Sadeq Hedayat, *The Pearl Cannon* (excerpt)

Translated by Mostafa Abedinifard

Translator's Preface

In the final six years of his life, Sadeq Hedayat (1903–51) maintained an intense correspondence with his close friend, Hassan Shahid-Nura'i. These letters, brimming with relentless grievances about the status quo—particularly everything related to Iran—lay bare his growing estrangement from a country he saw as irredeemable, steeped in corruption and hypocrisy. Nowhere is his fury more distilled than in a letter where he declares: "Honestly, the sheer brazenness and depravity in this land know no bounds! What a damned, rotten, and wretched place, swarming with spiteful, infernal creatures!"

In a letter from earlier that same year, he had already outlined a final act of defiance, a literary onslaught against the myths, institutions, and ideologies he saw as corrosive—whether religious, nationalistic, or imperialistic: "I intend to create something obscene and outrageous—something that will be a spit in the face of everyone. Maybe I won't be able to publish it, but that doesn't matter. This is my last weapon—at the very least, I don't want them thinking to themselves, 'That fool got taken for a ride!'"

This "last weapon" became *The Pearl Cannon* (*Toop-e Morvari*, 1947), perhaps the most incendiary work of Hedayat's career. Written in his final years, it is both a satire and a reckoning, a book that refuses deference as much as it defies categorization. If *The Pearl Cannon* is an assault on nationalism, religion, and self-mythologizing, it is also a testament to Hedayat's own refusal to reconcile with a world he found intolerable.

At its core, *The Pearl Cannon* is framed around the legend of a weather-worn cannon—an actual historical artifact—but this is a pretext for Hedayat's scathing critique of Iranian society, its myths, and its institutions. Wielding the cannon like a literary weapon, he dismantles nationalistic and religious dogma while rewriting world history as grotesque satire, exposing the absurdities of empire, colonialism, and the narratives that sustain them.

More than anything, *The Pearl Cannon* is an act of literary subversion, refusing containment—linguistically, historically, and ideologically. Hedayat distorts Persian historiographical traditions, exposing how national myths, colonial narratives, and religious dogma are

assembled and manipulated. What emerges is an absurd meditation on history as invention, where classical Perso-Arabic historiography collides with European colonial discourse, and neither escapes unscathed.

His linguistic play is just as radical. Hedayat moves across Persian registers, veering from the grandiosity of classical historiography to the deadening bureaucracy of officialdom to the raw immediacy of street vernacular. He revels in the bloated pomposity of Arabic-infused religious rhetoric, only to puncture it moments later. Yet his linguistic shifts are not merely stylistic; they are political. Arabic appears most frequently, often through untranslated Qur'anic references asserting their own authority. Meanwhile, Azeri, Gilaki, and other languages surface briefly but deliberately, unsettling the reader and critiquing the nationalist impulse to impose Persian as Iran's sole literary medium. What makes this even more striking is that Persian—the official language—is relegated to the footnotes, reversing the usual hierarchy of linguistic authority and challenging Iran's monolingual myth.

Hedayat is equally merciless in his treatment of nationalist historiography. With biting humor, he assigns improbable modern national identities to premodern poets, skewering the tendency to retroactively conscript literary figures into nationalist pantheons. These poets belonged to the fluid, borderless Persianate world, not to modern nation-states, and Hedayat exploits this anachronism to lay bare the absurdity of rewriting history to fit contemporary political imperatives.

Just as its themes are unstable, so too is its form. *The Pearl Cannon* blends the modern novella and speculative fiction with *maqāma*-style prose, epic traditions, grotesque satire, and travelogue. Yet rather than a mere pastiche, Hedayat's approach reflects the destabilizing effects of print modernity on Persianate genres. He weaponizes classical Persian literary forms, turning *madh* (praise) into *hajw* (invective), hijacking the language of eulogy to deliver his most lacerating critiques—not only against nationalistic myth-making but also against religious dogma. The satirical excess of *The Pearl Cannon* unsettles rigid boundaries between the "secular" and the "religious," revealing both as ideological constructs rather than fixed categories.

For all its satirical brilliance, however, *The Pearl Cannon* does not escape the charge of Islamophobia. While Hedayat attributes much of the anti-Islamic rhetoric to his characters, his letters leave little doubt about his disdain for the Shiʿa clergy and the ways religion was wielded as a tool of power and corruption in Iran. Yet to reduce his critique to outright rejection of Islam would be misleading. His deep engagement with Qurʾanic references, Islamic history, and religious folklore suggests not dismissal but an enduring preoccupation—one shaped as much by his hostility toward its practitioners as by the institution itself.

