

# Hajj Sayyah -- fashioning a self by exploring the world

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# HAJJ SAYYAH: FASHIONING A SELF BY EXPLORING THE WORLD

ハッジ・サイヤーフ：世界歴訪による自己形成

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ハッジ・サイヤーフ(1836-1925年)は広く19世紀中葉の欧米を見聞した旅行家であり、またイラン人として最初にアメリカ合衆国の市民権を得た人物である。彼がその生涯で訪れた国や地域は順にコーカサス地方、イスタンブール、ヨーロッパ諸国、米国、日本、中国、シンガポール、ビルマ、インドなどに及ぶ。またメッカは9度巡礼しており、エジプトも数度訪れている。だが彼の本領は単なる世界旅行者というよりも、彼が卓越した旅行記作家だったところにある。

本論は前半においてサイヤーフの生涯を改めて簡潔に紹介し、後半部では彼の記録から典型的な事例を4つほど引用してその個性的な自己認識と自己形成を跡付ける。それは総じて非ヨーロッパ系のアジア出身者として西欧的な「市民」概念とどう対峙し、それを自らの属性として血肉化したかを具体的に物語っている。

これを読むとハッジ・サイヤーフは欧米の一流の政治家・知識人と交流を持っていたことが理解される。またサイヤーフは当時の著名な汎イスラミスト、ジャマール・アッディーン・アフガーニー(1838/9-97年)とも親交があった。最後に筆者はサイヤーフが明治維新直後の1875年に日本(横浜)を半年ほど訪れ、ハッジ・アブドラー・ブーシェフリーなる人物と邂逅したことを紹介している。上記4番目の事例はサイヤーフが日本を訪れる直前インタビュー記事だという。

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The Iranian world-traveler Hajj Sayyah was unique in many ways. After trotting the globe for some sixteen years, he arrived in the US, and was the first Iranian to become a US citizen in 1875. He kept travel journals while traveling, two of which, his European and domestic travelogues, and some fragments of his travels in the Middle East, are already published.<sup>1</sup>

The present author has had the privilege of preparing the manuscript of Sayyah's travel diaries in the US for publication. In the Journal of Sayyah's travels in the US, one not only finds a rare view of parts of the US as seen through the eyes of the first Iranian to ever write a firsthand account of his travels in the US, but also, no less importantly, one comes face to face with the report of the first Persian to try to come to terms with an altogether novel situation, that is his own "citizenship" in a country in which he had come to experience for the first time what he calls in his conversation with President Ulysses S. Grant at the White House, "Genuine freedom".

After a brief introduction, my main focus in this study is the change, or rather transformation, that is involved in becoming a modern political subject in other words a citizen, after experiencing a situation in which such kind of subjectivity is not only lacking, but even incomprehensible. More precisely, I would like to explore how Sayyah's world travels, particularly his encounter with authentic liberty in the US, figure in his acceding to a radically new political subjectivity. As such, I am going to read Hajj Sayyah's travels not so much as a record of the world he saw, but as a privileged record of his own transformation. I will try to argue that in exploring the world, or more precisely the modern world, and by his attempt to capture and narrate it in Persian, Hajj Sayyah performatively stages the first instance of becoming a modern subject inside of the Persian language sphere which itself moves along the same dimension by this very activity of narration.

## Introduction

A persistent theme in Sayyah's travel writing is his characterization of himself and his travels as belonging to what is commonly termed "*awalem-e darwishī*" (literally, worlds of the mystic) by which he means the ensemble of attitudes, deeds and purposes that define a *darwish's* (sufi's) relations to himself, the world, and to God. Sufi discourses, as is well-known to any one with the least familiarity with this tradition, is replete with travel-metaphors such as *soluk* (quest), and *salek* (the seeker) and recognizes and promotes two types of journeys in the construction of the sufi's subjectivity: an inward journey, called *seyr-e anfos*, and an outward journey, called *seyr-e afaq*. Together they form the core of the seeker's regime of "subjectivation," to borrow

