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# Freedom in Existence: A Comparative Study of the Poetics of Emily Dickinson and Sohrab Sepehri

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**City College of New York**

**Freedom in Existence:**

**A Comparative Study of the Poetics of Emily Dickinson and Sohrab Sepehri**

**Neda Zahraie**

**MA Thesis**

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*“I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men...I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.”*

- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, January 1827<sup>1</sup>

Poetry, like thought, belongs to all people and is representative of existence itself. In one sense, poetry is the musical formation of words, whose effects must be experienced in sound, tone and melody, but in another sense, poetry is also an artistic discourse where the “fundamental character is that of an incidentally moving and imaginative form of communication” (Edman 46). Emily Dickinson and Sohrab Sepehri are two poets who sought to identify and define the *Self* in their modernist poetic discourse, and they each appropriated language as a means and a stepping-stone towards a methodological and unrestricted method of inquiry into the nature of existence. The purpose of this essay is to emphasize the universality of artistic behavior by conducting a comparative study of two poets, the 19th-century American poet, Emily Dickinson, and the 20th-century Iranian poet, Sohrab Sepehri. What at first may seem as their many differences, a 19th-century American poetess and a 20th-century Iranian poet, is also what unifies them as they are both representatives of marginalized voices in world literature—neither embraced the popular themes of nationalism or patriotism, or the fashionable

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<sup>1</sup> See Works Cited “Damrosch, David.”

philosophical discourse of their time, and the subject of their poetics is often universal rather than the communication of time and place specific ideas.

Whereas Dickinson and Sepheri each use a different language for their poetic discourse, the themes, subjects and methods of inquiry used in their poetry indicate a common thought process. Their poems, complex in drawing from different sources of knowledge available to each, profound and at times intimidating for readers, once carefully delved into demonstrate the author's deep engagement to a deliberate and unique artistic and philosophical method of experimentation in synthesizing the objective reality. Shaped by the social atmosphere to which each belonged, Sepehri and Dickinson's art is representative of a "speculative mode of cognition" described by Hegel as dialectical.

When idealistic trends are brushed aside, dialectics is occurring at all times and in all places. Even if the mind stops at an idealist wonderland and denies the individual the full realization of the dialectical process of history, the ever-changing form of unity amongst all species, natural, social and historical processes is constantly revealing itself in its full form verifying the unity of nature, humanity and all things. Poetry, like thought, when freed from the constraints of allegiance or tradition can be representative of the dialectics of reality and a dialectical cognitive ability to synthesize the world.

The form of thinking that is unleashed from the focused, unbiased and persistent observation and study of the subjective *self* in relation to history, tradition and nature can result in the individual's emergence as a *conscious* or *unconscious* dialectician. Born to different cultures and historical times, both Sepehri and Dickinson set out upon an artistic journey to explore the nature of the mind, and while perhaps neither set out to write philosophical poetry,

they each arrive at a poetic discourse which exemplifies a method of reflecting *dialectically* upon the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence. Their poetry therefore is representative of a fundamental dialectical relationship in all matter and existence.

In lieu of a conventional poetics that reinforces tradition and national allegiance, both Dickinson and Sepehri reject the norms and expectations of *popular discourse*, or what Erica Hunt characterizes as the ideology of the “master narrative” which controls the way the social body is organized (198-199) and what Marx and Engels define as the *superstructure*—the culture, ideology, norms and expectations, individual identities, social institutions and political structures constantly reconfigured by the ruling class (Cole). Armed with a plethora of knowledge—literary, scientific, artistic and religious—and dedicated to the artistic presentation of their respective studies of subject-object relationships as drawn from society and nature, they each set out to express the glory of the logic of evolution. Dickinson and Sepehri’s verse is evidence of how the habitual everyday mode of thought, “in a kind of shifting of gears, now finds itself willing to take what had been a question for an answer,” (Jameson 308) arriving at a poetics which like dialectic materialism is “neither fiction nor mysticism, but a science of the forms of our thinking insofar as it is not limited to the daily problems of life but attempts to arrive at an understanding of more complicated and drawn-out processes” (Trotsky, “The ABC” 105).

The many men and women throughout history who have engaged in poetic discourse, are in fact practitioners of one artform; by overcoming the barrier of language literature can be enjoyed for its universal qualities. The particular circumstances that have shaped my life, born to two nations and raised amongst various cultures, have equipped me with several languages that

facilitate my access to the works of diverse writers. This access to several languages has demonstrated to me that there is no Persian literature, anymore than there is American, Spanish or French literature; rather there is only *world literature*. It is important to reiterate the ultimate purpose of comparative literature here, the idea that we must not look at the literature of different cultures as separate from one another and to stress Goethe's conjecture that *Weltliteratur* shall and must supplant the idea of national literatures—especially in today's social atmosphere where all divisionist ideologies seek to hide our commonalities.

Emily Dickinson and Sohrab Sepehri are observers of perceptions. They are not poets who are trying to elevate our feelings. However, by distilling the essence of existence into verse they both do provide uplifting poetic elixirs for many. Outside the boundaries of popular discourse, dwelling in the *interstice* of the master narrative Dickinson and Sepehri refer to the miraculous and the mystical cultural inheritance at their feet, but neither seeks refuge in such beliefs—they are not participants in the *romantic* theory of the *beyond* but each actively explores individual freedom in *life*.

Modernism emerged from the necessity to depart beyond our knowledge of history, myth and tradition into a new realm where objective reality, free from previous artistic restrictions, can be examined from the perspective of the cognitive being. This moving beyond was first a reaction to idealistic thought, which sought to view the mind or spirit as existing independently of matter and matter which was thought to depend on mind or spirit, and second a move away from the traditional form of poetic discourse which emphasized form over content. Ehsan Yar-Shater, despite his rather mechanical approach in brushing aside the conquests of classical

*orf* and *erfan*<sup>2</sup> intellectual development and literature, correctly assesses that modernism is the establishment of “a new idiom” and “a new identity,” in which poetry “evolved a completely new language in which content dominates form” (61). For both Dickinson and Sapehri, a modernist approach to poetry facilitated the communication of the cerebral navigation over a terrain of folklore, out of the mystic fog and into illuminating new grounds where the self-recognizing and ever-changing nature of the dialectical structure of existence could be experienced.

Emily Dickinson is often assumed to have arrived at her modernist form of writing out of nowhere. Sohrab Sapehri, like many of Iran’s 20th-century poets, is said to have followed in the footsteps of Nima Yushij (1897-1960), the father of the new form or *sh’er-e nou*.<sup>3</sup> Yet, for both poets, the new form and its fresh content are not random artistic occurrences. As the 19th-century German composer and critic Adolf Bernhard Marx explains, “art is always and everywhere the secret confession as well as the undying monuments of its time” (63). Modernism, as part of the literary and artistic experience of late 19th-century United States and Iran, emerges in a historical moment where new discoveries in the field of science and the emergence of working-class politics converge.

Literature, after all, “is the complete reflection of the cultural, ideological, psychological and political conditions of a society...in fact an excellent indicator of social realities and the people’s subjective condition of that society” (ISAUS 88). Both Emily Dickinson and Sohrab Sapehri are products of cultural, philosophical and historical events that have shaped their humanity and fueled their poetics. Despite their individual differences, neither Dickinson nor

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<sup>2</sup> Classical enlightenment from Sufism to 8th/9th-century mathematics and science

<sup>3</sup> The new form of poetry began emerging in Iran in late 19th C. (Shaki 34). In the 1920s Nima Yushij published his works free from the classical form, which became known as *sh’er-e nou* or *sh’er-e nimai* (Ricks xxi).

Sepehri existed in a vacuum. The worlds which they inhabited, unsurprisingly, are similar in essence, and their poetry is representative of an artistic plateau reached and necessitated by social realities.

Dickinson and Sepehri live until about the same age—Dickinson dies at the age of 55 perhaps from Bright’s disease on her own bed at the “Homestead,” her father’s home in Amherst where she was born and where she would spend most of her life (Martin 22). Sepehri succumbs to cancer at the age of 52, in Tehran’s Pars hospital in 1980, not too long after the triumph of the revolution and an end to 2500 years of monarchy in Iran; he is buried in his hometown of Kashan. It seems both poets experience falling in love and they both remain single—neither marries, neither produces offspring, neither wishes to be very far from their paternal home and garden. In addition to copious poetic output, both poets devote a great portion of their lives to the process of learning, inquiry and observation. They are described by their respective family members as having been voracious readers; they both master a remarkably vast lexicon. Both their families considered books and knowledge a source of pride, the intellectual atmosphere of the home and the era play key roles in the intellectual development of both Emily and Sohrab.<sup>4</sup>

Emily Dickinson, today regarded as one of the two pioneers of modernist American poetry,<sup>5</sup> was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, United States on December, 10th, 1830. However, during her lifetime, Dickinson was known as a great poet and artist to only a “select few”—most of her approximately 1800 poems were discovered after her death, ten were published anonymously during her lifetime, and she shared about 600 of her poems through private letters

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<sup>4</sup> The Dickinson family considered books “a source of pride” and their library contained some 2600 volumes of books in genres ranging from novels and poetry to law, geology, mathematics and philosophy (“The Polly Longworth Library Project”)

<sup>5</sup> Along with Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

with more than forty correspondents, amounting to an informal publication within her “select society” (Boisseau 179). Dickinson becomes an important literary figure after her death with the discovery and posthumous publication of her verse and letters.

Almost a century later, Sohrab Sepehri enters the world in Qom, Iran, on October 7, 1928. After the publication of a first book of classical verse at the age of 19, Sepehri dedicates the remainder of his life to creating modernist poetry and paintings. He publishes seven subsequent collections of modernist poetry during his lifetime, which in 1976 he compiles into one book entitled, *Hasht Ketab*, or *Eight Books* (Massoumi Hamedani 1). Sepehri received considerable recognition for his poetry in Iran and gained global attention for his paintings during his lifetime. Although, today Sepehri is considered one of the most acclaimed poets and painters of 20th-century Iran, many of his contemporaries accused him of producing irrelevant mystical poems in a time of political upheaval. Ahmad Shamloo (1925-2000)<sup>6</sup>, the dominating figure of 20th-century Iranian new poetry, has been one of the many voices critical of Sepehri’s poems describing them as “mysticism which seemed out of the social context in the years following the 1953 coup in Iran” (Shamissa 382).

Aside from periods of unrest, where the political power structures are thrown into question, society commonly recoils towards the dominating force of a master narrative. In such societies, as Marx once wrote, “everybody is subjected to censorship, just as under despotism everybody is *equalized*, not in the sense of respect for personality but in the sense of its depreciation” (*Debates*, 224). It is in this equalization, a process of assimilation necessarily carried out by society’s dominant forces to both silence doubt and to maintain the patriarchal

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<sup>6</sup> Like Sohrab, Shamloo follows the form of Nima’s *sh’er nou*.

social hierarchy, that the ego of every individual including the artist is suppressed. “Social life,” Erica Hunt explains, “is reduced once again to a few great men or a narrow set of perceptions and strategies stripping the innovative of its power” (682). Individual identity is blurred into disappearance, and therefore poetics of an autonomous self becomes the expression of the marginalized. It is necessary to evaluate the different yet comparable social climates to which Dickinson and Sepehri are born to fully appreciate each poet’s unique poetic stance, intellectual and artistic approach.

In the age of sentimentality to which Emily and Sohrab are each respectively born, assumptions of an *idealistic* philosophy adhering to the attitude that everything is permeated with theology and exists for a purpose while the individual “is merely the voice of some developing idea” (Lifshitz 69) are held in place by the dominating cultural authority. Yet Dickinson and Sepehri apply the thinking process like a vehicle for the poet’s personal observations to navigate the abstract tunnel of traditions and norms to reach a concrete understanding of the self. In a 1911 essay, the American feminist and writer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman summarizes the challenging task of thinking independent of social currents:

It is no easy matter to deny or reverse a universal assumption. The human mind has had a good many jolts since it began to think, but after each upheaval it settles down as peacefully as the vine-growers on Vesuvius, accepting the last lava crust as permanent ground (185).

Born to a prominent Amherst family, Emily’s paternal grandfather, Samuel Dickinson, is one of the founders of Amherst College and her father, Edward, is a lawyer and politician who serves at the state legislature and a term at the U.S. Congress (Martin 3). Federal judges and

lawyers, prominent literary and political figures, clergy and students are familiar guests at the Homestead (Martin 11), while cultural icons like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Ralph Waldo Emerson are visitors next door at her brother Austin and his wife Sue's home, the Evergreens.<sup>7</sup> Joan Kirkby asserts that, "Dickinson wrote in a discursive network infused by darwinian ideas, and she also had direct access to these ideas through the periodicals and the family library...The many writers participating in the evolutionary debate in the periodicals to which the Dickinsons subscribed were very conscious of the new epithet darwinism and sought to inform their readership as to what kind of speculation it entailed" (3).<sup>8</sup>

During Emily's childhood, as major religious revivals swept through Amherst, the social pressure to profess one's faith in public to provide evidence of faith was immense (Habegger 240). Emily Dickinson presents her single-minded independence in an April 1862 letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, where she informs him that her parents and siblings, "...they are religious, except me, and address an eclipse, every morning, whom they call their 'Father'" (L 261). She is the only member of her family who refused to make a public profession of faith (Martin 26).

It is in such social atmosphere that Emily Dickinson sets out to discover what life and existence may mean beyond dogma. According to Dickinson's niece, "aunt Emily was busy, always busy. When she read, she was next busiest to when she wrote..." (Heginbotham 133). Dickinson's time was as fully occupied with reading as with writing, and both were active not

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<sup>7</sup> There is in fact no evidence of Emily Dickinson meeting Emerson.

<sup>8</sup> Joan Kirkby who has studied Dickinson's correspondences finds echoes between the poet's nature writings and her readings of the great 19th-century debates between science and theology provoked by the Darwinian revolution. "Dickinson had access to these debates through key volumes in the family library and the libraries at Amherst and Mount Holyoke, as well as through the periodicals to which the family subscribed and the curriculum of study at Amherst Academy under the stewardship of the great evolutionary theologian Edward Hitchcock, Professor of Geology and Theology at Amherst College" (1).

passive pursuits. In or about 1873, in a letter addressed to Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, the one-time editor of *Springfield Republican*, Dickinson writes, “I am glad there are Books. They are better than Heaven, for that is unavoidable, while one may miss these”<sup>9</sup> (L402) (“Sanborn Correspondence”). As Martin explains, Dickinson’s “overt use of biblical language and metaphor has often caused her to be classified as a “religious” or even a “Christian” poet. However, her use of religious language is “unorthodox,” “impious” and in Martin’s words, “possibly even blasphemous” (58). Aware of the uncompromising stance of the intellectual current of her period’s superstructure, Dickinson cautions to “Tell all the truth but tell it slant —” (F/1263).

The period to which Emily Dickinson is born is a highly politicized and anxious time in American history. Thomas Johnson<sup>10</sup> has labeled the most productive years of Dickinson’s poetic production, the period from 1861 to 1865, her “flood years.” Significantly, these “flood years” coincide with the years of the American Civil War (Martin 18). The scholarship of several literary critics, including Shira Wolosky and Cody Marrs, reveal Emily Dickinson to be deeply engaged with the language, events and ideas of the war. Although far from the front, the impact of the war is felt in Amherst and Dickinson discerns that war is always a catastrophe—no matter the moral justification victory is meaningless to those who die in the effort. Dickinson does not accept the promise of eternity as a solution to life’s woes:

Victory comes late —  
 And is held low to freezing lips —

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<sup>9</sup> Emily Dickinson letter to Frank Sanborn, 1873.

<sup>10</sup> One of the two major editors of Emily Dickinson’s poetry

Too rapt with frost

To take it —

How sweet it would have tasted —

Just a Drop —

Was God so economical?

His Table's spread too high for Us —

Unless We dine on Tiptoe —

Crumbs — fit such little mouths —

Cherries — suit Robins —

The Eagle's Golden Breakfast strangles — Them —

God keep His Oath to Sparrows —

Who of little Love — know how to starve — (F/195)

As Wolosky asserts, Dickinson's language "records the converging crises in metaphysics and culture that came to a head in the Civil War" (xviii). Cody Marrs explains how Dickinson "instead of trafficking in direct representations of the Civil War's issues and events, ...frequently depict[s] [the war in her poetry] as a vast destruction that is unmoored from chronology..." (125).

The atmosphere of Dickinson's childhood was equally tainted by calls for "Manifest Destiny," the idea that territorial expansion is a religious duty. As Cynthia Wolff explains, up until the civil war, Amherst was one of the last areas holding onto Puritanism (Wolff 66). Dickinson is well aware of the concealed metonymy of territorial "exploration" and economic "expansion." She is also aware that the available popular intellectual discourse has not offered a

satisfactory solution that can lessen the turmoils of everyday existence. Thus, the poet turns away from the pursuits of adventurous men and issues her personal edict:

Soto!<sup>11</sup> Explore thyself!  
 Therein thyself shalt find  
 The “Undiscovered Continent” —  
 No Settler had the Mind. ( F/814).

