Aleph" (the short story) might not initially strike us as being relevant to the islamicate since it is a story about "one of the points in space that contain all points," yet the numerous references to islamicate, Persianate, and Indian cultures, especially towards the end,[118] hint at its layered structure and meaning. Borges writes that the word aleph:

---

[115] "In the beginning of Hakim's cosmogony there was a spectral god, a deity as majestically devoid of origins as of name and face. This deity was an immutable god, but its image threw nine shadows; these, condescending to action, endowed and ruled over a first heaven. From that first demiurgic crown there came a second, with its own angels, powers, and thrones, and these in turn founded another, lower heaven, which was the symmetrical duplicate of the first. This second conclave was reproduced in a third, and the third in another, lower conclave, and so on, to the number of 999. The lord of the nethermost heaven—the shadow of shadows of yet other shadows—is He who reigns over us, and His fraction of divinity tends to zero." Borges, "Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv," 43.

[116] Borges, "Ibn-Hakam al-Bokhari, Murdered in His Labyrinth," in *Collected Fictions*, 260.

[117] Borges, "The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths," in *Collected Fictions*, 263-4.

[118] Some of these reference are: "the fable of Muhammad and the mountain"; "a Persian mystic speaks of a bird that somehow is all birds"; "a Tarot card in a shopwindow in Mirzapur"; "a Persian astrolabe"; "the mirror attributed in

> is the name of the first letter of the alphabet of the sacred language. Its application to the disk of my tale would not appear to be accidental. In the Kabbala, that letter signifies the En Soph, the pure and unlimited godhead; it has also been said that its shape is that of a man pointing to the sky and the earth, to indicate that the lower world is the map and mirror of the higher.[119]

It is not just the Hebrew alphabet that starts with the letter "aleph," Arabic and all Phoenician-driven alphabets do so as well. Thus Borges uses the term "sacred language" (lengua sagrada), despite the reference to Kabbalah, to suggest that there is more than one aleph—for one reason, there is another aleph in aleph, ad infinitum. Given his knowledge of Arabic and Islam, it is likely that he was aware of the fact that the Quran begins with letter "aleph," and that it bears similar esoteric significances in the islamicate cultures as the first letter with the numerical value of one.

The last text in this discussion is "The Zahir" (El Zahir), one of the plainest examples of the intersection of the esoteric and the islamicate in Borges' body of work. In the story, Zahir is a coin that the narrator has become obsessed with—a mystical, esoteric coin that is strangely all the coins in the world, and on another level, everything in the world. As an Arabic word, Borges is well-aware of its meaning:

> Belief in the Zahir is of Islamic ancestry […]. In Arabic, '*zahir*' means visible, manifest, evident; in that sense, it is one of the ninety-nine names of God; in Muslim countries, the masses use the word for 'beings or things which have the

---

the East to Iskandar dhu-al-Qarnayn, or Alexander the Great of Macedonia"; "the sevenfold goblet of Kai Khosru"; "the mirror that Tariq ibn-Ziyad found in a tower (*1001 Nights*, 272)"; and finally "ibn-Khaldun."

[119] Borges, "The Aleph," in *Collected Fictions*, 285.

> terrible power to be unforgettable, and whose image eventually drives people mad.'[120]

Though I have no knowledge of this latter use of the word by the masses, the word "zahir" is indeed an accurate equivalent for "exoteric," as opposed to the word "batin" which stands for "esoteric." Both "zahir" and "batin" are among the ninety-nine names of Allah; as a famous line of the Quran says (57:3): "He [Allah] is the First, and the Last, and the Outward [Zahir], and the Inward [Batin]; and He is Knower of all things."[121] The Sufis are occasionally called "people of batin," whereas Faqihs (experts of the Sharia and Islamic jurisprudence) are known as "people of zahir." The former reads between and behind the lines of the Quran to understand life and the universe; the latter reads the manifest lines in order to initiate laws to control society. It seems then that Borges has used the word "zahir" contra wise; however, the last few sentences of the story elucidate his choice:

> In order to lose themselves in God, the Sufis repeat their own name or the ninety-nine names of God until the names mean nothing anymore. I long to travel that path. Perhaps by thinking about the Zahir unceasingly, I can manage to wear it away; perhaps behind the coin is God.[122]

"Behind the coin is God"; that is to say, behind the zahir or the exoteric is the batin or the esoteric. What Borges achieves in this story is an organic and playful engagement with esoteric and islamicate materials that also reflect his pantheist ideas: that even a coin, presumably the most material of all things, could be divine (or be a key/path to divinity). Zahir is a coin, but it has a divine batin.

---

[120] Borges, "The Zahir," in *Collected Fictions,* 246.

[121] Translation from *The Study Quran*.

[122] Borges, "The Zahir," 249.

Borges' take on the Quran could be subject of an exclusive article. As I discussed in the introduction, his essay "On the Cult of Books" contains his most direct remarks about the Quran, situating it within a brief but broad history of writing. It appears that Borges had mainly worked with George Sale's English translation of the Quran, and as he would regard the Divine Comedy higher than the Bible, his fascination with *1001 Nights* is much stronger than his interest in the Quran. Recognizing "the Orient" as a section in the human library helps Borges approach the Quran in a secular manner and make peace with the book (in contrast to Dante but akin to Goethe). One hears resonances of this centuries-old dilemma over the Quran, on how to categorize or catalogue it, in Eco's *The Name of the Rose* when Adso the narrator and his adept William are discovering the library:

> 'Leones: south. On our map we are in Africa, hic sunt leones. And this explains why the have found so many texts by infidel authors.'
>
> 'And there are more,' I said, rummaging in the cases. '*Canon* of Avicenna, and this codex with the beautiful calligraphy I don't recognize...'
>
> 'From the decorations I would say it is a Koran, but unfortunately I have no Arabic.'
>
> 'The Koran, the Bible of the infidels, a perverse book…'
>
> 'A book containing a wisdom different from ours. But you understand why they put it here, where the lions, the monsters, are. This is why we saw that book on the monstrous animals, where you also found the unicorn. This area called LEONES contains the books that the creators of the library considered books of falsehood. […] Obviously the founders of the library had strange ideas. They must have believed that this book which speaks of fantastic animals and beasts

> living in distant lands was part of the catalogue of falsehoods spread by the infidels […].' [123]

Eco nicely frames the "discourse" of the library: the relation between materiality of written texts and their accumulation in libraries verses the abstract ideas governing library rules—how to categorize and catalogue the texts, what to preserve and what to reject. *The Name of the Rose* later comes back to the Quran, when Jorge of Burgos—an allegory of Borges of course—delivers a sermon on "the coming of the Antichrist":

> It is said that an Oriental caliph one day set fire to the library of a famous and glorious and proud city, and that, as those thousands of volumes were burning, he said that they could and should disappear: either they were repeating what the Koran already said, and therefore they were useless, or else they contradicted that book sacred to the infidels, and therefore they were harmful: The doctors of the church, and we along with them, did not reason in this way. Everything that involves commentary and clarification of Scripture must be preserved, because it enhances the glory of the divine writings; what contradicts must not be destroyed, because only if we preserve it can it be contradicted in its turn by those who can do so and are so charged, in the ways and times that the Lord chooses.[124]

To preserve, or to reject, that is at least part of the question! Whereas Hedayat's references to the Quran aim at exposing its exoteric qualities and satirizing it, Borges rather engages with the metaphysical and allegorical notions in the Quran to nourish his fiction. He has in fact two short stories that begin with an epigraph from the Quran. "Ibn-Hakam al-Bokhari, Murdered in His Labyrinth" (1949), as noted earlier, opens with the allegory of spiderweb to enrich the detective

[123] Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Warner Books, 1986), 187.
[124] Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 236.

plot that plays around 'dreams within dreams' and 'universal labyrinthine vs. human-made labyrinthine.' The other story is "The Secret Miracle" (El milagro secreto, 1944), a metaphysical fantasy about an author whose very moment of death extends over the period of a year so he can finish a monumental piece—a play—in his head. The epigraph is mistakenly noted as 2:261 (in Spanish editions and later English translations), whereas the correct line from the Quran is 2:259. Borges quotes part of this verse: "Y Dios lo hizo morir durante cien años y luego lo animó y le dijo: —¿Cuánto tiempo has estado aquí? —Un día o parte de un día, respondió" (So God caused him to die for a hundred years, then raised him up. He said, 'How long hast thou tarried?' He said, 'I tarried a day or part of a day').[125] Without access to Borges' archives or a catalogue of his personal library, it is difficult to say if he had access to a Spanish edition of the Quran or if this is his own English to Spanish translation. What is significant and certain however, is that Borges approaches the Quran in a respectful manner, and that he has selected particular moments of the Quran that could be of use to fantastic literature—in these two cases the allegorical spiderweb, and the metaphysical fantasy of the relativity of time. Here, the Quran justifies itself in front of literature and fiction, not the other way around. This is one of the consequences of the distinguished autonomy that Borges bestowed upon literature.

IV. Buenos Aires – Isfahan: Borges in Farsi

- Chess city!
  Chess city!

Two walls
And corridor of silence.

[125] The Spanish is from Borges' *Obras Completas 1923-1972* and the English is from *The Study Quran*.

And then
a shadow that speaks of sunlight's decay.

A people,
And a shout from the depth
- We ain't pieces!
We ain't pieces!

—Ahmad Shamlou (1959)[126]

I began this chapter with "Ahmad's Inquisition in Translation," the story of Ahmad Mir-Alāi—the first translator of Borges in Farsi—and his execution. Mir-Alāi was part of the *Isfahan Circle* and also a member of the *Writers' Association of Iran*, the latter a union of writers, poets, and translators formally established in 1968.[127] The membership of the Writers' Association at the time was comprised largely of Marxists and socialists primarily from the Tudeh party,[128] but also non-partisan members who had their own literary group like the Isfahan Circle (it was through this latter group that Borges was introduced in Farsi). With the death of Jalal Al-I Ahmed—the most charismatic member of the association—in 1969, the Writers' Association dismantled. It never got formally recognized and licenced by the state, with reports that the SAVAK (National Organization for Security and Intelligence) had been capturing and questioning some of its members in order to prevent empowerment of the association. After few years of hibernation, the association started a second period of activity in 1977.[129]

[126] A.T.: Ahmad Shamlou, *Complete Works, Volume I: Poems* (Tehran: Negaah, 2004), 374.

[127] Efforts to establish a union of writers in Iran goes back to 1946 and the first *Congress of Iranian Writers*—an initiative of *The Soviet-Iranian Culture Center*. Sadegh Hedayat was an executive member of this congress. For more on the topic in Farsi look at Arian-Raad (2017).

[128] For a comprehensive study of the Tudeh party in English look at Abrahamian (1982). Abrahamian also notes the overall influence of the Tudeh party on Iranian writers and intellectuals including Sadegh Hedayat: "one of the few pro-Tudeh writers from an aristocratic background."

[129] The highlight of this period was the famous *10 Nights* of poetry and speeches in 1977, co-organized by the *Goethe Institute* in Tehran that turned into an anti-Pahlavi rally. For more on the topic in English look at "Goethe Institute" entry in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

The anti-Pahlavi position of the Writers' Association led to their support of the revolution of 1979; around twenty members even met with Ayatollah Khomeini soon after the Pahlavi regime collapsed.[130] Yet, as the revolution unfolded, dynamics of the Writers' Association changed. Within a month, the general membership met and voted to expel five members connected to the Tudeh party whose political stance was to stay on the side of Khomeini. In July 1979, a week before the election of Iran's new Assembly for Constitution, the initial volume of the weekly journal *Book of Friday*, an unofficial organ of the Writers' Association, got published. Ahmad Shamlou, executive member of the Writers' Association and the editor-in-chief of *Book of Friday* (whose poem is noted in the epigraph of this section) opened his introduction to the first volume with:

> Gloomy days are ahead. A period of misery, which logically cannot last for long, has revealed its dark nature, and is seeking to establish its dominance on a basis of negating democracy, negating nationality, and negating achievements of civility and culture and art. Inevitably, such a period will not be permanent, and the force of history without a doubt will squash it under its heavy roller. But our generation and the next, through this sorrowful struggle, will endure a shattering loss. […] Now we are standing at the threshold of a storm. Wind vanes are whining and moving, and a plaguy mist has arisen in the horizons. It is possible to take refuge inside caves of silence, to keep quiet till the storm is over. But the historical duty of intellectuals does not prescribe a shelter. Any shout brings awareness; thus we shout with our wounded throats, and declare the outbreak of the storm. The army of mournful engaged intellectuals have entered an unequal war. Let the damage

[130] For more on this meeting and the history of the Writers' Association in English look at Karimi-Hakkak (1985).

> they take be an alarming signal of this assault on all cultural and civic achievements of the people residing in this region.[131]

The mad future that Hedāyat predicted in *The Blind Owl*, one where the metamorphosed old peddler triumphs, became reality. Shortly, with start of the Iran-Iraq War and establishment of Islamic Republic, the Writers' Association was forced to cease activity and hence its second period came to an end, as bitter as the first one. Some members left Iran and eventually constituted the *Iranian Writers Association in Exile* in 1982 in Paris; others went underground.

In the early 1990s and with the end of the war, the Writers' Association started to hold meetings again. In 1994, they released a statement entitled "We Are Writers," also known as the statement of 134 writers. "When it is beyond our individual potency to confront the barriers for writing and thinking, we need to respond collectively and as a guild, that is to work as a group to achieve freedom of thought and speech, and to fight against censorship," notes the statement.[132] Ahmad Mir-Alāi, our protagonist from "Ahmad's Inquisition in Translation," was one of the 134 signatories of this statement. His body was found dead a year later in October 1995 in Isfahan—it was few months after V. S. Naipaul had met with him. When in January 1999 Iran's Ministry of Intelligence accepted responsibility for the death of four intellectuals (two of them members of the Writers' Association), speculation grew over a dozen of other deaths, including that of Mir-Alāi. Still, however his file is closed without details regarding how he really died.[133] At the burial of Mohammad Mokhtari—one of the four confirmed victims—Houshang Golshiri famously said:

---

[131] A.T.: Ahmad Shamlou, "Beginning of the Book…" *Book of Friday* 1, no. 1 (1979): 3. The next article in this volume of *Book of Friday* is a Farsi translation of a 1935 Bertolt Brecht speech on Fascism.

[132] A.T.: BBC Persian, "*We Are Writers*: Statement of 134 Iranian Writers in 1994."

[133] For more on the (so-called) "chain murders" and related events in English look at Fowler (2018). For more on Mir-Alai and his death in English look at Human Rights & Democracy for Iran, "One Person's Story: Ahmad Mir-Alai."

> Like me, Mohammad Mokhtari was a member of the Writers' Association of Iran. All these years, we tried to establish the Writers' Association. Regrettably, they have piled on us much mourning that we do not have time to even moan. The message has arrived to us very precisely: "we strangle!" So we are ready. Isn't it that we need to sacrifice for civil society and for freedom of speech? We are ready.[134]

Golshiri, a founding member of the *Isfahan Review,* which published the first translation of Borges in Farsi ("The Circular Ruins" translated by Mir-Alāi in 1966), wrote a short story after Mir-Alāi's death in 1995 entitled "Book of Treasure" (or Treasure Map). It stands as one of his classics; a stream of consciousness recounting of the narrator's memories of Mir-Alāi:

> What places has he [Ahmad Mir-Alāi] been before arriving at this last step? He has started in the morning, 7:45am. At 10, no, at 9:30pm he has arrived at this street and has ended. I must fill it. I write to fill this gap, all these gaps. One is between the morning of October 24th, 1995 and 10:30pm where in the street, leaning on the wall, they had found him. I must write.[135]

The urgency to write for Golshiri comes not only from his friendship with Mir-Alāi; it is also the *responsibility* of the author and of the engaged literature (Sartre's littérature engagée) to tell the truth and to side with justice that urges him to write. The title of this story, "Book of Treasure," likely refers to a treasure or an aleph hidden in Borges' corpus of writing, a treasure revealed in Farsi through translations of Mir-Alāi. A large part of "Book of Treasure" is a description of one of Golshiri's meetings with Mir-Alāi where the latter has translated some new pieces by Borges and is reading them for Golshiri. Towards the end, the character of Mir-Alāi says:

---

[134] Transcribed and translated by me from Farsi: Youtube, "Houshang Golshiri at Mohammad Mokhtari's Burial."

[135] A.T.: Houshang Golshiri, "Book of Treasure," in *The Dark Side of the Moon: Short Stories* (Tehran: Niloufar, 2003), 518.

> I am a translator; I translate what exactly he has written. Now I think if only my translation of 'The Aleph' remains, whatever I translated from Borges and Conrad and Poe and others, they all exist in that Aleph, without a word being omitted. Even my unfinished translations or those that I would have translated if I had stayed, they exist in this Aleph. […] If the Aleph of our alphabet is all the letters and all the words of now and future, then here or wherever that I am, is everywhere; I am you, and whoever that has written or will write.[136]

Golshiri also has an essay on Borges in Farsi, "I Haven't Lived, I Want to be the Other" (1970), included in the recent editions of Mir-Alāi's collected translations of Borges. The focus of this essay is on the experiences of otherness for a creative writer. "For someone who writes and publishes a part of himself/herself (including his/her experiences or explorations), becoming divided into two with each story or poem is a necessity," writes Golshiri.[137] He then examines this understanding of otherness in Borges' "The Circular Ruins":

> And we see how this creature [a piece of writing] during the process of creation, though living within the writer, is itself the other—a being that has its own particular presence. […] the storyteller is like the sorcerer [in 'The Circular Ruins'], and the story is a getaway for creation or for instance numerous journeys or perhaps circular ruins. And can't we say that Borges suddenly realizes that he himself is a creation of others: characters of his story, myths, things, a blind father?[138]

[136] A.T.: Golshiri, "Book of Treasure," 532.

[137] A.T.: Houshang Golshiri, "I Haven't Lived, I Want to be the Other," in *The Garden of Forking Paths* (Tehran: Jooya, 2015), 384.

[138] A.T.: Golshiri, "I Haven't Lived, I Want to be the Other," 385-6.

When discussing "The Zahir," Golshiri notes the pantheist views of Borges and compare them to Khayyām's cosmology, moving away from Hedāyat's Khayyām/Kafka-driven nihilism:

> One can easily accept this about Zahir that, though it is a coin with a certain contractual value, since it carries all the events that has happened to it and is a reminder of all the stories of all the coins of the world, it is not implausible to get enchanted by it. Thus, in order to learn all the world and even god, it is enough to learn a small part of the world—the Zahir coin for example. At first glance, this viewpoint sounds similar to Khayyām's, but due to its mixture with elements of mysticism of the East as well as Plato and Aristotle, it no longer has the naivety and caustic quality of Khayyām's thought. For Borges, a jug is all the humans not because it has been made of people's clay, but because it has lived alongside people and in their hands and that it carries people's feelings and fates and destinies, to the extent that it contains the whole human culture. And since all things possess this magical quality, then they can be subject to years of thinking and can enchant people, just like [Borges'] tiger. […] Creating this space in order to arrive at such vertiginous sphericity and leaving the reader inside this mysterious and magical labyrinth is only possible through Borges' technique. Although this technique is employed in Kafka's *The Castle*, one dares to argue that creating this space is a result of such a [Borgesian] technique, or vice versa.[139]

Finally, he finishes with a conclusion on Borges' pantheism and techniques of narration:

> When one thing is all things, is a reminder of all things, and all is one thing, then it is possible to gather them all and spin them over the axis of the autodidact

[139] A.T.: Golshiri, "I Haven't Lived, I Want to be the Other," 389-90.

> narrator's viewpoint. Ultimately, as the Zahir is everything as well as a coin, Borges can also employ all elements of humankind's culture and still remains Borges. […] To be honest, Borges' coin enchants to the extent that we are afraid of going blind, or it is just me who is afraid.[140]

Golshiri's fascination with "otherness" is not just a passing point on Borges, but a notion that he has thoroughly explored in his works of fiction, particularly *Book of Jinn*.

I also opened this chapter with an epigraph from Ahmad Okhovat's "Preface" to his translation of Borges' *The Book of Imaginary Beings* and his account of meeting Borges during a lecture that resulted in his undertaking of the task of translating Borges into Farsi. Okhovat was also born in Isfahan, helped with the *Isfahan Review,* and was a part of the Isfahan Circle. When in 2019 a commemoration was held in Isfahan to honor his lifetime achievements in literature, an Iranian news agency called him "the Borges of Isfahan." In addition to *The Book of Imaginary Beings,* Okhovat also translated *Atlas* (a Borges book of poetry) in 2000. Yet more interestingly is his volume *Book of Angels* published in 2011. As Okhovat notes in its introduction, no book by Borges with such a title exists in any language other than Farsi. Okhovat has gathered all pieces of writing by Borges on the topic of "angels" in one volume. Thus, it is not merely a work of translation, but the outcome of extensive research in order to complete an unfinished project on Borges', with extensive footnotes and commentary; a quite Borgesian task in itself. This project of Borges', according to Okhovat, started in 1926 with the essay "A History of Angels," but Borges never published his angelic writings as a separate book. Instead, it was Okhovat who stepped into this labyrinth and continued the exploration that Borges had started. The result is a

[140] A.T.: Golshiri, "I Haven't Lived, I Want to be the Other," 392-3.

mini-encyclopaedia of angels and angelology that invites the readers to further explore the labyrinth themselves.[141]

V. Conclusion: Back from Isfahan

> He/she who writes about Borges, is rather writing about himself/herself, about his/her own works.
>
> — Houshang Golshiri, "I Haven't Lived, I Want to be the Other"[142]

> I'm sorry to have to tell you [Borges] that books are now considered an endangered species. By books, I also mean the conditions of reading that make possible literature and its soul effects. Soon, we are told, we will call up on 'bookscreens' any 'text' on demand, and will be able to change its appearance, ask questions of it, 'interact' with it. When books become 'texts' that we 'interact' with according to criteria of utility, the written word will have become simply another aspect of our advertising-driven televisual reality. This is the glorious future being created, and promised to us, as something more 'democratic.' Of course, it means nothing less than the death of inwardness—and of the book.
>
> This time around, there will be no need for a great conflagration. The barbarians don't have to burn the books. The tiger is in the library. […] The era we are entering now, this twenty-first century, will test the soul in new ways. But, you can be sure, some of us are not going to abandon the Great Library. And you will continue to be our patron and our hero.
>
> —Susan Sontag, "A Letter to Borges [1996]"[143]

The first time I learned about Borges was when, as a teenager (early-mid 2000s), I was walking across the bookshops in front of the University of Tehran, and noticed a book behind the

[141] *Book of Angels* also reflects Borges' wide interest in esotericism and World Religions including Islam. It includes pieces on Gnosticism, Kabbalah, John Dee, Swedenborg, Jung, Burton, Rilke, Guenon, and Maimonides. With respect to the islamicate, there are discussions on jinn, Zakariya al-Qazwini's 13th century *Marvels of Things Created and Miraculous Aspects of Things Existing*, Muhammad's Mi'raj, and even the death of Husayn ibn Ali (Muhammad's grandson).

[142] A.T.: Golshiri, "I Haven't Lived, I Want to be the Other," 393.

[143] Susan Sontag, "A Letter to Borges [1996]," in *Where the Stress Falls* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 112-13.

windows of a bookstore: The Aleph (الف) by Jorge Luis Borges (خورخه لوئیس بورخس). I thought to myself: the name of the author sounds European and probably Spanish; how is it that his book is entitled Aleph, the first letter of Arabic and Farsi alphabets? I could not imagine then that one day I would acquire eight different translations of the story in three different languages in my personal library, and still remain perplexed and puzzled by this very story of Aleph. If it is a story that contains all stories of Borges, then…?

What the narrator of "The Aleph" sees in the Aleph in the cellar only takes a moment, a simultaneous moment that language, due to its successiveness, cannot fully capture, much like a dream. He references "a Persian mystic" speaking of "a bird that somehow is all birds"—that is Attar and the Simurgh of course—as an "inconceivable analogy" that bears relation to the Aleph. If this is a hint to pantheism, then the Aleph might be a variation of Spinoza's "Proposition 15" in *Ethics*: "Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be, or be conceived, without God." Yet Borges sides with the Gnostics and Kabbalists on the problem of evil, maintaining that there are gradual series of divinities, and evil appears when divinity nears zero. Even then, the narrator raises suspicion about the Aleph he saw; maybe it was a false Aleph, maybe there is another Aleph.[144]

I can only speculate that "The Aleph" is about how much we as humans can come to comprehend the Aleph. While recording his vision of the Aleph, the narrator ends up seeing the Aleph everywhere at once, seeing the earth in the Aleph, the Aleph in the earth and the earth in Aleph, seeing his own face and the reader's face and then feels dizzy and weeps as he sees "the

[144] In a 1956 interview when asking about his belief in God, Borges remarks: "If by God we imply a single personality or a trinity, some sort of supernatural man, judge of our actions and thoughts, I don't believe in that being. On the other hand, if by God we mean a moral or mental purpose in the universe, I certainly believe in Him. […] That there is an order in the universe, a system of periodic recurrences and a general evolution, seems to me obvious. No less undeniable to me is the existence of a moral law, of an intimate feeling of having acted well or badly in each occasion." Jorge Luis Borges, "Do You Believe in God? Interview with Borges," in *On Mysticism*, ed. Maria Kodama (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 105.

inconceivable universe"—"that secret, hypothetical object whose name has been usurped by men but which no man has ever truly looked upon." Gazing at the abyss, the abyss talks back to him:

> 'Serves you right, having your mind boggled, for sticking your nose in where you weren't wanted,' said a jovial, bored voice. 'And you may rack your brains, but you'll never repay me for this revelation—not in a hundred years. What a magnificent [formidable] observatory, eh, Borges!'[145]

And formidable it is that Borges refuses to discuss the Aleph with the host (Carlos Argentino Daneri, whose name hints at Dante) after seeing it. This recalls a line by Rumi, "Whoever was taught secrets of the Haqq (حق), They sealed and sew up his mouth."

