

In Search of ‘*Alam-i Misal*: Hidayat’s *The Blind Owl* and the Persian Philosophical Tradition

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No discussion of the innovative aspects of Iranian literature can bypass a reference to Sadiq Hidayat (1903–51) and his masterpiece *The Blind Owl* (pub. 1315/1936–37, Bombay). At a time when Iranian literature was integrating in its canon modern genre forms like the short story and the novel (which had gained ground in western European literatures during the nineteenth century), with *The Blind Owl* Hidayat staked an Iranian claim on modernism and avant garde aesthetics, which was novel for Europe as well.¹

¹Discussing the reception of *The Blind Owl* in France, where its first translation was published in 1953, M. R. Ghanoonparvar notes that many French critics hailed it as a masterpiece, sufficient to place Hidayat “among the most eloquent and expressive writers of the present century” and a work which will leave “a special impression in the literary history [of France].” See M. R. Ghanoonparvar, “The Blind Owl (Sadeq Hedayat, Iran, 1941),” in *The Novel Vol 1: History, Geography and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 794–801, quotes on p. 794.

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The Blind Owl's radical departure from the writings of Hidayat's Iranian contemporaries has inspired a range of scholarly studies speculating on the roots of the author's innovations. The emphasis from the 1950s until the early eighties was on possible antecedents of Hidayat's novel in Western literatures. (Rapid modernization along Western lines was the order of the day for the Iranian state and society during those decades.) Notable examples of this trend are some of the articles in Michael Hillmann's compendium *Hedāyat's 'The Blind Owl' Forty Years After*² and Michael Beard's monograph *Hedayat's "Blind Owl" as a Western Novel*.³ Interest in the traits which anchor Hidayat's novel in the Persian literary space gathered momentum after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Perhaps one of the factors in this change of direction—which thus affirms *The Blind Owl*'s place in the Persian literary canon—might have been the ban of the book in Iran, as well as the heightened focus on cultural authenticity triggered by the rise of postmodernist scholarship. Thus, Nasrin Rahimieh points out that Hidayat drew also on Iranian folklore and Indian and Zoroastrian mythology;⁴ Youssef Ishaghpour emphasizes the mystical affinities of *The Blind Owl*;⁵ and Houra Yavari seeks parallels between *The Blind Owl* and Nizami Ganjavi's romantic epic *Haft Paykar* (*Seven Beauties*, twelfth century).⁶ Homa Katouzian's monograph *Sadeq Hedayat: The Life and Literature of an Iranian Writer* opens a new line of investigation, tracing the roots of the novel back to Hidayat's own writing.⁷ Self-referentiality as a distinctly modernist feature of *The Blind Owl* is also highlighted by Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami, who, however, emphasizes the "intra-actions" and "gradual transformations" of the

²Michael C. Hillmann, comp. and ed., *Hedāyat's 'The Blind Owl' Forty Years After*, Middle East Monographs 4 (Austin, TX: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1978).

³Michael Beard, *Hedayat's "Blind Owl" as a Western Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁴Nasrin Rahimieh, "A Systematic Approach to Modern Persian Prose Fiction," *World Literature Today*, no. 1 (1989): 15–19, reference on p. 16.

⁵Youssef Ishaghpour, "At the Tomb of Sadeq Hedayat," *Iran Nameh*, no. 3 (1992): 419–72.

⁶Houra Yavari, *Ravankari va adabiyat; du matn, du insan, du jahan: as Bahram Gur ta ravi-i Buf-i kur* (Tehran: Intisharat-i Sukhan, 2008–9).

⁷Homa Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat: The Life and Literature of an Iranian Writer* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002).

Persian literary tradition which prepared the ground for Hidayat's novel.⁸ Omid Azadibougar also notes the author's self-referentiality in *The Blind Owl*, and cautions against using "European concepts of literary description"⁹ in its analysis, which would lead to its decontextualization and mark it as derivative work, missing the ways in which *The Blind Owl* mocks, subverts, and destabilizes European narrative models. Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh goes a step further in that direction. He would rather "extricate" entirely "emergent literature[s]" from "any reference to the abandoned realms of Western thought" and "the confines of some centralized canon." Alternatively, he would use a "conflicting-comparative methodology" to gauge to what extent the authors (Hidayat included) have distanced themselves from the reigning Western conventions.¹⁰ This trend indicates a radical pushback against issues of "influence" and "origins," which were addressed by authors of the previous waves, and a shift of focus on genre forms and their development within discrete literary traditions.

At first glance, the present article might be mistaken for yet another "search for origins," this time attempting to locate the roots of Hidayat's novel in the Persian philosophical tradition. That is not the idea behind it. This article is part of a larger project based on the hypothesis that *The Blind Owl* is not only a work of fiction, but also an allegory of cultural reform, which posits the continuity of the Persian cultural heritage from pre-Islamic times down to the present and demonstrates how that legacy could be integrated in contemporary Iranian culture by "recasting" iconic elements from it in a modernist framework. In other words, it is a study of intertextuality—deliberate referencing, rather than emulating, aspects of the Persian cultural legacy. The importance of having "the classical Persian perspective" in view—be it even just as a foil to the developments in modern Iranian prose—has been acknowledged by

⁸Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami, *Literary Subterfuge and Contemporary Persian Fiction: Who Writes Iran?* (London: Routledge, 2015), 186.

⁹Omid Azadibougar, "The Serious Century and Hedayat's Grim Laughter," *Iranian Studies* 47 (2014): 21–47, quote on p. 23.

¹⁰Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh, *New Literature and Philosophy of the Middle East: The Chaotic Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), xi and xii.

other authors, too, although with a very different objective.¹¹ So far, I have explored affinities between *The Blind Owl* and Manuchihri's wine poetry, Gurgani's *Vis u Ramin*, and Zoroastrian mythology. But would Hidayat—a “romantic nationalist”¹² who saw Islam as an alien imposition on the Persian cultural space—give a nod of acknowledgment to a branch of philosophy that provided intellectual underpinnings to Shi'i Imamology? Many of his works, as Kamran Talattof points out, exemplify “the Persianist ideology of representation,” which glorifies pre-Islamic Persia and depicts with disdain Muslim concepts and rituals.¹³ And yet, isn't the “philosophic interpretation of religion,” initiated by Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 980–1037),¹⁴ part of the Persian intellectual tradition as well? Ibn Sina's line of philosophical reasoning was later taken in a non-Aristotelian direction by the mystically inclined Suhrawardi (1154–91),¹⁵ and was further developed into “a new school of theosophic Shi'ism” through the writings of Safavid theologians like Mulla Sadra Shirazi (1571/2–1640).¹⁶

Would Hidayat ignore this legacy due to the hypocritical religiosity which he mercilessly lambasts in his short stories “Alaviyyah-khanum” and “In Search of Absolution” (“Talab-i amurzish”)? It is the task of this preliminary study to find out. This paper was written in a pandemic

¹¹Omid Azadibougar, *The Persian Novel: Ideology, Fiction and Form in the Periphery* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), 10.

¹²Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat*, 68–69.

¹³Kamran Talattof, *The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 54. On the prevalence of the Aryanist discourse among Iranian intellectuals of the Pahlavi period, including Sadiq Hidayat, see Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, “Self-Orientalization and Dislocation: The Uses and Abuses of the ‘Aryan’ Discourse in Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 44 (2011): 445–72, reference on p. 466.

¹⁴M. Mahdi, Dimitri Gutas, S. B. Abed, M. E. Marmura, Fazlur Rahman, George Saliba, O. Wright, B. Musallam, M. Achena, S. Van Riet, et al., “Avicenna,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, 2020, dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_6102>.

¹⁵Hossein Ziai, “al-Suhrawardī,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, T. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs, 2012, dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1107.

¹⁶D. MacEoin, “Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, T. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs, 2012, dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_5490.

year when access to library materials was curtailed, and thus relies on a limited range of available sources and sets modest goals: to follow the faint trail of clues in *The Blind Owl*, which seem to reference aspects of Persian philosophical thought, and to see where this trail leads. Considerably broader research will be necessary to decisively prove and expand this hypothesis.

The Cultural Legacy of the Hidayats: Passing on the Torch?

Sadiq Hidayat was the scion of a prominent family which contributed significantly to Persian literature and Iranian culture and politics.

The Hidayats trace their lineage back to Kamal Khujandi¹⁷ (ca. 1320–1400), a Sufi master and poet known as Shaykh Kamal, who was a contemporary of Hafiz and was praised for his graceful style and ecstatic spiritual verses by the literary historian Dawlatshah (1438–95) and the poet Jami (1414–92).¹⁸

The founder of the Hidayat clan was Rizaquli Khan Hidayat (1800–71), a Qajar-era poet, literary historian, educator, and courtier whose nom de plume became their family name.¹⁹ As a poet, Rizaquli Khan was a proponent of the reformist *Bazgash*t (Return) movement, which strove to replace the ornate Indian style popular in Persia around the mid-eighteenth century with the inimitable simplicity of the Persian classics from the ninth to thirteenth centuries. However, his fame as a literary historian and lexicographer far outshines his poetic legacy: Rizaquli Khan is the author of two *tazkirahs* (literary compendiums) that Jan Rypka considers “works of extreme value,” for they not only summarize information found in earlier sources (many no longer available), but add biographies of newer poets, up to the author’s own time:²⁰ *Majma‘ al-fuṣaḥā* (*The Meeting Place of the Eloquent*)

¹⁷Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat*, 17.

¹⁸Paul Losensky, “KAMĀL ҶОJANDI,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, 2020, dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_771.

¹⁹Paul E. Losensky, “HEDĀYAT, REẒĀQOLI KHAN,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, 2020, dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_2952.

²⁰Jan Rypka, “History of Persian Literature up to the Beginning of the 20th Century,” in *History*

comprises the biographies of 867 poets, and *Riāz al-‘ārifin* (*The Gardens of the Mystics*) of 354 Sufi poets. Rizaquli Khan’s writings extend to the realm of religion as well. According to Paul Losensky, he produced treatises on Shi‘i religious lore and on Sufism, and a highly regarded “devotional history” on the Shi‘i imams entitled *Mazāhir al-anwār fi manāqib a‘imma al-aṭhār* (*Manifestations of Lights from the Virtues of the Immaculate Imams*).²¹

Besides preserving the memory of the past, Rizaquli Khan strove to lay down the foundations of the future. As the first principal (*nazim*) of the polytechnical college Dar al-Funun (founded in 1851), he was instrumental in establishing a curriculum which launched modern education in Persia, and according to Rypka, “had a powerful influence on the deployment of the whole of cultural life in Iran.”²²

The interweaving of reformism with attention to the legacy of the past is evident in Sadiq Hidayat’s lifework as well, but with him, it took a different turn, in alignment with the priorities of the day. For Iranian reformers, the priorities of the early twentieth century lay in the establishment of a modern Iranian nation–state and an Iranian culture to match.²³ In the political sphere, between 1925 and 1941 this nation-building urgency was harnessed in Reza Shah Pahlavi’s project of top-down secularization and rapid modernization of Iran along Western lines. The priorities in the cultural sphere included the simplification of the literary style, the democratization of literature through greater attention to the lives of ordinary people, and the acculturation of modern genre forms, already popular in Europe.²⁴

of *Iranian Literature*, ed. Karl Jahn (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Reidel, 1968), 69–348. Quote on p. 340.

²¹Losensky, “HEDĀYAT.”

²²Rypka, “History of Persian Literature,” 339.

²³Nematollah Fazeli places these decades within the “Period of Nationalism,” lasting from the Constitutional Revolution of 1911 to the abdication of Reza Shah in 1941. See Nematollah Fazeli, *Politics of Culture in Iran: Anthropology, Politics and Society in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2006), 2.

²⁴Fazeli, *Politics and Culture*, 2–3.

Sadiq Hidayat was one of the key proponents of this literary revolution. As Michael Hillmann points out, Hidayat's writings brought colloquial language into literary fiction; folk customs were integrated into his plots "in functional ways"; realistic situations and characters replaced didactic narratives and idealized protagonists. Thus, Hidayat's prose "served as an indigenous model for later Persian short-story writers and novelists."²⁵ Meanwhile, his experimental "psycho-fiction," which reached its pinnacle in *The Blind Owl*, kept abreast with a rising trend in world literature contemporaneous with, or even preceding, some of the European modernist works, with which it would be compared later.²⁶ Hidayat's engagement with modernist aesthetics is not surprising: He spent four years in Europe, the last two in Paris (1928–30),²⁷ the epicenter of modernism, where thinkers, writers, and artists like James Joyce, Pablo Picasso, and T. S. Eliot found respite from the cultural constraints of their home environments, and strove to "Make It New"—as Ezra Pound (1885–1972) summed up the modernist objective in his collection of essays under the same title (1934). Hidayat was fluent in French, having graduated from the Lazarist missionary school École St. Louis²⁸ in Tehran, where French was the main language of instruction. His linguistic skills stood him in good

²⁵Michael C. Hillmann, "HEDAYAT, SADEQ: ii. THEMES, PLOTS, AND TECHNIQUE IN HEDAYAT'S FICTION," a subsection of Homa Katouzian, EIR, Michael C. Hillmann, Ulrich Marzolph, and Touraj Daryaei, "HEDAYAT, SADEQ," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, 2020, dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_2953.

²⁶On the timing of the first publication of *The Blind Owl* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausee* (1938), see Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat*, 142. There, the author also notes that Kafka's novels—another possible source of influence on *The Blind Owl*—were published only posthumously and read by Hidayat in the 1940s. Kafka's *The Trial* was written in 1914 and first published in German in 1925, while *The Castle* was finished in 1922 and published in German in 1926. Incidentally, the publication of these two influential novels happened at the time when Sadiq Hidayat was studying in Europe. It will be interesting to know when they were translated and published in French, the foreign language in which Hidayat felt most at home.

²⁷Omid Azadibougar, *World Literature and Hedayat's Poetics of Modernity* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 21.

²⁸On French schools in Iran, see Jean Calmard, Florence Hellot-Bellier, Marie-Louise Chaumont, Massoud Farnoud, Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, Anne-Marie Touzard, Nader Nasiri-Moghaddam, Jacques Duchesne-Guillemain, Christophe Balay, et al., "FRANCE," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, 2020, dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_10379.

stead when, upon graduation in 1925, he was given a grant to study civil engineering in Ghent, Belgium. The subject did not appeal to him, so he changed it to French literature. He went to Paris, where he stayed for a year and a half, then spent some time in Reims and Besançon, before giving up his scholarship in 1930 and returning to Tehran. Although Hidayat did not get a diploma, the four years he spent in Belgium and France were very productive for him as a writer.²⁹ He had started writing before his sojourn there, and the away time did not sever his bonds with his cultural milieu. Rather—as with the other iconic modernists mentioned above—it gave him a critical distance from which to see it with new eyes. (According to Eric M. Bledsoe, in their drive for artistic innovation modernists had to “break with the formal and contextual standards of their contemporaries in making works fundamentally individual.” However, “[these] ‘new’ modern works [could not] be wholly autonomous [. . .] as they [had to] consider the aesthetics of the past in the context of the present moment.”³⁰)

Hidayat’s involvement with the “aesthetics of the past” and his role in the preservation and popularization of the Iranian cultural legacy extended primarily to Iranian folklore and to the heritage of pre-Islamic Persia. Although, as Ulrich Marzolph notes, Hidayat’s collections of folk narratives and customs were not compiled by a trained folklorist, their effect on Iranian folkloristics cannot be overestimated.³¹ His essay “Fulklor ya farhang-i tudah” (“Folklore or the Culture of the People”), published in 1944, provided the first methodological guidelines published in Persian for this discipline.³² Hidayat’s fascination with Iranian folklore was partially motivated by his conviction that it had preserved remnants of customs and beliefs going all the way back to the

²⁹According to some sources (e.g., M. Farzanah, quoted in Katouzian below), an early version of *The Blind Owl* was first produced during Hidayat’s stay in Europe. See Homa Katouzian and Elr, “HEDAYAT, SADIQ i: LIFE AND WORK,” in Katouzian, Elr, Hillmann, Marzolph, and Daryae, “HEDAYAT, SADEQ.”

³⁰Eric Matthew Bledsoe, “‘Make It New,’” in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*, Taylor and Francis, 2016, doi.org/10.4324/9781135000356-REM1131-1.

³¹Ulrich Marzolph, “HEDAYAT, SADEQ: iii. HEDAYAT AND FOLKLORE STUDIES,” in Katouzian, Elr, Hillmann, Marzolph, and Daryae, “HEDAYAT, SADEQ.”

³²Fazeli, *Politics and Culture*, 65–68.

ancient Indo-Iranians: the glories of pre-Islamic Persia and the tragedies visited upon it by alien invaders found expression in a number of his historical plays and short stories on Zoroastrian and pre-Islamic themes. His fascination with the pre-Islamic legacy was one of the factors that sent him to Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1936, where he spent almost two years studying Middle Persian (Pahlavi) with the Parsi scholar Bahramgor Tahmuras Anklesaria (1873–1944) and where *The Blind Owl* was first published in a limited mimeographed edition. Hidayat aided Anklesaria in transcribing Middle Persian texts into New Persian, and himself was the first Iranian to translate some of these texts into New Persian, adding extensive notes and commentaries on extant translations in European languages.³³

As for the Persian intellectual traditions associated with Islam in general, and Shi‘ism in particular, we do not see explicit evidence that Hidayat ever engaged with them, but there is abundant evidence of his interest in cultural continuity. It seems to me that some of the allusions in *The Blind Owl* provide that missing link.

The Blind Owl

Sadiq Hidayat’s famous novel has a bipartite structure, whereby a story of a doomed love is played out twice, in two different settings. Part I is the story of a reclusive painter in love with an elusive “ethereal girl” (*dukhtar-i asiri*). Part II is “a hysterical self-analysis” (Kamshad’s term)³⁴ of a sick young man who is examining in writing his unrequited desire for his unfaithful wife. Both narrators are loners: The painter lives in isolation, amidst ruins, beyond the city limits. The writer resides amidst a bustling city, but in total alienation from “the rabble” (*rajjaliha*) around him. In both cases, the object of love—platonic or carnal—ends up dead: “The ethereal girl” of Part I, for whom the painter has been searching obsessively, appears at his abode one night and dies mysteriously on his bed, as if she has come only to leave in his care

³³Touraj Daryae, “HEDAYAT, SADEQ: iv. TRANSLATIONS OF PAHLAVI TEXTS,” in Katouzian, Elr, Hillmann, Marzolph, and Daryae, “HEDAYAT, SADEQ.”

³⁴H. (Hassan) Kamshad, *Modern Persian Prose Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 165.

her mortal frame, which is quickly afflicted by decay. “The Bitch” (*Lakkatah*) in Part II is inadvertently murdered by her husband, in the only instance when he gains access to her body, by disguising himself as her repulsive old lover.

In previous research, these two domains have been variously equated with the world of dreams and of reality,³⁵ with the past and the present.³⁶ My own reading of the novel highlights the fact that Part I is the story of a painter inspired to create by platonic love, while Part II is a story told by a writer of sorts, motivated by frustrated carnal desire. Read allegorically, the two parts can be seen as an expression of two alternative visions of the creative impulse: classical inspiration (Part I) and Freudian sublimation (Part II).³⁷ It is primarily in Part I that faint references to the classical canon can be found. The present study will explore the possibility that Part I of the novel may harken back in some key details to the Illuminationist theosophy³⁸ of Shihab al-Din Suhrawardī (1154–91), further developed in the treatises of his commentators and by the Shi‘i philosophical tradition. At this early stage, my objective is to see whether the recurrent use of the phrases ‘*alam-i misal* (“the world of dreams” in D. P. Costello’s translation)³⁹ and *dukhtar-i asiri* (ethereal girl) in Part I of the novel could be Hidayat’s tribute to the philosophy of Illumination (*hikmat al-ishraq*). The multidimensional nature of Hidayat’s masterpiece does not preclude any other interpretation of the elements considered in this study.

³⁵See, e.g., Leonardo P. Alishan, “The *menage a trois* in The Blind Owl,” in Hillmann, *Hedayat’s ‘The Blind Owl,’* 168–84, reference on p. 168; and Beard, *Blind Owl as a Western Novel*, 77–81.

³⁶Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat*, 116 and 120.

³⁷Marta Simidchieva, “Rituals of Renewal: Šādeq Hedāyat’s *The Blind Owl* and the Wine Myths of Manučehri,” *Oriente Moderno*, no. 1 (2003): 219–41.

³⁸There is still no scholarly consensus on the terminology most appropriate for Suhrawardī’s writings. According to Hossein Ziai, “Suhrawardī’s thought constitutes neither a theology, nor a theosophy, nor *sagesse orientale*, as the volume of scholarship to date may suggest. Instead, it represents systematic mystical philosophy” (Ziai, *Knowledge and Illumination: A Study of Suhrawardī’s Hikmat al-Ishrāq*, Brown Judaic Studies 97 [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990], 1). Since the present study focuses on Hidayat’s possible “recasting” of Suhrawardī’s thought and not on the study of Suhrawardī’s writings as such, the terminology will follow that used by the authors cited.

³⁹See Sadiq Hidayat, *Buḡ-i kar* (Tehran: Kitabha-i parastu, 1348/1969), 21. See also Sadeq Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, trans. D. P. Costello, introduction by Porochista Khakpour (New York: Grove Press, 2010), 28. All references to the English translation of Hedayat’s novel are to this edition unless otherwise stated.

'Alam-i Misal, or 'Alam-i Barzakh?

It must be noted, though, that the term *'alam-i misal* does not appear in the 1936–37 Bombay edition of *The Blind Owl*, which Hidayat mimeographed himself during his sojourn in the city. Instead, the realm to which this term alludes is called *'alam-i barzakh* (translated by Naveed Noori as “the realm of purgatory”⁴⁰). It is only five years later, in the 1941 Amir Kabir edition, that *'alam-i misal* becomes an established part of the text.⁴¹ According to Naveed Noori (based on a personal communication to him by Hidayat’s nephew Jahangir Hidayat), Sadiq Hidayat “does not appear to have revised this manuscript after the Bombay edition.”⁴² Hence, it must be assumed that all changes in the printed text were made by the Iranian publisher of the 1941 edition. But is it possible that the author did not have a say at all on how his text would appear for the first time in his native land (excluding the censor’s interventions, of course)? It seems to me that a culturally significant change like the introduction of *'alam-i misal* instead of *'alam-i barzakh* would not have been made without the author’s acquiescence. But whether or not Hidayat had a hand in it, what could have prompted the replacement?

The answer might lie in the works on Suhrawardi by the French philosopher and orientalist Henry Corbin (1903–78), three of which appeared in French, in quick succession, between 1932 and 1939—that is, before the first Iranian publication of *The Blind Owl*.⁴³ Corbin would

⁴⁰See, e.g., Sadegh Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, trans. Naveed Noori under the auspices of the Sadegh Hedayat Foundation (n.p.: Iran Open Publishing Group, 2011), 8.

⁴¹Naveed Noori, “Preface,” in Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, trans. Noori, vii–xxvii, reference on p. xv. According to Michael Hillmann, the first publication of *The Blind Owl* in Iran was in the Tehran weekly *Iran*, where it was serialized in the fall of 1941 after the abdication of Reza Shah. The novel appeared in book form toward the end of the same year, and that version has been reprinted ever since. See Michael C. Hillmann, “BŪF-E KŪR,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, 2020, dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_7181. I have no information about whether that serialized version referred to *'alam-i misal* or to *'alam-i barzakh*. This detail should be checked, for it may shed light on when—if not by whom—the term was changed.

⁴²Noori, “Preface,” viii.

⁴³The three works of Henry Corbin referred to here are Henry Corbin, *Suhrawardi al-Maqtul*, Yahya b. Habash, and Shihabuddin Yahya Suhrawardi, “Pour l’anthropologie philosophique: Un traité Persan inédit de Suhrawardi d’Alep (1191),” *Recherches philosophiques* 1 (1932): 371–96;

become the most prominent Suhrawardi scholar of his time worldwide. He was fascinated by Suhrawardi's fusion of Islamic theosophy, the philosophy of Plato, and "the spiritual vision of Ancient Persia."⁴⁴ The French scholar emphasized the unbroken link between the spirituality of pre-Islamic and Islamic Persia, and saw the Illuminationist theosophy of Suhrawardi (where Platonic ideals are recast as Persian archangels) as a synthesis of the Zoroastrian legacy with that of the Greek philosophers.⁴⁵ That synthesis, and Corbin's enthusiastic promulgation of it, would have caught the attention of Hidayat, who—by all appearances—did follow closely the reception of Persian literature and culture abroad, especially in France.

However, the term '*alam-i misal*' does not appear in Suhrawardi's writings either, although he is the one who introduced in Islamic philosophy the notion of a distinct "realm of suspended images" (*al-muthul al-mu'allaqa*) or of "pure figures" (*al-ashbah al-mujarrada*)—a world situated between the spiritual and the physical realms,⁴⁶ which corresponds to the notion of '*alam-i misal*' in the treatises of Suhrawardi's commentators and followers. (According to van Lit, the term '*alam-i misal*' appears first in the commentaries on Suhrawardi's writings by the thirteenth-century polymath Shams al-Din Shahrazuri. This term, along with Shahrazuri's explanations of what that world is, was taken up by subsequent authors and has shaped the scholarly discourse on the topic down to the present.⁴⁷)

Henry Corbin, Paul Kraus, Suhrawardi al-Maqtul, Yahya b. Habash al-, and Shihabuddin Yahya Suhrawardi, "Suhrawardi d'Alep. Le bruissement de l'aile de Gabriel, traité philosophique et mystique, publié et traduit avec une introduction et des notes," *Journal Asiatique* 227 (1935): 1–82; and Henry Corbin, *Suhrawardi d'Alep (1191) fondateur de la doctrine illuminative (ishraqi)* (Paris: G. P. Maisonneuve, 1939).

⁴⁴Corbin, *En Islam Iranien : Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, vol. IV, *L'école d'Ispahan, l'école shaykhie, le douzième imâm* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 10, quoted in L. W. Cornelis van Lit, *The World of Image in Islamic Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 6.

⁴⁵See, e.g., Henry Corbin, "Mundus Imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imaginal," *Les Amis de Henry & Stella Corbin*, www.amiscorbin.com/bibliographie/mundus-imaginalis-or-the-imaginary-and-the-imaginal/ (accessed 1 June 2021); and Daryush Shayegan, "CORBIN, HENRY," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, 2020, dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_7833.

⁴⁶Fazlur Rahman, "Dream, Imagination, and '*Alam al-Mithal*,'" *Islamic Studies*, no. 2 (1964): 167–80, quotes on p. 169.

⁴⁷van Lit, *World of Image*, 79 and 93.

Henry Corbin followed in the footsteps of Suhrawardi’s Muslim commentators. According to van Lit, in a way Corbin read back the term *‘alam-i misal*, developed by them, into the writings of Suhrawardi himself, “continuously [speaking] of *‘alam-i misal* when discussing Suhrawardi, when Suhrawardi never uses this term in any of his writings.”⁴⁸ Although van Lit gives credit to Corbin, who “single-handedly raised our ability to study Suhrawardi, and our knowledge of him, to a whole new level,” he nevertheless highlights the scholar’s “deeply personal approach” to the study of the subject matter, and the lack of historicity in his analyses.⁴⁹ Similar criticism—but in much harsher terms—has been leveled at Corbin by other modern scholars.⁵⁰ However, as Maria Subtelny rightly notes, Corbin was a phenomenologist and not a historian, and he expressly states on numerous occasions that his interest lies not in the historical development of religion, but in the “religious facts”—the experience and conceptualization of the sacred by the followers of a religious tradition.⁵¹ Subtelny’s concluding remarks on Corbin’s contribution to the study of esoteric thought in Islam suggest why, five years after the original Bombay publication of *The Blind Owl*, Hidayat may have introduced the notion of *‘alam-i misal* in his masterpiece—or may have gone along with the change made by his publishers: “Corbin’s signal achievement—and it has yet to be equaled—consisted in recreating, through his poetical hermeneutical technique, the *weltanschauung* of the medieval Islamic mystics and visionaries in a way that not only made them accessible to those without the requisite philological training to penetrate the textual sources, but that utterly transformed the way in which sensitive scholars of medieval mysticism, in both the Islamic and Jewish traditions, looked at their sources.”⁵²

⁴⁸van Lit, *World of Image*, 2 and 4.

⁴⁹van Lit, *World of Image*, 3.

⁵⁰For example, Steven M. Wasserstorm, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Sholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁵¹Maria E. Subtelny, “History and Religion: The Fallacy of Metaphysical Questions (A Review Article),” *Iranian Studies* 36 (2003): 91–101, quote on p. 93.

⁵²Subtelny, “History and Religion,” 100.

Does the delayed introduction of the term *'alam-i misal* in *The Blind Owl* suggest that a reference to the theosophy of Suhrawardi could not have been intended by Hidayat at the outset? Not necessarily.