Reading *The Pearl Cannon* through the lens of translation—not as mere accessibility but as a critical act of negotiation—raises broader questions about linguistic and cultural transmission. Hedayat's engagement with translation, from his playful insertion of borrowed words to his subversion of historical discourse, reflects an acute awareness of how texts and ideas transform as they move across linguistic and ideological boundaries. Rather than a fixed artifact, his work resists containment, demanding to be read as a dynamic, evolving act of subversion—one that continually unsettles meaning, disrupts hierarchies, and exposes the fluidity of history, language, and identity.

Even in its most scathing moments, *The Pearl Cannon* is the product of a mind that saw writing as an absurd, unpredictable process governed as much by chance as by intent. This is perhaps best captured in a letter to Shahid-Nura'i, where Hedayat, struck by his friend's use of the German word *Verzweiflung* ("despair"), declares that he must "stuff it somewhere into *The Pearl Cannon* so that it stays—what a waste it would be to let it be forgotten."[1] And so he does. The word finds its way into the novella, not as some grand literary statement, but as a casual, almost accidental relic of their correspondence—an inside joke against oblivion.

[1] The three references to Hedayat's letters in my preface are from letters number 34 (1947), 27 (1947), and 51 (1948), as published in Sadeq Hedayat, *82 Nameh beh Hassan Shahid-Nura'i* [82 letters to Hassan Shahid-Nura'i], ed. Naser Pakdaman (Ketab-e Chashm-Andaz, 1379 [2000]).

In the end, *The Pearl Cannon* is more than a critique of history or ideology; it is a rejection of imposed meaning altogether. Language, plundered from different sources and smuggled into the text, becomes part of his defiant game. His last weapon was not merely satire but the refusal to impose coherence on an incoherent world—his *Verzweiflung*, smuggled into literature, ensuring that even in its absurdity, it would not be forgotten.

Although the novella was completed in Hedayat's lifetime, *The Pearl Cannon* remained unpublished in full until after his death. On April 9, 1951, Hedayat ended his life in Paris, unaware that Shahid-Nura'i would die shortly later. The coincidence is haunting, yet *The Pearl Cannon* stands apart from biography. With its linguistic irreverence, genre-bending form, and dismantling of nationalist and colonial mythologies, it remains as unsettling today as when it was first written.

Cover of the 2008 edition of Hedayat's controversial and satirical work, accompanied by critical commentary by Mahjoub. Photo credit to Arash Publishers & House of Art and Literature, Stockholm and Gothenburg, Sweden, 2008.

From *The Pearl Cannon*, by Sadeq Hedayat

Captain Columbus set off at the auspicious day and hour.[2] [. . .] The warship *Carthagena* sailed for two or three months, like a drunken reveler, lurching from side to side. Yet, contrary to all expectations, there was no sign of the Arabian Peninsula, nor any news to be heard. Meanwhile, in its struggle against opposing winds, the *Carthagena* retraced its path two or three times, exhausting all the provisions aboard. [. . .] As the warship reached the shore, Captain Columbus noticed the natives gathered around a thick pipe resting on two wheels, engaged in various rituals and ceremonies. Some of them wore masks, rhythmically tapping the bottoms of water sprayers as they swayed and chanted, "Since the world was made, we've sung and swayed." Women climbed up and down the pipe, singing songs of joy and laughter. Meanwhile, young men with bald vulture feathers perched on their heads thoughtfully puffed on marijuana cigarettes. With knives in hand, they swayed in a coquettish manner around the pipe, moving to the rhythm of samba, rumba, and conga, as if caught in a frenzy of Amok.[3]

Upon witnessing this scene, Columbus was filled with astonishment. Suddenly, he noticed that, aside from the seven individuals who appeared to be the special attendants of this pipe and were likely receiving some extraordinary bonus, everyone else scattered. One of the attendants approached, ignited the end of the pipe, and immediately a deafening roar filled the air. A cloud of smoke and flames erupted from the pipe's mouth, and the wheels reversed, crushing the seven special attendants beneath them.

At the sight of this spectacle, Columbus was overwhelmed with awe. He immediately fell to his knees in prostration and cried out,

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[2] Unless otherwise indicated, the notes are by the translator. Some entries have been adapted or expanded from the commentary by Mohammad Jaʿfar Mahjoub in the Persian edition, *Toop-e Morvari* (Arash Publishers & House of Art and Literature, 2008).

[3] "Amok" (from Malay) entered European languages by the 19th century; its frenzied connotation was popularized by Stefan Zweig's novella *Amok* (1922), later translated into Persian by Hedayat's relative, Rahmat Elahi.

"Glory be to God! What wondrous tale is this?" Then, as he lifted his head from the ground, he saw that 77 of the ship's crew had been so shaken by the terrifying sound that they had departed for the eternal abode, while the rest were all struck with explosive diarrhea. Columbus himself was on the verge of resigning his life, or at the very least, preparing to change his trousers (don't get me wrong; he fully intended to send them to the Museum of Andalusia as part of their collection of ancient and national relics).