I am not back from Isfahan empty-handed though. That certain esoteric-islamicate aspects of Borges' works were absorbed into modernist literary currents in Iran illustrates that his writing excites not only the readers of European languages. For one thing, Borges appeals to the Farsi (and Arabic[146]) readers/writers because of an uncanny quality; in a Borges piece, familiar texts such as *1001 Nights* and *Conference of the Birds* take strange, unfamiliar shapes. The new life of a story (or combination of stories) reborn into a new form arouses admiration. Borges' reception in world literature (as a field of circulation of texts) is first due to techniques of narration and writing. It is not unusual that publishers in U.S. rejected proposals to translate Borges until French translations by Gallimard appeared in the 1950s.[147] Complexity within simplicity; the smart usage of diverse and polyglot source materials; fabricating the essay-fiction genre; a mathematical imagination; his mastery of tricks and limits of language—these are some of Borges' skills that translate into a universal aesthetic, an aesthetic based on a will to beauty

[145] Borges, "The Aleph," in *Collected Fictions*, 284.

[146] A monograph on Borges' "Eastern" stories in Arabic is Makhluf (1996).

[147] Suzanne Jill Levine, "The Latin American novel in English translations," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Latin American Novel*, ed. Efraín Kristal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 310.

and not a will to power. There is something liberatory and ethical here; arms open to dialogue and to finding bridges between languages and literatures, to understand life and the cosmos. It is a focal point in *1001 Nights*: Scheherazade keeps telling her infinite stories to stay alive, and to keep her sisters alive, and to pause the game of war. Burroughs however in the next chapter will pessimistically assure us that there is no end or pause in the game of war. This is not to suggest that Borges is apolitical; his writings on WWII and also Fascism in Argentina prove otherwise.

In Borges' world there are powers beyond human comprehension; as I quoted earlier, "there is no chance: what we call chance is our ignorance of the complex machinery of causality." His explorations in pantheism (that extent to a whole range of esoteric currents and doctrines) aim to understand the complex cosmos and its mechanisms, and it opens up space for a non-sectarian theology—a secular mysticism that he examines for its validity by means of reason (the mathematical reasoning of the Library of Babel for example). Borges finds in islamicate a culture that has walked through questions on the nature of divinity/evil and on writing being sacred and magical. Some of islamicate answers to these questions were rejected due to geopolitical reasons (such as that of Al-Moqanna in "Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv"), some were rational but distant (like that of Averroës), and some were too beautiful to be ignored (like *Conference of the Birds*). Within the Isfahan Circle, Borges' writings became a method of searching for and speaking of divinity without falling into a monophonic religious discourse. During times of religio-political insecurity, sometimes "heretics" seek refuge in the languages of symbolism and secrecy. Borges tells a story of Zahir being a coin, but his own body of writing—"over which I [Borges] shall be gazing after I am dead"—is also a Zahir, behind and in-between its lines exists an esoteric Batin that haunts an author of Golshiri's calibre.

All in all, Borges' works have indeed survived the century. Credits would first go to Buenos-Aires, Argentina, and Spanish language, but more than anything Borges is a poet of the planet earth who sought for inspiration beyond borders of national literatures towards a new world literature. Nationalists will forever despise him, but for humanists he remains a distinguished author who emphasized universal questions of "high truth."

There are 1001 ways of writing on Borges. This was one of them.

Chapter (3) William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin: Operation Rewrite

> All collaboration is mysterious.
>
> —Jorge Luis Borges, "The Enigma of Edward FitzGerald"[1]

> Finally, I will examine the connections between so-called occult phenomena and the creative process. Are not all writers, consciously or not, operating in these areas?
>
> —William S. Burroughs, "Technology of Writing"[2]

> Words have a vitality of their own and you or anybody can make them gush into action.
>
> —Brion Gysin, "Cut-Ups Self-Explained"[3]

Burroughs and Gysin's collaborations, i.e. the cut-ups, are multimedia art projects—a series of experiments in writing (poetry and prose), painting, calligraphy, sound and voice recording, music, film, photography, and even dreaming (the latter best materialized in Gysin's peculiar invention, "the dream machine"[4]). These projects have interdisciplinary dimensions that concern neuroscience and biology, psychology, philosophy of language, cultural anthropology, political theory, study of religion and esotericism, and of course, arts and literature; all of which are being played against the background of the uncertainty surrounding the cold war period, the fear of atomic bombs and total annihilation of life on planet earth, the exhaustion caused by authoritarian and ideological propaganda (be it either capitalist or communist), and yet, they are

[1] Jorge Luis Borges, "The Enigma of Edward FitzGerald," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 368.

[2] William S. Burroughs, "Technology of Writing," in *The Adding Machine: Selected Essays* (New York: Grove Press, 2013), 45.

[3] Brion Gysin, "Cut-Ups Self-Explained," in William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), 34.

[4] For more on the dream machine look at John Geiger's *Chapel of Extreme Experience* (2003) and the 2008 documentary *Flicker*.

filled with a curiosity for exploring both the human psyche and outer space—tripping inward and outward.

My object of study in this chapter is narrowed to some of the final products of this collaboration published and circulated in book format; in other words, the writing and literature aspect of the collaboration. Particularly the focus here is on *The Third Mind*—the 1978 English text co-written by Burroughs and Gysin, first published in French as *Oeuvre croisée* in 1976—a manifesto or a guideline or a reader for their cut-up method that offers great potential in expanding the horizons of world literature through inventive practices and methods of writing and collage, while entangling with the esoteric and the islamicate. Speaking of *The Third Mind* as a book about the cut-up *method* (or perhaps a "discourse on the method," since Gysin at some point cuts-up "I THINK THEREFORE I AM," the common English translation of Descartes's famous "Je pense donc je suis," and replaces it with variations of his new formula "I AM THAT I AM"), there exists a network of texts around this manifesto examining it as a practice and application of the cut-up method itself. Apart from *Naked Lunch* (1959), Burroughs's most famous work that, in his own account, is a cut-up before his awareness of the method, is his 1960s "nova trilogy" or "cut-up trilogy" (*The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*)[5]. The trilogy is the most notable example in the novel genre. Yet the first defining collaborative cut-up publications in book format are *Minutes to Go* (first published in Paris in 1960, co-authored by Burroughs, Gysin, Sinclair Beiles, and Gregory Corso),[6] and *The*

[5] In his introduction to new restored editions of these books, Oliver Harris notes the word "trilogy," while impossible to avoid, is a misnomer: "[…] calling them 'the trilogy' has the effect of domesticating these wildly experimental texts and glossing over the differences between them. […] over a seven-year period this 'trilogy' materialized itself as no fewer than six quite different books: three versions of *The Sof Machine* (1961, 1966, 1968); two of *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962, 1967); and one of *Nova Express* (1964)." Oliver Harris, "Introduction," in William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded (The Restored Text)*, ed. Oliver Harris (New York: Grove Press, 2014), xxvii.

[6] Gérard-Georges Lemaire notes that Beiles and Corso joined in the collaboration, but "quickly withdrew from the game, since they considered that all forms of literary activity, even exploded and depersonalized ones, were based

Exterminator (first published in San Francisco in 1960, co-authored by Burroughs and Gysin).[7] Unlike other Burroughs novels that have been reprinted several times since their publication (mostly by Grove Press), his collaborative works with Gysin are somewhat rare and collectable, with a portion of them consisting of unpublished materials and working documents.[8] All in all, this network of texts alongside the selected essays by Burroughs and Gysin form the primary materials for this chapter's inquiry.

In the previous two chapters, I tried to demonstrate and formulate the magic and labour of writing in the worlds of Hedāyat and Borges. Their practice of writing, in comparison with the cut-up method of Burroughs-Gysin, is pretty conventional—writing with pen and paper, and perhaps sometimes with typewriter, and in the case of late Borges, with dictation. These are all linear methods of writing whose limitation Borges notes when he sees the Aleph: "What my eyes saw was *simultaneous*; what I shall write is *successive*, because language is successive."[9] At the heart of the cut-up method, there is a tendency to arrive at this impossible simultaneity in writing. Burroughs repeatedly echoes Gysin's assertion that "writing is fifty years behind painting." He insists on a different or defamiliarized understanding of writing in order to get closer to simultaneity: "Remember that the written word is an image," he writes in "The Fall of Art" (an essay about magic of writing) when explaining the cut-up method.[10] It is a simple principle of how-to-treat written words: treat them like you treat images—crop or fold, write

---

on intellection and imagination. They had not been able to free themselves from the subjectivism fought against by Burroughs and Gysin." Gérard-Georges Lemaire, "23 Stitches Taken," in Burroughs and Gysin, *The Third Mind*, 18.

[7] *The Exterminator* has nothing to do with *Exterminator!*; the latter is a conventional short story collection of Burroughs first published in 1973.

[8] A new critical edition of *The Third Mind* entitled *The Book of Methods* (edited by Marcus Boon and Davis Schneiderman) which includes previously unpublished materials is set for publication by the University of Minnesota Press.

[9] Jorge Luis Borges, "The Aleph," in *Collected Fictions*, 283.

[10] William S. Burroughs, "The Fall of Art," in *The Adding Machine: Selected Essays* (New York: Grove Press, 2013), 76.

again, crop or fold, further, write again, further, again. The first half of the 20th century had seen the booming of new schools and movements of painting, alongside the development and the globalization of cinema, and techniques and technologies of collage and montage reached new heights.[11] By the time Gysin and Burroughs advanced in cutting-up, cassette tapes had made it accessible for the general public around the world to juxtapose their own DIY music cut-ups known as mixtapes.[12] With spoken words, one can easily treat words like other sounds and noises and music: by mixing them and having them overlap. One reason that the contemporary music industry has become dominated by sampling is the unique property of sound in its ability to reflect simultaneity. Still, a writing machine appeared to be missing. Burroughs-Gysin brought writing to the studio, a multimedia studio, in order to design a writing machine that operates by cutting up. Gysin finishes "Minutes to Go"—his first cut-up poem from 1960 broadcasted also on BBC Radio—with:

> the writing machine is for everybody
>
> do it yourself until the machine comes
>
> here is the system according to us[13]

The basic principle of the cut-up method is that existing texts can be re-arranged by being cut and shuffled, through degrees of chance *and* will, in order to produce new texts. Now there are infinite permutations of possible re-arrangements and new texts—a Library of Babel indeed—that can come into existence as a result. While book volumes like *Minutes to Go* and *The Exterminator* (both from 1960) are some of the "final products" of the cut-up writing machine, *Oeuvre croisée*/*The Third Mind* (1977-78) is distinctively about the process of cut-up

[11] For more on this look at: Marcus Boon, "Montage," in *In Praise of Copying* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 142-175.

[12] David Byrne, *How Music Works* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2012).

[13] Brion Gysin, "Minutes to Go," in Sinclar Beiles, William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, and Brion Gysin, *Minutes to Go* (San Francisco: Beach Books, 1968), 5.

production and its history and philosophy. *The Third Mind* by Burroughs-Gysin or Gysin-Burroughs offers techniques and algorithms on how to cut and then paste the fragments or associated lines. Thus, from this an angle, it is a book about writing itself, a study in creative writing, or a how-to-write-a-book-using-cut-up guide for writers of different languages.

The scope of *The Third Mind* expands from here, from a book about technique, to a philosophical and political inquiry into writing. It is on the one hand an exploration of intersubjectivity, as the English title "third mind" suggests:

> GYSIN: It says that when you put two minds together…
>
> BURROUGHS: …there is always a third mind…
>
> GYSIN: …a third and superior mind…
>
> BURROUGHS: …as an unseen collaborator.[14]

On the other hand, it yearns to be the defining text (or even a manifesto) of a semiotic guerrilla movement within the context of the cold war, an anti-propaganda aesthetic machine exploiting means of "control" with word and image:

> Our troops operate in the area of dream and myth under guerrilla conditions. This area is our cover, just as jungle and mountains serve as cover for three-dimensional guerrilla troops. The enemy is a noncreative parasite. It cannot touch us in this area. Their counter is saturation bombing and blockade of creative personnel.[15]

This is not exactly the clichéd 'words as bullets' or 'pen as sword' or a similar metaphor. This, the chapter's inquiry, is in many ways a genealogy of *scissors* as instruments of writing (i.e.

[14] From an interview by Robert Palmer, *Rolling Stone*, May 11, 1972, p. 52. Qtd. in Lemaire, "23 Stitches Taken," in *The Third Mind*, 19.

[15] William S. Burroughs, "First Recordings," in William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), 90.

material swords, not metaphoric ones), a genealogy that involves the name and cut-up "razor" of Hasan Sabbāh—the 12th century leader of Nezāri Ismaʿili state, known in Europe since Marco Polo. Burroughs-Gysin re-invent and re-enchant the legendary Sabbāh in their cut-ups. He is called from the confused and contradictory pages of history and myth and occult to legitimize and fantasize this apparently paranormal method of writing. What Olav Hammer identifies as "the appeal to tradition," a way of constructing a historical lineage among modern and contemporary esoteric groups,[16] is applicable to Burroughs-Gysin's Sabbāh. Still, Sabbāh is only one blade of Burroughs-Gysin's scissors. The other blade belongs to that of Tristan Tzara (1896-1963).

The Dada legend is that dada the word was somehow discovered at random by placing a letter-opener inside a dictionary. Burroughs-Gysin claim that the "cut-up" was, in not a dissimilar manner, seen and discovered by Gysin or revealed to him. Burroughs had used the method unconsciously in *Naked Lunch*—the method did not have a name at the time. Gysin, not very long after the first publication of *Naked Lunch* (by Olympia Press in Paris in 1959), envisions the "cut-up" method, as he recalls it in *The Third Mind*:

> *Naked Lunch* appeared and Burroughs disappeared. He kicked his habit with apomorphine and flew off to London to see Dr Dent, who had first turned him on to the cure.
>
> While cutting a mount for a drawing in room #15 [at the Beat Hotel in Paris], I sliced through a pile of newspapers with my Stanley blade and thought of what I had said to Burroughs some six months earlier about the necessity for turning painters' techniques directly into writing. I picked up the raw words and

[16] Olav Hammer, "The Appeal to Tradition," in *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 85-98.

> began to piece together texts that later appeared as "First Cut-Ups" in *Minutes to Go*. At the time I thought them hilariously funny and hysterically meaningful. I laughed so hard my neighbors thought I'd flipped. I hope you may discover this unusual pleasure for yourselves—this short-lived but unique intoxication. Cut up this page you are reading and see what happens. See what I say as well as hear it.[17]

I certainly cannot cut through pages of a PhD dissertation, but how can one describe an assault on the successiveness of writing in successive words? *The Third Mind* is partly such an effort, included in the book are non-cut-up pieces such as Burroughs' 1966 interview with *Paris Review* which opens the 1978 English edition. The Gysin piece from *The Third Mind* that I just quoted, "Cut-ups: A Project for Disastrous Success," is another threshold one must cross to reach into the book. In the paragraph that follows the quote, Gysin points out the main difficulty of explaining cut-ups:

> I can tell you nothing you do not know. I can show you nothing you have not seen. Anything I may say about Cut-Ups must sound like special pleading unless you try it for yourself. You cannot cut up in your head any more than I can paint in my head. Whatever you do in your head bears the prerecorded pattern of your head. Cut through that pattern and all patterns if you want something new. Take a letter you have written or a letter written to you. Cut the page into four or into three columns—any way you may choose. Shuffle the pieces and put them together at random. Cut through the word lines to hear a new voice off the page.

[17] Brion Gysin, "Cut-ups: A Project for Disastrous Success," in Burroughs and Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), 43-44.

> A dialogue often breaks out. "It" speaks. [Eugen] Herrigel describes such an experience in *Zen in the Art of Archery* when "It" shot the arrow.[18]

What is "It"? It must have many names, "the third mind" being one of them. Another is "oeuvre croisée," the French title: "'work in common' is one translation, but it's also a term applied to those kind of chopstick that four-handed piano parts are written for as well… four hands at the piano playing a piece together, making that dreadful racket."[19] "It" is then the collaborative mind behind a collaborative work of art, its smallest possible form being the duet. But are the mindset and the product easily distinguishable? The mindset is not necessarily "behind" the work/product as its starting point. The cut-up mindset, in this context specifically regarding writing, is also "within" pages of the book, and is conditioned by the equipment and materials at hand (like having a pair of scissors on the writer's desk). It could also refer to the mindset of the readers as much as it refers to the mindset of the scissor-writers. Writing or making cut-ups is like the art of cooking, adding chopped ingredients into the pot. Reading cut-ups however is not quite like tasting food; it is more like browsing through a pile of jigsaw puzzle pieces without having a static model of the complete picture in front of you. For methodological considerations, due to differences in the experiences of writing cut-ups and reading cut-ups, we have conducted a series of cut-up experiments in Farsi using algorithms and computers in collaboration with Nima Behravan (designer and researcher). The latter section of this chapter is a report on these experiments as part of the method for a better understanding of cut-ups, and as a form of participant observation—thinking through cut-ups not only as a researcher of literature and esotericism, but also as a creative writer.

[18] Gysin, "Cut-ups: A Project for Disastrous Success," in *The Third Mind*, 44.

[19] Brion Gysin, "Where is the third mind?," unpublished material from *The Book of Methods*.

I argue that another name of "it" is *dada*.[20] Dada is, first and foremost, product of a collective (or collectives). Formed in the midst of World War I in Zürich in 1916 at the Cabaret Voltaire founded by German Hugo Ball (1886-1927), Dada gathered refugee artists and international exiles in neutral Switzerland, among them most notably Romanian Tristan Tzara. Although Ball wrote the first dada manifesto in 1916 ("Dada is a new tendency in art. […]"), it was through Tzara's persistent publication of journals and manifestoes with the Dada flag that caused, within a few years, the Dadaist movement to spread all throughout Europe. 1920s Paris (where Tzara resided in 1919) was historically known for the collaborations and rivalries of Dadaism and Surrealism, a legendary epic of Tzara vs. Breton. Burroughs-Gysin picked Tzara from the list of all Dadaist artists for many reasons. In the Parisian context of 1960s, the cut-up project appears as a revolt against Surrealism and Breton's cult of personality in favor of a more "democratic" poetry and art. Burroughs-Gysin see in Tzara the first revolt against Breton's Freudian dogmatism and his overall authoritarian charisma. Tzara is the scissor-handed and random-seeker poet who was rejected by king Breton. Burroughs begins "The Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin" from *The Third Mind* with:

> At a surrealist rally in the 1920s Tristan Tzara the man from nowhere proposed to create a poem on the spot by pulling words out of a hat. A riot ensued wrecked the theater. Andre Breton expelled Tristan Tzara from the movement and grounded the cut-ups on the Freudian couch.[21]

[20] On the first use of the word dada, OED notes: "The name first appeared in print in *Cabaret Voltaire* (1916): on page 5, in an editorial in German by Hugo Ball (dated 15 May) where it appears as the proposed title for a periodical review which was first published later in the same year, and on page 31, in a dialogue in French and German by Richard Huelsenbeck and Tristan Tzara. According to two accounts (both 1916) by Richard Huelsenbeck and Hugo Ball, two of the founders, the name was originally chosen at random from a dictionary, where the headword was French *dada* hobby horse, (in children's language) horse (1508 in Middle French, 1776 in figurative use); however, the word was adopted with conscious reference to the underlying syllables, perceived as ultimately meaningless."

[21] William S. Burroughs, "The Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin," in Burroughs and Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), 29.

And few pages later:

> Now take the poem and type out selected passages. Fill a page with excerpts. Now cut the page. You have a new poem. As many poems as you like. As many Shakespeare Rimbaud poems as you like. Tristan Tzara said: 'Poetry is for everyone.' And Andre Breton called him a cop and expelled him from the movement. Say it again: 'Poetry is for everyone.' Poetry is a place and it is free to all cut up Rimbaud and you are in Rimbaud's place.[22]

This tale of revolt against Breton has its parallel in Gysin's life, and his own experience with the Surrealists:

> In 1934 [age 18] he [Gysin] moved to Paris, studied briefly at the Sorbonne, and made his first literary and artistic contacts by way of Sylvia Beach and the surrealists. The following year he was to have his first show as part of the surrealist drawings exhibit, but his work was taken down the day of the opening on orders from André Breton, for alleged insubordination.[23]

Gysin did not hide his feeling about this rejection, and saw in himself a Tzaraesque artist coming from a peripheral "Nowehere" to central Paris, as he writes in one of his early cut-up experiments "Cut me Up * Brion Gysin" (not included in *The Third Mind*):

> Tristan Tzara, the Man from Nowhere, divined Dada out of a dictionary with a knife, pulled words out of a hat and might well have burned the Louvre if he hadn't diverted into the Communist Panic by the Art Wing of the Freudian Conspiracy calling itself Surrealism under André Breton. We don't want to see it

[22] Burroughs, "The Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin," in *The Third Mind*, 31.

[23] Jason Weiss, "Introduction," in Brion Gysin, *Back in No Time: The Brion Gysin Reader*, ed. Jason Weiss (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), xi.

> happen again. Above all I don't—I the Man from Nowhere negotiated like a Tangier Space Draft on a Swiss bank.[24]

Yet more important than these biographical parallels (and Burroughs and Gysin emphasizing them), is the intertextual relationship of Gysin's "Minutes to Go" and Tzara's "Pour faire un poème dadaïste" (To make a Dadaist poem, 1918) that embodies the scissors sisterhood of Dada and Cut-ups.

> Prenez un journal.
>
> Prenez des ciseaux.
>
> Choisissez dans ce journal un article ayant la longueur que vous comptez donner à votre poème.
>
> Découpez l'article.
>
> Découpez ensuite avec soin chacun des mots qui forment cet article et mettez-les dans un sac.
>
> Agitez doucement.
>
> Sortez ensuite chaque coupure l'une après l'autre.
>
> Copiez consciencieusement dans l'ordre où elles ont quitté le sac.
>
> Le poème vous ressemblera.
>
> Et vous voilà un écrivain infiniment original et d'une sensibilité charmante, encore qu'incomprise du vulgaire.
>
> Take a newspaper.
>
> Take some scissors.

[24] Brion Gysin, "Cut me Up * Brion Gysin," in *Back in No Time*, 75.

Choose from this paper an article the length you want to make your poem.

Cut out the article.

Next carefully cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them all in a bag.

Shake gently.

Next take out each cutting one after the other.

Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag.

The poem will resemble you.

And there you are—an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd.[25]

Gysin's first cut-up poem "Minutes to Go"—the titular source of the first book-format cut-up publication *Minutes to Go* (1960), also included in *The Third Mind*—is partly an update to Tzara's recipe:

[…]

Pick a book any book cut it up

cut up

prose

poems

newspapers

magazines

the bible

the koran

[25] The English translation is from: Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 107.

the book of moronic

la-tzu

confucius

the bhagvad gita

anything

letters

correspondence

ads

all the words

slice down the middle dice into sections

according to taste

chop in some bible pour on some Madison Avenue

prose

shuffle like cards toss like confetti

taste it like piping hot alphabet soup

[…][26]

The "alphabet soup"! Such a Dadaesque and Tzaraesque phrase! The promise of two poems is similar: what is already written can, through degrees of chance and will, be re-written in a different order. Even the English phrase "cut-up" is a translation of French "découper," with the "the cut-up technique" being known in French as "découpé." In the 1976 French Edition of *The Third Mind,* i.e. *Oeuvre croisée*, the lines "Pick a book any book cut it up cut up" from

[26] Gysin, "Minutes to Go," in *Minutes to Go,* 4.

"Minutes to Go" are translated as "Prenez un livre n'importe quel livre découpez-le découpez"[27]—the word that Tzara had used in "Pour faire un poème dadaïste." Throughout *Oeuvre croisée* though, mostly the English term "cut-up" is used in the French text (e.g. "Le *cut-up*, cette méthode mécanique de broyer les textes dans une machine impitoyable").

Still, the recipes are not exactly the same. Tzara suggests cutting newspaper articles; Gysin suggests any book can get cut, adding to list the classics and the sacred. How can the differences of the recipes be explained then? They seem to be primarily dictated by historical material conditions—technologies of writing and development of writing instruments. In other words, the differences between the cutting recipes of Tzara and Gysin are reflections or by-products of changes in material conditions of producing art and anti-art. Though Gysin describes his cut-up efforts with Burroughs as "the American Way," the Americanness of their writing machine refers rather to possibilities of mass production and mass circulation of cut-ups rather than American aesthetics or mentalities:

> there is no longer a need to drum up a season of
> geniuses be your own agent until we deliver
> the machine in commercially reasonable quantities
>
> we wish to announce that while we esteem
> this to be truly the American Way
> we have no commitments with any government groups[28]

A history of writing is, largely, a history of writing technologies, with part of this history being the development of instruments of writing, and the material conditions within which these

[27] Brion Gysin, "Minutes to Go (I)," in William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *Oeuvre croisée* (Paris: Flammarion, 1976), 48.

[28] Gysin, "Minutes to Go," in *Minutes to Go*, 5.

instruments were used. Since the invention of writing until the early 20th century, humans did not use scissors as the main instrument of writing. In the pre-papyrus age, one could hardly cut and rearrange stone carvings! Prior to 15th century—with Gutenberg and the printing revolution—manuscripts were rare and collectable that it must have been unthinkable to conduct such a "heretical" experiment to cut a book. "Keep it or burn it" appear to be the only choice at the time.

I am not attempting to detect the exact moment of an invention or an idea; my point is that without the mass production of printed materials, the idea of writing with scissors was rather unthinkable and impractical (or at best was a mere heretical joke). Then, even after the printing revolution, there needed to be enough texts in circulation and accumulation to tempt one to take scissors to them.

Cut-ups ask critical and radical questions about the many properties of writing. Are not all writings cut-ups (juxtapositions of words/images on material surfaces/templates)? Is the line between cut-up writing and non-cut-up writing not quite blurry? Is the meaning of a text (cut-up or non-cut-up) not always (but not absolutely) ambivalent and fluid, not always (but not absolutely) deferred, not always (but not absolutely) subjected to readers? If cut-ups yearn to achieve simultaneity in writing (as opposed to the standard successive quality of language), have they successfully achieved this goal? I am of course particularly curious about the esoteric and occult dimensions of cut-ups: could the reinforced and channelled *randomness* of cut-ups be an emanation of unseen sacred/profane powers and complex hidden laws/algorithms? What does it mean to cut-up the Bible and the Quran—texts that, despite being celebrated by their followers as sacred and absolute, are themselves historically re-arranged and cut-and-pasted? In addition, what is the prospect of the cut-up method for world literature in the 21st century age of big data

and the cyberspace? I think most of these questions can be answered by tracing the footprints of Tzara and Sabbāh in Burrough-Gysin cut-ups. In the meantime, I urge a pondering of a famous legend about the invention of writing—the Egyptian Thoth.

