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BŪF-E KŪR

BŪF-E **KŪR** (The blind owl), the chef d'œuvre of Ṣādeq Hedāyat (1281-1330 Š./1903-51) and one of the first major modernist Persian novels.

Būf-e kūr was first distributed from Bombay in a stenciled edition in the author's hand at his expense in late 1315 Š./1936 or early 1937. Hedāyat had presumably finished writing the novel during residence of less than a year there. *Būf-e kūr* was serialized in a Tehran weekly called *Īrān* in the fall of 1320 Š./1941, shortly after the Allied occupation of Iran and the abdication and exile of Reżā Shah Pahlavī. At the end of that year it appeared in book form and has been much reprinted since. Owing to French and English translations in the 1330s Š./1950s, Hedāyat's enigmatic masterpiece is the one modernist Iranian literary work to achieve any appreciable audience beyond the Persian-speaking world (Figure 1, Figure 2).

Būf-e kūr is the first-person narrative of a title character who reveals an incredible sequence of events he says recently took place, describes entry into an opium-induced state, then recounts, while apparently unconscious, an apparently closer-to-the-truth version of those events, and concludes by awakening and presumably not remembering what he has just recounted.

Describing his house as outside of the city far from other dwellings, the narrator says that he spends his days drinking wine, smoking opium, and painting an unvarying scene on pen-case covers of a stooped old man crouching under a cypress tree; opposite the old man is a girl separated from him by a stream of water; the girl is leaning toward the old man offering him a

morning glory. But two months and four days earlier an event occurred that caused him to stop painting altogether.

On that day, near dusk, the door to his room suddenly opens, and an old man enters who resembles the man depicted on the narrator's pen-case covers and who introduces himself as the narrator's uncle. Seeking to find something to offer to his visitor, the narrator comes across a flask of old wine on a shelf. When he reaches to get the wine, he sees a scene outside from a small window near the ceiling. It is the scene he has always painted. Head in hands, the narrator sits in reverie for minutes or perhaps hours. In the meantime, his visitor has left. When the narrator summons the courage to look again outside the window, he discovers that the window is no longer there. It had never existed. Subsequently, on his way home on a walk in the mist after midnight, he sees a woman dressed in black seated on the platform in front of his house. She is the woman in his paintings, the woman he has seen from the non-existent window. She enters his house listlessly and without a word lies down on his bed. Thinking that she is perhaps hungry or thirsty, the narrator pours some of the wine into her mouth through her closed teeth. He then realizes that she is dead. Hoping to warm her lifeless body, he undresses and lies beside her on the bed. Two things that he needs to do come to mind: to capture the woman's eyes on paper and to dispose of the corpse. He spends the night trying unsuccessfully to draw the eyes. Near dawn the corpse's cheeks miraculously redden, and her eyes open and look at him for the first time. He is able to draw them. He then decides to cut the body up into pieces, which he puts into a suitcase that proves incredibly heavy when he lifts it. Outside it is raining again. He finds an old man with a hearse who digs graves and makes coffins. They set out for Shah ʿAbd-al-ʿAẓīm. Once there, the old man digs a grave and unearths a ceramic vase. The narrator becomes aware of his soiled, torn, and bloodied clothes. His efforts to rub the blood out merely spread it all over him.

Back home, where the narrator goes to get money to give to the old man, the latter disappears just as his uncle did earlier. However, he leaves behind the vase, on which is painted her face with her eyes. The image is identical with the drawing the narrator had made the night before. The narrator begins to smoke opium while staring at the pictures. He grows weary and desires forgetful sleep, to disappear into nothingness. He begins to dream and move backward in time to his childhood. After experiencing momentary and pure forgetfulness, he comes to and finds himself in a small room and special

circumstances both strange and natural for him.

In the candlelight he senses that his body is hot and that his clothes have blood stuck to them. Despite feverishness and dizziness, he brings the candle forward and starts writing. He writes that, although silence is always best, it is out of his hands now because what should not have happened has happened. He adds that in order to explain his life to his shadow on the wall, be is obliged to tell a story.

Ill and almost bedridden, he says that his only contact with the outside world are the people he can see from the two windows of his tomb-like (or pen case-like) room, his nanny, and his wife. He never saw his parents. His mother was an Indian temple dancer who met his father there where he dealt in wares from Ray. The narrator has wasted away in desire for his wife who, he says, will not let him near her. The doctor prescribes a special diet and fumigation of his room. His condition grows worse. He has a terrible cough and dreams and fantasizes.

The narrator reveals that at one point when once his condition improved somewhat, he decided to flee somewhere where people might never find him. But he returns home at the end of the first day.

Two days later, the narrator makes a frightful resolution. He grabs his bone-handled knife and decides that, if death is coming to get him, he is going to take his wife “the bitch” with him. That evening, disguised as an old man, he goes to his wife’s room to kill her. But an old man’s mocking laughter interrupts him and he returns to his own room.

The next evening, the narrator again dresses up as an old man, takes the knife, and goes to his wife’s room. He undresses but keeps the knife with him. He and his wife embrace and become intertwined. She bites through his lip. He thinks she has gone mad and involuntarily jerks his hand. The knife plunges into her. She releases him. She is dead, her eye in his hand. He is drenched in blood. He looks into the mirror and is exactly like the old odds-and-ends man he had seen from the window of his room and who he had suspected of sleeping with his wife.

Agitation seems to awaken him. He rubs his eyes. He is back in the room of the first part or the novel. It is almost dawn. He looks for the vase he had been contemplating and comparing to his drawing of the ethereal girl while

smoking opium late at night before being transported to the state leading to his story of the nanny and "the bitch." But the vase is gone. An old man is running away with something like it under his arm. The narrator looks at his torn and bloodied clothes. In the novel's last sentence, he says that he feels the weight of a dead body on his chest.

The plot of *Būf-e kūr* intrigues readers with its repetitions and dual, yet not exactly parallel, events as narrated by a person whose credibility is never established. Characterization seems to parallel the plot in doublings: perhaps only two characters exist, a man and a woman, each with young and old, spiritual and physical, good and evil facets; or perhaps the narrator alone exists, a personality with male and female dimensions revealed through his fiction of people around him. Equally intriguing to readers are such potentially symbolic images repeated throughout the narrative as the old man, the beautiful Turkman girl, the lovers' scene as in a miniature painting, and the hair-raising laughter that immobilizes the narrator.

Enigmatic aspects of plot, characterization, and imagery notwithstanding, essential strands of the thematic warp and weft of *Būf-e kūr* are discernible in the protagonist's simultaneous and obsessive fear of and longing for death, his equally obsessive craving for and revulsion of sexual expression, and his apparent merging of past and present and consciousness and subconsciousness. All of this contributes to a uniquely Hedayatesque atmosphere of mystery and urgency. But beyond its basic representation of godlessness in the manner of ʿOmar Ḵayyām, the portrayal of its misanthropic, iconoclastic, and pathetically sensitive title character (which have brought to the book the unceasing opprobrium of the religious community and other conservative elements in Iranian society who have feared that the book might corrupt Iranian youth), and the desirability of the idyllic world of childhood in the face of the adult world of sexuality and death, critics have seemed mostly at a loss to discern the book's narrative structure or to pinpoint its central theme.

The most popular approach to the novel is for the critic to desist from endeavoring to understand or explicate it and passively to allow it to work its atmospheric magic on him or her (e.g., Kamshad, 1966, p. 167). At the other extreme is a sociological view (e.g., Āl-e Aḥmad, 1978, pp. 15-18), in terms of which the action is presumed to represent the title character's revulsion of the dictatorial years of Reżā Shah Pahlavī allegorically depicted in the figures of old men throughout the novel. A cultural view (e.g., Fischer, 1984, pp. 207-13)

sees *Būf-e kūr* portraying wholehearted love of Iran, the Iranian artist's almost impossible task of shouldering Iranian cultural baggage, and despair at Iran's cultural decay.

Psychological, biographical, and other readings of *Būf-e kūr* in Iran and abroad have further broadened bases for its appreciation. But, after 1359 Š./1980, as a result of the banning of Hedāyat's works in the Islamic Republic of Iran, research has been mostly Western and concerned chiefly with the narrative's culture-specific features and Hedāyat's Western sources of inspiration.

One cultural analysis sees *Būf-e kūr* as a depiction of polarities and irresolvable tensions in Iranian secular intellectual life between past and present, patriarchal and feminine values, material and spiritual inclinations, indigenous and foreign forces, and ordinary lives and intellectual pursuits (Hillmann, 1989).

Research on Western literary parallels or Hedāyat's possible sources of inspiration (e.g., Beard, 1976, 1982) has done much to demystify the imagery and plot of *Būf-e kūr* and to highlight Hedāyat's genius in detailed discussions of likely debts of inspiration on Hedāyat's part to Gothic narrative conventions and to such works as Edgar Allen Poe's "Berenice" and "Ligeia," Otto Rank's *The Double*, various *fin de siècle* depictions of *Salomé*, Maria Rainer Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Brigge*, and Johannes Jensen's *Gradiva*. In such terms, *Būf-e kūr* stands out as an unprecedented work in Persian literature, without Persian forebears at it were. But it is paradoxically the most Persian of narratives, heralding the maturation of modernist Persian prose fiction in the second half of the twentieth century.

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