The Trail of Tears<sup>12</sup> and America’s expansionist wars are realities of 19th-century American life—Congress had already declared war in May of 1846 on Mexico, acquiring what would eventually become Texas, California, New Mexico, Utah, Arizona and Nevada (Martin 28). Dickinson acknowledges her reluctance to travel away from home and she emphasizes her preference to remain in one place to fully devote her attention to learning and writing. She is aware that concentrated effort may reveal greater satisfactory outcomes and she notices that great moves do not always equate great results:

“Go traveling with us”!  
 Her Travels daily be  
 By routes of ecstasy  
 To Evening’s Sea-- (F1562)

Sohrab Sepehri’s childhood in Kashan is equally permeated by intellectual currents and bound by the comforts of tradition. Sohrab contrasts the insulated climate of his formative years alongside the researched findings of his later years: “the rainbow of my childhood was melting

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<sup>11</sup> Hernando de Soto (A.D. ca. 1496-1542); Spanish explorer; early governor of Cuba; adventurer in the Americas; traveler in Panama, Nicaragua, Peru, and later Florida (“Emily Dickinson Lexicon”)

<sup>12</sup> The official forced relocation of five Native tribes to Indian territory under the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

away in the pitiless atmosphere of our home<sup>13</sup>...My uncle did not know what a deep meaning the encounter of two coiled cobras can have for a Hindu...He did not know uncle Goethe. Had not read *The Green Snake*” (“Blue Room” 18-19).<sup>14</sup> The matured Sohrab rejects narrow beliefs and national credo for a universal view of life. In *Hanooz dar Safaram / I am Still Travelling*, a collection of poems and journals gathered and published posthumously by his sister Parvaneh Sepehri, Sohrab writes:

For years I did my prayers. The elders did their prayers, and so I did too. In elementary school they would take us to the mosque for prayer. One day the door of the mosque was closed. The grocer was passing by and said: “do your prayers on the roof of the mosque to be a few meters closer to God!” Religion was a heavy joke that the environment played on me and for years I remained religious, without having a God. (2006)

Sohrab Sepehri’s father, Assad-Allah, is a man of many talents—a clerk at the city’s telegraph office, a master calligrapher, a musician and a *tar*<sup>15</sup> maker. Sohrab’s grandmother, Hamidéh Sepehri, was a published poetess; the grandfather of his mother, Mohammad Taghi Sepehr, was the author of *Nasikh al-Tawarikh*, an 11 volume history of Iran (Massoumi Hamedani 1). According to Sohrab’s sister, Parvaneh, while at home “[Sohrab] read books from morning until night. He read books in French. He knew the French language better than the French [...] and he [was fluent] in English” (Alé Teyb). In 1948, when Sohrab leaves his hometown of Kashan to study painting at the Fine Arts University of Tehran, his *sh’er-e nou* poetry begins appearing in various literary journals and magazines. In this period of his life he is introduced to literary societies where he is able to meet with the great poets of his time including

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<sup>13</sup> قوس قزح کودکی من در بیرحمی فضای خانه ما آب می شد

<sup>14</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations by the author.

<sup>15</sup> *Tar* is a Persian stringed instrument.

Nima Yushij, Fereydoun Moshiri, Hushang Ebtejaj and others (Massoumi Hamedani 1).

Sohrab's interest in world knowledge takes him to India, Japan, Europe and the United States. In the 1950s alongside his own original poems, Sohrab Sepehri's translations of Japanese, French and English poems appear in various publications ("Encyclopedia Iranica"). Until 1962 when Sohrab decides to quit his last governmental post, he had been making his living as a government employee holding various positions throughout the years in agencies such as the Department of Education, General Offices of Fine Arts, General Offices of Agricultural Information and the Ministry of Oil (Massoumi Hamedani 1).

The self-declared Kashani<sup>16</sup> is aware that, as much as we may identify with a sense of origin, the reality of existence demonstrates that we do not belong to any one place more than another. The poet recognizes the place of his origin but denounces allegiance to any one spot and thus declares in his opus poem "Seday-e Pay-e Ab" / "Water's Footsteps":

.....

I am from Kashan, but

اهل كاشانم، اما

My town is not Kashan.

شهر من كاشان نيست.

My town is lost.

شهر من گم شده است.

I with fortitude, I with fervor

من با تاب، من با تب.

Have built a home on the other side of night.

خانه‌ای در طرف ديگر شب ساخته ام.

..... ("Hasht Ketab" 285-286) (ll. 190-194)

As Ehsan Yar-Shater explains, prior to Nima and his *sh'er-e nou*, or modernist verse, the rules and rhymes of Persian poetry were "elaborate" and "strictly observed," and "the reputation

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<sup>16</sup> During Sohrab's early childhood the Sepehri family moves from the city of Qom to the city of Kashan (Milani, 887-888). In his magnum poem, *Seday-e Pay-e Ab*, (Water's Footsteps) Sepehri declares: *Ahl-é Kashaanam*, I am from Kashan.

of a poet could not survive defects in rhyme or meter—defects that fellow poets were quick to seize upon” (43). *Sh'er-e nou*, is at first strongly dismissed by the classicists who assume modernism an appropriation of European thought and declare the new style incompatible with Persian art and ideology. As Yar-Shater explains:

Erosion of the solid walls of autocratic rule betokened the decay of the centuries-old foundations of classical poetry. Traditional poetry was supported and encouraged primarily by the court and the aristocracy. Its language had therefore developed into a courtly idiom in which there was no room for colloquialism...[after 1906] poetry both adjusted to and encouraged a new phenomenon: the emergence of the common man as a significant political force. The audience of the poetry was changing character; it was no longer merely the elite society, but a larger segment steadily expanding with the spread of literacy and political awareness (44).

Toward the turn of the century, the movement for social and political reconstruction gained momentum in Iran, eventually leading to the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. In this period, “the ingenuity of the poet consisted in making the familiar and available images express his own feelings and ideas...No more ghazals, in which the lover lamented endless nights of separation; no more nightingale pouring forth sad songs over the inconstant rose; no more *rends* or *kalandars*<sup>17</sup> seeing truth in wine or preferring tavern to mosque; no more narcissus resembling the beloved in its own drunken eyes” (44-45).

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<sup>17</sup> In Persian classical poetry, a *rend* is one “who has given himself up to wine and its delights is the emancipated spirit of man too long constrained and imposed upon by the Establishment” (Yar-Shater 44); a *kalandar* may refer to an ascetic Sufi mystic or dervish.

In his poetry, Sepehri repeatedly compares the obscurity of limiting notions to the clarity of a knowledge-driven awakening:

.....

In my jungle, there is no sign of savagery. در جنگل من ، از درندگی نام و نشان نیست.

In the shade — the sunlight of your land, در سایه — آفتاب دیارت،

You hear tales of “good and evil.” قصه ”خیر و شر“ می شنوی.

I hear the blossomings. من شکفتن را می شنوم .

And the watercourse skirts the yonder side of time. و جویبار از آن سوی زمان می گذرد.

You are on the way. تو در راهی.

I have arrived. من رسیده ام.

A sorrow landed in your eyes, fainthearted wayfarer! اندوهی در چشمانت نشست، رهرو نازک دل!

There is not much of a distance between us: میان ما راه درازی نیست:

The tremor of a leaf. لرزش یک برگ.

(“Hasht Ketab” 164) (“Faratar”/ “Further” ll. 17-24)

Just two years before Sohrab’s birth, the 136 year rule of the Qajar Empire comes to an end when Reza Khan<sup>18</sup> with the help of the British dethrones the last Qajar king. With Reza Shah’s accession to the throne in 1926, “the censorship and restrictions imposed by the new regime upon the press silenced the poets from making any political criticism which might be deemed offensive to the Government” (Rahman 179). In 1941, when Sohrab is a teenager, the Allied powers of Great Britain and the Soviet Union invade and occupy Iran removing Reza Shah from power, send the king into exile for siding with Hitler during the war and they choose

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<sup>18</sup> later known as Reza Shah

his eldest son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as Shah, absolute monarch and replacement for the father.

Recalling his childhood in his diaries, Sohrab reflects upon the pressure from the social norm that is the prescriber of acceptable behavior:

My grades were good. I was the top student in class. Crémieux thinks “the top student in class” exemplifies an opportunist and a hypocrite. I was the top student in class due to fear. Josiane finishes his schoolwork with creative diligence, because he believes it is useless. My home works were in order because I had been raised in order. *Parishani* / anguish, frightened me. It still frightens me (*Blue Room*, 47).

The most important political events of Sepehri’s youth, according to Mehdi Ramshini, are the nationalization of the oil industry by Prime Minister Mossadegh in March of 1951 and the 28th of Mordad coup d’état—the August 19, 1953 U.S. orchestrated coup which crushes the parliamentary government of Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh and reinstates Mohammad Reza Shah as absolute monarch (48), *Shahanshah*, or *King of Kings*. Everyone in popular society suffered in the aftermath of the coup: the suspension of parliament would also mean the suspension of artistic and intellectual freedom, the silencing of all opposition or criticism of the monarchy, suspension of on the right to assembly as carried out by the Shah’s CIA trained secret police, SAVAK—anyone opposing the monarchy faced incarceration, torture or execution. Sepehri had already published one book of poetry, entitled *Marg-é Rang / Death of Color* in 1951 and he publishes a second book of poems, *Zendegi-é Khabha / Life of Dreams* in 1953.

In the period before the coup d'état, Iran's leading intellectual community followed the doctrines of Stalinism and its general political rule.<sup>19</sup> After the terrible defeat of '53, the grounds had now shifted, the old hierarchy was now renewed with dictums of populist intelligentsia.<sup>20</sup> Afflicted by the misfortunes of propaganda and populism, possibilities and potentialities turned into fallacies when leading *committed intellectuals* turned the new current into factionalism and used their narrow definitions of culture against genuine art and artists who they felt were moving in directions away from their control. It is rare to find a true artist in this period that is able to place a clear distance between art and populist tendencies in this era. In addition to having been rejected by many of his fellow modernists for not adhering to the tone and themes of the *engagé* (committed) poets (Shamissa 382) some of today's contemporary critics have gone so far as describing Sepehri's poetry as "personal" and "feminine" (Fomeshi 10). In the political atmosphere where amplified dominant voices were unable to capture the truth of the sociopolitical crisis, Sohrab Sepheri, similar to Emily Dickinson, adopts a much broader attitude in synthesizing the dialectics of conflict and abuse.

Sepehri can recognize the environment of lost hopes and the unrelenting spirit of mankind that beckons us to ride on and to continue breathing through stifling times. Thus the poet journeys on in an endless search for a "*Neshani*,"<sup>21</sup> to find the home of a friend:

"Where is a friend's home?"

"خانه دوست کجاست؟"

It was at dawn that the rider asked.

در فلق بود که پرسید سوار.

The sky took a pause.

آسمان مکثی کرد.

<sup>19</sup> Tudeh Party had absolute hegemony

<sup>20</sup> armed-action groups

<sup>21</sup> The title of the poem, *Neshani*, is the Farsi word for address or direction, the particulars of the place where someone lives or an organization is situated; The poem is dedicated to Abolghassem Saidi.

The passerby offered the branch of light at his lips	ر هگذر شاخه نوری که به لب داشت
To the darkness of the sands	به تاریکی شن ها بخشید
and with a finger at a poplar pointed and said:	و به انگشت نشان داد سپیداری و گفت:
“Just before the tree,	” نرسیده به درخت،
There is a garden path greener than God's dreams	کوچه باغی است که از خواب خدا سبزتر است
In it there is love as blue as the wings of honesty.	و در آن عشق به اندازه پره های صداقت آبی است.
You go on to the end of that street	می روی تا ته آن کوچه
Which becomes visible right behind maturity,	که از پشت بلوغ سر به در می آرد،
Then you turn toward the flower of loneliness,	پس به سمت گل تنهایی می پیچی،
Two steps before reaching the flower,	دو قدم مانده به گل،
You are halted by the immortal fountain of earthly myths.	پای فواره جاوید اساطیر زمین می مانی
There a transparent terror will seize you,	و تو را ترسی شفاف فرا می گیرد.
In the fluid intimacy of space, you'll hear a froufrou:	در صمیمیت سیال فضا، خش خشی می شنوی:
You'll see a child	کودکی می بینی
Who has climbed a tall pine,	رفته از کاج بلندی بالا،
To lift a chick out from the nest of light	جوجه بردارد از لانه نور
And you ask him	و از او می پرسی
“Where is a friend's home?” (“Hasht Ketab” 358-359)	خانه دوست کجاست؟

The poem's vivid imagery allows the reader like the poet to become the rider upon a journey in search of a lost friend. The figurative search demonstrates how at “the dawn” of awakening the earliest human demand is the quest for mutual understanding, and also highlights the oppressive nature of the era. In a suppressive reality where individuals are barred from access

to the truth and friends become informants for the oppressive regime, the poem can be read as the unofficial protest against the hypocritical nature of “honest” and the “noble” men. Aside from the self, the only *other* that can be trusted for advice is the “child,” and children, as we know, are usually not yet in a position to be giving out directions. The pulsing voice of the rider’s aching heart repeats the same question in the first and last stanza of the poem, transmuting the verse into an ancient symbol of paradox, an ouroboros, a serpent eating its own tail, or man on the eternal quest to be understood by another. In his pursuit, the poet or the rider has derived wisdom from signs in nature and has encountered innocence but no concrete direction to a friend’s house.

According to Fomeshi and Pourgivi, “through decentralizing the human and deconstructing the long-held binary opposition of man/nature, Sepehri’s environmental ethics aimed at creating a harmonious world of human and nature, which distinguished him from anthropocentric writers” (110). Unlike the patriotism and nationalism of *committed* poetry, Sepehri opts for a path most often overlooked: he chooses the simplicity of nature and the power of the thinking mind to formulate his conviction that the world can and must be understood in a simple and unclouded manner.

Dickinson’s poetics is also an unwelcome aesthetic—hers is an unacceptable form and content within the realm of the male dominated romantic and transcendental 19th-century American intellectual atmosphere. For Dickinson, a female artist at the center of an inflexible male dominated literary world, the writing of unconventional poetry is in itself a form of protest and liberation from the available societal definitions for women. When her poem “A narrow

Fellow in the Grass”<sup>22</sup> appeared in print both edited and titled as “The Snake” by a male editor—alterations made to her work without her knowledge or consent, the “editorial interference defeated her poetic objectives and dissuaded her from conventional publication via mechanical reproduction” (Smith 76).<sup>23</sup> Wendy Martin makes the assertion that Dickinson’s declaration to Higginson that “while my thought is undressed—I can make the distinction, but when I put them in the Gown — they look alike and numb,” (L404) demonstrates her need to express her raw, unadorned thoughts rather than traditional exultations and lamentations confined by layers of adornments.

It appears that throughout her life, Dickinson stands resolute and alone, against the social and artistic rules of her time. Emily Dickinson’s response to a now lost letter received from T.W. Higginson, in May or early June of 1862 in which he had provided criticism of her work and conducted some “surgery” on her verse illustrates the 19th-century male literary critic’s assessment of Dickinson’s style, and illuminates her defiant stance against his negative valuation of her poetry:

You think my gait “spasmodic” — I am in danger — Sir —

You think me “uncontrolled” — I have no Tribunal. (L265)

As Jonathan Morse explains, from the point of view of 19th-century literary criticism, “spasmodic” is something which is bad both esthetically and morally (508):

Dickinson’s fragments of pure conception may well have seemed trivial to [Higginson]

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<sup>22</sup> Dickinson’s poems do not have names, the quotation is the first line of the poem

<sup>23</sup> In a 1866 letter to T.W. Higginson Dickinson enclosed a clipping of “The Snake,” the version of “A narrow Fellow in / the Grass” (Set 6c; P 986) which had appeared in the *Springfield Daily Republican* two months earlier, to demonstrate her reasons for choosing not to publish. She comments on the printed version: “Lest you meet my Snake and suppose I deceive it was robbed of me —defeated too of the third line by the punctuation. The third and fourth were one —I had told you I did not print —I feared you might think me ostensible. . .” (L 316) (Smith, 76).

at [a] time [when he was to join the war effort], merely esthetic in intent, destitute of stabilizing rhetorical decorum (“uncontrolled”), insufficiently rooted in the fundamental seriousness of the American agony (508)...Placed in the 19th-century critical context of spasmodism...Dickinson does appear a stronger, more enigmatic, less Emersonian and more Byronic figure, a powerful amoralist forcing the bewildered Higginson into embarrassed rationalizations about insanity and unorthodox grammar (509).

Dickinson refers to the domineering social forces as “they” and expresses how “they” preferred her to stay quiet or perhaps adhere to the more accepted form of writing for women: fictional storytelling. Dickinson’s poetry is illustrative of her understanding of both her disposition and the power of her artistic expression:

They shut me up in Prose —  
 As when a little Girl  
 They put me in the Closet —  
 Because they liked me “still” —  
 Still! Could themselves have peeped —  
 And seen my Brain — go round —  
 They might as wise have lodged a Bird  
 For Treason — in the Pound (F/445) (Lines 1-8).

Aware that her thoughts and poetics stand in conflict with the dominant social and artistic norms of her time, Dickinson expresses herself in concrete terms. She recognizes that her power lies in her will to think and act independently—a punishable offence like “treason.” In poem 445 Dickinson punctuates the bewilderments of social confinement by her ingenious long

dashes—the inundations of thoughts are deliberately highlighted by isolation—and she employs her unconventional capitalizations to offer a key to the poem—Prose, Girl, Closet, Brain, Bird, Treason and Pound.

Dickinson and Sepehri have both been described as solitary characters who retreat from society into their own space. Sepehri never attends the opening night of his many painting exhibits, he shuns the book launches organized to honor the publication of his poetry (Abedi 111); he is awed and disturbed by the cacophony of traffic and the absence of the birds' singing during his visits to New York City; he flees Tehran for the serenity of the familiar villages of Kashan and the garden at every opportunity (Golestan 14). Alert to intrusions by popular and domineering voices, Sepehri does not refuse society—he is thirsty for a rare *other* who may comprehend him—thus he instructs those who may want to visit him to respect his space of solitude and to tread lightly upon the fragility of his state:

.....

If you are going to come see me, come softly and slowly      به سراغ من اگر می آید، نرم و آهسته بیایید

Lest should fracture      تا مبدا که ترک بردارد

The thin porcelain of my loneliness (“Hasht Ketab” 361)      چینی نازک تنهایی من

Dickinson, expresses a similar aversion to fame and shuts her door upon intrusive society. In a June 7, 1862 letter to her chosen preceptor, T. W. Higginson, she writes: “If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her; if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase, and the approbation of my dog would forsake me then. My barefoot rank is better” (L265, *Selected Letters*, 174). Like Sepheri, she repeatedly asserts her preference for solitude and shelter from the dominant master narrative:

The Soul selects her own society —  
 Then — shuts the Door —  
 To her divine Majority —  
 Present no more —  
 Unmoved — she notes the Chariots — pausing —  
 At her low Gate —  
 Unmoved — an Emperor be kneeling  
 Opon her Mat —  
 I've known her — from an ample nation —  
 Choose One —  
 Then — close the Valves of her attention —  
 Like Stone — (F/409)

As Michael Davidson explains, “Emily Dickinson not only “creates” an elliptical and hyperbolic style, she textualizes herself out of the doctrinal and social discourse she finds around her” (212):

When Emily Dickinson seeks to choose her own “Society,” she chooses a word as well, one with recognizable cultural and historical connotations. She has not simply chosen a metaphor from others to suit poetic ends. The word exists enmeshed in political and theological contexts that lie at the heart of American institutions (211).

In the context of their respective era, Dickinson and Sepehri are both artists at the forefront of what Leon Trotsky once termed a “creative splinter.” As Trotsky asserts, “when an artistic tendency has exhausted its creative resources, creative “splinters” separate it, which are

able to look at the world with new eyes. The more daring the pioneers show in their ideas and actions, the more bitterly they oppose themselves to established authority which rests on a conservative ‘mass base’” (“Art” 119). In splintering away from the master narrative, both Dickinson and Sepehri rid their poetics of the musty conventions of the idealistic and the sentimental traditions, creating a poetry new in both form and content. In constructing their poetic discourse in the margins of the master narrative both poets locate a peripheral space for the unfolding of the abstract.

Karl Marx uses the term *interstice* to define a pocket of trading activity that stands outside the capitalist framework (“Capital” 172). Similar to this notion, art can occur in a *social interstice*—space of free interaction that provides opportunities for the artist outside of the norm. Dickinson is aware of her place in the *interstice* and defines the space of her approach as *circumference*. She declares her position in a July 1862 letter to T.W. Higginson: “My Business is Circumference” (L268). In August of that same year, she reiterates her approach hoping to clarify for the “preceptor” her aim to explore the truth in the margins outside of popular discourse:

You say I confess the little mistake, and omit the large — Because I can see  
Orthography — but the Ignorance out of sight — is my Preceptor’s charge —

Of “shunning Men and Women” — they talk of Hallowed things, aloud — and  
embarrass my Dog — He and I dont object to them, if they’ll exist their side....

...When much in the Woods as a little Girl, I was told that the Snake would bite  
me, that I might pick a poisonous flower, or Goblins kidnap me, but I went along and met

no one but Angels, who were far shyer of me, than I could be of them, so I hav'nt that confidence in fraud which many exercise (L271).

Sepehri's oeuvre demonstrates the artist's move away from the premise of an immutable dominating center towards the mutability found in our surroundings. For Sepehri, like Dickinson, the peripheral margin turns out to be the perfect place for linguistic deviation—where the *truth of life* is felt and grasped. As Sirous Tahbaz writes:

Sepehri was close to “the beginning of the earth.” He was familiar with “the wet destination of the water” and “the green habit of the tree” and his spirit was flowing in “the new direction of objects” (45). If our children, and their grandchildren, want to read a poem overflowing with honesty, purity, brilliance, amity, love and beauty, they shall find him...For he had come from the fellowship of the sun, what he had to say was clear...like a patch of grass (49).

In the peripheral plain the poet is able to observe and synthesize the unity of all matter and the qualitative change in all things. From this genuine standpoint, poetry in the hands of Emily Dickinson and Sohrab Sepehri became the tool for the expression of new formulations and the mutilation of popular myths.

In his poetics, Sepehri lends himself to an unbiased process of observing the objective reality through the subjectivities of his human mind. Similar to Dickinson, Sepehri grasps the constant unifying relationship between one's mind and nature and identifies the hollowness of global belief systems throughout ages that push to institute man's existential ambiguity. In a poem such as “*Hamta,*” or Counterpart,<sup>24</sup> the last poem from his 1958 book of poems *Avar-e*

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<sup>24</sup> This poem does not appear in *Hasht Ketab*

*Aftab / Ruins of Sunshine*, Sepehri expounds upon the emptiness of established and idealized assumptions and outlines his personal and poetic destination:

Had come from the emptiness of <i>kalaam</i> <sup>25</sup>	از تهی کلام آمده بود
Went further than wishes	در فراتر از آرزو ها می رفت
I am about to claw into the sky's blue,	بر آنم تا در آبی آسمان چنگ زنم،
to lift a slit, and regain the cleave of its regard	پاره ای برکنم، و شیار نگاهش را بازیابم
I am about to lift a pebble from the floor of whisper,	بر آنم تا ریگی از زمین زمزمه بردارم،
and throw into time's lagoon	و در تالاب زمان اندازم
In the length of this half-open slope I am about to	بر آنم تا در بلندی این شیب نیمه باز
Drink a chalice of the voice of roosters	پپاله ای از صدای خروسان بنوشم
and to seek the secret of deserts in its <sup>26</sup> eye	و راز بیابان ها را در چشمانش بیابم
I mean to travel the dewy galactic path	بر آنم تا راه شبنمی کهکشان ببیمایم
and think of <i>u</i> ' <sup>27</sup>	وبه او اندیشم
Its tress was the night's waterhole	گیسوانش آبشخور شب بود
Its shirt a spring of winds	پیراهنش چشمه وزشها بود
In its hands the string of dawn was brewing	در دستش رشته سپیده دمان بود
Its eyes was the potholes of worship	چشمانش چاله های نیایش بود
Its lashes was the grass of gravity	مژگانش علفهای جاذبه بود
Its fingers was the pasture of caress	انگشتانش بیشه نوازش بود
I was empty, I went to the jungle of affection,	تهی بودم، به جنگل مهر رفتم،

<sup>25</sup> *Kalaam* translates to word, speech or oral expression.

<sup>26</sup> See footnote 27.

<sup>27</sup> *U*' is third-person Farsi pronoun for he, she or it— therefore the decision rests upon the reader to assign a gendered or neutral pronoun to the reading of this verse and to the subsequent six verses.



the intellect, “The Tabernacles of the Minds / That told the Truth to me (F/1456, ll. 1-2), and Sepehri suggests that “our task perhaps / in the middle of the lotus flower and the century / is to chase after the song of the truth”<sup>28</sup> (“Hasht Ketab” 298-299). For both poets the function of poetic language was not to pass reality through rose-tinted glasses, but to rescue the truth from the ruins of idealism and mysticism.

Dickinson chooses poetry as a vehicle for expression of the truth and not as a device that can alter the state of reality:

In other Motes,  
 Of other Myths  
 Your requisition be.  
 The Prism never held the Hues,  
 It only heard them play — (F/1664)

The poem may be addressing Washington Irving (1783-1859), who in an 1835 article had described how “walking all day in a complete delusion [he] had surveyed the landscape through the prism of poetry, which tinged every object with the hues of the rainbow” (98). Unlike a poet like Irving, Dickinson uses language as the means to convey the nature of the world beyond social conventions and personal deceptions. Allowing “no monarch in [her] life,” (L 271) in her solitary space of artistic experimentation, Dickinson organizes the English language into a new system of communication where her “form explodes” (L 265) into an often divergent verse. Dickinson wants her reader to understand that her studies and observations have led her to

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<sup>28</sup> کار ما شاید این است / که میان گل نیلوفر و قرن / پی آواز حقیقت بدویم

comprehend that the world and all matter, with all its past and present contradictions, exist in one ever-changing unity.

Martha Nell Smith's research into "Dickinson's Manuscripts" demonstrates how with multiple variants and variant punctuation and line breaks, Dickinson will not let us forget that poetry must at times emulate the poet's process of inquiry:

Dickinson's writings, both in content and in form and both in holograph and in print, encourage readers' free play...[her] sets, groups of poems which she gathered as if for a fascicle but refused to bind, invite each reader to make a new pattern for every reading...(133).

Dickinson is able to mold the form and content of poetry into an artistic transmission conveying her report of the relationship between the analytic mind and the objective reality. Her poetry exemplifies Hegel's philosophy that human experience is dependent on the mind's perceptions:

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—  
 For—put them side by side—  
 The one the other will contain  
 With ease—and You—beside— (F598).

As the neuroscientist, Evan Thompson explains, "Whereas some philosophers, notably Immanuel Kant, thought that in experiencing the sublime, we distance ourselves from nature and proclaim our superiority over it by being able to comprehend it," Dickinson, much like Hegel, "undermines this distance by having the brain—a material thing of nature—be that which does the comprehending" (2015). In his *Philosophy of Fine Art*, Hegel postulates that God "exists in

the medium of mind, *which is actual as intelligence*, for us *at any rate, only in the human self-consciousness*" (Bosanquet xxx). For both Dickinson and Sepehri, the cognitive power to realise the self stands in opposition to unquestioned cultural habits. Thus, they both endeavor to remove the old dust of routine beliefs from the bright surface of life.

As Mashidi and Kamali Nahad assert, Sepehri invites his readers to clear their eyes from the dust of habit and to look at life with a new and realistic outlook. Each moment of life, Sohrab proposes, is a new birth whose beginning is awakened in nature (891):

.....

Life is a pleasing tradition

زندگی رسم خوشایندی است

Life has wings and feathers as wide as death

زندگی بال و پری دارد با وسعت مرگ

Has a leap the size of love

پرشی دارد اندازه عشق

Life is not a thing, that at the edge of the shelf of habit

زندگی چیزی نیست که لب طاقچه عادت

you and I can forget

از یاد من و تو برود

..... ("Hasht Ketab" 289-290) ("Water's Footsteps," ll. 241-244).

As Leon Trotsky writes in a December 1938 letter to André Breton, "The struggle for visionary ideas in art begins with the struggle for artistic *truth*, not in terms of any single school, but in terms of *the immutable faith of the artist in his own inner self*. Without this there is no art. "You shall not lie!"—that is the formula of salvation" ("Art" 132). In his second long poem "*Mossafer*" / "*Traveler*," again the poet proposes that habits stifle the powers of clear cognition. According to Sepehri one must go forth with fresh action:

.....

The dust of habit endlessly is in the path of observation.

غبار عادت پیوسته در مسیر تماشاست.

Always with a fresh breath one must walk.

همیشه با نفس تازه باید راه رفت.

..... (“Hasht Ketab” 314)

In their poetic discourse Sepehri and Dickinson both choose to look around their bedrooms, to reach into their pockets, the hills, the birds, the snake, the bees and butterflies near the family home and its garden, the palpability of sunshine and the immediacy of the sky, to uncover the clear pulse of the self buried under the layers of age-old suppositions. For both poets nature is the domain for observations of the logic of the universe. It is in this domain that they each notice the ever changing nature of existence and are able to reject sentimental and skeptical thoughts in favor of the concrete idea of humankind’s unity with the environment. Sometimes their poems are written plainly, and in other instances they demonstrate an elliptical style which is reflective of the complexities of thoughts in the process of observation. Unadorned and honest, the nature of the poetry of Sohrab Sepehri and Emily Dickinson is transparent.

Sepehri traces back the identification of the self through a dialectical method of inquiry—the poet is able to grasp the ever changing nature of existence, including the qualitative change of all things through the observation of the material conditions that render the subjective changed and objective inconstant:

In the beginningless and endless darkness

در تاریکی بی آغاز و پایان

A door burgeoned in my lucid anticipation.

دری در روشنی انتظارم رویید.

I placed myself beyond the door alone

خودم را در پس در تنها نهادم

And I went in:

و به درون رفتم:

A room without an opening filled up the emptiness of my gaze. اتاقی بی‌روزی تهی نگاهم را پرکرد.



Conviction — That Granitic Base —  
 Though none be on our side —  
 Suffice Us — for a Crowd —  
 Ourselves — and Rectitude —  
 And that Assembly — not far off  
 From furthest Spirit — God — (F/740)

For Dickinson, to believe in oneself is to have a base as strong as granite—it will resemble the support of an almighty and it shall withstand all calamities.

When Sohrab Sepehri urges us to “come together let us understand something of the state of a stone,”<sup>29</sup> this is not a call to embrace the void, or to assume a vegetative position in a state of vacuity, it is rather an invitation to a methodological observation of life and matter, to understand oneself, and one’s likeness and unity with all the surrounding objective universe.

Dickinson too invites us to peel back the stratified petals of conventional standards of conduct and to apply the latest knowledge in order to gain a panoramic view of the fleeting moment that is life. The rarity of her certainty is that we come, we live and we die—no obscure promises are necessary to cloud this clear notion:

Could live — *did* live —  
 Could die — *did* die —  
 Could smile upon the whole  
 Through faith in one he met not —  
 To introduce his soul —

---

<sup>29</sup> بیابا هم از حالت سنگ چیزی بفهمیم

Could go from scene familiar  
 To an untraversed spot —  
 Could contemplate the journey  
 With unpuzzled heart —  
 Such trust had one among us —  
 Among us *not* today —  
 We who saw the launching  
 Never sailed the Bay! (F/59)

Sepehri and Dickinson's methodology for observations and identification of the concrete self demonstrates how phenomenal ideas are nothing more than reflections of the material world by the human mind. The works of both poets are representative of a voice which is opposed to the *idealistic* subordination of the *concrete* to the *abstract*. Therefore, in comparing the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Sohrab Sepehri, I find the point of convergence in their dialectical method to be *freedom in existence* not *freedom from existence*—Marx's revision and completion of Hegel's philosophy—dialectic materialism as opposed to dialectic idealism/mysticism.

In 1845, Marx inaugurates a standpoint in which he replaces “the cult of abstract men...by the science of real men and their historical development (Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach”). In *The Holy Family* (1845) Marx introduces the proposition that people are the real makers of the history of mankind (10), and he revises Hegel's idealistic philosophy, giving him credit for the rational elements in his dialectics but overcoming the mystic side of it (9):

*Hegel's* conception of history assumes an *Abstract* or *Absolute Spirit* which develops in such a way that mankind is a mere *mass* bearing it with a varying degree of

consciousness or unconsciousness. Within *empiric*, exoteric history he therefore has a *speculative*, esoteric history develop. The history of mankind becomes the history of the *abstract* spirit of mankind, a *spirit beyond all man!*...Hegel is doubly half-hearted: first because, while declaring that philosophy constitutes the Absolute Spirit's existence he refuses to recognize the *real philosophical individual* as the *Absolute Spirit*; secondly, because according to him the Absolute Spirit makes history only in *appearance*. For since the Absolute Spirit becomes *conscious* of itself as the creative World Spirit only *post festum* in the philosopher, its making of history exists only in the consciousness, in the opinion and conception of the philosopher, i.e., only in the speculative imagination (115-116).

The artist, like any worker, creates everything; and art in itself does not fulfill a historical task—it is simply an expression of reality in a historical moment. The poetry of Dickinson and Sepehri highlights a dialectically materialist view of existence in which the power of cognition evolved in our species adopts the fruits of known knowledge for the understanding of reality. The dialectical method, according to Frederic Jameson, “can be acquired only by a concrete working through of detail, by a sympathetic internal experience of the gradual construction of a system according to its inner necessity” (xi). Furthermore, as Jameson explains, there is no content for dialectic thought but *total* content:

...it is thought to the second power: an intensification of the normal thought processes such that a renewal of light washes over the object of their exasperation, as though in the midst of its immediate perplexities the mind had attempted, by willpower, by fiat, to lift itself mightily up by its own bootstraps. Faced with the operative procedures of the

nonreflective thinking mind...dialectical thought tries not so much to complete and perfect the application of such procedures as to widen its own attention to include them in its awareness as well: It aims, in other words, not so much at solving the particular dilemmas in question, as at converting those problems into their own solutions on a higher level, and making the fact and the existence of the problem itself the starting point for new research (307).

In opposition to moral and conventional indulgences, Sepheri presents an individual and conscious voice aware of the ever-changing nature of all matter. The *self*, objective reality, and even the syllogism, *in the beginning was the Word*, are mutable facts. In “*Ta Entehayé Hozur*” / “*The End of Presence*,” as the name of the poem suggests, the poet sets out to explore the fluctuating edges of existence and identifies this changing unity in all of nature:

Tonight	امشب
In a strange dream	در یک خواب عجیب
The face shall unveil	رو به سمت کلمات
Towards words.	باز خواهد شد.
The wind shall say something.	باد چیزی خواهد گفت.
The apple shall fall,	سیب خواهد افتاد،
Over the earth's peculiarities it shall roll,	روی اوصاف زمین خواهد غلتید،
Till the presence of the night's absent homeland it shall go.	تا حضور وطن غایب شب خواهد رفت.
The ceiling of one delusion shall cave in.	سقف یک وهم فرو خواهد ریخت.
Eye	چشم
The somber wisdom of a tree shall see.	هوش محزون نباتی را خواهد دید.

A tendril shall twirl around watching God.	بیچکی دور تماشای خدا خواهد پیچید
Mystery, shall boil over.	راز، سر خواهد رفت.
The root of time's piety shall wilt.	ریشه ی زهد زمان خواهد پوسید.
.....	
Tonight	امشب
The stem of meaning	ساقه ی معنی را
A friend's winnow shall shake,	وزش دوست تکان خواهد داد.
Stupor shall be depetalled.	بهت پرپر خواهد شد.
.....	
Inside the word for morning	داخل واژه صبح
Morning shall come. ("Hasht Ketab" 455-457) (ll. 1-14, 19-22, 26-27)	صبح خواهد شد.

Sepehri's poetry demonstrates how inferences of all distinct concepts involve and arise from oppositional relationships to other concepts. As Leon Trotsky explains, dialectical thought is the kind of "thinking that analyzes all things and phenomena in their continuous change" ("The ABC" 107). Abolfazl Horri assesses a dialectic design in the poem where from the combination of two phenomenon, a third phenomena is generated. Horri explains how the poem appears to have a "door" (129) which has been opened, allowing for the dream of the first stanza to open up towards the direction of words—that same wind has caused the apple to roll to the floor and that which later causes the ceiling to collapse (130). For Sepehri, the dark expanse of a long night "Night" functions both as metaphor for oblivion, ignorance and innocence, and is also the space for the poet's deliberations upon the logic of evolution. He thus begins the poem's first verse with the blindness of "the night," three subsequent stanzas are also an excursion through

the darkness of the night. But this obscurity is resolved with sunshine—the poem ends with the arrival of “morning.” Daylight, in one sense, brings an end to the poet’s reverie, and in Platonic terms illumines the intelligible with truth (Plato 235).