In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida mentions Thoth only in passing when discussing Rousseau's incrimination of Thoth as "some god, who was an enemy to the repose of mankind, was the inventor of sciences."[29] But Thoth becomes the central figure of Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy" [a long essay first published in *Tel Quel* in 1968, that is the period between the first cut-ups of *Naked Lunch* and *Minutes to Go* (1959-60) and the publication of *Oeuvre croisée-The Third Mind* (1976-78)].[30] I briefly mentioned "Plato's Pharmacy" when investigating Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* through Derrida's formulation of pharmakon. The third section of "Plato's Pharmacy," entitled "The Final Inscription: Theuth, Hermes, Thoth, Nabû, Nebo," is an exclusive discussion of the figure of Thoth in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Derrida notes that we do not know the meaning of the word Thoth/Theuth [Θώθ in Greek]—though Thoth's female counterpart's name, Seshat, means "she-who-writes"—a "mistress of libraries" Derrida calls her. In Thoth, the inventor and god of writing, Derrida sees further a "god-doctor-pharmacist-magician," a "Master of the books," who is also "the god of death," who "is neither king nor jack, but rather a sort of *joker*, a floating signifier, a wild card, one who puts play into play":

> This god of calculation, arithmetic, and rational science also presides over the occult sciences, astrology and alchemy. He is the god of magic formulas that calm the sea, of secret accounts, of hidden texts: an archetype of Hermes, god of cryptography no less than every other –graphy. […] The god of writing is thus

[29] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, qtd. in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 313.

[30] Derrida appears in *Oeuvre croisée-The Third Mind*: in Gérard-Georges Lemaire's introduction to both French and English editions, he quotes from Derrida's "The Double Session," a complimentary essay to "Plato's Pharmacy"—the two have been published together under the title *La dissémination -Dissemination*.

> also a god of medicine. Of 'medicine': both a science and an occult drug. Of the remedy and the poison. The god of writing is the god of the *pharmakon*. And it is writing as a *pharmakon* that he presents to the king in the *Phaedrus*, with humility as unsettling as a dare.[31]

I have set the stage to continue the legend of Thoth. He presents writing to the king. The opinionated king labels writing a pharmakon. Thoth presents his next invention, a pair of scissors (or maybe a blade, or a letter opener). "What is this?" asks the king. "It cuts what has been written," says Thoth, "in order to rearrange the words in new orders through chance-based mechanisms." The king asks what the use or function of that would be. One way of constructing the rest of this dialogue is to imagine dada and cut-up writers speaking to the king on behalf of Thoth. Hugo Ball for instance calls the invention "a new tendency in art" and reads from his 1916 Dada Manifesto (that partly resembles recipes of Tzara and Gysin):

> I shall be reading poems that are meant to dispense with conventional language, no less, and to have done with it. Dada Johann Fuchsgang Goethe. Dada Stendhal. Dada Dalai Lama, Buddha, Bible, and Nietzsche. Dada m'dada. Dada mhm dada da. It's a question of connections, and of loosening them up a bit to start with.[32]

The king would at some point ask about the occult and esoteric magic of the blade/scissors/dada/cut-up. The tarot deck designed by Aleister Crowley (illustrated by Frieda Harris) from 1940s is named after Thoth. This "Thoth Deck" is accompanied by *The Book of Thoth*, Crowley's extensive instructions on and interpretations of the cards. The book contains little to no discussion of Thoth specifically; there is only a footnote on the word, "Tahuti:

[31] Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 97.

[32] Hugo Ball, "Dada Manifesto," in *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, trans. Ann Raimes (Los Angeles: University of California Press Berkeley, 1996), 221.

Egyptian God of Wisdom, Magick, Science, also Illusion."[33] [Magick is Crowley's term to differentiate his occult magic(k) with trickery stage magic.] Yet it is notable that, though in passing, Crowley writes that "the Tarot is a razor."[34] This again is not a metaphor; tarot is literally a cut. The number of possible permutations of 78 cards is very large, and each attempt of drawing few cards out of a shuffled deck is a cut-up.

Considering this example of tarot, suddenly the magic of cut-up resembles many pre-dada methods of divination. The historical tarot dates back to the renaissance, but think about geomancy (*raml* in Arabic, meaning sand, which Borges hints at in his "The Book of Sand" as a dangerous art) which is similarly based on permutations of a set of elements. These are all templates or matrixes governed by laws of chance. Some differences still remain: geomancy and tarot belong to discourses of divination, a magic/science technology or category; dada and cut-up however belong to a modern field of cultural production. Discussing dehumanization and hybridity in dada chance, Abigail Susik notes:

> dada chance developed out of a broad context of other dissociative operations in Dada: the asemic sound poetry of German dadaist Hugo Ball; the primitivist performance masks designed by Romanian dadaist Marcel Janco; the Cubist-influenced collage and montage of several dadaists; and the French artist Marcel Duchamp's readymades. In all of these regards, Dada served as a predecessor, example, and influence upon French Surrealism beginning as early as 1919 in a proto-surrealist phase, and certainly chance operations in Dada specifically

[33] Aleister Crowley, *The Book of Thoth* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 2011), 35.
[34] Crowley, *The Book of Thoth*, 209.

> affected and enabled the later development of automatism and objective chance by surrealist leader, André Breton, and the rest of his cohort.[35]

Tessel Bauduin's study of Surrealism and the occult maps out Breton's particular interest in esotericism, including his fascination with tarot,[36] but a comprehensive study of Dada and the occult is yet to be done. The large multi-lingual archive of Dadaist publications very likely contains insights on the metaphysics of chance and randomness, and on dada divination. John Elderfield's "Afterword" to dada diaries of Hugo Ball, an effort in historicizing myths and mysteries of the word dada, highlights the connections that Ball makes between Dada and Dionysius during a period where he was interested in "the alchemy of letters and words" and was in search of the "primitivism" of magical incantations in his sound poetry. Elderfield's detective criticism in this piece ends with a speculation on the "mystical" origins of the word (that invites further research on the esotericism of Dada):

> For Ball, Dionysius's lesson was of an ascetic rebellion against a demonic and dissolute world—escaping (and reforming) this world in a new "mystical birth." […] it would be strange indeed if hidden in the alchemy of letters that denotes the most scurrilous of modern movements lies a saint who dreamed of a hierarchy of angels.[37]

Burroughs and Gysin are bolder and more direct when it comes to the occult and esoteric dimensions of randomness in their cut-up collaborations, yet they hardly ever mention works of German Dadaists or any other dada figure except Tzara who is in an eternal conflict with Breton! It is arguably through the globalization of Surrealism from Paris to the world that Dada's status

[35] Abigail Susik, "Chance and Automatism: Genealogies of the Dissociative in Dada and Surrealism," in *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, ed. David Hopkins (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 244.
[36] Tessel M. Bauduin, *Surrealism and the Occult: Occultism and Western Esotericism in the Work and Movement of André Breton* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014).
[37] John Elderfield, "Afterword ('Dada': The Mystery of the Word)," in Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, 251.

in art history has been established and repeated as a movement that paved the way for surrealists. Burroughs-Gysin taking side with Tzara against Breton and automatic writing occurs in this Parisian context. Dada was born in Zürich and from there spread across Europe and was most impactful in Paris; Burroughs-Gysin started working on the cut-ups in Paris, but they had strangely first met in Tangier—an International Zone at the time, and quite an islamicate milieu. This Tangier context, as I will try to demonstrate, plays a massive role in the islamicate aspects of Burroughs-Gysin cut-ups.

Meanwhile, what would Burroughs and Gysin say to the king if he asks about its magic? Burroughs answers back with a question: "Are not all writers, consciously or not, operating in these areas [of the connections between so-called occult phenomena and the creative process]?"[38] Then Gysin adds:

> Writing is fifty years behind painting. Painters have been doing this sort of magic for years. They sprung words on canvas before World War I. Surely, this is the 'artless art.' You can't call *me* the author of these images come trooping out of the colors, now can you? Catch up on your writing: make with the words.
>
> I roll you out a bright, new cellular framework of Space and, in it, I write your Script anew. Light writes in Space. Art is the tail of a comet. The comet is Light. We aim to rewrite this Show and there is no part in it for Hope. Cut-Ups are Machine Age knife-magic, revealing Pandora's box to be the downright nasty Stone Age gimmick it is. Cut through what you are reading. Cut this page now. But copies—after all, we are in Proliferation, too—to do cut-ups and fold-ins until we can deliver the Reality Machine in commercially reasonable quantities.[39]

[38] Burroughs, "Technology of Writing," in *The Adding Machine*, 45.

[39] Gysin, "Cut-ups: A Project for Disastrous Success," in *The Third Mind*, 44.

The issue of authorship regarding cut-ups that Gysin raises here is significant in relation to Dada and, as I will elaborate towards the end of this chapter, encourages a reading of Borges' "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" as a coded game of literature in response to Dadaism.

The last two decades saw a growing academic interest in the works of Burroughs. Overall, the scholarship has moved from situating Burroughs within the Beat Generation—primarily alongside Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac—to focusing solely on Burroughs as a peculiar author who has challenged conventional and hegemonic approaches to literature. Examples of older scholarship (relevant to the topic here) include Gregory Stephenson's *The Daybreak Boys: Essays on the Literature of the Beat Generation* (1990) that has a chapter on "The Gnostic Vision of William S. Burroughs," and John Lardas's *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs* (2001) that mainly focuses on the Beats and Buddhism. Brian Edwards' *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express* (2005) offers a postcolonial analysis of American representations of Maghreb including a detailed account of Burroughs' Tangier period (with some brief discussions on Gysin and his role in promoting and mythologizing Jajouka musicians). Timothy S. Murphy's *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (1997) reads Burroughs as a post- Ralph Ellison author who competes against both modernist and postmodernist literatures and theories. Oliver Harris' *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination* (2003), alongside his numerous introductions to revised editions of Burroughs' works, provides extensive information and close reading analysis of them. Micheal Sean Bolton's *Mosaic of Juxtaposition: William S. Burroughs' Narrative Revolution* (2014) is a remarkable, exclusive study of Burroughs' novels that sums up and addresses most of earlier scholarships while reinforcing development of decentralized narrative subjectivities in works of

Burroughs. The volume edited by Davis Schneiderman and Philip Walsh, *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization* (2004) is a comprehensive survey of various social and political aspects of Burroughs' works. Marcus Boon's *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs* (2002) offers an extensive analysis of Burroughs in the context of drug literature. Casey Rae's *William S. Burroughs & the Cult of Rock 'n' Roll* (2019) maps out the enormous influence of Burroughs on contemporary counterculture music.

It was only recently that scholars of literature and of religion have started to pay particular attention to Burroughs' collaborations with Gysin. It appears that earlier scholarship on Burroughs, whether consciously or unconsciously, had been driven by his Americanness and trying to situate him within frameworks of national, American literatures. The quite cosmopolitan characteristics of Gysin's life and works flees national frameworks and thus for years he remained understudied in the academia. Michael K. Walonen's *Writing Tangier in the Postcolonial Transition: Space and Power in Expatriate and North African Literature* (2011) has an exclusive chapter on "Brion Gysin's Conflictive Maghreb" where he correctly points out:

> Gysin is a figure largely forgotten or passed over in the annals of postwar cultural production. There is not much existing scholarship devoted to his work, and what little there is almost completely ignores his writings that represent the Maghreb. There are many likely reasons for this: a naturalized American citizen of Swiss descent who was born in England, grew up in Canada, and lived much of his adult life in Paris and Tangier, he does not fit neatly into any national cultural tradition or canon. A jack of all trades—painter, historian, restauranteur, sound poet, inventor of the psychedelic Dreamachine—traditional academic disciplinary boundaries stand in the way of a scholar having an adequate range of critical

> vocabulary to analyze Gysin's entire body of work. Generally considered by the literary critical establishment to be a somewhat marginal figure of a marginal literary movement (the Beats), the circulation of Gysin's work has been limited at best.[40]

For this reason alone it would be quite fruitful to engage with works of Gysin through frameworks of world literature. In addition, Tommy P. Cowan's two recent articles are remarkable not only for putting Burroughs and Gysin together, but also for placing the esoteric at the heart of their collaborative endeavors.[41] Chad Weidner's 2019 article takes strong advice from cut-ups and Dadaist trash aesthetics for our contemporary ecological crises.[42]

I. Hasan Sabbāh's Razor: Burroughs-Gysin and the Islamicate

> Here is told of the Old Man of the Mountain and of his Assassins.
>
> —*The Travels of Marco Polo*[43]

> The fact is that some substances capable of inducing visions were burning there. I recognized the smell: it is an Arab stuff, perhaps the same that the Old Man of the Mountain gave his assassins to breathe before sending them off on their missions. And so we have explained the mystery of the visions. Someone puts magic herbs there during the night to convince importunate visitors that the library is guarded by diabolical presences.
>
> —Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*[44]

[40] Michael K. Walonen, *Writing Tangier in the Postcolonial Transition: Space and Power in Expatriate and North African Literature* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2011), 97.

[41] Tommy P. Cowan, "What Most People Would Call Evil: The Archontic Spirituality of William S. Burroughs," *La Rosa di Paracelso* 1 (2018): 83-122; Tommy P. Cowan, "Devils in the Ink: William Burroughs, Brion Gysin, and Geometry as a Method for Accessing Intermediary Beings," *Aries* 19 (2019): 167-211.

[42] Chad Weidner, "The Glorious Plagiarism, Trash Aesthetics, and Ecological Entropy of Cryptic Cut-Ups from *Minutes to Go*," *Humanities* 8, no. 2 (2019).

[43] Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. Aldo Ricci [from Benedett] (London: Routledge, 2014), P.49.

[44] Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Warner Books, 1986), 105. Eco's next novel *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988) also has an exclusive chapter (#103) on Sabbāh and "Assassins."

Minutes to Go, the very first book of the cut-up project, initially published in Paris in 1960, begins with a curious epigraph on the inside cover page: "Not knowing what is and is not knowing *I knew not*." It is attributed to "Hassan Sabbah's Razor," with the word "Razor" noted in quotation marks, suggesting that the statement is a cut-up. Why do the cut-ups begin with the name of Hassan Sabbāh of all people? How and why has he been a source of inspiration for Gysin and for Burroughs and for their collaboration? Why is his presence in the cut-ups overwhelmingly strong? Earlier I noted my short answer to these questions, using Olav Hammer's notion of "the appeal to tradition" as a common and powerful strategy for legitimization among modern esoteric currents. While Tzara is the artistic wing or blade of Burroughs-Gysin's cut-ups, Sabbāh is the esoteric wing or blade. For someone like Eco—the author arguably most influenced by Borges—the story of Sabbāh and his Alamut castle is one of many exotic and occult stories of the human library surrounded by a network of conspiracy and myth. For Burroughs-Gysin, this turns into a central point of reference for the cut-up project, and a myth that bends to fit their dada aesthetic as well as their anarchist political orientations.

The portrayals of Hasan Sabbāh and the Nizari Ismailis in European traditions since Marco Polo have a remarkable history that, until very recently, had not been critically examined. The fascination with 'a secret heretic cult advanced in guerilla warfare whose members smoke hashish to commit political assassination' has taken a variety of exotic forms through the centuries. The Burroughs-Gysin encounter with Sabbāh, which is as substantial as their references to Dada and Tzara, must be contextualized within the broader histories of Ismailism and a genealogy of their representations in art and literature. This is a complex and multi-dimensional context. On the one hand within Islamdom the history of Ismailis had been written

primarily by their Muslim adversaries since the fall of Alamut Castle in 13th century. On the other hand, within European traditions, the seed that Polo planted in his travel memoirs gave birth to the big tree of representations of Assassins/Hashashins throughout the centuries, a most recent fruit of which that has been distributed globally is the video game franchise *Assassin's Creed* developed by Ubisoft. Furthermore, the history of Ismailis on the whole has been a focal topic of secular and academic studies of Islam in the 20th century.

The first of the academic studies on Ismailis is Marshall Hodgson's *The Secret Order of Assassins: the Struggle of the Early Nizari Ismailis Against the Islamic World*, a book based on his doctoral dissertation that was first published in 1955. This is of course the same Hodgson who later coined the term "Islamicate"; his first project was to distinguish between myth and history of Nizari Ismailis as a "rejected minority group":

> We will not be concerned here, primarily, with the exotic curiosity of an incredible cult; not with the romance of legend, or the grim mysteries of a murderous power: through all these elements will enter into our story. Our concern will be with the fate of an aspiring minority group, whose religious and social orientation had been rejected by the bulk of Islamic society; and who were faced with a steadily hardening patter of orthodox life, hostile to them, and which they could not accept.[45]

On another extreme, there is Bernard Lewis' *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam*, first published in 1967. Lewis, one of the most vocal advocates of anti-Islamism (whom for Edward Said was an embodiment of the orientalism of his generation), writes in a 2003 preface to his book:

[45] Marshall G. S.Hodgson, *The Secret Order of Assassins: the Struggle of the Early Nizari Ismailis Against the Islamic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 1.

> […] then as now, among Muslims as among others, there have been groups who practiced murder in the name of their religion, and a study of the medieval sect of Assassins may therefore serve a useful purpose—not indeed as a guide to mainstream Islamic attitudes on assassination, but as an example of how certain groups gave a radical and violent turn to the basic Islamic association of religion and politics, and tried to use it for the accomplishment of their own purposes.[46]

While Hodgson sought after the historical face of a mythologized, marginal appearance of islamicate cultures in the Nizari Ismailis, and Lewis emphasized the contemporary relevance of them for discussions and debates about religion and violence, it was Henry Corbin whose interest in Ismailis was first and foremost driven by an interest in esotericism. Corbin's writings on Ismailism is scattered throughout his larger project of studying esotericism as it occurs in Shia Islam, his posthumous 1983 volume *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis* is exclusively about the topic.

> […] what was known of them [Ismailis]—and what inflamed imaginations very rapidly spread about—finally resulted in that cheap adventure serial of the 'Assassins' […]. The designation became traditional, even before being exploited for sensational stories, and it has persisted among many Orientalists since the seventeenth century. Where a text reads 'Ismailis,' they have casually translated 'Assassins,' as thought they were the same thing. […] Our purpose here is not to go back over those historical vicissitudes or that lack of scientific integrity. […] At last we have gained access to authentic and complete treatises of Ismaili doctrine. These books are what will concern us here, and whoever has reflected

[46] Bernard Lewis, "Preface to the Paperback Edition," in *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

> on them already knows that Ismaili spirituality has absolutely nothing to do with those 'tales of assassins.'[47]

Corbin's ahistorical and hermeneutical methodology, one that is concerned with doctrines of philosophical and mystical thought, has since been outfavoured in academia by Hodgson's historical and discursive methods, while Lewis' approach still resonates as more hegemonic in popular and mainstream culture. Contemporary scholarship on Ismailis is marked by a tendency towards historicizing centuries of neglect and misunderstanding through an insider's point of view. Studies by Farhad Daftary (1994; 2007; & 2018) and by Shafique N. Virani (2007) are examples of this latter trend. Virani's 2021 article "An Old Man, a Garden, and an Assembly of Assassins: Legends and Realities of the Nizari Ismaili Muslims" is the latest piece on the topic, attempting to distinguish the myth and history of Sabbāh. It is an indication that Sabbāh's figure is overall still misunderstood, and that how difficult it is, even after half a century of critical studies, to demythologize a thick and dense centuries old myth. Additionally, Meriem Pages' 2007 PhD dissertation on "The Images of the Assassins in Medieval European Texts" is a critical genealogy of the early representations of Nizaris in Europe.

Islamic studies and Ismaili studies have paid almost no attention to islamicate allusions in works of Burroughs and Gysin. On the other hand, the scholarship on Burroughs and on Gysin overall has not been equipped with tools and resources of Islamic studies to critically examine the islamicate aspects of their works including references to Sabbāh. The only exception to this is Murphy's 1997 monograph *Wising Up the Marks* which has an exclusive chapter on Sabbāh's presence in the cut-ups particularly in Burroughs' Nova Trilogy:

[47] Henry Corbin, "From the Gnosis of Antiquity to Ismaili Gnosis," in *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 151-152.

> The name 'Hassan i Sabbah' is a central point of reference in the *Nova* trilogy, despite the fact that Hassan i Sabbah rarely appears in any of the books as a character. He functions rather as an author-surrogate, a godlike figure, subject of imperative curses and object of magical invocations, whose incarnations, or *avatars*, under different names, fill the novels; as such Hassan i Sabbah is unquestionably the central figure in Burroughs's later literary cosmology.[48]

Murphy's study of the topic is comprehensive, and his analysis of the abolition of the Law in Burroughs' Nova trilogy is remarkable. Still, some of his suppositions could be subject to revaluation. Murphy concludes that "[t]hough Burroughs's symbolic use of Hassan i Sabbah may appear wholly personal, in fact it generally remains quite close to the few historical facts that we have concerning the real Muslim leader,"[49] yet adding that:

> Several important aspects of the [Nova] trilogy that Burroughs associates with Hassan i Sabbah have no apparent grounding in this part of the historical record, however. In particular, there seems to be no historical rationale for Burroughs's attribution of the destruction of language or the oft-repeated quotation 'Nothing is true, everything is permitted' to Hassan i Sabbah. This fact suggests that Burroughs's Master of Assassins may be a composite of several figures […]. It is possible, of course, that Burroughs merely extended, according to his own figurative intentions, the few historical facts he had learned about the Old Man from Gysin and elsewhere.[50]

---

[48] Timothy S. Murphy, "'I Hassan I Sabbah *rub out the word forever*': The Dialectic of Treason and the Abolition of the Law in the *Nova* Trilogy," in *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 118.

[49] Murphy, *Wising Up the Marks*, 120.

[50] Murphy, *Wising Up the Marks*, 123.

We can say more confidently today that the statement "Nothing is true, everything is permitted" is NOT by Sabbāh. After all, it is paradoxically a fit: if the statement is true, then attributing it falsely to someone is permitted! Part of our knowledge regarding this topic comes from research on Ismailis, and that (as far as I could explore) no Arabic or Persian expression even close to this statement exists in historical sources, be it by Sabbāh or others. More information is now accessible as to why Burroughs-Gysin picked up Sabbāh in particular for their cut-up purposes, most importantly Gysin's essay on his trip to Alamut that I will elaborate on it shortly. In the meantime, if the statement is not by Sabbāh, then what is its origin?

The impact of "Nothing is true, everything is permitted" on popular culture and on counterculture is not to be underestimated. In the 1970 movie *Performance*, the quite hedonist character of Turner (played by Mick Jagger) quotes the statement as words of Sabbāh. Even David Cronenberg's 1991 adaptation of *Naked Lunch*—as the most globally circulated work related to cut-ups—begins with screening the statement and noting Sabbāh's name. While it is true that in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky entertains the idea that in a world where there is no god, everything is permitted, the exact phrasing of the statement seems to be coming from Nietzsche (who was a big admirer of Dostoevsky). In the fourth and final part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in the section entitled "The Shadow," it is Zarathustra's shadow that speaks to him and says "Nothing is true, all is permitted"[51] [in German: Nichts ist wahr, Alles ist erlaubt].

At the same time, there is some evidence suggesting that the statement had been developed and understood by Burroughs-Gysin in response to Aleister Crowley's "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law" which is a principal statement of Crowley's Thelema religion. During an interview with Tennessee Williams in 1977, Burroughs claims:

[51] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 221.

> Old Aleister Crowley, plagiarizing from Hassan I Sabbah, said: 'Do what thou wilt is [shall be] the whole of the law.' […] then Hassan I Sabbah's last words were: 'Nothing is true; everything is permitted.' In other words, everything is permitted *because* nothing is true. If you see everything as an illusion, then everything is permitted […]. And this was given a slightly different twist, but it's the same statement as Aleister Crowley's […].[52]

Although Crowley was highly influence by Nietzsche (to the extent of regarding him as "one of our [Thelema's] prophets"[53]) and had quite likely read the fourth part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, his "Do what thou wilt […]" is first and foremost derived from Francois Rabelais' 16th century *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. In Book 1 when describing how the abbey of "Theleme" was built and how the "Thelemites" (whose "life was laid out not by laws, statutes, or rules but according to their will and free choice") were regulated in their way of life, Rabelais notes: "In their rule was only this clause: DO WHAT YOU WILL [FAY CE QUE VOULDRAS]."[54]

That Burroughs falsely accuses Crowley of plagiarism while he and Gysin have misattributed "Nothing is true […]" to Sabbāh is more a case of distinction rather than a competition over authenticity. We are back to Goethe's "prophet versus poet" distinction from the previous chapter. Whereas Crowley developed an occult order or a new religious movement to gather people around some teachings/doctrines and practices/rituals, a discourse where art and literature must justify themselves before religion and metaphysics, Burroughs and Gysin respectively yearned to be recognized as writer and artist, hesitant to become monotonous

[52] William Burroughs, *Burroughs Live: the Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs*, ed. Sylvere Lotringer (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 382-383.

[53] Aleister Crowley, "Morals of Liber AL," in *Magick without Tears*, ed. Israel Regardie (Las Vegas: Falcon Press, 1989), 303.

[54] Francois Rabelais, "Book 1: The Very Horrific Life of the Great Gargantua, Father of Pantagruel," in *The Complete Works of Francois Rabelais*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 126.

prophets. Of their interactions with Thelemites, Gysin recounts how "[a] sorcerer's apprentice, follower of Aleister Crowley, once asked me if I knew my real name. I was dumbfounded, I don't. Burroughs has told me he knows his—not me."[55] Later, Gysin expresses his distaste more directly: "these people like Crowley, they had their sex magic . . . these sexual acts were supposed to bring in money, for instance . . . presumably that was concentrated attention."[56] As Marco Pasi recently demonstrated, Crowley had an extensive interest in Islam and its esoteric dimensions, with the primary source of his knowledge being the works of Richard Francis Burton.[57] Both Thelema and Cut-ups stretched their influence to popular culture of the 60s and 70s in quite an occultural manner, and while both understood writing and art as media for magic, they remain distinct in terms of their approach to authoritarian powers of politics and religion. Crowley wrote *The Book of the Law* as a sacred text for Thelema, claiming it to be dictated by his guardian angel, with its tone and rhetoric being—in my opinion—an imitation of the Quran. Burroughs-Gysin however were not interested in establishing a new order around a definite text that needs commentary from an elite, selected group; they wanted to democratize art and poetry in the manner of Tzara, and to abolish the law in the manner of "their" Sabbāh. They never used Crowley's magick with k to distinguish themselves from cultic practices of the Thelemites. Gysin believed that "magic, like art, is outside the law."[58]

Though the triad of Hodgson-Lewis-Corbin were contemporaries of Burroughs and Gysin, their scholarship on Ismailis have not been sources of information and inspiration for the cut-ups. Among the three, it is only Corbin's that Gysin has addressed in an interview:

---

[55] Brion Gysin, "Introduction," in *Here to Go: Planet R101 (Brion Gysin Interviewed by Terry Wilson with Introduction and Texts by William S. Burroughs & Brion Gysin)* (London: Quartet Books, 1985), xvii.