Barzakh is a Qur'anic term that has two meanings: 1. an impenetrable barrier that separates the sweet from the salty waters on earth,⁵³ and 2. a barrier that prevents the dead from returning to the world of the living until the Day of Resurrection.⁵⁴

Suhrawardi uses the term *barzakh* in the expression “double *barzakh*,” when he explains in *Hikmat al-ishraq* (translated by Corbin as *Oriental Theosophy*) his fourfold model of the universe:

Suhrawardi: I have witnessed in my soul some authentic and unquestionable experiences which prove that the universes are four in number: there is the world of dominant or archangelic Lights (Luces victorales, the *Jabarut*); there is the world of the Lights

⁵³On *barzakh* as a barrier between waters in the Qur'an, see, e.g., Qur'an 25:53: “It is He Who let free the two bodies of flowing water, one palatable and sweet, and the other salt and bitter; yet has He made a barrier [*barzakh*] between them, a partition that is forbidden to be passed.” See also Qur'an 55:19–20: “He has let free the two bodies of flowing water, meeting together. Between them is a barrier [*barzakh*] which they do not transgress.” All translations of Qur'anic verses are based on *The Quran: The Meaning of the Glorious Quran*, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali (Istanbul: Asir Media, 2002). See also Salman Bashier, “Barzakh, Sūfī Understanding,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, and Everett Rowson, 2012, dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_25238; and B. Carra de Vaux, “Barzakh,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, T. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs, 2012, dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_1249.

⁵⁴On *barzakh* in the Qur'an as a barrier between the living and the dead, see, e.g., Qur'an 23:99–100: “(In falsehood will they be) Until, when death comes to one of them, he says, ‘O my Lord! Send me back (to life), in order that I may work righteousness in the things I neglected.’ By no means! It is but a word he says. Before them is a Partition [*barzakh*] till the Day they are raised up.” For a detailed study of the notion of *barzakh* in a variety of contexts in Arabic and Persian traditional scholarship, see Malihe Karbassian, “The Meaning and Etymology of *Barzakh* in Illuminationist Philosophy,” in *Illuminationist Texts and Textual Studies: Essays in Memory of Hossein Ziai*, ed. Ali Gheissari, Ahmed Alwishah, and John Wallbridge (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 86–95. According to her (see p. 86), Suhrawardi uses the term *barzakh* to mean “body,” but he distinguishes three kinds of bodies, opaque (*hājiz*), which completely blocks light; transparent (*latīf*), which does not block light; and translucent (*muqtaṣid*), which transfers light incompletely.

governing bodies (the Souls, that is to say, the *Malakut*); there is a double *barzakh* and there is the world of autonomous Images and Forms, some of them dark, some luminous, the first constituting the imaginative torment of the reprobate, the second the imaginative sweetness enjoyed by the blessed [. . .] This last world is the one we call the world of the Apparentiae reales which are independent of matter (*alam al-ashbah al-mujarrada*); this is the universe in which the resurrection of bodies and divine apparitions are realized and where all the prophetic promises are fulfilled.⁵⁵

According to Suhrawardi's commentator Qutb al-Din Shirazi (thirteenth century), the expression "double *barzakh*" refers to "the world of bodies perceptible to the senses," because the body or any material form is in itself a *barzakh* (division, barrier). That realm "is divided into the world of the celestial Spheres with the astral bodies they enclose, and the world of the Elements with their compounds."⁵⁶ This interpretation of the "double *barzakh*" is confirmed by Suhrawardi's own brief description of the structure of the universe in his Persian treatise *Partaw-Namah*, written in accessible language for the Seljuq ruler Sulayman Shah.⁵⁷ There, Suhrawardi enumerates three realms of existence: the Realm of Intellect (*alam-i 'aql*), consisting of "non-corporeal essences free from matter"; the Realm of Soul (*alam-i nafs*; *Malakut*), comprising "essences free of matter,"

⁵⁵Suhrawardi, *Hikmat al-ishraq*, quoted in Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Islam*, trans. Nancy Pearson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 130.

⁵⁶See Qutbuddin Shirazi, quoted in Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 130: "The double *barzakh* constitutes the third universe; it is the world of bodies perceptible to the senses (because everything which has a body forms an interval, a distance, a *barzakh*). It is divided into the world of the celestial Spheres with the astral bodies they enclose, and the world of the Elements with their compounds." See also Hermann Landolt, "Suhrawardi's 'Tales of Initiation,'" review of *The Mystical and Visionary Treatises of Suhrawardi*, by W. M. Thackston, Jr., *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107 (1987): 475–86: "The physical world, whether of terrestrial bodies or of relatively luminous celestial ones, is indeed *barzakh* for Suhrawardi, and the ultimate Sphere is only the most subtle of all *barzakhs*" (p. 477).

⁵⁷On *Partow-Nameh*, see Hossein Ziai, "Introduction," in *The Book of Radiance Partow-Nameh, a Parallel English Persian Text*, by Sohrawardi, ed. and trans. Hossein Ziai (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1998), ix–xx, reference on p. xiv.

which “take matter upon themselves”; and finally, the Realm of Matter or of the Earthly Dominion (‘*alam-i jirm*; ‘*alam-i mulk*), which is further subdivided into the aerial/ethereal realm (‘*alam-i asir*) of the celestial beings (*aflak*) and the Realm of the Elements (‘*alam-i ‘unsuriat*).⁵⁸ The fact that the ethereal and the elemental spheres are both part of a single material realm may have found expression in Part I of *The Blind Owl*, where breaches between the material world of the narrator and the world which the “ethereal girl” inhabits occasionally occur: the painter glimpses her for the first time through an opening in the wall of his closet, which later disappears.⁵⁹ (Such details—and the original use of ‘*alam-i barzakh* in the novel—suggest that Hidayat’s possible sources of inspiration were the works of Suhrawardi himself, and not Corbin’s interpretations of Suhrawardi’s vision.)

In Islamic thought, the notion of ‘*alam-i misal* is of later extraction. As van Lit points out, it evolved out of the eschatological concerns of medieval philosophers like Ibn Sina regarding the fate of the departed souls who have neither achieved the intellectual perfection that allows the purest ones to taste true felicity by joining the intelligible world, nor are among the irretrievably corrupt souls destined to suffer eternal misery by being excluded from that realm. For the souls in-between, Ibn Sina envisages a state in which they experience the rewards and punishments of the afterlife promised by revelation, perceived through their faculty of imagination.⁶⁰ However, since—according to the medieval philosophers—imagination is located in a cavity of the brain, the problem was how it would survive the shedding of the body after death. Ibn Sina suggests that the in-between souls might have to connect “to a celestial body or something equal to it,” which would become substrate to the faculty of imagination.⁶¹ Suhrawardi develops this hypothesis further. He proposes a place, the celestial world,

⁵⁸Sohravardi, *Book of Radiance Partow-Nameh*, 67–68.

⁵⁹Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 25–27; and Hidayat, *Buf-i kur*, 17–21.

⁶⁰van Lit, *World of Image*, 24–25.

⁶¹Ibn Sina, “Sharh Utulujjiya,” quoted in van Lit, *World of Image*, 25. See also p. 26.

where intermediate souls will have sensory perceptions as they did before death.⁶² By establishing a connection to a celestial body, the good but imperfect souls “will imagine wonderful, delicate images and forms, which they may enjoy.”⁶³ (As for the bad souls, they are denied a connection to the ethereal bodies, but through a spherical body on the boundary, *barzakh*, between the ethereal world and the elemental world, they imagine fire, snakes, scorpions, and other terrors that religion describes.⁶⁴)

The celestial bodies are made of ether (they are *asiri*), and the souls do not actually connect to them, as souls do to their material bodies, which they control, but the presence of the celestial bodies to the souls allows them to acquire “knowledge by presence” (*al-‘ilm al-huzuri*),⁶⁵ which mirrors, according to Roxanne Marcotte, mystical intuition.⁶⁶ Van Lit points out that the images, which the soul sees through that association, are “suspended images” (*musul mu’allaqa*): they have an independent existence, but neither a specific shape nor a location. Rather, they take on the shape of the souls’ desires and fears, and where they appear, like an object reflected in a mirror, is their “place of manifestation” (*mazhar* rather than *mahal*), which does not actually contain them. And yet, they are not a mere fantasy: Just like bodies in a material world, they can be experienced through the senses—for example, touched, smelled, or heard. Even physical places such as lands, mountains, and seas can be experienced in a similar manner.⁶⁷ All of these observable representations are part of “the world of suspended images” (*‘alam al-musul al-mu’allaqa*), which Suhrawardi also calls “world of autonomous shapes” (*‘alam al-ashbah al-mujarrada*) and even once—*al-‘alam al-misali*—“the imaginable world.”⁶⁸ The “suspended images” from this world appear not only to souls in the afterlife: they may appear

⁶²On Suhrawardi’s intermediate realm, see van Lit, *World of Image*, 39.

⁶³Suhrawardi, quoted in van Lit, *World of Image*, 44.

⁶⁴van Lit, *World of Image*, 46.

⁶⁵van Lit, *World of Image*, 48.

⁶⁶Roxanne Marcotte, “Suhrawardi,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2019, plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/suhrawardi/.

⁶⁷van Lit, *World of Image*, 57.

⁶⁸van Lit, *World of Image*, 56.

to the living in dreams or in meditations, or may manifest themselves as jinn and devils—all observable through the imaginative quality.⁶⁹

What may trigger such encounters between the living and the entities from “the world of suspended images”? In his *Book of Conversations*, Suhrawardi notes that they may occur in several ways: through observing a work of art; “through a certain way of reading a written text”; through hearing the voice, gentle or terrifying, of an invisible speaker; or through a visitation of one of the “celestial princes” in the form of a constellation, a human form, or the form “of places appropriate to the moment.” It could also be “the souls of the past which induce an awakening or an inner call.”⁷⁰ But one of the conditions for this encounter appears to be the reclusive nature of the seeker, who is described as a “solitary exile.” The seeker also needs to be initiated by a “master of theosophic experience,” although in very rare cases may be guided “by special divine assistance.”⁷¹

Is *The Blind Owl* Hidayat’s Homage to the Philosophy of Illumination?

The basic outlines of *The Blind Owl*’s plot seem to indicate Hidayat’s familiarity with Suhrawardi’s scenario for a suprasensory encounter of a seeker with the world of suspended images. Thus, the narrator of the novel is a recluse (both in Part I and Part II); he experiences visions that appear out of nowhere, and moves between two worlds, which are parallel, but also drastically different from one another. How can we be sure that these coincidences are an intentional nod to the philosophy of Illumination? We should not expect to discover in *The Blind Owl*

⁶⁹van Lit, *World of Image*, 63–64. Roxanne Marcotte (“Suhrawardi”) explains the essence of this “world of suspended images” in simpler terms. This “world of immaterial shapes” (*ashbah mujarrada*) exists alongside 1. the world of intelligible or dominating (*qahira*) lights, perceptible only through the intellect; 2. the world of spiritual managing (*mudabbira*) lights, associated with a human or celestial body; and 3. the material world of bodies or barriers (*barzakhian*). In the fourth world, new entities exist—“suspended forms,” which the souls of the dead can perceive with their imagination. These images are not embedded in matter but exist as ghosts or as images “suspended” in a mirror. They provide the essence of dreams, visions, and miraculous occurrences, but some can also be actualized in the material world.

⁷⁰Suhrawardi, quoted in Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 123.

⁷¹Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 124.

a consistent and explicit reflection of the Illuminationist principles. Rather, like the multicolored pieces in a kaleidoscope, shards of them, intermixed with other components, might fall into place only when viewed from a certain angle.

Hidayat pays homage to the classical tradition in a highly subjective manner, which finds expression, in my view, in the statement of the author's artistic alter-ego, the painter-narrator of Part I, as he prepares to draw the portrait of the dead ethereal girl. Like that painter, Hidayat records "the essential lines" of an iconic artifact, selecting only "those lines of which [he has himself] experienced the power." The end product is a representation which may have "emanated" from a classical source, but is now rendered in novel ways—as it has "impressed itself" on the author's mind.⁷²

The new representation might combine features of more than one "model." Thus, the narrator's descriptions of the ethereal girl in Part I to *The Blind Owl* harken back both to the celestial bodies, which serve as substratum for the imaginal faculty of the souls of the departed, and to the suspended images, which imprint themselves on the imaginal faculty of the rational soul of both the dead and the living. The girl's resemblance to the celestial bodies (*ajsam-i asiri*) is emphasized through the designation *dukhtar-i asiri*, which suggests that she is of the same substance as them. Her "slender, ethereal, misty form" (*andam-i asiri, barik u mahalud*) reinforces the impression that her substance is not of this Earth.⁷³ Not only her body, but everything that touches it—including her dress and the flower she holds—are from beyond this world, and any earthy thing—even the glance of a human—will cause her to wither.⁷⁴ Like Suhrawardi's celestial bodies, which are of a finer quality and a higher order than the bodies made up of the material world's four elements,⁷⁵ she is "a creature apart" or rather, "a creature of a higher stature" (*vujud-i barguzidah*).⁷⁶ Indicative of her kinship to the

⁷²Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 40; and Hidayat, *Buḥ-i kur*, 38–39.

⁷³Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 21; and Hidayat, *Buḥ-i kur*, 13.

⁷⁴Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 30; and Hidayat, *Buḥ-i kur*, 24.

⁷⁵van Lit, *World of Image*, 94.

⁷⁶Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 30; and Hidayat, *Buḥ-i kur*, 24.

celestial bodies are the references to light and heavenly bodies through which the narrator first introduces her (“ray of sunlight,” “passing gleam,” “falling star”), and the fact that the immediate effect of her appearance on him is the sudden surge of knowledge, which opens his eyes to his own condition: in the light of her presence, within a moment, the painter “beheld all the wretchedness of [his] existence and apprehended the glory and splendour of the star.”⁷⁷ Could this conjunction of references to light, heavenly bodies, and knowledge be a distant echo of Suhrawardi’s idea of “knowledge by presence” (*al-‘ilm al-huzuri*), whereby simply the presence of a celestial body to a soul (as a substrate [*mawzu*] for the faculty of the imagination) allows the soul of a departed person to experience the afterlife which the person deserves?⁷⁸

There are also significant differences between the ethereal girl and the celestial bodies. According to Suhrawardi, although made of a substance (but not of the four elements), the celestial bodies do not mix with the “dregs” (*kudurat*) of elemental matter. They do not decay, do not perish, and are of a “fixed form,” while the “elemental bodies are generated and corruptible, with a changing form.”⁷⁹ As for the ethereal girl, when she appears at the doorstep of the painter–narrator and lies on his bed, she not only dies (after he administers a sip of his inherited wine between her lips), but also decays rapidly—as if she has been dead for several days.⁸⁰ The very fact that she can be touched, held, and finally, dismembered makes her akin to Suhrawardi’s suspended images, which can be experienced through all five senses, and can “come into being and go out of it.”⁸¹ Although these suspended images are “neither intellects, nor souls, nor bodies,” they have particular “sensory qualities” and are “that which the soul perceives in whichever way,” in accordance with its specific situation.⁸²

⁷⁷Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 21; and Hidayat, *Buf-i kur*, 12.