Captain Columbus, upon reflection, believed this to be one of the tactical tricks of the Arabs. Accordingly, he prepared to surrender unconditionally, taking with him a single cross and a white flag, along with several crates of spoils he had collected from the treasures of Arab civilization—such as the water jug, sandals, tents, knives, cloaks, headscarves, prayer *turbah*, prayer beads, sickness prayers, a few water skins of Arab buttermilk, some barrels of depilatory powder, and cans of preserved rat and lizard meat. Accompanied by a Jew who spoke Arabic fluently, he disembarked at the shore.

Contrary to expectations, the natives, with cheerful faces and drums and tambourines, rushed to greet them. They gently patted the heads of the newly arrived guests and, on behalf of their "Red Dragon" enterprise, distributed some *Paregoric Elixir* and *Laudanum* among the seasick crew members. They promptly sent a lengthy list, amounting to several million *bare-headed sovereigns*, to the Red Indians' Ancestral Bureau of Blunders.[4]

The newly arrived guests, having regained their strength from this tender care, started mumbling and flailing about, trying to communicate.

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[4] The "'Red Dragon' enterprise" may satirically reference organizations such as the Red Cross, the Red Lion and Sun Society (precursor to the Iranian Red Crescent), or the Green Crescent, all known for their humanitarian work. Paregoric elixir is an outdated medicinal preparation containing opium, commonly used in the 19th and early 20th centuries to treat diarrhea and alleviate minor pain. Laudanum is a tincture of opium dissolved in alcohol, historically used as a painkiller and sedative. It was widely used before its addictive properties became well-known. "Bare-headed sovereigns" likely references British coins with bare-headed monarchs, such as those from George IV (r. 1820–30) or Edward VII (r. 1901–10). Though anachronistic, it humorously plays with historical symbols for satirical effect. (Some details in this note are informed by the late Professor Mohammad-Ja'far Mahjub's edition and commentary on *The Pearl Cannon*.)

Then, the chief of the Indigenous people, speaking in the eloquent Aztec language—the semi-official and courtly tongue of the region—addressed Columbus, saying, "Well now, welcome, welcome! What a joy to see you! Where do you come from, and where are you headed?"

Columbus, who had yet to finish *The Beginner's Book in Aztec*, became flustered and stammered in response, saying, "Well, by your blessed crown, I embarked on this journey from my beloved homeland with the intention of exploring both the outer and inner worlds. As per the noble verse of 'So [Prophet] fight in God's way. You are accountable only for yourself,' I had planned to carry out a great slaughter in the name of God and strike a heavy blow to the Bedouin Arabs. But now, I see I've arrived in a friendly and neighboring land. Therefore, I am ready to submit unconditionally."[5]

The chief of the Native Americans gave a warm smile and said:

"Well, well, young man, you've made a little mistake. What do you mean by unconditional surrender? Don't worry, my dear, take a load off. This place? Oh, this isn't Arabia! This land is called Costa Rica by those in the West. In Turkish, 'Yeni' means 'new,' and since we couldn't pronounce it properly, we called it 'Yankee.' And in your language, it became 'Yenge.' So, you've arrived in a new land, which will later be known as America, and we mean you no harm. As you can see, we are also busy worshipping and praising the phallus, and this tube here symbolizes the male organ. What choice do we have? We have no strong belief in the Vatican, the Pope, or the Inquisition specialists who deny the sphericity of the Earth, and this whole belief in worshipping shameful organs . . ."

Columbus, who was out of the loop, interrupted him and asked, "Well now, what did you say?"

The chief of the natives, adjusting the bald vulture feather that hung from his head, straightened it in the pocket mirror he carried, painted his lips with red lipstick, swallowed his spit, and replied:

"By that, I mean the worship of the lower body and licentiousness. This practice of venerating the shameful organs has been a tradition here from time immemorial. Thanks to this, our population

[5] The quotation "So [Prophet] . . ." is from the Qur'an, 4:84.

grows daily, and the prospects for our daughters' marriages improve as well. I grant you permission, should you have any secrets or desires, to share them with the cannon, for it is highly effective. Moreover, your prayers at the shrine of His Holiness Tláloc (PBUH) will be answered. Now, as our population has been growing at an ever-increasing rate, we passed a law decreeing that we celebrate only once a year—on the last Wednesday of the year. On this day, the women use this cannon to seek their desires. As luck would have it, your arrival coincides with this day. We're honestly tired of war, conflict, strong-arming, colonialism, exploitation, holy verses, and all these tricks of the trade. If our 'worship of the shameful organs' unsettles you, that is no fault of ours, and we offer our sincerest apologies. You are free to come and go as you wish, but please respect our sovereignty, both earthly and celestial. In return, we will serve as your bridge of victory.[6] And we are particularly pleased that you arrived unannounced and discovered us. Because of this fortunate event, we hereby decree that the historic celebration, representing our patriotism and national unity, will last for seven days and nights."