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<sup>1</sup> Hajj Moḥammad `Ali Sayyah, *Khāterāt-e Hājj Sayyah: Ya dawra-ye khawf o wahshat*, ed. Hamid Sayyāh, rev. S. Golkār, Tehran, 1967; Hajj Sayyah, *Safar-nāma-ye Hājj Sayyāh be Farang*, ed. `Ali Dehbashi, Tehran, 1984; for a translation of the latter book see: *An Iranian in 19th Century Europe: The Diaries of Haj Sayyah, 1859-1877*, tr. Mehrbanoo Nasser Deyhim, foreword by Peter Avery, Bethesda, MD, 1998.

from Foucault. From a Sufi perspective that is the sum of practices that constitute the path that if traversed sincerely and correctly would produce and sustain a Sufi subject. By contemplating the apparent world (*jahan-e zaher/afaq*) that is the world of material objects, cities, nature, as well as the esoteric world (*jahan-e baten/anfos*), that is the world of ideas, inner states of mind, spiritual states and beings, the seeker arrives at a full understanding of God, and hence his place in the regime of creation, or if you will, as I experienced one early morning moment in the central desert of Iran, his “ontological address”. Bearing this dual-track in mind, the term “*awalem-e darwishi*” suggests something about the relationship between the two which significance can hardly be exaggerated. It suggests a Sufi attitude with respect to things of the material world in the dimension of the *seyr-e afaq*, an attitude of disinterest in the outward world in the service of a higher value that is proper to the inner world in the dimension of the *seyr-e anfos*. Put differently, and in a language that is elaborated upon in Foucault’s later reflections on the “hermeneutics of the self”, the process of the becoming of the subject of a Sufi, that is the process of subjectivation as a Sufi, is, in so far as it involves a dimension of changing relations “to some kind of truth”, demands a sort of regimen of action that runs simultaneously on two registers, one inward and one outward, with the outward dimension being subordinate to the inner and serving its purposes.

However, if these are the coordinates of Sayyah’s experience of traveling, which certainly corresponds to his own understanding, in reading him one is struck by the absence of one of these two registers, namely a near total silence on the goings on in his head or heart as he travels: he meticulously records the world of distant and unfamiliar places, peoples, and things while rarely speaking of himself and his inner states. Sayyah’s narrative, in other words, lacks the inward register almost entirely. In this sense his writing is not much different from Iranian travel-writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sayyah never talks about his inner feelings and hardly ever pauses to truly ponder and reflect on the inner meaning of things. At times, it appears that his world, or the world as he sees it, is made entirely of surfaces. There is a lot of “*seyr-e afaq*” but scant little “*seyr-e anfos*”.

This apparent absence is troublesome, particularly when we note that a clear “modernization” of Sayyah’s relations to things, practices and ideas, takes place across his writings. In spite of this absence, in reading Sayyah and seeing his attempt at narrating the world from the outside, one cannot escape a strong impression that one is seeing a scene of unfolding of modernity. There is clearly a *buildungsroman*-like feeling to his writing over time. This should not come as a surprise for many Sufi narratives already include a precursor to this type of narrative pattern, something that is lacking in other 19<sup>th</sup> century travel writings in Persian. How are we to explain this apparent incongruity? Where does this impression come from? Where is the precise locus of it? Could it be that the inner register is immanently present in the outer? Or rather is it the case that the modernizing inner register is unfolding in the signifier itself, instead of being spoken about? The locus of this evolving modernity, it follows, is the very gaze of Sayyah; it is immanent in the structure of his attention, *the way* he relates to things and in his way of narrating it.

Perhaps a brief digression to the notion of “performativity,” introduced by J. L. Austin in his “speech act theory” in 1962, would make things a little clearer. Performatives are non-apophantic statements in that they are utterances that do not passively describe a given reality, but display, alter or effectuate it. The uttering of a performative, said Austin, “is, or is part of, the doing of a certain kind of an action.” