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ZENDA BE GUR

"ZENDA BE GUR" (1930, translated by Brian Spooner as "Buried Alive," 1979), a short story by the prominent 20th-century writer, Sadeq Hedayat (HEDAYAT, SADEQ, 1903-1951); it first appeared in a collection of the same title (Figure 1). The subtitle of the story reads, "from the jottings of a mad man."

"Zenda be gur" is a first-person narrative featuring the notes of a young writer in his sickbed in Paris; his unfortunate existence; his disgust and despondency; his horrible nightmares; his desire to end his life; his plots for a "successful suicide," and how he tortures himself throughout in his failure to attain his goal. At times he celebrates existence and contemplates starting anew, going to Siberia, living among the pine trees in a wooden hut under the grey sky, or to India under the blazing sun, in endless jungles where no one would know him or understand his language, before conceding that he "wasn't made the right way for this" ("Buried Alive," p. 155).

He wavers throughout, between reliving the experiences he has had, and his feelings that it is all entirely pointless. Sometimes he feels that he has even been rejected by death. Finally he comes to terms with his condition: "No, I am neither living nor asleep. I don't like anything, I don't hate anything ... I don't envy the dead any more. I must be considered belonging to their world. I am with them. I am buried alive." ("Buried Alive," p. 162).

But the narrator is, nonetheless, sensitive to the judgements of others, to the point where he is worried about how his death will be viewed. He tries to pass his death off as natural, attempting to feign gradual deterioration, before

finally ingesting opium. In keeping with his concern for appearances, he puts on new under-wear, and sprays his bed with eau de cologne.

Having unsuccessfully poisoned himself with cyanide, he ingests a large amount of opium, which fails to provide an immediate effect, but which gradually seems to incapacitate him. In the final sentences we are informed of his death. "He had forgotten to breathe," ("Buried Alive," p. 162) is the explanation provided at the end of the story.

In his depiction of the simultaneously suicidal and invulnerable self exposed in this soul-searching and self-interrogating narrative, Hedayat captures the mood of a society in transition (Yarshater, p. vii). Like the Iran of Hedayat's era, it is haunted by memory and forgetting (Tavakoli-Targhi, p. 107). His skillful employment of interior monologue as a modern literary technique throughout the narrative sheds light on the landscape of the narrator's dreams and hallucination. Flashbacks, as with the girl in the cinema or the opium seller and descriptions of inanimate objects interplay in exploring the character's sense of alienation, and in turn, create a work of art from a very simple and ordinary premise. "[T]he wallpaper has [a] red and pink paisley design, and at regular intervals two blackbirds are sitting on a branch facing each other. This pattern drives me mad" ("Buried Alive," p. 145).

"Buried Alive," unlike most of Hedayat's stories of social realism, is devoid of colloquial phrases and idioms and often acquires a lyrical overtone (Bahārlu, pp. 27-28). It is written in plain, short sentences with precision and economy of words (Zarrinkub, p. 766), and is placed alongside "Bonbast" (Dead End), *Tarik-ḵāna* ("Dark Room"), and "Sag-e velgard" (Stray Dog) among Hedayat's works in which realistic techniques are employed in psychologically-oriented stories or psycho-fictions (Katouzian, p. 123-24). The protagonist in "Buried Alive," reminiscent of the central characters of "Āyena-ye šekasta" ("The Broken Mirror"), and "ʿArusak-e pošt-e parda" ("The Mannequin behind the Curtain"), is "unable or unwilling to participate in a normal romantic relationship," and like the narrator of "Three Drops of Blood" is "caught between his consciousness of the meaninglessness and futility of life and his impulse to impart meaning through creative communication" (Hillmann, p. 127; see also Milani, p. 98), He can "find a little solace only through painting" ("Buried Alive," p. 149), as does the narrator of *The Blind Owl.*

Hedayat's exercise in transcending existential agonies through creativity, as noted by critics, culminated in the creation of his masterpiece *The Blind Owl* in

1937 (Golširi, 1999, I, p. 281; Mirʿābedini, I, p. 99; Maḥmudiān, pp. 378-86; Etteḥād, pp. 165-67). The narrator's life, not too far from Mirza Ḥosayn-ʿAli in "Mardi ke nafsaš rā košt" ("The Man Who Killed His Self"), and Mirza Aḥmad in "Se qaṭra ḵun" ("Three Drops of Blood"), is laden with a pressing dread of death, and like Hedayat himself who "lived an unhappy life, and died a tragic death," (Katouzian, p. 127) ends his life in suicide.

Critics have also traced affinities between "Buried Alive," and "Diary of a Mad Man," by Nicolai Gogol (1809-1852), which centers on the life of a minor civil servant and his descent into insanity (Ḥosayni, p. 17-29). Although Hedayat's introduction to the Persian translation of Franz Kafka's (1883-1924) *Penal Colony* ("Payām-e Kafka," *Goruh-e maḥkumin*, Qāʾemiān, Tehran, 1948), and his translation of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (*Masḵ*, Tehran 1950), were published long after the publication of his stories, his fascination with the writer, and his conviction in Kafka's masterful depiction of "humanity's despicable plight in a world without God," ("Payām-e Kafka," p. 31), has inspired some critics to comment that he tried his hand in employing Kafka's signature literary techniques in treating the theme of alienation in some of his stories (Āriyanpur, III, pp. 333-429; Milani, p. 97; Bahārlu, pp. 27-32).

"Zenda ba-gur" has been translated into English by Brian Spooner, as "Buried Alive,"(*Sadeq Hedayat: An Anthology*, Modern Persian Literature Series 2, Ehsan Yarshater, ed., USA, 1979, pp. 145-62), and also by Carter Bryant, (Tehran, 2005); into Armenian by Khachik Khacher (Tehran 2005) and into French by Derayeh Derakhshesh (*Enterré vivant*, Paris, 1986). A bilingual collection of Hedayat's short stories, translated in Korean by Gyoseob Shin, is published in two volumes. The first volume of the collection includes "Zanda be gur" and several other short stories.

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