[56] Brion Gysin, "Making It Happen—The Process," in *Here to Go*, 63.

[57] Marco Pasi, "Aleister Crowley and Islam," in *Esoteric Transfers and Constructions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Mark Sedgwick and Francesco Piraino (Cham: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2021), 151-193.

[58] Brion Gysin, "Teaching," in *One Night @ the 1001* (Sub Rosa Records, 2007), audio recording.

> […] I understand that the late Henry Corbin was, in recent years [1970s], given access to books in Bombay belonging to the present Aga Khan […]. Professor Henry Corbin and many others know infinitely more than I do about the Ismailis. I know next to nothing: read Marco Polo in my childhood, became a hashishin in Greece at 19, read my Baudelaire, got syphilis like he did long before penicillin, smoked a lot in the Algerian Sahara and Morocco where I spent what is still more than a third of my lifetime. I did not become an Assassin.[59]

During these interviews of Gysin with Terry Wilson in *Here to Go* (1985), he is asked about the direct connections between Sabbāh and the cut-ups. Gysin first tells what is known as 'the tale of the three schoolfellows' about Sabbāh, Khayyām, and Nizām al-Mulk which is well known to English readers through FitzGerald's introduction to his translation of Khayyām's *Rubaiyat*. This story is itself a legend that, as Harold Bowen wrote in 1931, "has been pretty conclusively rejected as an invention on account of the evident difficulty of reconciling the ages of the schoolfellows."[60] Gysin's recount of the story then takes a twist even from FitzGerald's account:

> […] and Hassan i Sabbah then presented himself at court and asked for an equivalent position [to that of Khayyām] and was given the direction of the finances . . . And he found when he came to deliver his speech on the exchequer that his manuscripts had been cut in such a way that he didn't at first realize that they had been sliced right down the middle and repasted—books were individual folios that were pasted into bindings at that time, or else one great big roll out of which one read . . . All of his material had been cut up by some unknown enemy

[59] Brion Gysin, "Points of Order," in *Here to Go: Planet R101 (Brion Gysin Interviewed by Terry Wilson with Introduction and Texts by William S. Burroughs & Brion Gysin)* (London: Quartet Books, 1985), xiii-xiv.

[60] Harold Bowen, "The *sar-gudhasht-i sayyidnā*, the 'Tale of the Three Schoolfellows' and the *wasaya* of the Nizām al-Mulk," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 63, no. 4 (1931): 774.

> and his speech from the Woolsack was greeted with howls of laughter and utter disgrace and he was thrown out of the administration . . . So he was the victim of a cut-up […].[61]

If the tale of three schoolfellows is one ahistorical myth repeated by generations of orientalists until proven inaccurate, this latter story of Sabbāh's speech being cut-up is utterly made up by Gysin. It is an effort to put some dada clothes on Sabbāh's figure and present him at Cabaret Voltaire to create "howls of laughter." The story itself is a cut-up, one whose creation is more intentional than accidental, and it showcases again an appeal to tradition in order to further authenticate unconventional cut-ups. Moreover, by making Sabbāh a "victim" of the cut-ups, Gysin indirectly salutes the status of dada art over and above politics, and infers how a simple cut-up of a single text can ruin the political career of even Sabbāh himself.

Gysin actually visited Alamut in 1973 (with his friend Lawrence Lacina) and wrote an essay, "A Quick Trip to Alamut: The Celebrated Castle of the Hash-Head Assassins."[62] Rejected for publication by *Rolling Stone* at the time, it was later included in the 2001 *Back in No Time: The Brion Gysin Reader*. Some of the information in this overlooked essay repeats earlier discussions, for instance that Gysin's interest in Sabbāh goes back to reading fantastic tales of Marco Polo in his childhood: "Alamut loomed large in my life from the time I first read *The Travels of Marco Polo* in my childhood. I read every version I could find, until I felt I had been there."[63] Gysin recounts the tale of schoolfellows, and (the made up tale of) Sabbāh's cut-up speech, commenting on it that "this is the random process of discontinuity with which Burroughs

[61] Brion Gysin, "Mektoub," in *Here to Go*, 98.

[62] Brion Gysin, "A Quick Trip to Alamut: The Celebrated Castle of the Hash-Head Assassins," in *Back in No Time: The Brion Gysin Reader*, ed. Jason Weiss (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 218-239.

[63] Gysin, "A Quick Trip to Alamut," 220.

and I have been working since 1960 when I called them the Cut-Ups."[64] It appears that the tale of Sabbāh's cut-up speech is developed for the first time in this essay of Gysin, as if the actual visiting of Alamut—THE place that neither Hodgson nor Lewis nor Corbin had visited—has given extra legitimacy to Gysin in order to add his own imaginative part to the legend. At the same time, Gysin denounces Burroughs for associating him as a reincarnation of Sabbāh:

> What was Alamut really like and was there a Garden? Burroughs and I promised each other that one day we would go there [Alamut] to see for ourselves. In the meantime, Burroughs sprinkled his writings with references . . . even unto the outrageous identification of me with the Master: 'See, see the Silent Writing of Brion Gysin, Hassan i Sabbah!' I always felt that Burroughs himself was much more like the Old Man of the Mountain. After all, I have never killed anyone in my life, not even an animal. Burroughs really digs knives and guns […].[65]

Still, on the way to Alamut, Gysin finds a "bootlegged and pirated" copy of *Naked Lunch* at the Isfahan airport and takes it with him to the ruins of the castle.

According to this Alamut essay, Gysin had read about Sabbāh in German, French, and English, and he describes the French accounts as being generally "pseudo-romantic rubbish" that portray Alamut like "a pre-World War II Parisian brothel or a branch office of Baudelaire's *Artificial Paradise*."[66] (Figure 6 is an illustration of "the old man of the mountain" from a 1930 English edition of Marco Polo.) Yet the one book on Sabbāh that inspired Burroughs-Gysin the most is a 1936 French volume by Betty Bouthoul, *Le grand maître des Assassins* [The Master of the Assassins]. Burroughs and Gysin dove into this book at the Beat Hotel in Paris when

[64] Gysin, "A Quick Trip to Alamut," 227.
[65] Gysin, "A Quick Trip to Alamut," 221.
[66] Gysin, "A Quick Trip to Alamut," 220.

experimenting with their first cut-ups around 1960. Gysin emphasizes Bouthoul's husband being "perhaps the only practicing adept of a very odd discipline . . . the philosophy of war: *polemology*." From here, he explains their main fascination with this particular book on Sabbāh:

> We [Gysin and Burroughs] pored over the book, passing it back and forth. We read and reread it. The crux of the matter, of course, is: How did he [Sabbāh] do it? And, beyond that: What is the nature of power? Bouthoul teases the reader enough to make you feel that there must be an answer and in the answer lies the key to Control on this planet. Big stuff. […] Burroughs denounced the Garden of Delights as a pernicious weapon of Control, like junk, but we still harkened back to the echo from Alamut, asking ourselves: *How* did he do it?[67]

Such questions and inquiries on the nature of power and of polemology set the direction of Burroughs-Gysin's research labour on Sabbāh. From here, Gysin addresses scholarship of Peter Willey (from whom few mentions in the essay to the medieval historian Juvayni must be driven as well). The reference to Willey must be to his 1963 *The Castles of the Assassins* (Willey's next book *Eagle's Nest: Ismaili Castles in Iran and Syria* was only published in 2005):

> 'The Assassins were at least as capable as the Crusaders—who were responsible for their drugs and murder image—in their brilliant construction of castles, their use of natural land and water resources, their adaptability to political circumstances and their appreciation of the arts. Their system of fortification was well ahead of its time. Theirs was a very advanced strategic concept of defense in depth which we did not develop again until well into the 20th century.'[68]

[67] Gysin, "A Quick Trip to Alamut," 221.
[68] Gysin, "A Quick Trip to Alamut," 235.

Nonetheless, Gysin's tiresome efforts to answer questions on how "Obedience to the Old Man [Sabbāh] is absolute [among his followers]"[69] remain hypothetical. He reinforces the myth of hashish that had been attributed to Nizari Ismailis by their enemies, and even raises the possibility of using "the sacred mushroom" and "O" (presumably opium) by Sabbāh and his followers, since "Hash [hashish] would not be enough to explain the hold he [Sabbāh] had over them [his followers]."[70]

More significant than the drug theme is Gysin's recognition of the Nizari Ismaili state as a "secret society" that shaped his esoteric and occult portrayal of Sabbāh. "By the year 1090, the Alamut Academy was the world's finest finishing school for secret agents," claims Gysin early in the essay. "The way it worked was elegant, simple. You announce you are starting a commune to beat Millennium […]. You make it hard to get in and you announce that once you are in […] you can never get out again." Gysin adds:

> Hassan i Sabbah could point a long bony finger and probe with a knife into the very heart of realpolitik wherever he sent his Fida'i-in. His instructions to them were said to have been: 'Nothing is forbidden. Everything is permitted.' Lodges both secret and open branched out through the whole Arab world, all receiving orders from the Old Man in Alamut. A great deal of very special knowledge centered there and not all of it was destroyed in the eventual fall of that capital castle […].[71]

Gysin even uses the phrase "the secret brotherhood of the Ismailians" at some point,[72] and finished the essay by coming back to this topic:

[69] Gysin, "A Quick Trip to Alamut," 219.
[70] Gysin, "A Quick Trip to Alamut," 228.
[71] Gysin, "A Quick Trip to Alamut," 219-220.
[72] Gysin, "A Quick Trip to Alamut," 227.

> the Assassins inspired many other secret societies in Asia and in Europe who adopted their techniques of iron discipline and their philosophy that the end justifies the means. In Europe, their methods of initiation, their method of appointing officers, their emblems and their insignia and other trappings were imitated by such groups as the Knight Templars, the Hospitallers and the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits founded by Ignatius Loyola. Today, Opus Dei in Spain is said to owe much to someone's studies of the Ismailis. Are there others?[73]

The nature of what Gysin calls "inflexible authority," what Burroughs describes as "total control" between Sabbāh and his followers known as "Fedāʾiān," remains a secretive matter, and it is precisely due to this constructed secrecy that it can serve as attractive material for fiction and fantasy.

It is crucial to note that one of the very first and most remarkable encounters of Gysin with 'real magic' prior to his cut-up experiments happened in the islamicate milieu of Tangier. On the invitation of Paul Bowles, Gysin traveled to Tangier in 1950, and in 1954 opened his famous "1001 Nights" restaurant where his favorite local Joujouka musicians regularly played. Gysin's fascination with Joujouka music took him far enough to suggest that it was a magical and pagan phenomena, and that the musicians "were still performing the Rites of Pan under their ragged cloak of Islam"[74]—a claim that has been convincingly undermined by later scholarship.[75]

---

[73] Gysin, "A Quick Trip to Alamut," 239.

[74] Gysin, "Cut-ups: A Project for Disastrous Success," in *The Third Mind*, 47.

[75] On this issue, Philip Schuyler writes: "Borrowing an interpretation from Edward Westermarck (1968), Gysin equated the Moroccan 'goat god' with Pan and suggested that Aisha might be Astarte, the Phoenician goddess of love. The Pan thesis has proven to be irresistible to Western journalists and listeners, and served as a powerful fuel for William Burroughs's imagination. The argument, however, has been convincingly contradicted by *The Victim and Its Masks* (1993), Abdellah Hammoudi's detailed study of Bou Jeloud, the surrounding team of masqueraders, and their relation to the feast (not to mention their interpretation by Westerners). Hammoudi stresses that, however tempting the parallels to Pan might be, the participants are all Muslims, the masquerade itself is closely tied to the most important feast on the Muslim calendar, and the actions of the dancers have serious implications for the welfare of the village. In other words, this is not, as one website called it, 'pagan party music.'" Philip Schuyler, in

Still, it is Gysin's narrative of how the 1001 Nights restaurant came to a closure that is the most striking in regard to his conception of magic:

> I fell out of business, not over money but magic. My Swiss banker never objected to items marked MAGIC that appeared in the bookkeeping done by his bank. He just raised an eyebrow and asked: 'Are you running an ethnographic museum, perhaps?' In a way. I kept some notes and drawings, meaning to write a recipe book of magic. My Pan people were furious when they found out. They poisoned my food twice and then, apparently, resorted to more efficacious means to get rid of me.
>
> During a routine kitchen check, I called for a ladder to see if a ventilator had truly been oiled. There was the Mare's Nest under my nose: a treasure trove for an ethnographer, I suppose. Seven round, speckled pebbles; seven big seeds in their pods; seven shards of mirror surrounded a small square paper packet, barely dusted over with soot. The charm stuck together with goo, probably made of newts' eyes, menstrual blood, public hair and chewing gum. Inside was the text, written in rusty ink from right to left across the square of paper, which had then been turned on its side and written over again to form the cabalistic grid. The invocation, when I got it hazily made out, called on the Jinn of the Hearth: 'May Massa Brahim (Brion) leave this house as the smoke leaves this fire, never to return…'

Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond, ed. Walter Armbrust (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 152.

> Several days later, on January 8, 1958, I lost the business over a signature given to a friendly couple […].[76]

Even if this story is fictious and made-up, it reveals the profound impact of islamicate occultism on Gysin's conception of magic. At the core of what Gysin finds accidentally in the restaurant is a piece of writing, an invocation, formed in a grid. In other words, he is kicked out of Tangier through magic of writing. Some say magic is "real" if one believes it to be real, and this appears to be the case with Gysin here. By attributing the reason for closing of 1001 Night to a piece of writing, Gysin affirms and proclaims his belief in the magic of writing. This story reinforces the significance of the speech act aspect of language for Gysin; it is about words that are gushed into action. It is also remarkable that this magical piece of writing has formed a grid, with the grid being an essential component of the cut-ups, as a vessel or container for the cut words to appear on paper. While it is not certain what the source of inspiration for using grids for cut-ups has been, this story gives a clue.

Burroughs was the more experienced 'writer' of the cut-up collaborations, while Gysin was more of a painter and calligrapher attracted to words. The importance of the visual aspect of the cut-up writings, embodied in the grids, stems from Gysin and possibly from his interest in magical spells and sigils he encountered in Tangier. This visual aspect of the magic of writing is something Borges was hardly concerned with, partly due his late visual impairment perhaps; but it plays a vital role in the case of Hedayat's Mumbai manuscript of *The Blind Owl* and his archaic handwriting and references to paintings.

Neither in the works of Burroughs and Gysin, nor in their collaborative work, do such direct references to the Quran exist. It is only in Gysin's "Minutes to Go," the very Tzaraesque

[76] Gysin, "Cut-ups: A Project for Disastrous Success," in *The Third Mind*, 47. According to Barry Miles's biography of Burroughs, the American couple were Jim Skelton and his friend Mary Cook who were "a couple of American Scientologists." Barry Miles, *Call Me Burroughs: A Life* (New York: Twelve, 2013), 341.

recipe for cut-ups, that Gysin mention the Quran alongside "the bible / the book of moronic / la-tzu / Confucius / the bhagvad gita" as recommendations for cut-ups. Still, this one instance alone is quite remarkable. Although even the mere idea of cutting up the Quran would sound as a heretical endeavor to Muslim believers and practitioners, Burroughs-Gysin's intention for such a recommendation comes from an urge to further explore esoteric dimensions of texts that are considered "classic" or "sacred." In *Living with Islam*, Gysin shortly elaborates on his reception of the Quran:

> The Coran is superb poetry; held to be almost impossible to translate. Any Westerner who attempts it will agree with this opinion. In it the path of virtue is bordered by oriental flowers of rhetoric and leads to the admirable if startling proposition that: 'The ink of the scholar is more holy than the blood of the martyr.'[77]

Metaphorically speaking, what Gysin yearned to achieve with the cut-up method was to impregnate the razor/scissors of Tzara-Sabbāh with the holy ink of many scholars.

In the transcription of a dinner with Susan Sontag and others in 1980, when Burroughs is asked "What is writing?" he answers: "I don't think there is any definition. *Mektoub: It is written*."[78] That he chooses an Arabic word to describe writing could be an indication of Quranic and islamicate influence on his theory and practice of writing. Nonetheless, the purpose of the cut-up method for Burroughs-Gysin is not to write something that could be more or potentially as "sacred" as the Quran; it is an endeavor much more "profane" than that. Cut-ups question, ridicule, and break into conventional linear writing, fighting against the control and authority of

[77] Brion Gysin, *Living with Islam* (Providence, Rhode Island: Inkblot Publications, 2010), 17-18.

[78] "On Writing: Dinner with Susan Sontag, Stewart Meyer, and Gerard Malanga: New York 1980," in William S. Burroughs and Victor Bockris, *With William Burroughs: A Report from the Bunker* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996), 1.

language in the context of growing multimedia propagandas of the Cold War era whose remainders are still with us in the stronger and more complicated forms of contemporary cyberwarfare. Although it might seem that cut-ups are merely mimics of other people's writings, they rather mimic the "form" of dreams and of the unconscious, and of the recollection of memories. *Our experience of the world is cut-up, and our dreams are cut-ups of those cut-ups*—such is the epistemology of Burroughs-Gysin's method. On one level, they reject the automatic writing of surrealism for failing to mimic the dream world, thus they updated and upgraded dada methods in response; on another level, they question definitiveness of what writing produces, and with that comes questioning the definitiveness of texts like the Bible and the Quran. Cut-ups are categorically esoteric; they can bring the esoteric out from even the most exoteric of texts like newspaper materials. To feed this writing machine with texts that are already considered esoteric only intensifies the hidden and the secretive.

II. 10001 Afsan: An Experiment with Cut-ups in Farsi

> How random is random? You know more than you think. You know where you cut in.
>
> —William S. Burroughs, "First Recordings"[79]

> Curatorship is arguably the big new job of our times: it is the task of re-evaluating, filtering, digesting and connecting together. In an age saturated with new artifacts and information, it is perhaps the curator, the connection maker, who is the new storyteller, the meta-author.
>
> —Brian Eno[80]

[79] Burroughs, "First Recordings," in *The Third Mind* , 89.

[80] Brian Eno, Review of *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* by Jay David Bolter, *Artforum*, November 1991.

I first came into contact with Burroughs-Gysin's *The Third Mind* back in 2013. Working on my Master's project at Queen's University on the topic of surveillance, I was researching Burroughs' formulation of "control" which was later picked up by Gilles Deleuze to describe our contemporary social systems as "control societies" in contrast to Michel Foucault's "sovereign societies" and "disciplinary societies." I had borrowed a copy of *The Third Mind* (the English Viking edition of 1978) from Queen's Stauffer Library. Some of the pages were marked with pencil by one or more of the previous readers, and somewhere in the middle it was noted "this book is a dangerous drug." Only few years later, I realized what that phrase meant when I read Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy" for my PhD comprehensive exam, for which I also reread Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*: writing is a pharmakon, and thus a book that invites its readers to write is inviting them to use this pharmakon that, according to the king of Plato's tale, is a danger to memory.

I began reading *The Third Mind* on a domestic flight from Toronto to Kelowna, British Columbia—on the way back to my first home in Canada to visit friends during the Christmas break. I had taken few pills due to a headache, and asked for coffee at the flight. The combination of pills and coffee and above all—literally above all—being on an airplane had given a certain weightless weight to my mind and body while reading the book. I am not sure how far I went through the pages, but I certainly finished Gérard-Georges Lemaire's introduction that ends with a most powerful description of what *The Third Mind* does and is about:

> How in the final analysis is the book to be defined? It eludes definition just as it eludes itself; a prey to unfathomable anamorphosis, it rubs itself out and rewrites itself; it allows itself to be read, only to slip away. *The Third Mind* jumbles the linguistic network, simultaneously revealing and antagonizing it. It is a strategic

> device for confronting semiotic assaults. But for it to do so, it calls on a fourth author—yourself—to establish the operational field of another book, an invisible book that you can make visible.[81]

Reading these lines, I felt a strong urge to write. Not a stranger to this feeling, I took my notebook out from the carry-on baggage, and a pen—a roller ball pen. Having completely forgotten that such a pen expands on high pressure above in the sky, I took its lid off. A large drop of black ink dropped on a blank page of the notebook. I gazed at it for a second or two, then with the tip of my index finger played around with the ink and drew some lines. Figure 7 is this drawing. It later found a name: "Dice & Hammer"—a title I gave to a set of my Farsi poems written after this incident (that are still unpublished). The title is a wordplay on the Farsi expression for hammer & sickle: "tās va chakkosh" (dice and hammer) instead of "dās va chakkosh" (sickle and hammer). Though I do not think this is the place to write about these poems, I would like to note that I think of the phrase "Dice & Hammer" as another expression for magic and labour of writing, with the dice reflecting on magic of random appearances of words, and the hammer connoting forces of labour spent on the craft of writing. In any case, *The Third Mind* and that drop of ink gave birth to an invisible book that became visible through time and through labour.

Of the important lessons I have learned from Burroughs over the years, that the output of writing is necessarily conditioned by instruments of writing, by the very materiality of these instruments is one most crucial to my research. One writer at the same moment and place would hypothetically produce different outputs by using different a writing instrument.

[81] Gérard-Georges Lemaire, "23 Stitches Taken," in William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), 23-24.

The temptation to experiment with cut-ups in Farsi had been with me since my first time reading *The Third Mind*. How would it sound and how would it look, I asked myself. In practice, committing scissors to a printed text, especially a book, needs some courage. If it is a book "dear" to you and is "worthy" to be experimented with, it would be foolish to tear up its pages (unless one has more than one copy of a certain book and would keep one and cut-up the rest). The Farsi section of my personal library in Canada, with books that I could only gather with difficulty over a decade, would have been a pity to cut. My temptation to cut-up in Farsi was prolonged then until recently.

Having resisted signing up for Twitter since the platform was founded and popularized, I created an account during early days of the COVID-19 pandemic to be more in touch with the world and my academic collegues under quarantine. Apart from all political and propagandist "bots" (also known as internet bots or web robots) involved in micro and macro cold cyberwarfare, I learned about many art and literature bots that existed on the Twitter platform. I would describe the Twitter bots engaged in writing (i.e. excluding audio and visual bots) into three different categories, while what they all share in common (which makes them be considered a bot) is that they are automated and produce scheduled tweets without disruptions:

(1) Quote Bots: These bots simply tweet an exact phrase or sentence from a certain corpus. "Sylvia Plath Bot"[82] is an example, tweeting bits of her poetry every hour. "Ulysses Reader"[83] and "Finnegans Wake"[84] are sister bots quoting from Joyce's two novels, and "Moby Dick"[85] retweets from Melville's.

[82] https://twitter.com/SylviaPlathBot (last accessed 2 August 2022).
[83] https://twitter.com/UlyssesReader (last accessed 2 August 2022).
[84] https://twitter.com/Finneganstreader (last accessed 2 August 2022).
[85] https://twitter.com/MobyDickatSea (last accessed 2 August 2022).

(2) AI-generated Bots: Based on algorithms of artificial intelligence that have levels of machine learning, these bots "generate" new expressions. "Magic Realism Bot"[86] is perhaps the most famous of this category that generates a one-sentence plot of a magic realist story every four hours. Other notable examples are "poem.exe"[87] and "The Babel Library"[88] that generate short haiku style poems.

(3) Cut-up Bots: These bots are given a certain corpus to cut from and make new expressions by only rearranging words and phrases. As cut-ups, their outputs are often meaningless and/or grammatically incorrect (though here both meaningfulness and correctness are arguably relative to readers' horizons). "Borges Bot"[89] cuts up from a large selection of Borges' corpus and some secondary literature on Borges, and "poe bot"[90] cuts from a small portion of Edgar Allan Poe's writings. "Cut-up Bot"[91] creates four-line pieces where each line comes from a different text. "Geopoetics"[92] cuts from an unidentified corpus (that I speculate to be that of Reza Negarestani). "I AM THAT I AM"[93] creates permutations of five-word expressions inspired by Gysin's method. These cut-up bots are overall, not surprisingly, less popular than the other two categories in terms of their number of followers.

It was in this context of electronic literature that together with a friend of mine Nima Behravan (designer and researcher), we started a Farsi cut-up project in January 2021. Not only this project is relevant to the topic of this dissertation, it has been largely an effort to put some of the methods discussed here into actual practice.

---

[86] https://twitter.com/MagicRealismBot (last accessed 2 August 2022).
[87] https://twitter.com/poem_exe (last accessed 2 August 2022).
[88] https://twitter.com/thebabellibrary (last accessed 2 August 2022).
[89] https://twitter.com/borgesbot1 (last accessed 2 August 2022).
[90] https://twitter.com/scarystoriesbot (last accessed 2 August 2022).
[91] https://twitter.com/cutup_bot (last accessed 2 August 2022).
[92] https://twitter.com/_geopoetics (last accessed 2 August 2022).
[93] https://twitter.com/PERMUTANT (last accessed 2 August 2022).

We picked up an open-source code designed for cutting up texts in English.[94] Without knowing how exactly it works and cuts, we fed the code (or the machine) some Farsi texts, and set up a Twitter account (https://twitter.com/30zerMbot) for the output to be published consecutively every hour. Assessing the outputs, we found that the machine recognizes the repetition of characters/words/phrases, and moves blocks of texts accordingly based on such repetition. This can be more clearly explained through an example.

Suppose we give these two inputs to the machine:

Input #1: This dissertation has three chapters.

Input #2: A bird has two wings.

The machine recognizes the word "has" is repeated in these two inputs. It can then replace the before and after of this repeated word and produce new outputs accordingly:

Possible Output #1: This dissertation has two wings.

Possible Output #2: A bird has three chapters.

This simple mechanism, when given a large bulk of inputs, can produce a variety of expressions that diverge from the original input texts. It creates a world of possibilities.