The dialectical method of inquiry and the understanding of the peaceful unity of opposites amongst all things, with its great potential for unchaining mankind from existential ruminations, cannot be reached through tranquilizing dogma anymore than it can be reached through a resignation of the will. Dickinson, like Sepheri, distinguishes stupor from reverie. The process of inquiry, observation and synthesis for her occurs in a conscious space of deep reflection:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,  
 One clover, and a bee,  
 And revery.  
 The revery alone will do,  
 If bees are few. (F/1779)

The unconscious dialectician is not a dreamer, he or she is in a deep state of thoughtful reflection or *revery*. As Gaston Bachelard explains, reverie is not a dream but a process of synthesis and it helps us “inhabit the world, inhabit the happiness of the world”:

...Poetic reverie gives us the world of worlds. Poetic reverie is a cosmic reverie. It is a phenomenon of solitude...Cosmic reveries...situate us in a world and not in a society. The cosmic reverie possesses a sort of stability or tranquility. It helps us escape time. It is a *state*. Let us get to the bottom of its essence: it is a state of mind... (13).

Sepehri refers to a state of cosmic reverie, or *vahm*,<sup>30</sup> repeatedly in his poetry. In “*Ku Ghatré-ye Vahm*” / “Where is a Drop of *Vahm*,” he celebrates the clarity that he is able to reach in the depths of reverie where the power of consciousness facilitates a self-communing with one’s inmost thoughts:

I raised my head:	سر برداشتم :
A bee flew in my thoughts	زنبوری در خیالم پرزد
Or the movement of a cloud cut my sleep?	یا جنبش ابری خوابم را شکافت ؟
In the bewildering awakening	در بیداری سهمک
The sea’s musicality — I heard as oscillation	آهنگی دریا — نوسان شنیدم
to the close-lipped glory of one pebble	به شکوه لب بستگی یک ریگ
and I rose from the margin of time	و از کنار زمان برخاستم
Mighty moment	هنگام بزرگ
Had placed silence upon my lips	بر لبانم خاموشی نشانده بود
In the sun of the grass a crawler flung open its eyes:	در خورشید چمن ها خزنده ای دیده گشود:
Its eyes drank the pond’s infinity	چشمانش بیکرانی برکه را نوشید
The play of shadow brought its flight to the earth	بازی سایه پروازش را به زمین کشید
And in the downpour of sunlight a dove was adream	و کبوتری در بارش آفتاب به رویا بود
May the breadth of my eyes be thy arena, o vast lookout!	پهنه چشمانم جولانگاه تو باد، چشم انداز بزرگ!
In this incredible bond where’s a drop of <i>vahm</i> ?	در این جوش شگفتانگیز کو قطره وهم ؟
The wings have lost the shadow of the flight	بال ها سایه پرواز را گم کرده اند
The petal awaits the weight of the bee	گلبرگ سنگینی زنبور را انتظار می کشد

<sup>30</sup> *Vahm* has several definitions including: conjecture, daydream, reverie, or delusion.

I run my hands over the freshness of the soil	به طراوت خاک دست می کشم
The moisture of disgust does not land on my fingers	نمناکی چندی بر انگشتانم نمی نشیند
I approach the flowing water	به آب روان نزدیک می شوم
It whispers of the obscurity of two shores	نا پیدایی دو کرانه را زمزمه می کند
Secrets like gashed pomegranates are in half-bloom	رمزها چون انار ترک خورده نیمه شکفته اند
Sprout of vim comprehend me, abreast bud!	جوانه شور مرا دریاب نورسته زود آشنا!
Welcome o transparent moment,	درود ای لحظه شفاف
a bee flies in your eternity (“Hasht Ketab” 169-171)	در بیکران تو زنبوری پر می زند

Karl Marx explains that “the reform of consciousness consists *entirely* in making the world aware of its own consciousness, in arousing it from its dream of itself, in *explaining* its own actions to it” (“Letter to Ruge” 6). In his moment of reverie, Sohrab, like Emily, sees all reality in an amazing struggle to join the whole. Sepehri encapsulates the unity of all things in their changeability and contradictions in the harmonic flight of the bee. Such paradoxal images in terms of meaning lead to "unity of opposites," exhibiting extraordinary examples for identification of dialectic relations.

Fred White argues that, “the epistemological dilemma—the struggle between certainty and uncertainty—is central to Dickinson’s poetic vision. She uses poetry to perform... experiments in language, her counterpart to scientific experiments which she accepts as equally valid efforts for apprehending essential Truth” (122). Dickinson demonstrates her skills in synthesis as a dialectician when she she identifies the co-existence of opposing conditions in order to define a sensation:

It was not Death, for I stood up,

And all the Dead, lie down —

.....

It was not Frost, for on my Flesh

I felt Siroccos — crawl —

Not Fire — for just my marble feet

Could keep a Chancel, cool —

And yet it tasted, like them all,

The figures I have seen (F 355, L 1-3; 4-9)

As Parry and McGill explain, organisms, organs, structure and functions are demonstrably interdependent, and neither could exist without the other. They are inseparable, but also distinguishable, like the convex and concave sides of a curve (424). The poem is being written in the poet's present tense, relaying a past sensory experience: this temporal link between a past experience and present observations demonstrates the dichotomous harmony between all opposites, the present and the past, pain and perseverance, being and non-being.

The principle of *the unity of opposites* is the realization that “to understand anything is to distinguish it from its opposite” and that “the existence of a thing involves the existence of an opposite” and that “a concrete thing is a unity of opposite determinations” (McGill & Parry 422). Dialectics explains how “a concrete system or process is simultaneously determined by oppositely directed forces” and most importantly that in this, whether temporal or non-temporal, “concrete continuum” there is a middle ground between two contiguous opposites, i.e. life and death, a stretch of continuum where it is both true and not true that everything is life or death.

The idea of death, as a unified opposition to life, is the subject of scrutiny in many of Dickinson and Sepehri's poems. Having attained an understanding of the continuum of change and the unity of opposites and in all of nature, the unconscious or conscious dialectician is able to accept death as an essential element of life. For Dickinson and Sepehri, death is a natural and obvious component of life and stands in complete harmony with the essence of existence—it is not to be feared and it cannot be avoided. Recognition of the constant unity between the individual and nature facilitates a reconciliation with one's mortality. The only evidence of immortality, for both poets, is the findings we leave behind upon a page.

The subject of death appears in many of Dickinson's poems, but she does not think of dying as frightening, rather she considers death as a familiar life companion (Alqaryouti and Sadeq 18). In her opinion, dying is a normal process that occurs to any life, and she questions our inability to come to terms with something so natural. A natural death for Dickinson is a polite friend who arrives on time, makes no promises and means no evil:

Because I could not stop for Death —  
 He kindly stopped for me —  
 The Carriage held but just Ourselves —  
 And Immortality.  
 We slowly drove — He knew no haste  
 And I had put away  
 My labor and my leisure too,  
 For His Civility — (F/479) (ll. 1-8)

Since death is the one certainty that befalls all lifeforms, by comparing the death of a human being to the unsurprising death of a flower Dickinson posits how truly unimportant and unremarkable a fact it is:

Apparently with no surprise  
 To any happy Flower  
 The Frost beheads it at its play —  
 In accidental power —  
 The blonde Assassin passes on —  
 The Sun proceeds unmoved  
 To measure off another Day  
 For an Approving God — (F/1668)

Sepehri too accepts death as the necessary law of life, and like Dickinson compares our longevity and the endurance of our species to the life and death of a plant: “Companion! We are connected to the immortality of the flowers.” (“Hasht Ketab” 167). He understands that the most essential requirement for the evolution of life is death (Taghian 4). As Mashidi explains, Sepehri views life and death as two correlatives contingent upon one another. In Sepehri’s philosophy, life and death are commingled, one is the continuation of another like night and day (888). He delineates this understanding in a section from “Water’s Footsteps”:

.....

و اگر مرگ نبود دست ما در پی چیزی می گشت

And if death wasn’t our hand would be in search of something

و بدانیم اگر نور نبود منطق زنده پرواز دگرگون می شد

And if light wasn't, the live logic of flight would collapse

.....

And let us not be afraid of death

و نترسیم از مرگ

(death is not the end of the dove.

مرگ پایان کبوتر نیست.

death is not the inversion of a chain.

مرگ وارونه یک زنجره نیست.

death is flowing in the acacia's psyche.

مرگ در ذهن افاقی جاری است.

death has a seat in the temperate climate of thought. مرگ در آب و هوای خوش اندیشه نشیمن دارد.

death in the village night's core speaks of the morning.. مرگ در ذات شب دهکده از صبح سخن می گوید..

death comes with a cluster of grapes in its mouth.

مرگ با خوشه انگور می آید به دهان.

death sings in the robin's throat.

مرگ در حنجره سرخ - گلو می خواند.

death is responsible for the beauty of the butterfly's wing.

مرگ مسئول قشنگی پر شاپرک است.

death sometimes picks basil.

مرگ گاهی ریحان می چیند.

death sometimes drinks vodka.

مرگ گاهی ودکا می نوشد.

sometimes is sitting in the shade, looking at us.

گاه در سایه نشسته است به ما می نگرَد.

And we all know

و همه می دانیم

The lungs of pleasure, is full of death's oxygen.)