Then, he presented Columbus with a huge basket filled with rhubarb, pineapples, madder root, bananas, walnuts, Brazilian almonds, a few bags of Istanbul potatoes, a box of Philip Morris cigarettes, several bottles of Coca-Cola, a few kilograms of colorful, silky ice cream, a dozen packs of chewing gum, and some gold and silver bars, along with a tank of aviation fuel. Afterward, he lit his silver-tipped pipe with the finest tobacco, took a puff, and handed it to Columbus. Columbus, in turn, took a few deep, satisfying puffs himself.

The chief of the Native Americans grinned and said, "Now we are sworn brothers. Come, let me show you some prehistoric Aztec relics that'll blow your mind."

The gleam of gold and silver dazzled the azure eyes of Captain Columbus, and to himself, he thought, "Well, well, I'll give you such a hard time that you'll scream for mercy!"

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[6] The "bridge of victory" evokes the Veresk Bridge, built in 1934–35 during Reza Shah's reign and named "Pol-e Piroozi" during World War II for its strategic role in transporting Allied supplies to the Soviet Union.

In reality, he realized he was facing defeat, so with the white flag—the symbol of surrender—he wiped his nose and triumphantly tucked it into the depths of his pocket. Then, he furrowed his brow in frustration and took out a colored boiled egg from the fringe of his shawl and offered it to the Chief of the Native Americans.

The Chief of the Native Americans, struck with astonishment, exclaimed: "How did a simple white cloth from your shawl transform into this vibrant, colorful fruit?"

Columbus replied, "First of all, this is not a fruit, but a hen fruit. And second, if you are able to set it upright on the table, I shall kiss your shoulder, overlook any malicious colonial intentions, and take my leave. Otherwise, you will henceforth be subjects of the just Sultan of our realm, who rules over half of the inhabited world."

The Chief of the Native Americans agreed, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't solve the problem.

Columbus, overjoyed, slammed the bottom of the egg onto the table, and it stood upright on its broken end, like a well-behaved child.

Then, twirling his mustache, he said:

"Well, well, you are a wild and misguided people, completely bereft of the glories of Western civilization, liberty, and democracy. Therefore, as long as the world endures, you must bear the yoke of our servitude and continuously pay us tribute, taxes, and dues, while your women will remain forbidden to you, and your blood will be ours to spill. As for this phallic symbol, which led to the brutal death of 77 noble-born, gentlemanly Andalusians, it shall be taken from you. In exchange, we will appoint a few veteran Jesuit priests, seasoned in the arts of religious torture, to oversee you, ensuring that anyone who does not believe in the Trinity and our Father in the heavens receives their just due. Moreover, all the gold dust, silver nuggets, iron ore, coal, oil, money, and jewels you possess are now, from this moment on, the property of Sultan Ibn Sultan and Khagan Ibn Khagan, Dos Turdalinos Ibn Dos Torero Ibn Dos Toreador Ibn Dos Matador Ibn Dos Picador Ibn Dos Banderillero Ibn Dos Merinos."

The Chief of the Native Americans looked sheepish and said:

"Well, since you're our honored, uninvited guest, what can we do? This goddess of debauchery—which, frankly, we might as well

have tossed to the dogs—shall be handed over to the Queen of Andalusia. But, if you'll excuse me, our women won't give it up so easily. And if, God forbid, you take it by force, I fear that faith and belief will be lost, and the people will stray from the True Faith. So, by the souls of Tláloc and Tezcatlipoca, at least leave us this cross you hold, which, truth be told, resembles a dildo, so that our women will remain under the everlasting shadow of the eternal state and begin sending their prayers to it."[7]

At this audacious suggestion, Columbus suppressed the fiery anger within him and responded with calm resolve: "Now, what is this insolence? Have you reached the point where you dare disrespect our deity? It seems you've forgotten that you are the defeated, enslaved, and subjugated people under our rule! But I am not as you think, cruel and ungrateful."

He then reached into the pocket of his undergarment and pulled out a small box containing dried golden bee and wasp flies. He handed it to the Chief of the Tribe and said, "Instead, take this cantharidin and go back under the protection of His Royal Majesty, as you were before, and continue in your ignorance."

He then dismissed them.

[7] "Talian and Tsimatlan" in the original have been replaced with Tláloc and Tezcatlipoca, two Mesoamerican deities, as the original names appear to be unclear or invented.