As is the case with all sorts of cut-ups, especially the computer-assisted cut-ups, the outputs more or less become too meaningless, incorrect, or uncommunicable. To solve this problem, we took three major measures:

(1) Curating Chapters: Instead of feeding the machine a single large corpus as the input (e.g. all writings of a certain author) similar to what the existing cut-up bots do, we curated chapters. That is, the input of each chapter was a selection of texts between 1,000 to 5,000 words by more than one author. This way we could create constellations of texts that are in some way

[94] The code is available here: https://github.com/nimabeh/30zermbot.

related to each other to avoid exceeding chaos. For example, the inputs of Chapter 9 entitled "The Tale of the Deathly Wand, Narrated by Bīdel the Bard of Delhi" were a selection of ghazals by Bīdel Dehlavī (1642-1720) alongside parts of a Farsi translation of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* by J. K. Rowling. The machine was then running inputs of each chapter for a week or two, approximately producing 300 tweets or outputs every week. We curated 20 chapters over a year, with the prospect of them together forming a book volume at the final stage.

(2) Using the Slash Sign: In order to give some directions to the machine on where to cut from the inputs, we used the slash sign / when editing and preparing the inputs. The machine recognizes the repetition of slash signs, and can replace the before and after of it as separate blocks. This is, in other words, making a suggestion to the machine on where to cut. This particularly suits classical Farsi poetry where each line is always divided into two equal parts.

(3) Setting a Selection Process: Running an automated Twitter bot was never our final goal. We considered the outputs of the machine published on Twitter as processed materials that still need to be served in a more orderly and coherent format. We thus engaged in a manual process of selecting from the outputs and putting them together in a grid on a page. So far, 3 out of 20 chapters have been selected and finalized by Nima and I (and are accessible in Farsi at https://www.gheychi.net/). These 20 chapters will form a volume that is tentatively entitled *The Accident of Scissors Republics*.

The list of chapter titles of *The Accident of Scissors Republics* in English is provided in Appendix B. Then, Appendix C is my English translation of the first chapter. Entitled "The Exordium of the Scissors Movement," the inputs of this chapter consisted of works of prose with some poetry spices: Nimā Yushij's introduction to his poem Afsāneh; selections from Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*; selections from opening pages of *1001 Nights* (Tasuji's Farsi

translation); selections from opening pages of *Kelileh & Demneh* (Farsi translation of Marashi-pour); selections from Farsi Wikipedia pages of "Scissors" and of "Movement"; selected poetry lines from Sa'di's *Gulistan*.

Methodologically speaking, this project has been a sort of participatory observation, using new computer-assisted instruments to put into practice the recipes of Burroughs-Gysin and cut-up works of world literature in a peripheral language with a rich heritage of written literature. In fact the only time that the term "world literature" appears in *The Third Mind*, is a suggestion for cooking new alphabet soups with the best of the human library:

> If fragments of newspaper be the 'poorest' material for cut-ups, these treasures of world literature as rendered into English are, presumably, the 'richest.' I read the Song of Solomon onto a tape and ran it back, cutting lines from some of Shakespeare's sonnets into it at random … A third run-back cut lines from Anabasis, by St John Perse, in the Elliot translation, while a fourth added several phrases from Heaven and Hell, by Aldous Huxley.[95]

Of the most important lessons of this experimental participation for me has been a de- and re-construction of the concept of authorship, a subject where Borges and Burroughs-Gysin resonate with each other, and both resonate with dada.

III. Conclusion: Tlön is Dada?

> The poets are supposed to liberate the words – not to chain them in phrases. Who told poets they were supposed to think? Poets are meant to sing and to make words sing. Poets have no words 'of their very own.' Writers don't own their words. Since when do

[95] Burroughs, "First Recordings," in *The Third Mind* , 89.

> words belong to anybody. 'Your very own words,' indeed! And who are you?
>
> —Brion Gysin, "Cut-Ups Self-Explained"[96]

> Within the sphere of literature, too, the idea of the single subject is all-powerful. Books are rarely signed, nor does the concept of plagiarism exist: It has been decided that all books are the work of a single author who is timeless and anonymous. Literary criticism often invents authors: It will take two dissimilar works—the *Tao Te Ching* and the *1001 Nights*, for instance—attribute them to a single author, and then in all good conscience determine the psychology of that most interesting *homme de lettres*…
>
> —Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,"[97]

Delia Ungureanu's 2018 *From Paris to Tlön: Surrealism as World Literature*, a work of "detective criticism" that traces the global footprints of surrealism from Turkish Orhan Pamuk to Romanian Mircea Cărtărescu, contains some intriguing discussion on Borges and the aesthetics of plagiarism. Ungureanu draws the reader's attention to May 1939 when the first publication of Borges' short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" coincides with the publication of an article by a real graphologist, Dr. Pierre Menard, about the handwritings of Comte de Lautréamont (1846 – 1870). Lautréamont, who was picked up and promoted by surrealists half a century after his death, is a poet perhaps most remarkable for setting plagiarism as the basis for his poetics. Ungureanu detects, through exploring journal archives from Paris to Buenos Aires, how Borges had been involved in a coded dialogue with surrealism; in short, that in "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" Borges playfully plagiarizes from an article about a poet—i.e. Lautréamont—who saluted plagiarism as a new creative method for writing. Although Ungureanu's discussion of Borges is primarily focused on the "Pierre Menard" story, reading

[96] Brion Gysin, "Cut-Ups Self-Explained," in William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), 34.

[97] Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in *Collected Fictions*, 76-77.

some of her comments on "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" opened up a sea of possibilities for me to read this most twisted Borges piece from a different perspective in relation to dada and cut-ups.

Ungureanu argues that "together with 'Pierre Menard,' 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' shows that Borges' deep engagement with the surrealists' legacy was no passing fancy, but rather took account of the revolutionary influence of surrealism in literature, poetry and the arts at the end of the 1930s, the most prolific decade for the international spread of surrealism."[98] She then explains Paul Éluard's reading of Lautréamont and arrives at a certain passage of from Tlön:

> Appropriately, Éluard frames his discussion of plagiarism with two pivotal quotes from Lautréamont: 'Le plagiat est nécessaire' [plagiarism is necessary] and 'La poésie doit être faite par tous. Non par un' [poetry should be done by all, not by one]. […] Éluard theorizes plagiarism as the negation of ideas through their unattributed repetition in the very order of words used by a previous writer […], not very different from Borges' Menard who takes delight in stating the very opposite of his true thoughts. For Lautréamont, negation was inherent in the very texts he was negating […]. A book that contained its thesis and antithesis at the same time: one more reason for the Marxist surrealists who worshiped dialectics to anoint Lautréamont as their prime model. One more reason for Borges to engage obliquely with Lautréamont's poetics when he describes the literati of Tlön: 'Their works of a philosophical nature invariably contain both the thesis and the antithesis, the rigorous *pro* and *contra* of every argument. A book that does not contain its counter-book is considered incomplete.' […] Borges plagiarizes

[98] Delia Ungureanu, *From Paris to Tlön: Surrealism as World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 108.

> both Éluard and Dr. Pierre Menard, who writes on the great master of plagiarism, Lautréamont, who plagiarizes Vauvenargues, Pascal, and La Rochefoucauld.[99]

Prior to reading this interpretation of Tlön by Ungureanu, I had been speculating that the abbreviation of the title "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," i.e. TUOT, is a clue or direction that could guide one through the story's twisted labyrinth. Could the references to "mirrors" in the story suggest that the abbreviation must be mirrored from TUOT to TOUT? Could this be a reference to Thoth the god of writing (and that is why Derrida quotes from Tlön in the epigraph of the section on Thoth in his "Plato's Pharmacy")? I dropped the idea that the abbreviation might be a reference to Thoth when I came across a picture in Ungureanu's *From Paris to Tlön*: a 1921 Dada manifesto, "DADA soulève TOUT" [DADA lifts ALL] (see Figure 8).

Whether or not Borges intended for the abbreviation of the title to be a signifier, I arrived at reading Tlön (at least partly) as more of a dadaist world than a surrealist one. This is exactly where Borges and Burroughs-Gysin reach an agreement, as the two epigraphs at the beginning of this section (from *The Third Mind* and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius") suggest: Gysin questions if words belong to anyone, and Borges claims that in Tlön all books are by a single timeless and anonymous author. They both undermine the significance of authorship, which on the one hand challenges Cartesian subjectivity, and on the other hand—consequently—diminishes the increasing hegemony of discourse of copy-right in the modern, capitalist era. This problematic of authorship was a concern to Borges as early as 1922 as noted in his essay "The Nothingness of Personality" (that he claimed later to be his first fully realized essay[100]):

> I want to tear down the exceptional pre-eminence now generally awarded to the self […]. I propose to prove that personality is a mirage maintained by conceit

[99] Delia Ungureanu, *From Paris to Tlön: Surrealism as World Literature*, 108-109.
[100] Eliot Weinberger, "Notes," in Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, 527.

> and custom, without metaphysical foundation or visceral reality. I want to apply to literature the consequences that issue from these premises, and erect upon them an aesthetic hostile to the psychologism inherited from the last century, sympathetic to the classics, yet encouraging to today's most unruly tendencies.[101]

Though by "today's most unruly tendencies" he might not be directly referring to Dadaism, he is certainly addressing collectivist spirit of the avant-garde scene of that era, including the Ultraist movement in Spain that he and his sister Norah were part of and brought with themselves to Argentina in 1921.[102]

It is easy to imagine cut-ups in the Library of Babel—variations of words forming endless new volumes, whether or not they contain any meaning. But the cut-ups resonate in Tlön as well: "Their books are also different from our own. Their fiction has but a single plot, with every imaginable permutation [permutaciones imaginables]."[103] Are cut-ups not exactly these permutations that Borges imagines in Tlön, both similarly inspired by dada aesthetics that leave part of the labour of writing to mathematical magics of chance and randomness? We now know more about Borges and Dada, courtesy of a recent Spanish article that, through some of Borges' letters from 1920 to 1921, showcase his familiarity with Dadaist endeavors at the time.[104]

Dada was born during the horrors of WWI. Borges wrote the Library of Babel and Tlön during the horrors of WWII. Burroughs-Gysin developed cut-ups during the horrors of the Cold War. Are they not all reminders to put down swords and guns and pick up pens and scissors?

---

[101] Borges, "The Nothingness of Personality," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 3.

[102] Eamon McCarthy, "Borges and the Argentine Avant-Garde," in *Jorge Luis Borges in Context*, ed. Robin W. Fiddian (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 92.

[103] Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in *Collected Fictions*, 77.

[104] Carlos Garcia, "Borges y Dadá (1920-1921): Ensayo de datación de 'Lettre collective' y 'Esquisse critique,'" *Variaciones Borges* 48, (2019): 211–216.

Conclusion: Reading the Alif in Cyberspace

> A wizard deals with magic; *ergo*, a 'wizard' is someone in possession of a highly sophisticated technology, one which baffles us. Someone is playing a board game with time, someone we can't see. It is not God. That is an archaic name given to this entity by societies in the past, and by people now who're locked into anachronistic thinking. We need a new term, but what we are dealing with is not new.
>
> —Philip K. Dick, VALIS[1]

> If what you're saying is true, you have discovered an entirely new way of getting computers to think. One might even say that with this botnet, you have endowed your little desktop machine with intuition.
>
> —G. Willow Wilson, *Alif the Unseen*[2]

This research began with asking questions about possible connections between the esoteric and the islamicate in selected works of literature from the 20th century. Through the course of researching and writing this dissertation, I have come to the conclusion that the statement "writing is magic and labour" is an appropriate and useful tool when investigating "esotericism and/in literature" as a field of research—an interdisciplinary field that in the case of this dissertation is the coming together of two academic fields: the study of esotericism, and world/comparative literature. The journey I have taken has been primarily within the shelves of the human library, and I have approached the library as part of a larger "field of cultural production" in the sociological sense of the term as outlined by Pierre Bourdieu.[3] What I have written can be categorized under the label of 20th century global intellectual histories—tracking transmissions of esoteric and islamicate motifs within certain kinds of modernist and

[1] Philip K. Dick, *VALIS* (London: Gollancz, 2001), 133.

[2] G. Willow Wilson, *Alif the Unseen* (New York: Grove Press, 2012), 47.

[3] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, trans. Randal Johnson (Columbia University Press, 1993).

countercultural literatures circulated in English language, some originally written in English, and some translated into English from Persian/Farsi, Spanish, and French.

Methodologically speaking, the framework I have used here to explain the worlds of Hedāyat, Borges, and Burroughs-Gysin, can be applied to other modern authors and creative writers who have footprints of esotericism in their life or works. Two major sets of questions can be asked of these authors. 1) What are their conceptions and understandings of writing and of the written text? Do their conceptions, whether or not they are fully aware of it, signify writing as a form of magic or magical technology with possible esoteric dimensions? 2) What strategies, techniques, or practices have they employed to reinforce and enrich (or sometimes hide) those esoteric conceptions? What forces of production and circulation are governing and shaping these conceptions? These questions turn less abstract and more concrete when they are asked in relation to particular religious discourses. In the case of this dissertation, the questions are contextualized and further narrowed to a focus on Islam and islamicate cultures.

The first set of questions above relate to the *magic* of writing, and the second set to the *labour* of writing. My attempt to draw this distinction is derived from a necessity to investigate ideas and doctrines alongside material conditions that have shaped, preserved, or rejected them. I suspect that the second set, the *labour* aspect, would be of value and interest to creative writers and artists, though they can also be framed as questions concerning anthropology and sociology of art and literature in a broader sense. Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to go back and forth between the esoteric and islamicate ideas and practices, and histories of production and circulation of the texts under investigation. This is how Hedāyat, Borges, and Burroughs-Gysin have come together despite them writing in three different languages and being from three different continents. These authors not only share similarities in their use of esoteric and

islamicate themes in their works, but they are also interconnected due to the circumstances of the circulation of their works within the sphere of world literature, namely the publication and circulation of English versions of their works by Grove Press with their particular vision of world literature in post-war America.

With respect to the first set of questions on *magic*, I did not start the inquiry by asking 'what is magic?' or 'what is the magic of writing?' The starting point was to compare the nexus of the esoteric (forms of rejected knowledge) and the islamicate (cultures influenced by Islam) in certain works of literature from the 20th century that have traveled beyond their national borders. To conceptualize magic, one must first contextualize magic. Concentrating on the islamicate and on world literature has been a way to contextualize esoteric dimensions of the texts under investigation, through which the social and political milieu of the authors are also further explained.

One of the orthodox and definite pillars of Islam that has shaped and influenced a big part of all islamicate cultures is a single written text: the Quran. Attributing a written text or a group of texts as being "sacred" to a certain religion is not exclusive to Islam, but it is in the case of Islam and the Quran that the written text takes one of its strongest religious forms—a book that calls itself "The" book [e.g. 2:2], that takes an oath to the pen and what it inscribes [68:1]. Although it is complicated to speak of its authorship, it is commonly believed that its author is Allah—"Who taught by the Pen" [96:4], who is "the First, and the Last, and the Outward [zahir/exoteric], and the Inward [batin/esoteric]" [57:3]. Like its author, the book itself is also believed to have both exoteric and esoteric layers. Indeed, the esotericism of the Quran turns out to be an inseparable part of islamicate esotericism in general.

How are Islam and islamicate cultures to be framed within the field of esotericism and literature in the final analysis, and to what extent are islamicate cultures reflected in the magic of writing? Evidently, the authors examined here had varied encounters and experiences with Islam and islamicate cultures. Hedāyat was consistent in his critique of Islam and the islamicate as colonizing forces threatening the future of Iranian nation-state and the heritage of Persianate cultures. His interests in Zoroastrianism, in Buddhism, and in European occultism and decadent literature are largely to be understood as his cultural alternatives to the rising hegemony of Islamicists, while his warnings against the islamicate has certainly played a great role in building his counterculture legacy (at least in Iran and in Afghanistan where totalitarian and militaristic Islamism has state power behind it). In contrast, Borges was attracted to the islamicate cultures (with their nightly traditions of storytelling and also heated theological polemics) as a rich part of the human library through which he sought his own displacement centuries after the Spanish inquisition and the mass expulsions of Jewish (his ancestors) and Muslim people from the Catholic Spain. While Borges never lived in any part of the Islamdom, Burroughs and Gysin spent an important period of their lives in Tangier, a period with long lasting influence on their comprehension of magic, writing, and cut-up. Burroughs-Gysin re-constructed the figure of Hasan Sabbāh anew, and put his blade beside Tzara's in order to assault conventional linear forms of writing. How can one bring these contrary experiences and encounters with the islamicate cultures to a logical and analytical synthesis? Do the differences in these experiences indicate the fluidity of islamicate discourses, or are there some strings connecting them all?

Certainly, the differences among these authors' approaches to Islam and the islamicate are greatly dependent on different social and political contexts that they were part of. Hedāyat was experiencing the violence of Islamism firsthand (remember Ahmad Kasravi, an acquaintance

of Hedāyat was assassinated by the Shia fundamentalist group *Fadāyān-e Islam* in 1946 only five years before Hedāyat's suicide). The young Hedāyat undeniably had Aryanist and anti-Semitic tendencies, but the late Hedāyat was in panic and horror seeing the rising guns of Islamicists around him. That his graffiti is found in the underground life of Iranians points to a collective experience of "IslamoTrauma" during the reign of the "Islamic Republic" (similar to Afghans' experience of Taliban) and the resistance to and apprehension of political Islam that Hedāyat symbolizes. Borges' experiences of Islam and the islamicate were largely (if not only) limited to the library, though from there he enlarged the library and created maps and constellations in order to empower the *will to beauty* against the *will to power*. Burroughs and Gysin were privileged cosmopolitans in Tangier, and while some of their portrayals of Islam and the islamicate tend to be obscene (more so in Burroughs' works than Gysin's), their encounters with the islamicate reflect a desire to reveal or bring into conversation the narratives rejected by the orthodox and mainstream Islam.

In the context of contemporary islamicate esotericism, Peter Lamborn Wilson, known as Hakim Bey, is a remarkable author and researcher. Associated in his youth with the Traditionalists (most notably Schuon, Nasr, and Corbin) and working in Iran with the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy till the 1979 revolution, he later befriended Burroughs and Gysin, and his anarchist project bears strong affinities with objectives of their cut-up collaborations.[4] In his very last book on the esoteric traditions of the Yezidis, the late Wilson offers his latest thoughts on the social and political significance of the exoteric versus esoteric Islam for today's world (resonating with some of the focal points of discussions in this dissertation):

[4] For more information on life and works of Lamborn Wilson look at: Christian Greer, "Hakim Bey," in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (London: Routledge, 2015), 424-426.

[…] Hyper-orthodoxies such as Wahhabism or Salafism may be distortions of orthodox Islam, but they do not violate historical programs. If 'moderate' Islam today does not launch an effective critique of Salafism, perhaps this is from fear that the ugliest bigots are not misrepresenting the religion, but are practicing it *to the letter*, 'which killeth' [Quran 2:191]. Sufism and other heterodox forms of Islam appear to be precluded from making a robust resistance against Islamism—because as one Sufi shaykh put it, 'We believe in peace and love,' and not in violence or even militant self-defense. This constitutes, in the classical sense, a true *tragedy*.

[…] I have devoted decades of my life to the study of such heterodox forms. During this time, I have gone from a position of sympathy with Islam per se to a quite different view of the matter. I have waited in vain for a reasoned response from within mainstream Islam to the fundamentalist puritanism infecting it. […] The time has come to say, finally, that the exoteric religion itself must be held to blame for these horrors.

[…] The *text* has always (since about 4000 BC) been a means of enslaving humans to a status quo of the state and its official ideology or religion. By refusing literacy, the Yezidis signified their refusal of *law* as oppression. 'The pen is in the hand of the enemy,' as the old Persian proverb puts it. The magic of writing comprises both the blessing and the curse of Hermes-Thoth. According to a legend, when Thoth tells Thamus (= Ammon = Zeus) he's invented writing, and that from now on humans will never forget anything, Thamus answers, 'On the contrary, my son—now they'll forget *everything*.' Writing is the death of

> memory, and hence the origin of unknowing. Its spell binds us to the power of the author(ity). In this sense, in adhering to an oral tradition—and not an 'illiterate' or 'preliterate' one—the Yezidis can be seen as deliberately (not accidentally) *free*. In their so-called scripture, the Kitab al-Jilwah, Melek Ta'us the Peacock Angel says, 'I lead to the straight path *without a revealed book*; I direct aright my beloved and my chosen ones by unseen means' (italics mine [PLW]). Islam calls itself the religion of the Book. It acknowledges that Judaism and Christianity are also religions of the Book (and, according to some Sufis, also Hinduism with its Vedas [same has been said about Zoroastrianism and the Avesta]). All others, bookless, are illegitimate. But Yezidism goes further. It *rejects* the Book. It opposes the Book. In this dialectical opposition is formed its true essence and glory.[5]

There are two main issues to unpack in this long quote: the magic of writing, and the politics of Islamism. The magic of writing has been the main subject matter of this dissertation since day one, and reading Wilson lucidly formulating and phrasing the magic of writing as both the blessing and the curse of Hermes-Thoth, made me more confident—at this latter stages of 'writing' a dissertation—that the questions raised and discussed here have been timely, not only to understand the past of literature but especially to imagine its future. Wilson's view on writing here certainly resonates with Burroughs-Gysin's framing of a history of writing as well as their revolt against authoritarianism and determinism of language. The simultaneous blessing and curse of Thoth takes one of its strongest manifestations in *The Blind Owl* and mixes up with shadow/double/div/jinn where Zoroastrian and Islamic folklore meet De Quincey and Poe.

[5] Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Peacock Angel: The Esoteric Tradition of the Yezidis* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2022), 4-6.

Borges has a different perspective; for him the book and the library turn into metaphors for explaining the cosmos. He thinks of literature first and foremost in terms of games and beauty (activities of the mind and the soul), and though many of his pieces have strong political messages, he does not frame literature and language in terms of control. Still, in the meaningless volumes of the Library of Babel, Borges foresees the permutations that cut-ups can create. Burroughs-Gysin suggest the end of literature as Borges and Hedayat knew it, as a more or less autonomous field of cultural production. The literature of Burroughs-Gysin becomes multimedium and confused with sounds and images—sounds and images that can be cut and rearranged. Cut-ups promise evolving writing instruments at the dawn of a 21st century that is already marked by the booming of electronic literature including AI-generated/assisted texts. If writing since Thoth has been a magic technology whose instruments have continuously evolved through centuries, I can hardly imagine its future without new forms of magic and magical technologies. We must see how these magics will unroll in the coming decades of a post-global-pandemic world on the edge of a geopolitical and crisis.

Wilson's point about the politics of Islamism is not to be undermined, especially following the 2021 Taliban offensive in Afghanistan after a 10-year theater of blood and bombs. This is a topic where Borges possibly keeps his pacifist stance, but where Hedayat's prophecy in *The Pearl Canon* comes into reality. Taliban is where Hedayat's "Islam Limited Company" and Burroughs' "Islam Incorporated" meet each other—an exoteric Islam of *tout est permis (everything is permitted)*. We are back at the beginning of *1001 Nights*: we are sisters and daughters of Scheherazade, reciting tales of fantastic literature to delay the will to kill of the vicious Shahryar.

The study does not end here. Once one has tools to contextualize and conceptualize magics and labours of writing, various constellations consisted of authors and texts can be formed or founded to further explore and elucidate different manifestations of esotericism in literature and creative writing. Methodologically, these projects can range from distant readings in order to map out constellations, to close readings aiming at tracking specific themes. In the Canadian context, works by female authors such as Jo Walton's *Lent* (2019) and Julie E. Czerneda's *The Gossamer Mage* (2019) are examples of 21st century fiction with esoteric and occult themes. Moreover, the need to re-read and re-evaluate the "rejected, irrational, and superstitious" indigenous knowledge is urgent and underway. Investigating esotericism of indigenous cultures—that in many cases share the same oral and anti-writing status as that of the Yezidis discussed by Wilson—can be framed as de-colonial endeavors aiming at truth and reconciliation.

Although topics of 'religion, cyberspace, and internet' have been extensively explored during the last few decades, the intersections of 'esotericism and cyberspace,' despite their growing global manifestations, have not been thoroughly studied. The very few existing scholarships on the topic, notably Douglas E. Cowan's study of pagan groups on the internet,[6] view the cyberspace as a venue for information *about* the occult and an extension of offline interests and pursuits as well as a means of communication and community building. New approaches to this topic, however, can be less concerned with those reflective aspects, and instead focus on generative and productive dimensions of novel and avant-garde forms of electronic literature. Such inquiries about the implications of these creative and artistic methods and practices would broaden our understanding of *writing* and *reading* in the electronic era

[6] Cowan, Douglas E. *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

relation to esoteric discourses. I consider this area of 'esotericism, cyberspace, and electronic literature' as a natural next step of my research project, partly because it is an area that has been highly influenced by works of Borges and Burroughs-Gysin. Jonathan Basile's *Tar for Mortar: the Library of Babel and the Dream of Totality*, alongside his *Library of Babel* online project,[7] are recent examples of digital realization and materialization of Borges' esoteric lessons for comparative and world literature. In addition, the emergence of numerous automated cut-up (ro)bots on Twitter and other online platforms over the last decade demonstrates a Dadaist and polyphonic tendency similar to that of Burroughs-Gysin collaborations.

In order to draw preliminary maps for studying 'esotericism, cyberspace, and electronic literature,' I shall distinguish between three categories of texts and materials that can be subjected to further research:

1) *AI-generated/assisted forms of writing*: A prime example of this dynamic and growing category is K. Allado-Mcdowell's *Pharmako-AI* (2020), the first book to be co-written with AI language model GPT-3. It is a philosophical memoir that turns into an inquiry on writing technologies and human-machine-nature relationships, working with many esoteric conceptions of language and information spiritualties, and promising the arrival of more AI-generated/assisted texts in both printed and electronic formats.

2) *Coding as a form of creative writing*: New experimental projects and tools such as the "esoteric programming language" or "esolang" (an anti-practical and aesthetic current in coding) challenge the normative and practical approaches to computer programming (the normative-practical would label "esolang" a prank or a joke). The term "esoteric" in this context must not

[7] Jonathan Basile, *Tar for Mortar: The Library of Babel and the Dream of Totality* (New York: dead letter office, BABEL Working Group, 2018). See also: http://libraryofbabel.info/

get mixed up with the religious esoteric; still, this "esoteric" approach to coding raises fundamental questions about language, writing, and limits of (in)comprehensibility.