⁷⁸van Lit, *World of Image*, 44 and 48.

⁷⁹Suhrawardi, quoted in van Lit, *World of Image*, 44 and 202n93.

⁸⁰Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 36–37; and Hidayat, *Buf-i kur*, 34.

⁸¹van Lit, *World of Image*, 55–56.

⁸²L. W. Cornelis van Lit and Christian Lange, “Constructing a World of Its Own: A Translation

As van Lit points out, suspended images can not only change shape, but also be of different kinds: some are “dark,” some “illuminated.” In the afterlife, the former kind imprint themselves on the imaginative capacity of the souls deserving punishment, who have no control over what they experience,⁸³ and thus encounter their worst nightmares and fears. In earthly life, apart from appearing in dreams and nightmares, the “suspended images” may appear like devils and jinn to all present, imprinting themselves on the observers’ faculty of imagination, which then transmits them to common sense (*al-hiss al-mushtarak*), making the apparitions perceptible.⁸⁴

The emblematic “bent old man” (*pir-i mard-i quz kardah*),⁸⁵ who appears in three incarnations in Part I of the novel, may be assigned to this particular group of repulsive and frightening jinni-like figures. We see him first as the painter’s putative uncle from India, dressed as an Indian yogi, with “a ragged yellow cloak on his back” (*‘aba ‘-i zard-i parah ‘i*).⁸⁶ Then, we encounter him in the painter’s vision of the ethereal girl as the bent old man sitting under the cypress tree, whose demonic laughter interrupts the artist’s reverie of the archetypal scene he observes through the opening of his closet wall.⁸⁷ Finally, he appears again as the bent old hearse driver with his “hollow, grating, sinister laughter” (*khandah-i duragah-i khushk u zanandah*), who takes the narrator to the mosque Shah Abd ul-‘Azim to bury the ethereal girl’s dismembered body, and has an uncanny knowledge of all particulars of the painter’s life.⁸⁸

of the Chapter on the World of Image from Shahrazūrī’s *Rasā’il al-Shajara al-Ilāhiyya*,” in Gheissari, Alwishah, and Wallbridge, *Illuminationist Texts and Textual Studies*, 160–78, quote on pp. 162–63. According to Corbin, that perception happens without the involvement of the senses, which are among the facilities of the physical organism, but rather through the “active imagination,” “the organ that permits the permutation of internal spiritual states into external states” (Corbin, “Mundus Imaginalis”).

⁸³van Lit, *World of Image*, 54–55.

⁸⁴van Lit, *World of Image*, 63.

⁸⁵Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 24; and Hidayat, *Buf-i kur*, 16.

⁸⁶Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 24–25; and Hidayat, *Buf-i kur*, 16–17.

⁸⁷Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 25–27; and Hidayat, *Buf-i kur*, 18–19.

⁸⁸Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 44–54; and Hidayat, *Buf-i kur*, 44–51.

However, the function of these three figures in the narrative of Part I goes well beyond the traditional fear-inducing role of jinn and demons. Their intervention propels the plot's action forward. In a way, all of them act as guides who initiate the painter on a quest for artistic perfection and ensure that he attains that goal.⁸⁹

For example, the arrival of the uncle figure prompts the painter to enter his dark closet in search of a bottle of ancestral wine, which leads to his sighting of the archetype of the scene he has always painted. This vision makes him abandon his crudely drawn images and sends him on his search for the ethereal girl. Thus, the inception of the plot's action and the trigger of the painter's quest seem to follow a scenario anticipated by Suhrawardi's assertion that, as far as the appearance of suspended images is concerned, "[sometimes] it is the souls of the past which induce an awakening or an inner call."⁹⁰ We could assume also that the uncle is a stand-in for "the magnificent prince, Hurakhsh [the Angel-Prince of the Sun], the most sublime of those who have assumed a body, the greatly venerated one who, in the terminology of the Oriental theosophy, is the Supreme Face of God."⁹¹ Hurakhsh, according to Suhrawardi, appears to "the perfected recluse" in order to "sustain the meditation of the soul by lavishing light upon it," and by bearing witness to its meditation.⁹² It is not surprising, then, that the painter's epiphany is indirectly caused by the arrival of his uncle, who has disappeared without a trace when the narrator comes to from the rapture. We should not forget the fact that the uncle is wearing a yellow coat—a color associated with the sun.

⁸⁹There are other plausible interpretations of the recurrence of the "bent old man" figure in *The Blind Owl*, which will not be addressed in this preliminary study, since the authors' focus is not on the relationship of the novel to the Persian classical heritage. Among the more recent ones are Michael Cisco, "Eternal Recurrence in *The Blind Owl*," *Iranian Studies* 43 (2010): 471–88; and Sina Mansouri-Zeyni, "Haunting Language-Game: Baudrillardian Metamorphoses in Sadiq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*," *Iranian Studies* 46 (2013): 553–68.

⁹⁰Suhrawardi, quoted in Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 123.

⁹¹Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 306n9 and 306n15. Perhaps Suhrawardi's concept of Hurakhsh is based on the Avestan yazata Hvare-khshaeta (Pahlavi *Khwarshed*, Parsi *Khorshed*, Persian *khurshid*, lit. "the shining sun"), the yazad presiding over the sun. See Hvare-khshaeta (Phl. *Khwarshed*) in the list of yazatas in "Angels in Zoroastrianism," Avesta-Zoroastrian Archives, www.avesta.org/angels.html (accessed 3 October 2021).

⁹²Suhrawardi, quoted in Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 123.

The second figure—the old man from the vision with the ethereal girl—is not only the original source for the paintings which the painter has been creating on papier-mâché pen cases all his life, but also the template for all old-man figures throughout the novel, whose hollow, terror-inducing laughter hinders the narrator from achieving his desires. This terrifying sound, on its own, could be an imprint of a suspended image too, for according to Suhrawardi, “[the] encounter with suprasensory reality can come about [. . .] from hearing a voice, without the speaker being visible. Sometimes the voice is soft, sometimes it makes one tremble, at other times it is like a gentle murmur. It may be that the speaker makes himself visible in some form, either as a constellation, or in the likeness of one of the supreme celestial princes.”⁹³

The third old man—the hearse driver—functions as the figure of the guide, the stand-in for the spiritual master, who not only knows all the movements of the adept’s soul, but also makes sure that the seeker attains the goal of the quest. It is he who takes the painter on a ride through “a singular landscape [. . .] that [he] had never seen, sleeping or waking” (*chashmandaz-i jadid u bimanandi piyda bud, ki na dar khwab u na dar bidari didah budam*), passing by odd houses in geometrical shapes “built to house the ghosts of ethereal beings” (*Shayad barayi sayah-i mawjudat-i asiri in khanahha durust shudah bud*).⁹⁴ Could this landscape be a reference to Jabalqa and Jabalsa, “the cities of the Earthly world of suspended images,”⁹⁵ where “the wayfarers” encounter “the manifestations of wonders and cases where the natural order is interrupted,” and where they can attain “what they desire and aim for”?⁹⁶ It is the hearse driver again who gives the painter the clay pot from the ancient city of Rayy (which he has found while digging the grave of the ethereal girl) and takes him back to his home when the artist is lost in the fog. On that clay pot, an artifact from pre-Islamic

⁹³Suhrawardi, quoted in Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 123.