ریه های لذت ، پر اکسیژن مرگ است.)

.....

(“Hasht Ketab” 294-295) (“Water’s Footsteps” ll. 307-308, 335-348)

Throughout their poetry Dickinson and Sepehri repeatedly indicate a deep connection with nature. As Trotsky's asserts, “the logical forms of our thought develop in the process of our adaptation to nature” (Trotsky, “An Open Letter” 2)—the dialectic is “the logic of evolution”

(“An Open Letter” 1), “we call our dialectic materialist, since its roots are neither in heaven nor in the depth of our “free will,” but in objective reality, in nature. (“The ABC” 108).

“Nature” is what We see —

The Hill — the Afternoon —

Squirrel — Eclipse — the Bumble bee —

Nay — Nature is Heaven —

“Nature” is what We hear —

The Bobolink — the Sea —

Thunder — the Cricket —

Nay — Nature is Harmony — (F/721) (2-8)

For Dickinson heaven is both temporal and perceptible—heaven like “the Afternoon,” and also like “The Hill,” “Squirrel,” “Eclipse” and “the Bumble bee,” and similar to the fleeting sound of “The Bobolink” and “Thunder” or the perennial sound of “the Sea” and “the Cricket” like nature itself is perceived and experienced in a moment of time by the individual. Just as tangible objects and sound waves are encountered by a material structure that is the human being, Dickinson establishes the materiality of heaven by placing the concept within the palpable realm of the here and now.

The *realm of ideology*, as Friedrich Engels explains, “is made up of various false conceptions of nature, of man's own being, of spirits, magic forces, etc.” As Engels lightly asserts, “the history of science is the history of the gradual clearing away of this nonsense or of its replacement by fresh but already less absurd nonsense” (“Engels to Conrad Schmidt” 1).

Sepehri would like us to abandon the “various false conceptions” of existence presented to mankind throughout the ages. Like Dickinson, he too, distinguishes the ideological realm from the historical and material. In “*Sure-yé Tamasha*” / “*Sura of Advertence*” he writes:

.....

And I told unto them: و به آنان گفتم

Stone is not the ornament of the mountain سنگ آرایش کوهستان نیست

In the same way than metal همچنانی که فلز

is not an adornment to the body of the pickax. زیوری نیست به اندام کلنگ.

In the palm of the earth there is an invisible gem در کف دست زمین گوهر ناپیدایی است

That from its radiance prophets are all stupefied که رسولان همه از تابش آن خیره شدند.

Be after the gem. پی گوهر باشید.

Carry the moments to the grazing ground of prophecy. لحظه ها را به چراگاه رسالت ببرید.

.....

On top of every mountain they saw a prophet. سر هر کوه رسولی دیدند

Cloud of denial they took upon shoulders. ابر انکار به دوش آوردند.

We alighted the wind باد را نازل کردیم

To hoodwink them تا کلاه از سرشان بردارد

Their houses were full of chrysanthemums, خانه هاشان پر داوودی بود

We closed their eyes. چشمشان را بستیم.

We did not join their hands to the sprig of wit. دستشان را نرساندیم به سرشاخه هوش.

We filled up their pockets with habit. جیبشان را پر عادت کردیم.

Their dreams we agitated with the sound of passing mirrors. خوابشان را به صدای سفر آینه ها آشفتیم.

(“Hasht Ketab” 375-376) (ll. 9-15, 31-39)

Dickinson, like Sepehri, travels beyond Hegel’s idealism into the plateau of the materialist understanding of dialectics by recognizing the reality of the world free from the shrouding efforts of specific historical and social ideas. For Dickinson:

To be alive — is Power —  
 Existence — in itself —  
 Without a further function —  
 Omnipotence — Enough —  
 To be alive — and Will!—  
 ‘Tis able as a God —  
 The Maker — of Ourselves — be what —  
 Such being Finitude! (F/876)

In the beginning stanzas of “Water’s Footsteps,” Sepehri demonstrates his understanding of the truth of the unity of man with his material surroundings. The poet finds bare reality emanating from the identification of the self and the observable harmony found in our natural surroundings:

I have a piece of bread, a bit of brains,	تکه نانی دارم، خرده هوشی،
tip of a needle worth of taste.	سر سوزن ذوقی.
I have a mother, better than the leaf of a tree.	مادری دارم، بهتر از برگ درخت.
Friends better than running water.	دوستانی، بهتر از آب روان.
And a God that is these surroundings:	و خدایی که در این نزدیکی است:
In between these gillyflowers, at the foot of that tall pine.	لای این شب بوها، پای آن کاج بلند.

Upon the water's consciousness, upon the plant's law.	روی آگاهی آب، روی قانون گیاه.
I am a moslem.	من مسلمانم.
My <i>qiblah</i> one red rose.	قبله ام یک گل سرخ.
.....	
My <i>kaaba</i> is by the water,	کعبه ام بر لب آب،
My <i>kaaba</i> is under the acacias.	کعبه ام زیر اقاقی هاست.
My <i>kaaba</i> like the breeze,	کعبه ام مثل نسیم،
goes from garden to garden, goes from town to town.	می رود باغ به باغ می رود شهر به شهر.

(“Hasht Ketab” 272-273) (ll. 3-10, 21-23)

Taghian and Sattari assert that “Sepehri has something simple to say to us. He wants to remind us that we are a walled-in people living in enclosed cities and although, more than ever before, we pine to enjoy life, we are distanced more than ever before, from the truth of life” (5). When the perfect unity in all of existence is grasped then the ego of the individual transcends a romantic bourgeois ego and transforms into a *positive ego* where minimal personal repression allows for maximum personal happiness. The self-interest of a dialectician, as expressed in the modernist poet of Dickinson and Sepehri, is *personal freedom* as opposed to a romantic self-interest which pays captious attention to the rules governing order.

Having been born on different continents, to different cultures and times in history the common grounds upon which their monumental poetics stand is their common departure from the master narrative of their time and their comprehension of the dialectical relationship between the individual and the world. By seeking to enunciate individual existence through poetic discourse, strengthening self-consciousness by a methodology of studying the relationship and

parallels between myth, antiquity, the present and the self the poet of new verse arrives at the disintegration of national existence—the poem itself, a product of the public domain, becomes free of origin, period and author.

The poetics of Dickinson and Sepehri demonstrates how independent arts can emerge in the *interstices* of a previous social trend. This marginal perimeter can function as a space for the expression and the observation of the decentered totality of the universe. From a historical and artistic perspective, both Dickinson and Sepehri make “circumference” their “business”—in this space both poets are able to observe and reflect upon the unity of mankind with its surroundings. The understanding of this unity is to encounter the peace between the tangible/material and the intangible/spiritual, which leads to an overall comprehensive respect for the glory of existence.

Dickinson and Sepehri have each been mythologized and misunderstood. During their lifetimes, and still today, the insatiability found in their verse to uncover the dialectic dynamics of life through art has been diminished by the suppressive master narrative and its desire to dominate and censor independent voices. Critics of special spheres have repeatedly reduced the concrete nature of their poetics to mere mystical abstractions.

The language of every human heart is shaped in reaction to a social experience and is therefore part of the nature of humanity as a whole. Poetic creation, as Hegel explains, sparks from, if not always a conscious, then often a subconscious intensity of living. Ideas may, through the art of the poet, come “to have hands and feet” (59). Shaped by historical frustrated hopes, ideological defeats, philosophical and scientific developments and advancements, their poetry is the result of the author’s investigation into the realities of life. The carefully crafted lyrical verses of both Dickinson and Sepehri, packed with sequences of images and ideas, demonstrate the

endless capabilities of a questioning mind. Such artistic discourse, expressed in language, composed of various poetic devices, once passed through the sieve of the mind of a reader separates into a granular heap of inherited language, grammar, sound and form and the amorphous liquid that is the language of the human heart. The impact of Sepehri's poetry like the attar of his hometown's famous *mohammadi* roses remains in the drawers of the mind; the non-conformist roots ever present in Dickinson's verse meet our senses like Vesuvius, a lone and active volcano.

Nurtured in the artistic traditions of their own time and cultures before theirs, expert companions to the soil of the grounds of Kashan and Amherst, in rejecting dogma and the moral rule of men, in other words time-specific principles of conduct, Sepehri and Dickinson's poetry trespasses into a boundaryless realm of conscious objectivity. In the marginal space that each carved out for their verse, they each transcended the confinement of political, artistic and gendered rules. However much the themes of their poetry may reflect an originating point in a specific culture, the essence of what the poet expresses is universal reality. Emily Dickinson and Sohrab Sepehri's respective commitment to a non-traditional form of poetic discourse and the deeply analytical, personal, nonconformist and nonnationalistic nature of their poetry allots them a distinguishable space in world literature.

The subject of their poetry baffles and delights, and the form and content of their verse sparks electricity in a reader's mind. Scenic, marginal, and radically unexpected, the poems of Emily Dickinson and Sohrab Sepehri are artistic and intellectual confirmations of *existence* as just another passing moment of reality within the interdependent and interconnected development of nature. They each recorded this experience with a unique literary fire, intensity,

innovation and skill. Their poems have thus become the kind of autonomous self-contained art that render an artist immortal.

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