3) *Non-electronic literature of the 21st century that (re)imagines human-machine writing collaborations*: Examples of such works include Reza Negarestani's unconventional novel *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (2008) which asks substantial questions about new forms of narration in relation to esotericism and religion within the socio-political context of contemporary Middle East. Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) is a latest example of this category. G. WillowWilson's more popular *Alif the Unseen* (2012) entertains a Swedenborgian doctrine of correspondence through exploring communications between the codes/algorithms and the human mind, while it is also a work very relevant to topics of the islamicate.

The works of G. Willow Wilson are in particular very interesting examples of contemporary fiction dealing with esotericism of both the islamicate and the cyberspace. Interestingly, her two novels *Alif the Unseen* (2013) and *The Bird King* (2019) have been published by Grove Press (that initially brought together the constellation for this dissertation). These two novels are quite sensible examples of blending the esoteric and the islamicate; nevertheless, there are some categorical differences between them and the modernist and countercultural literature that Hedāyat, Borges, and Burroughs-Gysin had produced. The invention of Internet for one thing has spoiled the intercontinental highway of Paris – New York that the Grove of 1960s was heavily dependent on, and authors may now gain a global recognition more easily without being first published in French. Willow Wilson's fame is in fact lesser due to her two Grove novels, and rather more for her contributions to the *Ms. Marvel* series. She is credited for creating the first Muslim female superhero in Kamala Khan, which in

2022 was premiered on Disney+. For these reasons, in order to locate Willow Wilson on a map of world literature, a different constellation is needed. I ought to situate her works within the 21st century electronic literature and the esotericism of cyberspace.

Willow Wilson's two Grove novels, *Alif the Unseen* and *The Bird King*, both rely heavily on magic and esotericism of the islamicate cultures. The story of *The Bird King* happens in a 15th century Al-Andalus (Iberian Peninsula)—a new setting provided to imitate and retell Farid Al-Din Attar's classic of Sufi literature *The Conference of the Birds* in a context of the Spanish Inquisition. *Alif the Unseen* is set in an imaginary, contemporary Middle East where a young hacker named Alif, with help from various types of jinn, is on a mission to overthrow the despotic ruling regime of the region. It is a magical realist adventure fantasy reflecting the chain of events known as the Arab Spring, written by a young American woman who converted to Islam during her stay at Cairo as an English teacher around 2003, where she also married a Muslim Egyptian man. The fact that Willow Wilson's autobiography, *The Butterfly Mosque* (2010), was her first book-length publication prior to her attempts at writing novels, showcases the attractiveness of her own adventure and conversion for contemporary readers and publishers.

What does it mean to speak of magic and labour of writing in works of Willow Wilson? I believe Christopher Partridge's term "occulture" helps analyzing not only Willow Wilson's two Grove novels but also their relations to her *Ms. Marvel* comics. First coined in his two volume monograph *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualties, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, Partridge defines the term "occulture" as a sociological term, referring "to the environment within which, and the social processes by which particular meanings relating, typically, to spiritual, esoteric, paranormal and conspiratorial ideas emerge, are disseminated, and become influential in societies and in the lives of individuals. Central to those

processes is popular culture, in that it disseminates and remixes occultural ideas, thereby incubating new spores of occultural thought."[8] He further argues that "the late modern period since the 1960s has witnessed the emergence of a political and cultural context that has proved particularly conducive to the proliferation of broadly esoteric ideas. […] no longer can such thought be considered occulted or esoteric, in the sense of being recondite and secretive. While there are, of course, occult traditions and organizations that are styled as such […], the culture in which they are embedded is no longer hidden or unfamiliar. It is ordinary and everyday."[9]

Perhaps the clearest manifestations of occulture in *Alif the Unseen* are the graphic portrayals of the five types of jinn that are curiously included only in the Grove edition of the novel (see Figure 9). Marid—one of the five types—is coming out of a Mecca Cola bottle, a fit metaphor for the marketization of religious and spiritual experiences in a growing neoliberal culture. It is not accidental that in her autobiography, Willow Wilson calls *The Satanic Verses* a book "dense and unpalatable." Her own style contrasts that of Rushide; it is easy and straight forward, fiction designed for general readers and perhaps young adults. In other words, the magic in her novels do not extend to the form and the prose; the magic stays at levels of content and narrative and representation.

Nevertheless, *Alif the Unseen* paves the way for discussions around the esotericism of cyberspace and AI algorithms—an emerging and fast developing area that is shaping the future of writing in different ways. As mentioned, Alif—the protagonist of the novel—is a hacker, working alone from home. He becomes attracted to coding a program to analyze humans' typing pattern. "In theory, everyone has a unique typing pattern—number of keystrokes per minute, time lapse between each stroke […]. A keystroke logger, properly programmed, might be able to

[8] Christopher Partridge, "Occulture is Ordinary," in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), 116.

[9] Christopher Partridge, "Occulture is Ordinary," 113.

identify that pattern to within an acceptable margin of error."[10] Then, we read that "The program behaved in a way that made him uneasy. He had written it using a certain amount of fuzzy logic: the commands that acted as gray go-betweens in the black-and-white world of binary computing."[11] The third person narrator of the novel calls this "a pattern so esoteric,"[12] while Alif's friend Abdullal after learning about the machine's successful accuracy says:

> What are you talking about—recognizing a complete, individual personality—is something we do automatically. I recognize your voice on the phone. I could probably recognize your e-emails and texts even without seeing your address or phone number. This is a basic function for anybody who isn't suffering from some kind of mental disorder. But machines can't do it. They need an IP address or an e-mail address or a handle to identify someone. Change those identifiers and that person becomes invisible to them. If what you're saying is true, you have discovered an entirely new way of getting computers to think. One might even say that with this botnet, you have endowed your little desktop machine with intuition.[13]

This idea of designing an intuitive machine might appear as a mere science fiction theme within a magical realist novel, but I suspect there is more at stake here. Whether or not WillowWilson is aware of it, in *Alif the Unseen* she is entertaining a Swedenborgian doctrine of *correspondence*[14] which during the second half of the 20th century was picked up again by the French scholar of esotericism Antoine Faivre as one of the four fundamental characteristics of esoteric discourses:

[10] G. Willow Wilson. *Alif the Unseen* (New York: Grove Press, 2012), 34-35.

[11] G. Willow Wilson. *Alif the Unseen*, 44.

[12] G. Willow Wilson. *Alif the Unseen*, 44.

[13] G. Willow Wilson. *Alif the Unseen*, 46-47.

[14] For more on the concept of correspondences including its Swedenborgian formulation look at: Jean-Pierre Brach & Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Correspondences," in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 275-279.

"the idea of universal correspondences," that non-causal correspondences operate between all the levels of reality of the universe, which is a sort of theater of mirrors inhabited and animated by invisible forces; that for example there would exist relationships between heavens (macrocosm) and the human body (microcosm), between the planets and parts of the human body, between the revealed texts of religions and what nature shows us.[15] In *Alif the Unseen*, a magical realist fiction with numerous allusions to islamicate cultures and their esotericism, the possibility of correspondences between the codes and algorithms and the human mind is entertained within the narrative, and it paves the way for further imagining the relations of humans and computers, and asking questions of them. After all, coding is writing; but to what extent could computer coding be conceptualized as magic and esoteric? The literature of our time is indeed undergoing a shift from the library to the cyberspace, and within this shift it is not only the exoteric that is being transmitted, but also the esoteric.

[15] Antoine Faivre, *Western Esotericism: A Concise History*, trans. Christine Rhone (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 12.

Bibliography

English:

Abdolmaleki, Kara. "The Female Gaze in *The Blind Owl* by Sadeq Hedayat and *Lost Highway* by David Lynch." *Iranian Studies* 46, no. 6 (2013): 903-919.

Abrahamian, Ervand. *Iran between Two Revolutions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.

Adorno, Theodor W.. *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*. Edited by Stephen Crook. London: Routledge, 1994.

Aizenberg, Edna. *The Aleph Weaver: Biblical, Kabbalistic and Judaic Elements in Borges*. Potomac: Scripta Humanistica, 1984.

Aizenberg, Edna (ed.). *Borges and His Successors: The Borgesian Impact on Literature and the Arts*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990.

Aizenberg, Edna. "*I, a Jew*: Borges, Nazism, and the Shoah." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 104, no. 3 (2014): 339-353.

Aizenberg, Edna. "A 21st Century Note on Borges' Kabbalism." *Variaciones Borges* 39 (2015): 51-58.

Alazraki, Jaime. *Borges and the Kabbalah: And Other Essays on His Fiction and Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Al-e Ahmad, Jalal. *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*. Translated by Robert Campbell. Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1984.

Allado-Mcdowell, K.. *Pharmako-AI*. Ignota, 2020.

Almond, Ian. *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2007.

Andrianova, Anastassiya. "A 'Nilufar' by any other Name: The Implications of Reading Sadeq Hedayat in Translation." *Translation and Literature* 22, no. 2 (2013): 215-239.

Ambrose, Joe, Terry Wilson, and Frank Rynne. *Man from Nowhere: Storming the Citadels of Enlightenment with William Burroughs and Brion Gysin*. Dublin: The Gap and Subliminal Books, 1992.

Armbrust, Walter (ed.). *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

Asprem, Egil. *Arguing with Angels: Enochian Magic and Modern Occulture*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012.

Asprem, Egil. *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900-1939*. Boston: Brill, 2014.

Asprem, Egil, and Julian Strube (eds.). *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*. Leiden: Brill, 2020.

Asperm, Egil, and Kennet Granholm (eds.). *Contemporary Esotericism*. Sheffield: Equinox, 2013.

Attar, Farid ud-Din. *The Conference of the Birds*. Translated by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis. London: Penguin, 2011.

Attridge, Harold W. (ed.). *The HarperCollins Study Bible*. New York: Harper One, 2006.

Azadibougar, Omid. *The Persian Novel: Ideology, Fiction and Form in the Periphery*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014.

Azadibougar, Omid. *World Literature and Hedayat's Poetics of Modernity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Translated by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014.

Ball, Hugo. *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*. Translated by Ann Raimes. Edited by John Elderfield. Los Angeles: University of California Press Berkeley, 1996.

Banta, Martha. *Henry James and the Occult: The Great Extension*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972.

Barsham, Diana. *The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society*. New York: New York University Press, 1992.

Basile, Jonathan. *Tar for Mortar: The Library of Babel and the Dream of Totality*. New York: dead letter office, BABEL Working Group, 2018.

Bauduin, Tessel M.. *Surrealism and the Occult: Occultism and Western Esotericism in the Work and Movement of André Breton*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014.

Bauduin, Tessel M., and Henrik Johnsson (eds.). *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Beard, Michael. *Hedayat's Bind Owl as a Western Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Beiles, Sinclar, William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, and Brion Gysin. *Minutes to Go*. Paris: Two Cities Editions, 1960.

Beiles, Sinclar, William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, and Brion Gysin. *Minutes to Go*. San Francisco: Beach Books, 1968.

Beiles, Sinclar, William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, and Brion Gysin. *Minutes to Go*. Edited by Oliver Harris. Germany: Moloko Print, 2020.

Berger, Peter L. *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*. Boston: De Gruyter, 2014.

Bloch, William Goldbloom. *The Unimaginable Mathematics of Borges' Library of Babel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Bloom, Harold (ed.). *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003.

Bogdan, Henrik, and Gordan Djurdjevic (eds.). *Occultism in a Global Perspective*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014.

Bolton, Micheal Sean. *Mosaic of Juxtaposition: William S. Burroughs' Narrative Revolution*. Amsterdam: Brill, 2014.

Boon, Marcus. *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs*. London: Harvard University Press, 2002.

Boon, Marcus. *In Praise of Copying*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *A Personal Anthology*. Edited by Anthony Kerrigan. New York: Grove Press, 1967.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Seven Nights*. Translated by Eliot Weinberger. New York: New Directions, 1984.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Collected Fictions*. Translated by Andrew Hurley. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Selected Non-Fictions*. Edited by Eliot Weinberger. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Selected Poems*. Edited by Alexander Coleman. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *The Book of Imaginary Beings*. Translated by Andrew Hurley. New York: Penguin Books, 2005.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *On Mysticism*. Edited by Maria Kodama. New York: Penguin Books, 2010.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production*. Translated by Randal Johnson. Columbia University Press, 1993.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Translated by Susan Emanuel. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.

Bowen, Harold. "The *sar-gudhasht-i sayyidnā*, the 'Tale of the Three Schoolfellows' and the *wasaya* of the Nizām al-Mulk." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 63, no. 4 (1931): 771–782.

Boyce, Mary. “Pādyāb and Nērang: Two Pahlavi Terms Further Considered.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 54, n. 2 (1991): 281-291.

Boyle, Nicholas, and John Guthrie (eds.). *Goethe and the English-Speaking World: Essays from the Cambridge Symposium for His 250th Anniversary*. Rochester: Camden House, 2002.

Bramble, John. *Modernism and the Occult*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Burroughs, William S., and Brion Gysin. *The Third Mind*. New York: The Viking Press, 1978.

Burroughs, William S., and Brion Gysin. *The Exterminator*. Germany: Moloko Print, 2020.

Burroughs, William S., and Daniel Odier. *The Job: Interviews with William S. Burroughs*. New York: Penguin, 1989.

Burroughs, William S., and Victor Bockris. *With William Burroughs: A Report from the Bunker (Revised Edition)*. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1996.

Burroughs, William S.. *Exterminator!* New York: Penguin, 1985.

Burroughs, William. *Burroughs Live: the Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs*. Edited by Sylvere Lotringer. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001.

Burroughs, William S.. *The Adding Machine: Selected Essays*. New York: Grove Press, 2013.

Burroughs, William S.. *Naked Lunch (The Restored Text)*. Edited by James Grauerholz and Barry Miles. New York: Grove Press, 2001.

Burroughs, William S.. *The Soft Machine (The Restored Text)*. Edited by Oliver Harris. New York: Grove Press, 2014.

Burroughs, William S.. *The Ticket That Exploded (The Restored Text)*. Edited by Oliver Harris. New York: Grove Press, 2014.

Burroughs, William S.. *Nova Express (The Restored Text)*. Edited by Oliver Harris. New York: Grove Press, 2013.

Byrne, David. *How Music Works*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2012.

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Carter, Anthony John. “Myths and Mandrakes.” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 96, no. 3 (2003): 144-147.

Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters*. Translated by M. B. DeBevoise. London: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Clark, David R., “Metaphors for Poetry: W. B. Yeats and the Occult.” In *The World of W. B. Yeats: Essays in Perspective*. Edited by Robin Skelton and Ann Saddlemyer. Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1965.

Corbin, Henry. *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

Cowan, Douglas E. *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Cowan, Tommy P.. “Devils in the Ink: William Burroughs, Brion Gysin, and Geometry as a Method for Accessing Intermediary Beings.” *Aries* 19 (2019): 167-211.

Cowan, Tommy P.. “What Most People Would Call Evil: The Archontic Spirituality of William S. Burroughs.” *La Rosa di Paracelso* 1 (2018): 83-122.

Crowley, Aleister. *Magick without Tears*. Edited by Israel Regardie. Las Vegas: Falcon Press, 1989.

Crowley, Aleister. *The Book of Thoth*. San Francisco: Weiser Books, 2011.

Czerneda, Julie E.. *The Gossamer Mage*. New York: DAW Books, 2019.

Daftary, Farhad. *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Ismailis*. London: Tauris, 1994.

Daftary, Farhad. *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Daftary, Farhad. *Ismaili History and Intellectual Traditions*. Milton: Routledge, 2018.

Damrosch, David. *What is World Literature?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Damrosch, David, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi (eds.). *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: from the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

De Quincey, Thomas. *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. London: Penguin, 1988.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

Derrida, Jacques. "The Rhetoric of Drugs." In *High Culture: Reflections on Addiction and Modernity*. Edited by Anna Alexander and Mark S. Roberts. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003. 19-43.

Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

D'haen, Theo, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir (eds.). *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*. London: Routledge, 2012.

Dick, Philip K.. *VALIS*. London: Gollancz, 2001.

Doostdar, Alireza. *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Translated by Andrew R. MacAndrew. New York: Bantam, 2003.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. "The Double." From *Great Short Works of Fyodor Dostoevsky*. Translated by George Bird. New York: Perennial, 2004. 1-144.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Devils*. Translated by Constance Garnett. London: Wordsworth, 2005.

Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*. Translated by William Weaver. New York: Warner Books, 1986.

Eco, Umberto. *Foucault's Pendulum*. Translated by William Weaver. New York: Ballantine Books, 1989.

Edwards, Brian. *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

Einboden, Jeffrey. *Islam and Romanticism: Muslim Currents from Goethe to Emerson*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2014.

Elahi, Babak. "Poisons and Remedies in Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*." *Middle Eastern Literatures* 15, no. 2 (2012): 178-180.

Elia, Nada. “Islamic Esoteric Concepts as Borges Strategies.” *Variaciones Borges* 5 (1998): 129-144.

Eno, Brian. Review of *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* by Jay David Bolter. *Artforum*, November 1991.

Esposito, John L. (ed.). *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Faivre, Antoine. *Western Esotericism: A Concise History*. Translated by Christine Rhone. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010.

Faxneld, Per. *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Ferguson, Christine. *Determined Spirits: Eugenics, Heredity, and Racial Regeneration in Anglo-American Spiritualist Writing, 1848-1930*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

Ferguson, Christine. “Beyond Belief: Literature, Esotericism Studies, and the Challenges of Biographical Reading in Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Land of Mist*.” *Aries* (2021): 1-26.

Ferguson, Christine, and Andrew Radford (eds.). *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875-1947*. London: Routledge, 2018.

Fiddian, Robin. *Postcolonial Borges: Argument and Artistry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Fiddian, Robin W. (ed.). *Jorge Luis Borges in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Fishburn, Evelyn, and Psiche Hughes (eds.). *A Dictionary of Borges*. London: Duckworth, 1990.

Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Vintage Books, 1988.

Fowler, Sarah. “Iran’s Chain Murders: A Wave of Killings that Shook a Nation.” *BBC News*. Published December 2, 2018. (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46356725).

Frank, Luanne (ed.). *Literature and the Occult: Essays in Comparative Literature*. Arlington: University of Texas at Arlington, 1977.

Frazer, Sir James. *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion*. London: Wordsworth, 1993.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. Translated by David McLintock. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.

Garayale, Giovanna de. *Jorge Luis Borges: Sources and Illumination*. London: Octagon Press, 1978.

Geiger, John. *Chapel of Extreme Experience: A Short History of Stroboscopic Light and the Dream Machine*. Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2003.

Geiger, John. *Nothing Is True, Everything Is Permitted: The Life of Brion Gysin*. New York: Disinformation, 2005.

Glass, Loren. *Counterculture Colophon: Grove Press, the* Evergreen Review*, and the Incorporation of the Avant-Garde*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Conversations with Eckermann (1823-1832)*. Translated by John Oxenford. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *West-East Divan: The Poems, with "Notes and Essays": Goethe's Intercultural Dialogues*. Translated by Martin Bidney. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010.

Golshiri, Hushang. *Book of Jinn*. Translated by M. R. Ghanoonparvar. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2018.

Goodrick-Clarke, Nicholas. *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Gorski, William T.. *Yeats and Alchemy*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.

Graf, Susan Johnston. *Talking to the Gods: Occultism in the Work of W. B. Yeats, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and Dion Fortune*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015.

Granholm, Kennet. *Dark Enlightenment: the Historical, Sociological, and Discursive Contexts of Contemporary Esoteric Magic*. Leiden: Brill, 2014.

Gysin, Brion. *Here to Go: Planet R101 (Brion Gysin Interviewed by Terry Wilson with Introduction and Texts by William S. Burroughs & Brion Gysin)*. London: Quartet Books, 1985.

Gysin, Brion. *The Last Museum*. New York: Grove Press, 1986.

Gysin, Brion. *The Process*. New York: Overlook Press, 1987.

Gysin, Brion. *Back in No Time: The Brion Gysin Reader*. Edited by Jason Weiss. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.

Gysin, Brion. *Living with Islam*. Providence, Rhode Island: Inkblot Publications, 2010.

Hammer, Olav. *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*. Leiden: Brill, 2004.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J. *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J. (ed.). *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*. Leiden: Brill, 2005.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J.. *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J.. *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J. *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination: Altered States of Knowledge in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J., Peter J. Forshaw, and Marco Pasi (eds.). *Hermes Explains: Thirty Questions About Western Esotericism* . Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019.

Harper, George Mills (ed.). *Yeats and the Occult*. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1975.

Harris, Oliver. *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003.

Hedāyat, Sādeq. *The Blind Owl*. Translated by D. P. Costello. New York: Grove Press, 1969.

Hedāyat, Sādeq. *The Blind Owl*. Translated by Naveed Noori. Iran Open Publishing Group [Under the Auspices of the Sādeq Hedāyat Foundation], 2011.

Hedāyat, Sādeq. *The Blind Owl*. Translated by Iraj Bashiri. Bashiri Working Papers on Central Asia and Iran, 2013.

Hedāyat, Sādeq. *Haji Agha: Portrait of an Iranian Confidence Man*. Translated by G. M. Wickens. Austin: University of Texas at Austin, 1979.

Hedāyat, Sādeq. *The Pearl Cannon [Abridged Version]*. Translated by Iraj Bashiri. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1986.

Hedāyat, Sādeq. *The Myth of Creation: A Puppet Show in Three Acts*. Translated by M. R. Ghanoonparvar. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1998.

Hedāyat, Sādeq. *Three Drops of Blood*. Translated by Deborah Miller Mostaghel. London: Oneworld Classics, 2008.

Hodgson, Marshall G. S.. *The Secret Order of Assassins: the Struggle of the Early Nizari Ismailis Against the Islamic World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.

Hodgson, Marshall G. S.. *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization (Volume 1: The Classical Age of Islam)*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.

Hodgson, Marshall G. S.. *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization (Volume 2: The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods)*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977.

Hodgson, Marshall G. S.. *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization (Volume 3: The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times)*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977.

Hodkiewicz, Melinda. "Designing SNAKES AND LADDERS: An Analogy for Asset Management Strategy Development." *Simulation & Gaming* 46.5 (2015): 455-470.

Hollywood, Amy M. *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Hopkins, David (ed.). *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*. Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2016.

Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

Howes, Marjorie, and John Kelly (eds.). *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Human Rights & Democracy for Iran. "One Person's Story: Ahmad Mir-Alai." Accessed September 19, 2019. (https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/-7011/ahmad-miralai).

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Klara and the Sun*. New York: Vintage Books, 2022.

Jaén, Didier T.. *Borges' Esoteric Library: Metaphysics to Metafiction*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1992.

Jullien, Dominique. *Borges, Buddhism and World Literature: A Morphology of Renunciation Tales*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Jung, C. G.. *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 11; Psychology and Religion: West and East*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.

Jung, C. G.. *The Essential Jung*. Edited by Anthony Storr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

Kadir, Djelal. "Borges the Heresiarch *Mutakallimun*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 19, no. 3 (1973): 461-468.

Kadir, Djelal. "To World, to Globalize: World Literature's Crossroads." *Comparative Literature Studies* 41.1 (2004): 1-9.

Karimi-Hakkak, Ahmad. "Protest and Perish: A History of the Writers' Association of Iran." *Iranian Studies* 18, no. 2/4 (1985): 189-229.

Karimi-Hakkak, Ahmad, and Kamran Talattof (eds.). *Essays on Nima Yushij: Animating Modernism in Persian Poetry*. Leiden: Brill, 2004.

Katouzian, Homa. *Sadeq Hedayat: The Life and Literature of an Iranian Writer*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 1991.

Katouzian, Homa (ed.). *Sadeq Hedayat: His Work and His Wondrous World*. London: Routledge, 2007.

Kipling, Rudyard. *Kim*. New York: The Modern Library, 1928.

Kirsch, Adam. *The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st Century*. New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016.

Knight, Michael Muhammad. *William S. Burroughs vs. the Quran*. Berkeley: Soft Skull, 2012.

Knight, Michael Muhammad. *Tripping with Allah: Islam, Drugs, and Writing*. Berkeley: Soft Skull, 2013.

Knight, Michael Muhammad. *Magic in Islam*. New York: TarcherPerigee, 2016.

Kripal, Jeffrey J.. *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Kripal, Jeffrey J. *Mutants & Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Kripal, Jeffrey J. *The Superhumanities: Historical Precedents, Moral Objections, New Realities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022.

Kristal, Efraín. *Invisible Work: Borges and Translation*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002.

Kushigian, Julia A.. *Orientalism in the Hispanic Literary Tradition: In Dialogue with Borges, Paz, and Sarduy*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991.

Lardas, John. *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001.

Levine, Suzanne Jill. "The Latin American novel in English translations." In *The Cambridge Companion to the Latin American Novel*. Edited by Efraín Kristal. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 297-317.

Lewis, Bernard. *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.

Lewis, Pericles. *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

López-Baralt, Luce. *Islam in Spanish Literature: From the Middle Ages to the Present*. Translated by Andrew Hurley. Leiden: Brill, 1992.

Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*. Translated by Anna Bostock. Delhi: Aakar Books, 2016.

Manguel, Alberto. "The Muse of Impossibility." *The Threepenny Review* no. 123 (2010): 7-9.

Martínez, Guillermo. *Borges and Mathematics*. Translated by Andrea G. Labinger. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2012.

Matthee, Rudolph P.. *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History, 1500-1900*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Melvin-Koushki, Matthew. "De-orienting the Study of Islamicate Occultism." *Arabica* 64.3-4 (2017): 287-295.

Merrell, Floyd. *Unthinking Thinking: Jorge Luis Borges, Mathematics, and the New Physics*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1991.

Messent, Peter B. (ed.). *Literature of the Occult: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981.

Miles, Barry. *Call Me Burroughs: A Life*. New York: Twelve, 2013.

Mohandessi, Manouchehr. "Hedayat and Rilke." *Comparative Literature* 23, no. 3 (1971): 209-216.

Monegal, Emir Rodriguez. *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978.

Moretti, Franco. *Graphs, Maps, Trees*. London: Verso, 2005.

Moretti, Franco. *Distant Reading*. London: Verso, 2013.

Motherwell, Robert (ed.). *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989.

Mufti, Aamir R.. *Forget English! Orientalism and World Literatures*. London: Harvard University Press, 2016.