⁹⁴Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 46–47; and Hidayat, *Buf-i kur*, 46–47.

⁹⁵Suhrawardi, quoted in van Lit, *World of Image*, 103.

⁹⁶Shahrazuri, quoted in van Lit, *World of Image*, 93.

Persia, the painter discovers a portrait of a woman with intoxicating, magical eyes—an exact parallel to his own portrait of the dead ethereal girl. Although the two images are executed in different media (clay and paper, respectively), “there [is] not an atom of difference between the two,” as if they have been painted by the same hand.⁹⁷ This discovery has two functions in the narrative of Part I. First, it affirms the unity and continuity of the Persian cultural tradition from pre-Islamic times on. Second, it confirms the painter’s achievement of his artistic goal: he has apprehended and preserved faithfully, albeit in a new medium, the object of his adoration.

And finally, let us look at the narrator of Part I from the vantage point of Suhrawardi’s writings. Given the painter’s path from crude artisanship to inspired creativity, I would argue that *The Blind Owl* is also “a tale of initiation” (Corbin’s *recit d’initiation*⁹⁸), a modernist “literary response” (*nazirah*) to the philosophical allegories about the quest for knowledge introduced into Muslim–Arabic letters by the prose narratives of Ibn Sina,⁹⁹ and into Persian by the allegorical treatises of Suhrawardi.

Like many a tale of initiation—for example, Suhrawardi’s treatise “The Birds”—the prologue in *The Blind Owl* starts with a declaration of the narrator’s sadness¹⁰⁰ due to access to a higher presence gained and lost. For the painter, that loss is epitomized by the death of the ethereal girl,

⁹⁷Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 55; and Hidayat, *Buf-i kur*, 58.

⁹⁸Hermann Landolt, “Henry Corbin, 1903-1978: Between Philosophy and Orientalism,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119 (1999): 484–90, quote on p. 487.

⁹⁹On allegorical writings by medieval philosophers and especially Ibn Sina’s “Hayy Ibn Yaqzan” (later reworked by Ibn Tufayl, d. 1185), “Salaman and Absal,” and “Risala al-Tayr” (“Treatise on the Birds”), see Peter Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sina): With a Translation of the Book of the Prophet Muhammad’s Ascent to Heaven* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 5–7.

¹⁰⁰See Shihabuddin Yahya Suhrawardi, “The Birds,” in *The Philosophical Allegories and Mystical Treatises: A Parallel Persian-English Text*, ed. and trans. with introduction by Wheeler M. Thackston, Jr. (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1999), 1–7. The treatise “The Birds” starts with the narrator’s call to the other birds to hear the story of his grief: “Is there anyone among my brethren who will lend me his ears for a while that I may convey to him something of my sadness, that perchance he may bear some of these sadnesses in partnership and brotherhood?” (1). Compare with Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 1: “There are sores which slowly erode the mind in solitude like a kind of a canker. It is impossible to convey a just idea of the agony which this disease can inflict.”

whose magical eyes remain imprinted forever on his memory.¹⁰¹ In “The Birds,” “the sadness (*anduhha*)” which the birds (and the dramatic persona) endure arises from the fetters of the flesh, which hold them captive, and force them to depart from the presence of the king, who resides on the top of the eighth mountain—the goal of their quest.¹⁰²

Another trope common to Part I of Hidayat’s novel and Suhrawardi’s writings is the status of the seeker as a recluse who has severed his ties to the material world and is channeling his energies into acquiring self-knowledge. Thus, after the loss of the ethereal girl, the painter withdraws “from the company of men,” passing his life “within the four walls of [his] room.” He feels compelled to recount his story in writing “in order to disentangle [its] various threads,” and to explain it to his shadow on the wall, thus indicating a quest for self-knowledge.¹⁰³

This self-description places the narrator of Part I on a par with Suhrawardi’s conscious seeker, a “recluse” shunning the sensory world, whose “way consists first of all in investigating his knowledge of himself, and then in raising himself to the knowledge that is above him.”¹⁰⁴ To experience an encounter with suprasensory reality, the pilgrim of the spirit has to be a “persevering seeker” and “a prey to an intense obsession”¹⁰⁵ with his quest. According to Fazlur Rahman, such seekers who attain a high level of illumination acquire the power to enter ‘*alam-i misal*’ at will, and to create images there which then are materialized at the lower levels of the universe.¹⁰⁶ If we look for parallels between Suhrawardi’s seeker and the narrator in Part 1 of *The Blind Owl*, we can readily find them. The painter’s obsession with the ethereal girl compels him to endlessly search for her, abandoning his craft, and thinking of her “day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute,” until she appears on his threshold

¹⁰¹Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 21; and Hidayat, *Buf-i kur*, 9.

¹⁰²Suhrawardi, “Birds,” 1–6.

¹⁰³Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 22; and Hidayat, *Buf-i kur*, 13.

¹⁰⁴On the necessity of self-knowledge, see Suhrawardi, quoted in Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 119–20. On the importance of self-knowledge as a condition for acquiring “knowledge by presence,” see also van Lit, *World of Image*, 68–69.

¹⁰⁵Suhrawardi, quoted in Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 118–19.

¹⁰⁶Rahman, “Dream, Imagination, and ‘*Alam al-Mithal*,’” 173.

and enters his room, as if called into existence by his all-consuming thoughts about her.¹⁰⁷ The result of this close encounter with the object of his adoration allows the artist to create his masterpiece, preserving on paper not only the features of the ethereal girl, but also her spirit, capturing the radiance of her magical eyes.¹⁰⁸ The painter's achievement thus parallels the achievement of the Greek philosopher Pythagoras (ca. 570–495 BC), who, according to Suhrawardi's commentator Qutb al-Din Shirazi (thirteenth century), "determined the musical relationships and perfected the science of music" after having risen to the higher world, where he heard the music of the Spheres, and "the discreet resonance of the voices of their angels."¹⁰⁹ We can infer therefore that the artists to whom the exalted forms of the celestial spheres have manifested themselves in '*alam-i misal*' can attain the pinnacle of their art upon return to the material world.

Contemplating the multiple implicit links between key aspects of the theosophy of Illumination and the main triad in Part I of *The Blind Owl*, I think it is fair to say that Hidayat's use of notions like ethereal girl/*dukhtar-i asiri* and '*alam-i barzakh*'/'*alam-i misal*' is neither random nor inconsequential. If *The Blind Owl* is indeed intended in part as an allegory of Persian cultural continuity and a manifesto for cultural reform, these phrases are clues to Hidayat's homage to the philosophy of Illumination, and to the crucial role of the "faculty of imagination"¹¹⁰ in rejuvenating the Persian cultural tradition.

¹⁰⁷Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 31–33; and Hidayat, *Buf-i kur*, 25–27.

¹⁰⁸Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 42; and Hidayat, *Buf-i kur*, 40.

¹⁰⁹Qutbuddin Shirazi, quoted in Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 134.

¹¹⁰Sohravardi, *Book of Radiane Partow-Nameh*, 81.