Murphy, Timothy S.. *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Myers, David N.. “Editor’s Introduction: Jorge Luis Borges and the Jewish Question.” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 104, no. 3 (2014): 335-338.

Nafisi, Azar. *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. New York: Random House, 2003.

Nafisi, Majid. *Modernism and Ideology in Persian Literature: A Return to Nature in the Poetry of Nima Yushij*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1997.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (ed.). *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. New York: Harper One, 2015.

Negarestani, Reza. *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*. Melbourne: re.press, 2008.

Nenzén, Niklas. “The Epistemology of the ‘Great Invisibles’: A Surrealist Myth and Its Analogues in Modern Esoteric Imagination.” *Aries* 20, 2 (2020): 207-239.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. Translated by Adrian Del Caro. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Otto, Bernd-Christian, and Michael Stausberg (eds.). *Defining Magic: a Reader*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014.

Owen, Alex. *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Pages, Meriem. “The Image of the Assassins in Medieval European Texts.” PhD Dissertation, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2007.

Parlett, David. *The Oxford History of Board Games*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Partridge, Christopher H.. *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*. London: T & T Clark International, 2004.

Partridge, Christopher. *The Re-Enchantment of the West, Vol 2: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2006.

Partridge, Christopher (ed.). *The Occult World*. London: Routledge, 2015.

Plato. *Phaedrus*. Translated by Robin Waterfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Polo, Marco. *The Travels of Marco Polo (The Venetian)*. Edited by Manuel Komroff. New York: Garden City Publishing, 1930.

Polo, Marco. *The Travels of Marco Polo*. Translated from the text of L. F. Benedetto by Aldo Ricci. London: Routledge, 2014.

Rabelais, Francois. *The Complete Works of Francois Rabelais*. Translated by Donald M. Frame. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

Rae, Casey. *William S. Burroughs & the Cult of Rock 'n' Roll*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019.

Rank, Otto. *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*. Translated by Harry Tucker. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971.

Regavim, Ram Baruch. "The Most Sovereign of Masters: The History of Opium in Modern Iran, 1850-1955." PhD Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2012.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Translated by Robert Vilain. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Robertson, Ritchie. *Goethe: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Roukema, Aren. *Esotericism and Narrative: The Occult Fiction of Charles Williams*. Leiden: Brill, 2018.

Russell, Bertrand. *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Sadeqi, Bahram. *Malakut and Other Stories*. Translated by Kaveh Basmenji. Bethesda: Ibex Publishers, 2012.

Said, Edward W.. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.

Said, Edward W.. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1994.

Saif, Liana. "What is Islamic Esotericism?" *Correspondences* 7.1 (2019): 1-59.

Saif, Liana, Francesca Leoni, Matthew Melvin-Koushki, and Farouk Yahya (eds.). *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*. Leiden: Brill, 2020.

Schmidt-Madsen, Jacob. "The Game of Knowledge: Playing at Spiritual Liberation in 18th and 19th Century Western India." PhD Dissertation, University of Copenhagen, 2019.

Schneiderman, Davis, and Philip Walsh (eds.). *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization*. London: Pluto Press, 2004.

Sedgwick, Mark. *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Sedgwick, Mark. "Islamic and Western Esotericism." *Correspondences* 7.1 (2019): 277-299.

Sedgwick, Mark, and Francesco Piraino (eds.). *Esoteric Transfers and Constructions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

Senior, John. *The Way Down and Out: The Occult in Symbolist Literature*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959.

Shenk, David. *The Immortal Game: A History of Chess*. New York: Doubleday, 2006.

Simpson, Paul, Michaela Bushell, and Helen Rodiss (eds.). *The Rough Guide to Cult Fiction*. London: Haymarket Customer Publishing, 2005.

Sontag, Susan. *Where the Stress Falls*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

Sorgenfrei, Simon. "Hidden or Forbidden, Elected or Rejected: Sufism as 'Islamic Esotericism'?" *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 29.2 (2018): 145-165.

Sosnowski, Saúl. "*The God's Script*: A Kabbalistic Quest." *Modern Fiction Studies* 19, no. 3 (1973): 381-394.

Spinoza, Benedict de. *Ethics: Proved in Geometrical Order*. Edited by Matthew J. Kisner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Spivakovsky, Erika. "In Search of Arabic Influences on Borges." *Hispania* 51, no. 2 (1968): 223-231.

Spivakovsky, Erika. "A Further Word regarding Arabic Influences on Borges." *Hispania* 52, no. 3 (1969): 417-419.

Stephenson, Gregory. *The Daybreak Boys: Essays on the Literature of the Beat Generation*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1990.

Stuckrad, Kocku von. *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge*. Translated by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke. London: Equinox, 2005.

Stuckrad, Kocku von. *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities*. Leiden: Brill, 2010.

Surette, Leon. *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and the Occult*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993.

Surette, Leon, and Demetres Tryphonopoulos. *Literary Modernism and Occult Tradition*. Orono: National Poetry Foundation University of Maine, 1996.

Tal, Mikhail. *Life & Games of Mikhail Tal*. Edited by John Nunn. London: Everyman Chess, 1997.

Thayil, Jeet. *Narcopolis*. London: Faber and Faber, 2012.

Topsfield, Andrew. "The Indian Game of Snakes and Ladders." *Artibus Asiae* 46.3 (1985): 203-226.

Topsfield, Andrew. "Snakes and Ladders in India: Some Further Discoveries." *Artibus Asiae* 66.1 (2006): 143-179.

Turner, Bryan S.. *Marx and the End of Orientalism*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978.

Turner, Bryan S.. *Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Tyeer, Sarah R. Bin, and Claire Gallien (eds.). *Islam and New Directions in World Literature*. Edinburgh University Press, 2022.

Ungureanu, Delia. *From Paris to Tlön: Surrealism as World Literature*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

Versluis, Arthur. *Restoring Paradise: Western Esotericism, Literature, Art, and Consciousness*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.

Versluis, Arthur (ed.). *Esotericism, Art, and Imagination*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2008.

Virani, Shafique N. *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages: A History of Survival, a Search for Salvation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Virani, Shafique N.. “An Old Man, a Garden, and an Assembly of Assassins: Legends and Realities of the Nizari Ismaili Muslims.” *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* ahead-of-print (2021): 1–13.

Visnu Sarma. *The Pancatantra*. Translated by Chandra Rajan. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1993.

Waisman, Sergio. *Borges and Translation: The Irreverence of the Periphery*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005.

Walonen, Michael K. *Writing Tangier in the Postcolonial Transition: Space and Power in Expatriate and North African Literature*. London: Taylor and Francis, 2011.

Walton, Jo. *Lent*. New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2019.

Warner, Marina. *Stranger Magic: Charmed States & the Arabian Nights*. London: Vintage Books, 2012.

Weber, Max. *The Sociology of Religion*. Translated by Ephraim Fischoff. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.

Weber, Max. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Translated by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. Abingdon: Routledge, 2005.

Weidner, Chad. "The Glorious Plagiarism, Trash Aesthetics, and Ecological Entropy of Cryptic Cut-Ups from *Minutes to Go*." *Humanities* 8, no. 2 (2019).

White, Manon Hedenborg. *The Eloquent Blood: The Goddess Babalon & the Construction of Femininities in Western Esotericism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Willey, Peter. *The Castles of the Assassins.* London: G.G. Harrap, 1963.

Willey, Peter. *Eagle’s Nest: Ismaili Castles in Iran and Syria*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2005.

Williamson, Edwin. *Borges, a Life*. New York: Viking, 2004.

Williamson, Edwin (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Jorge Luis Borges*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Wilson, G. Willow. *Alif the Unseen*. New York: Grove Press, 2012.

Wilson, G. Willow. *Alif the Unseen*. Toronto: Emblem, 2013.

Wilson, G. Willow. *The Butterfly Mosque: A Young Woman's Journey to Love and Islam*. Toronto: Emblem, 2011.

Wilson, G. Willow. *The Bird King*. New York: Grove Press, 2019.

Wilson, G. Willow, and M. K. Perker. *Cairo: A Graphic Novel*. New York: DC Comics, 2007.

Wilson, Jason. *Jorge Luis Borges*. London: Reakton Books, 2006.

Wilson, Peter Lamborn [Hakim Bey]. *T. A. Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2003.

Wilson, Peter Lamborn. *Sacred Drift : Essays on the Margins of Islam*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1993.

Wilson, Peter Lamborn. *Peacock Angel: The Esoteric Tradition of the Yezidis*. Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2022.

Wolff, Robert Lee. *Strange Stories and Other Explorations in Victorian Fiction*. Boston: Gambit, 1971.

Wolfson, Elliot R.. "In the Mirror of the Dream: Borges and the Poetics of Kabbalah." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 104, no. 3 (2014): 362-379.

Yeats, W. B.. *Selected Criticism*. Edited by A. Norman Jeffares. London: Macmillan, 1964.

Yushij, Nima. *The Neighbor Says: Nima Yushij and the Philosophy of Modern Persian Poetry*. Translated by M. R. Ghanoonparvar. Bethesda: Ibex Publishers, 2009.

Ziolkowski, Theodore. *The Alchemist in Literature: From Dante to the Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Farsi:

Ahmadzadeh, Habib. *Code 24, or How The Blind Owl was Created and Crafted?* [کد 24 یا بوف کور چگونه ساخته و پرداخته شد؟]. Tehran: SooreMehr, 2015.

Ajudani, Mashallah. *Hedayat, The Blind Owl, and Nationalism* [هدایت، بوف کور، و ناسیونالیسم]. London: Fasl-e Ketab, 2006.

Akhtar, Nadeem. *Hedayat in India* [هدایت در هندوستان]. Tehran: Cheshmeh Publication, 2016.

Al-e Ahmad, Jalal. *Seven Articles* [هفت مقاله]. Tehran: Majid Publication, 2007.

Amoui, Kurosh. "On the Past and Future of Farsi Translations of Borges." *Motarjem Quarterly* [فصلنامه مترجم] no. 70 (2020): 87-94.

Arian-Raad, Amin. "A Survey of the Soviet-Iranian Culture Center." *Quarterly of History of Foreign Relations* [فصلنامه تاریخ روابط خارجی] 18, no. 70 (2017): 43-62.

Attar, Farid ud-Din. *Conference of the Birds* [منطق الطیر]. Edited by Mohammad Reza Shafiei Kadkani. Tehran: Sokhan, 2015.

Baraheni, Reza. "History of the Writers' Association of Iran: Another Narrative." *Kelk* [کلک] no. 6 (1990): 215-224.

Baraheni, Reza. "Rewriting *The Blind Owl* [بازنویسی بوف کور]." In *Report to the Ageless Generation of Tomorrow*. Tehran: Markaz, 1995.

Barati, Parviz. *Winds of Enchantment: An Introduction on Occult Sciences in Iran* [بادهای افسون: مقدمه‌ای بر شناخت علوم غریبه در ایران]. Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2017.

BBC Persian. "*We Are Writers*: Statement of 134 Iranian Writers in 1994." Published January 9, 2014. (https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2014/01/140109_l45_chain_murders_134_authors).

Borges, Jorge Luis. *The Book of Imaginary Beings* [کتاب موجودات خیالی]. Translated by Ahmad Okhovat. Tehran: Arast, 1994.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Borges' Labyrinths* [هزارتوهای بورخس]. Translated by Ahmad Mir-Alai. Tehran: Zaman Book, 2002.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Book of Angels* [کتاب فرشتگان]. Translated by Ahmad Okhovat. Tehran: Ofoq, 2011.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *The Aleph* [الف]. Translated by M. Taher Nokandeh. Tehran: Niloufar, 2012.

Borhan, Khalaf Tabrizi. *Borhan-e Ghaate (5 Volumes)* [برهان قاطع]. Edited by Mohammad Moin. Tehran: Ibn-e Sina, 1963.

Shahidi, Jafar (ed.). *Dehkhoda Medium Dictionary (Two Volumes)* [فرهنگ متوسط دهخدا]. Tehran: Dehkhoda Lexicon Institute, 2007.

Eslamieh, Mustafa. *Biography of Nima Yushij* [زندگی‌نامه نیما یوشیج]. Tehran: Niloufar, 2012.

Farzaneh, M. F.. *Meetings with Sadeq Hedayat* [آشنایی با صادق هدایت]. Tehran: Markaz Publishing Co., 2004.

Farzaneh, M. F.. *Sadeq Hedayat in the Spider Web* [صادق هدایت در تار عنکبوت]. Tehran: Markaz Publishing Co., 2017.

Golbon, Muhammad. *Bibliography of Sadeq Hedayat* [کتابشناسی صادق هدایت]. Tehran: Toos Publication, 1975.

Golshiri, Houshang. *Book of Jinn* [جن نامه]. Stockholm: Baran, 1998.

Golshiri, Houshang. *The Dark Side of the Moon: Short Stories* [نیمه‌ی تاریک ماه: داستان‌های کوتاه]. Tehran: Niloufar, 2003.

Golshiri, Houshang. "I Haven't Lived, I Want to be the Other" [من زندگی نکرده‌ام، می‌خواهم دیگری باشم]. In *The Garden of Forking Paths*. Tehran: Jooya, 2015.

Habibi, Nahid. *Bibliography of Sadeq Hedayat* [کتابشناسی صادق هدایت]. Tehran: Ghatreh, 2007.

Hafiz. *The Divan* [دیوان]. Edited by Ghani and Ghazvini. Tehran: Jeyhoun, 2003.

Hedayat, Sadeq. *Neyrangestān* [نیرنگستان]. Tehran: Parastu Books, 1966.

Hedayat, Sadeq. *Letters of Sadeq Hedayat* [نامه‌های صادق هدایت]. Edited by Muhammad Baharlou. Tehran: Oja, 1995.

Hedayat, Sadeq. *82 Letters to Hasan Shahid-Nouraie* [هشتاد و دو نامه به حسن شهید نورائی]. Paris: Ketab-e Cheshm-andaz, 2001.

Hedayat, Sadeq. *Sadeq Hedayat Complete Works, Volume I: The Short Stories* [مجموعه آثار صادق هدایت، جلد اول: داستان‌های کوتاه]. Edited by Jahangir Hedayat. Sadeq Hedayat Foundation, 2008.

Hedayat, Sadeq. *Sadeq Hedayat Complete Works, Volume II: The Satirical Works* [مجموعه آثار صادق هدایت، جلد دوم: طنز هدایت]. Edited by Jahangir Hedayat. Sadeq Hedayat Foundation, 2008.

Hedayat, Sadeq. *Sadeq Hedayat Complete Works, Volume III: Studies on the Folklore of Iran* [مجموعه آثار صادق هدایت، جلد سوم: پژوهش در فرهنگ عامیانه مردم ایران]. Edited by Jahangir Hedayat. Sadeq Hedayat Foundation, 2009.

Hedayat, Sadeq. *Sadeq Hedayat Complete Works, Volume IV: The Blind Owl* [مجموعه آثار صادق هدایت، جلد چهارم: بوف کور]. Edited by Jahangir Hedayat. Sādeq Hedayat Foundation, 2009.

Hedayat, Sadeq. *Sadeq Hedayat Complete Works, Volume V: Studies and Travels* [مجموعه آثار صادق هدایت، جلد پنجم: پژوهش‌ها و سفرهای صادق هدایت]. Edited by Jahangir Hedayat. Sadeq Hedayat Foundation, 2011.

Hedayat, Sadeq. *Sadeq Hedayat Complete Works, Volume VI: Translations* [مجموعه آثار صادق هدایت، جلد ششم: برگردان به زبان فارسی]. Edited by Jahangir Hedayat. Sadeq Hedayat Foundation, 2011.

Hedayat, Sadeq. *Sadeq Hedayat Complete Works, Volume VII: Translation from Pahlavi* [مجموعه آثار صادق هدایت، جلد هفتم: برگردان به فارسی از زبان پهلوی]. Edited by Jahangir Hedayat. Sadeq Hedayat Foundation, 2012.

Hedayat, Sadeq. *Sadeq Hedayat Complete Works, Volume VIII: Historical Satire* [مجموعه آثار صادق هدایت، جلد هشتم: طنزهای تاریخی هدایت]. Edited by Jahangir Hedayat. Sadeq Hedayat Foundation, 2014.

Hedayat, Sadeq. *Sadeq's Khayyam: Collection of Sadeq Hedayat's Writings on Khayyam* [خیام صادق: مجموعه آثار صادق هدایت درباره خیام]. Edited by Jahangir Hedayat. Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2016.

Hedayat, Sadeq. *The Rare Works of Sadeq Hedayat* [آثار نایاب صادق هدایت]. Edited by Jahangir Hedayat. Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2017.

Hedayat, Sadeq. *The Folklore of Iranian People* [فرهنگ عامیانه مردم ایران]. Edited by Jahangir Hedayat. Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2017.

Iran Art [ایران آرت]. "Sadeq Hedayat according to Mahmoud Dowlatabadi." Published April 9, 2019. (http://www.iranart.news/).

Iran's Metropolises News Agency, IMNA [خبرگزاری ایمنا]. "Commemoration of the Borges of Isfahan." Published April 15, 2019. (https://www.imna.ir/news/373105/).

Ishaghpur, Youssef. *The Tomb of Sadeq Hedayat* [بر مزار صادق هدایت]. Translated from French by Bagher Parham. Tehran: Bagh-e Ayeneh Publishers, 1994.

Jamshidi, Ismael. *Sadeq Hedayat's Suicide* [خودکشی صادق هدایت]. Tehran: Elm Publication, 2016.

Kalirad, Ali. "A Dot in Darkroom: Psychological Analysis of Sadeq Hedayat's *Darkroom* and Sait Faik's *A Dot on the Map*." *Iranian Studies* [پژوهش‌های ایرانشناسی] 4, no. 2 (2015): 45-63.

Kelileh & Demneh (New Arabic to Farsi Translation) [کلیله و دمنه]. Translated by Mohammad Reza Marashipour. Tehran: Niloufar, 2014.

Khaqani. *Divan* [دیوان]. Edited by Zia-al-Din Sajjadi. Tehran: Zavvar Publication, 2014.

Maroufi, Abbas. *The Body of Farhad* [پیکر فرهاد]. Tehran: Ghoghnous, 2002.

Moeeni, Mohsen. *Dictionary of Quranic Proverbs* [فرهنگ امثال و تعابیر قرآنی]. Tehran: Farhang Moaser, 2013.

Nirangestan (Manuscript T 58, with word-by-word translation into Persian) [نیرنگستان با زیرنویس فارسی، دستنویس ت 58]. Edited by Mahyar Nawabi and Kh. M. Jamasp. Shiraz: The Asia Institute of Pahlavi University, 1976.

Parastesh, Shahram. *Narrative of Absolute Desolation: A Burdieuian Analysis of* The Blind Owl *within Iran's Literary Field* [روایت نابودی ناب: تحلیل بوردیویی بوف کور در میدان ادبی ایران]. Tehran: Saless Publication, 2014.

Parham, Bagher. "The Tudeh Party and the Writers' Association of Iran I." *Book of Friday* [کتاب جمعه] 1, no. 25 (1980): 10-14.

Parham, Bagher. "The Tudeh Party and the Writers' Association of Iran IV." *Book of Friday* [کتاب جمعه] 1, no. 28 (1980): 19-30.

Rumi. *Mathnawi* [مثنوی معنوی مولوی]. Edited by Reynold A. Nicholson. Tehran: Hermes, 2011.

Sadeqi, Bahram. *Malakut* [ملکوت]. Tehran: Zaman Book, 2007.

Sanati, Mohammad. *Sadeq Hedayat and Fear of Death* [صادق هدایت و هراس از مرگ]. Tehran: Markaz Publishing Co., 2001.

Sarshar, Muhammad Reza. *The Secret of Sadeq Hedayat's Fame* [راز شهرت صادق هدایت]. Tehran: Kanoon Andishe Javan, 2016.

Sattari, Jalal. *Reflection of Myth in* The Blind Owl [بازتاب اسطوره در بوف کور]. Tehran: Toos, 1998.

Shamissa, Cyrus. *Story of a Ghost* [داستان یک روح]. Tehran: Ferdos Publication, 2000.

Shamlou, Ahmad. "Beginning of the Book…" *Book of Friday* [کتاب جمعه] 1, no. 1 (1979): 3.

Shamlou, Ahmad. *Complete Works, Volume I: Poems* [مجموعه آثار، دفتر یکم: شعرها]. Tehran: Negaah, 2004.

Shams [Shamsoddin Muhammad Tabrizi]. *Maqalat* [مقالات شمس]. Edited by Jafar Modarres Sādeqi. Tehran: Markaz, 2007.

The Iranian Writers Association in Exile [کانون نویسندگان ایران در تبعید]. "The Constitution and Charter of the Iranian Writers Association in Exile." Accessed September 19, 2019. (https://iwae.info).

Yushij, Nima. *The Complete Collection of Nima Yushij Letters* [مجموعه کامل نامه‌های نیما یوشیج]. Edited by Sirus Taahbaaz. Tehran: Elmi, 1998.

Yushij, Nima. *Collected Poetry of Nima Yushij* [مجموعه اشعار نیما یوشیج]. Edited by Abdol-Ali Azimi. Tehran: Niloufar, 2008.

Yushij, Nima. *Prose Works of Nima Yushij* [مجموعه آثار منثور نیما یوشیج]. Edited by Sheragim Yushij. Tehran: Roshdieh, 2017.

Yushij, Nima. *Diaries of Nima Yushij* [یادداشت‌های روزانه نیما یوشیج]. Edited by Sheragim Yushij. Tehran: Morvarid, 2017.

Yushij, Nima. *Diaries of Nima Yushij* [یادداشت‌های روزانه نیما یوشیج]. Edited by Sheragim Yushij. Tehran: Roshdieh, 2020.

Yushij, Nima. *Roja: Tabari Poems of Nima Yushij* [روجا: مجموعه اشعار طبری نیما یوشیج]. Edited by Sheragim Yushij. Tehran: Roshdieh, 2022.

Zende-del, Siamak. *Transformations of Iran's Visual Arts: A Critical Study* [تحولات تصویری هنر ایران: بررسی انتقادی]. Tehran: Nazar Publication, 2018.

Zolfaghari, Hasan. *Folklore Beliefs of Iranian People* [باورهای عامیانه مردم ایران]. Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2016.

Arabic:

Azarnoosh, Azartash. *A Modern Arabic-Persian Dictionary (Based on Hans Wehr's Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic)*. Tehran: Ney, 2012.

Makhluf, Issa. *Eastern Dreams: Borges in the Labyrinths of the Thousand and One Nights* [الأحلام المشرقية: بورخس في متاهات ألف ليلة وليلة]. Beirut: Dar al-Nahar al-Nashr, 1996.

Spanish:

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Obras Completas 1923-1972*. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editors, 1974.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Obras Completas 1975-1985*. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editors, 1989.

Garcia, Carlos. "Borges y Dadá (1920-1921): Ensayo de datación de 'Lettre collective' y 'Esquisse critique.'" *Variaciones Borges* 48, (2019): 211–216.

French:

Baudelaire, Charles. *Les paradis artificiels: opium et haschisch*. Paris: Poulet-Malassis & de Broise, 1860.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *L'Aleph*. Traduit par Roger Caillois et René L.F. Durand. Gallimard, 1967.

Bouthoul, Betty. *Le grand maître des Assassins*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1936.

Burroughs, William S., and Brion Gysin. *Oeuvre croisée*. Flammarion, 1976.

Tzara, Tristan. *Poésies completes*. Flammarion, 2011.

Scanned Manuscripts:

Adib al-Mamalek Farahani. *Book of Magic and Enchantment in Chess and Backgammon* [كتاب السحر و النیرنج فی النرد و الشطرنج]. 1917. Library of Iranian Parliament.

Online Data Bases:

Dehkhoda Dictionary [لغتنامه دهخدا]. Dehkhoda Lexicon Institute & International Center for Persian Studies. (https://icps.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary).

Encyclopaedia Iranica. Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, Inc.. (http://www.iranicaonline.org/).

Ganjoor [گنجور], (Data Base for Classical Persian Poetry). (https://ganjoor.net/).

Oxford English Dictionary (OED). Oxford University Press. (https://oed.com/).

The Thousand Nights and a Night. [a *Wollamshram World* project containing various English translations of *1001 Nights*]. (http://www.wollamshram.ca/1001/).

Films and Videos:

Aladdin. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. Walt Disney Pictures, 1992.

Performance. Directed by Donald Cammell and Nicolas Roeg. Goodtimes Enterprises, 1970.

Naked Lunch. Directed by David Cronenberg. Goodtimes Recorded Picture Company, 1991.

Flicker. Directed by Nik Sheehan. 2008.

Youtube. "Houshang Golshiri at Mohammad Mokhtari's Burial." Published December 3, 2018. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRbphR9CkFU).

Audio Recordings:

One Night @ the 1001. Brion Gysin. Sub Rosa Records, 2007.

Appendix A: Figures

Figure 1: 72-square Sufi Chess board, kept at Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford

Figure 2: Graffiti of Sādeq Hedāyat in Tehran, photo by Kurosh Amoui (2016)

Figure 3: Graffiti of Sādeq Hedāyat in Tehran, photo by Kurosh Amoui (2017)

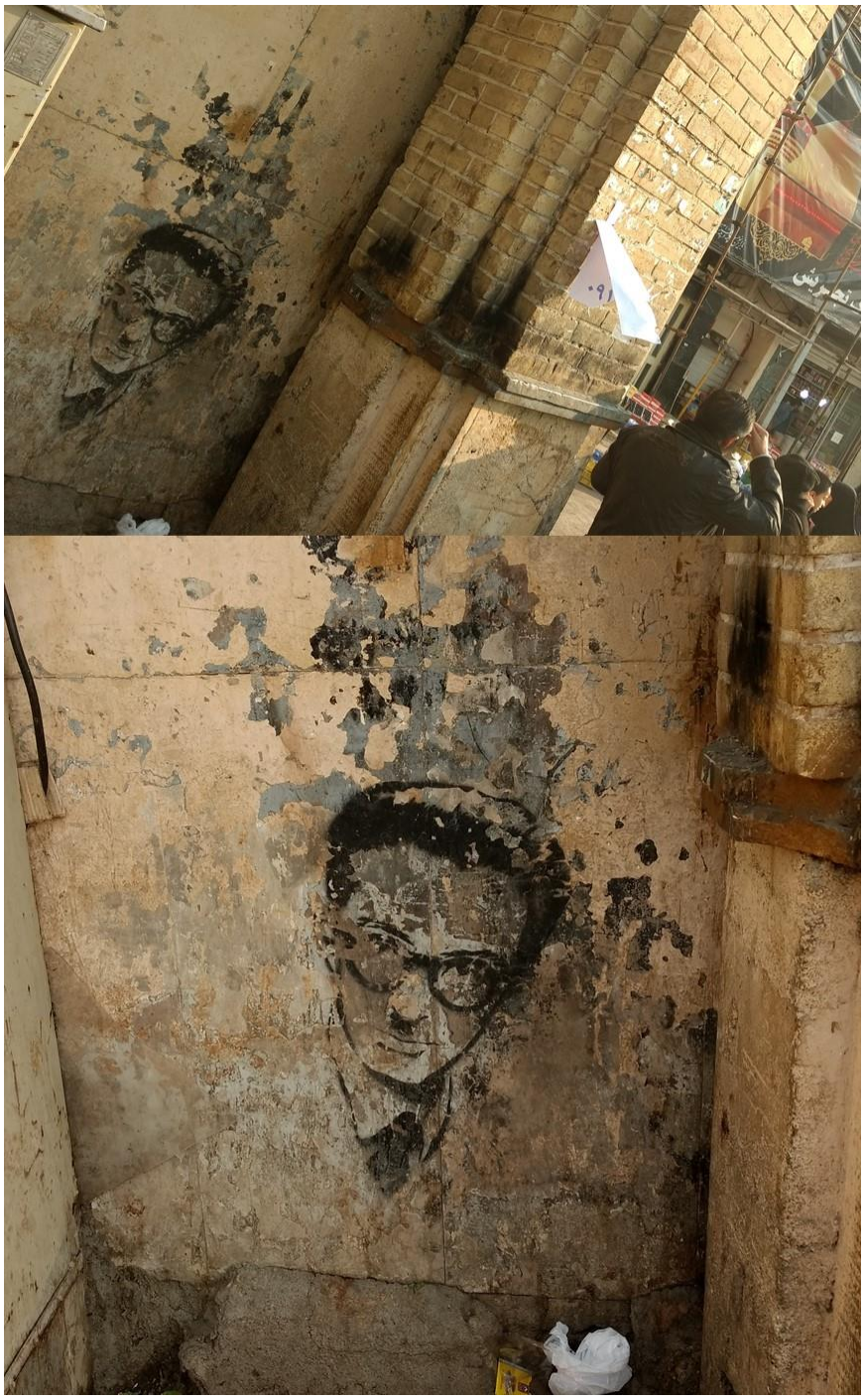


Figure 4: Front cover of a 1966 edition of Neyrangestān *(Tehran: Parastu Books)*

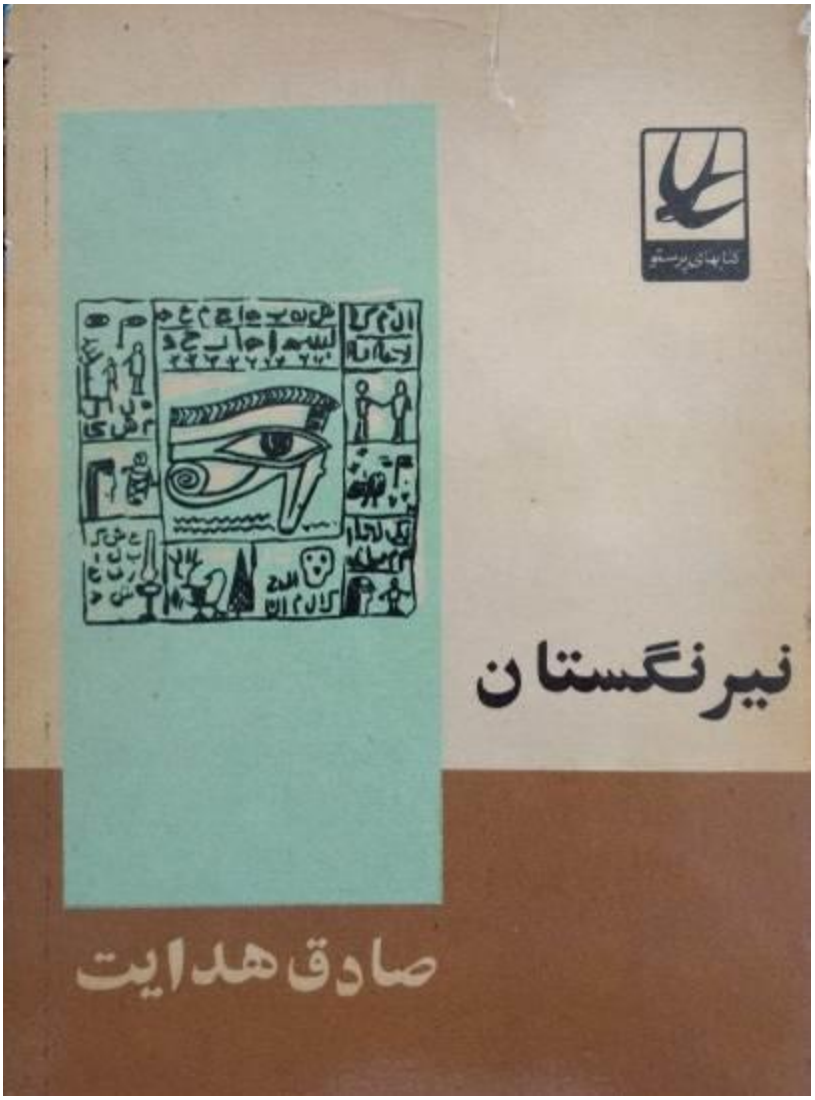


Figure 5: (From right to left) front cover, first page, and last page of the Mumbai edition of The Blind Owl

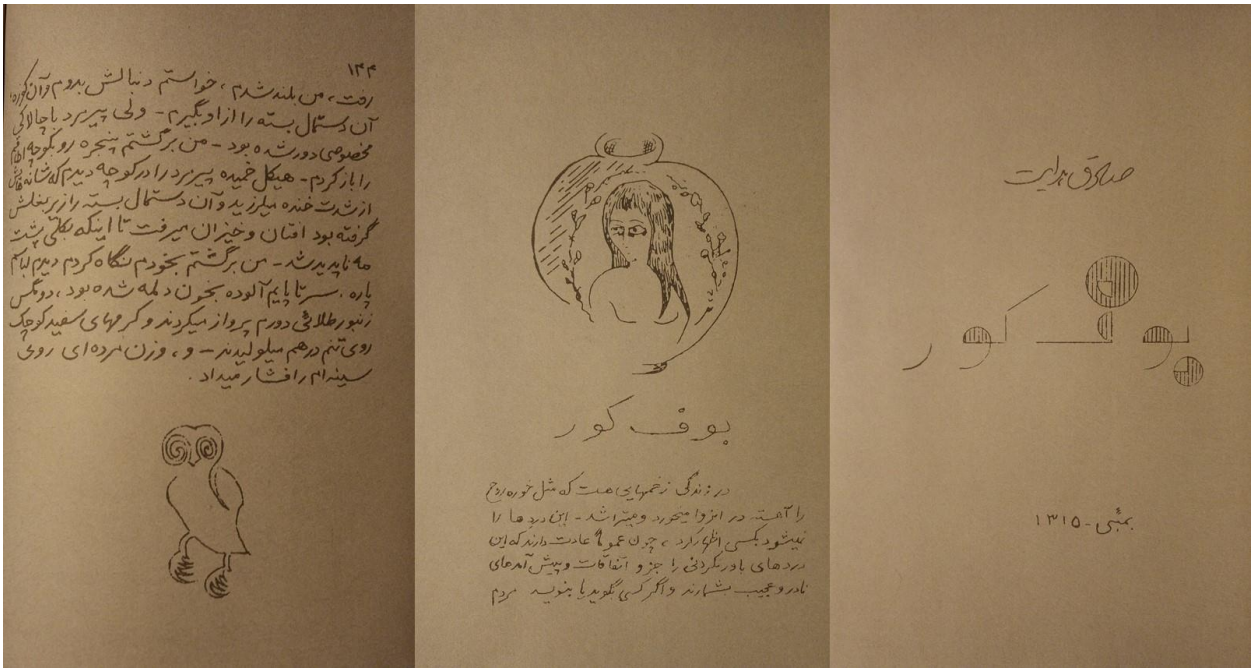


Figure 6: Illustration by Witold Gordon in The Travels of Marco Polo *(New York: Garden City Publishing, 1930)*

Figure 7: Dice and Hammer by Kurosh Amoui (2013)

Figure 8: DADA soulève TOUT. 12 January 1921.

(Les Signataires de ce manifeste habitent la France, l'Amérique, l'Espagne, l'Allemagne, l'Italie, la Suisse, la Belgique, etc., mais n'ont aucune nationalité).

DADA SOULÈVE TOUT

DADA connaît tout. DADA crache tout.

MAIS.....

DADA VOUS A-T-IL JAMAIS PARLÉ :

OUI = NON
OUI = NON
OUI = NON

de l'Italie
des accordéons
des pantalons de femmes
de la patrie
des sardines
de Fiume
de l'Art (vous exagérez cher ami)
de la douceur
de d'Annunzio
quelle horreur
de l'héroïsme
des moustaches
de la luxure
de coucher avec Verlaine
de l'idéal (il est gentil)
du Massachussetts
du passé
des odeurs
des salades
du génie . du génie . du génie
de la journée de 8 heures
et des violettes de Parme

JAMAIS JAMAIS JAMAIS

DADA ne parle pas. DADA n'a pas d'idée fixe. DADA n'attrape pas les mouches

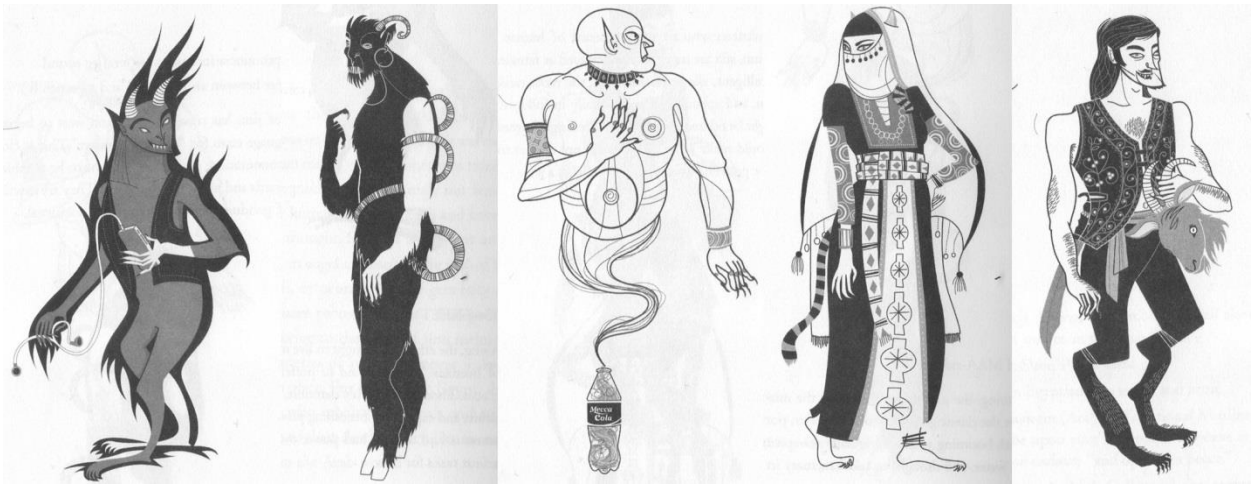
LE MINISTÈRE EST RENVERSÉ. PAR QUI ? PAR DADA

Le futuriste est mort. De quoi ? De DADA
Une jeune fille se suicide. A cause de quoi ? De DADA
On téléphone aux esprits. Qui est-ce l'inventeur ? DADA
On vous marche sur les pieds. C'est DADA
Si vous avez des idées sérieuses sur la vie,
Si vous faites des découvertes artistiques
et si tout d'un coup votre tête se met à crépiter de rire,
si vous trouvez toutes vos idées inutiles et ridicules, sachez que

OUI = NON

C'EST DADA QUI COMMENCE A VOUS PARLER

Figure 9: The five types of jinn from Alif the Unseen *(left to right: Efrit, Ghoul, Marid, Sila, Vetala)*



Appendix B: Table of Content for *The Accident of Scissors Republics*

Chapter 1: The Exordium of the Scissors Movement

Chapter 2: Scissors of the World, Unite!

Chapter 3: The Story of Owls and Crows

Chapter 4: The Story of SandWind of Sea, Narrated by Geomancer of Lahore

Chapter 5: Rubáiyát of Mahsati of Ganja

Chapter 6: The Story of Ishrāqi Occidentalists [in collaboration with Taymaz Azimi]

Chapter 7: The Fantasy of Raven, by Edgar Yushij

Chapter 8: From the Midst of Pebbles and the Mirror Garden

Chapter 9: The Tale of the Deathly Wand, Narrated by Bīdel the Bard of Delhi

Chapter 10: Let's Hear from Tao

Chapter 11: The Rise and Fall of Proletarian Feliformia and the Xenarthrans from Tlön

Chapter 12: The Pros and Cons of Afshārstein and Poetry Machinery [in collaboration with Ata Heshmati]

Chapter 13: Magick and Nērang in Dado and Ajedrez of Xul Solar

Chapter 14: Two Ghazals

Chapter 15: Crossed Winds and CosmiDestino

Chapter 16: Two Qasidas and a Cold Verse

Chapter 17: In Repulse of Imagination [in collaboration with Morehshin Allahyari]

Chapter 18: Another Alf

Chapter 19: Alawiya and Daughters [in collaboration with Mina Rajabi Paak]

Chapter 20: The Fāl of Kafez

Appendix C: English Translation of "The Exordium of the Scissors Movement"

You will understand this step is worthy progress for poetry and poet above this treasure I will pick little by little / my work is taking long.

For this purpose / just like other types of poetry each has a name / as if this conversation is happening among themselves.

Kinetic theory in short / with the collaboration of two and more people / randomly / so you understand well what I was looking for.

Indeed it is conserving specific meaning and nature of everything / now maybe some small small ideas cannot help you / so you wouldn't like a corner of the library as much as I do.

It benefits from fairy tales / if I want it's not from this / better able to explain nature / many times more has this type of advantage / that has five hundred and seventy rings in it / it speaks in occult.

The wise have brought its knowledge to speak.

Such they say / the star darkened in his eyes / at daybreak they beat on drum of journey / they tried consistently and tested every trick / they experimented every instrument / finally they agreed on this method.

If some structures / so you understand well what I was looking for.
If some structures / so you understand well what I was looking for.
If some structures / so you understand well what I was looking for.
If some structures / so you understand well what I was looking for.
If some structures / so they memorize by heart a corner of the library.
If some structures / so they memorize by heart a corner of the library.
If some structures / so they express their intended meaning.
If some structures / so they express their intended meaning.
If some structures / so they express their intended meaning.
If some structures / so they express their intended meaning.
If some structures / so they express their intended meaning.
If some structures / so they express their intended meaning.

No terrestrial force can be a threat to the library / when necessary measuring the text / with more errors they used their materials more / you wouldn't like the book as much as I do.

This is the book of Kelileh & Demneh / so to recognize its multiple layers / to know why through language of animals / when necessary measuring the text / with less errors give to production.

It doesn't reach the place where his profit was / one is Shahrzad and the other Dunyazad / ask me for a tale / I will tell a tale maybe causes me to escape decease / Shahrzad began to cry.

If the king permits I will tell / the king can't sleep either / in addition choosing a more appropriate procedure for conversation / and they tested every trick / they experimented every instrument / finally they agreed on this method.

Indeed it is conserving specific meaning and nature of everything / it expresses a natural and free style of conversation / perhaps you will finish it.

Social movement / any collective effort to advance common interests / have spread over time.

This power and talent of it fit in it accepts from you.
This power and talent of it is there / at least to find a set of connections in a small range.
This power and talent of it they used / I finished the book in this style and gave it to the stage / how and what I want to say.
To recognize this structure through older structures / this incident will cause us patience / stoped talking.
To recognize this structure through older structures / this is just a sample / force, power, speed, distance / change in the effect of force or the direction of force.

So by the side of the pool they took off their clothes / as Shahzaman saw their posture / not worth it from the middle they are connected to each other / the scissors one of the sincere friends / singing of a bird makes a frenzy.

Lunatics and children always tell the truth / they are outside the books / as if this conversation is happening among themselves.

If the scissors are such that they have achieved a beautiful and elegant text / as it grows up and boasts / was aware of poets and writers and elegants and kings of the past.

This power and talent of it was there / one is Shahrzad and the other Dunyazad / from the compilation of stories and fairy tales and various cultural elements / invited / and I finished the meaning in this style and gave it to the stage / how and what I want to say.

This is the book of Kelileh & Demneh / offended I said.

To you Dunyazad.

This book is essential / force, power, speed, distance / change in the effect of force or the direction of force.
This book is essential / there is no virtue above it for poetry and poet / otherwise I would have recognized.
This is the book of Kelileh & Demneh / now maybe some small small ideas cannot help you / so they express their intended meaning.
This is the book of Kelileh & Demneh / that has five hundred and seventy rings in it / after this we deserve no king / then they minded their own business and took the desert road / under a tree that provides.
This is the book of Kelileh & Demneh / has been no virtue for our poetry / they gathered the most expressive and beautiful stories and subjects in it / so they express their intended meaning.

For the people of the world from common people of streets and bazars / ask me for a tale / I will tell a tale maybe causes me to escape decease / Shahrzad began to cry / and others have approached it.

A treasure of secrets that originated from many minds / after comparing the printed copies / as a philosopher I doubted that the world has any order and system / at least to find a set of connections in a small range.

Precession / discussion on changing the position of particles and their motions / does not think well in what he reads / is deserved I showed him that its pages were covered with mysterious letters / stopped talking.

A treasure of secrets that in the sense of recognizing this structure through older structures / this is just a sample / ho young poet.

Books often tell about other books / in fact conditions of being scientific are provided first.

For the people of the world from common people of streets and bazars / of dealing with wisdom and its different branches.
For the people of the world from common people of streets and bazars / of dealing with wisdom and its different branches.
For the people of the world from common people of streets and bazars / from the compilation of stories and fairy tales and various cultural elements / invited / it means to twist and changing direction of the axis of a rotating object / ho younge poet.
For the people of the world from common people of streets and bazars / from the compilation of stories and fairy tales and various cultural elements / invited / if it wants without receiving from what it reads / arrange the book in a simple way.
For the people of the world from common people of streets and bazars / from the compilation of stories and fairy tales and various cultural elements / invited / if I want from this will cause us patience / thus is not from this / otherwise I would have recognized.
For the people of the world from common people of streets and bazars / from the compilation of stories and fairy tales and various cultural elements / invited / and to you the meaning.
For the people of the world from common people of streets and bazars / it is from the will and specific nature of each thing / can make the characters of a story to speak freely.
For the people of the world from common people of streets and bazars / ask me for a tale / I will tell a tale maybe causes me to escape decease / allowed Shahrzad to speak.

If the scissors are such that make tasks easier for human / quantities of energy and labour remain fixed / is possible / it expresses a natural and free style of conversation / the hope it provides is important.

Scissors is a tool to be read / it consists of signs that we trust in them / the books was filled with knowledge and entertainment.

Because although they did not comprehend the meaning / it was clear to them that we trust in them / the books was filled with knowledge and entertainment.

I said this is not a condition of humanity / otherwise I would have recognized.

Types of scissors consist of two types of simple machines that is wedge and lever.

If the king permits I will tell / the king can't sleep either / to a widespread literary movement especially in the context of Farsi language and literature.

Maybe this library was created to / faith in the claims of a movement gathered their importance in it / to arrange a corner of the library in a simple way.

I finished each one's burden in this style and gave it to the stage / how and what I want to say.
I finished each one's burden in this style and gave it to the stage / how and what I want to say.
I finished each one's burden in this style and gave it to the stage / how and what I want to say.
Each one's burden to have spoken.
Each one's burden to arrange in a simple way.

The wise chose its knowledge and the simple-minded its entertainments / newbies tried their perception to you.

This power and talent of it fit there / so to recognize its multiple layers / to know why through language of animals / several types of motion in astronomy / dependent on torque / independent of torque.

Bring Dunyazad to an end. I can't read / these are not letters of alphabet / better able to explain nature / and he set it up / himself also started / neither more nor less.

A treasure of secrets that tells about other signs.

What they wanted from the language of animals / in fact conditions of being scientific are provided first.
What they wanted from the language of animals / in fact conditions of being scientific are provided first.
What they wanted from the language of animals / in fact conditions of being scientific are provided first.
What they wanted from the language of animals / there were two girls at home / thus they returned to their city.
What they wanted from the language of animals / there were two girls at home / the impalpable conversation of a parchment with another parchment / a living creature / repository of forces that were not under control of the human mind.
What they wanted from the language of animals / as a philosopher I doubted that the world has any order and system / the person who seeks knowledge / there were two girls at home / thus they returned to their city.
What they wanted from the language of animals and birds it is to be read / it consists of signs that make tasks very difficult for humans / carpet scissors / carpet scissors / kitchen scissors / sheet metal scissors.
What they wanted from the language of animals and birds in this book is essential / with collaboration of two and more people / randomly / to make a corner of the library speak.
What they wanted from the language of animals / it speaks in occult.

I finished Dunyazad in this style and gave it to the stage / how and what I want to say.

The wise have brought its knowledge to speak.

Indeed it is conserving specific meaning and nature can talk as much as they want / without their constrained and limited poetical same will happen to it.

No terrestrial force can be a threat to the library / it is the best of structures / to make performances expressive.

The library was the place of an age-long and centuries-old whisper / the first duty of a scholar is to learn several languages / ho young poet.

Types of scissors to two types of simple machines is a tool by which numerous organizations around the world.

And you don't like a work as much as I do.
And I finished a work in this style and gave it to the stage / how and what I want to say.
And has made a work to speak.
And memorize a work by heart.
And has make a work to run / does not think well in what he reads / is deserved I showed him that its pages were covered with mysterious letters / this is just a sample / can make the characters of a story to speak freely.
And has called a work to itself / from the compilation of stories and fairy tales and various cultural elements / invited / by means of which / they cut / it has two sharp wings in the sense of this conversation is happening among themselves.

A book that contains wisdom different from our wisdom / a place where lions and beasts you fit there accepts from you.

It benefits from fairy tales / if I want in the sense of this conversation is happening among themselves.

Scissors movement cut-ups of texts / singing of a bird makes a frenzy.

For this purpose / just like other types of poetry each has a name / and with this method a fruitful language to you.

I can't read / these are not letters of alphabet / better able to explain nature / and with this method a fruitful language
I finished in this style and gave it to the stage / how and what I want to say.
I can't read / these are not letters of alphabet / the bird sings and we silent.
I can't read / these are not letters of alphabet / the bird sings and we silent.
I can't read / these are not letters of alphabet / the bird sings and we silent.
I can't read / these are not letters of alphabet / the bird sings and we silent.
Said I didn't believe that you / unless my singing was heard.
Said I didn't believe that you / unless my singing was heard.

The scissors are a tool that tell about other signs.

This movement initially for the encyclopédistes / including joint projects / securing the main goal by means of collective action outside the realm of official organizations / depends on the number of members of that movement.

Scissors movement cut-ups of texts / unless my singing was heard.

Scissors movement cut-ups of texts / by means of which / they cut / it has two sharp wings that tells about other signs.

Maybe this library was created to / faith in the claims of a movement loses its importance / maybe it is not to your liking in the first time / maybe you have it to you.

The scissors are a tool that originated from many minds / thus they returned to their city.

One of the sincere friends / singing of a bird makes a frenzy.
One of the sincere friends / had been to a widespread literary movement especially in the context of language and prolonging the subject / offended I said.
One of the sincere friends / loved to hear stories / allowed Shahrzad to speak.
Vizir recited the story / stopped talking.
Vizir recited the story / stopped talking.
Vizir recited the story / stopped talking.
Vizir recited the story / stopped talking.
Vizir recited the story / stopped talking.
Vizir recited the story / stopped talking.

But my only intention is this freedom in Farsi language and literature.

It's been said / a man was passing a desert / saw signs of a treasure / started digging and searching / if it wants without receiving from what it reads does not think well / is deserved what happens to him.

And no girls were left in the city / there were two girls at home / the impalpable conversation of a parchment with another parchment / a living creature / repository of forces that were not under control of the human mind.

Thus from this treasure I will pick little by little / my work is taking long.

If some structures / so that your heart and your mind can move with every beat / and except for this I know it didn't deserved another name / can make the characters of a story to speak freely.

This structure that fairy tales are in it / books are not made to be trusted / the book must be subject of research.

The wise have put its knowledge to work / at least to find a set of connections in a small range.

A treasure of secrets that in the sense of this conversation is happening among themselves.
A treasure of secrets that originated from many minds / I will be lonesome after this / said the king.

If the king permits I will tell / the king can't sleep either / with the collaboration of two and more people / randomly / so that your heart and your mind can move with every beat / and he set it up / himself also started / neither more nor less.

They were from different tribes / they tried consistently and he set it up / himself also started / neither more nor less.

Memorize Dunyazad by heart.

Bring Dunyazad to speak.

Lunatics and children always tell the truth / they are outside the books / and others have approached it.

So by the side of the pool they took off their clothes / as founded its exaggeration.

Scissors movement cut-ups of texts / unless my singing was heard.

After comparing the printed copies / colleagues in this important work / editing is not after this / better able to explain nature / and has brought the meaning to speak.

Here you guard as it's my bedtime / can be narrated like this / loved to hear stories / allowed Shahrzad to speak.
Here you guard as it's my bedtime / now maybe some small small ideas cannot help you / so you understand well what I was looking for.
Here you guard as it's my bedtime / now maybe some small small ideas cannot help you / so they express their intended meaning.
Here you guard as it's my bedtime / ho young poet.
Here you guard as it's my bedtime / offended I said.
Here you guard as it's my bedtime / can be narrated like this / it speaks in occult.
Here you guard as it's my bedtime / no virtue for poetry and poet above this treasure I will pick little by little / my work is taking long.
Here you guard as it's my bedtime / there is no virtue above this for poetry and poet / the bird sings and we silent.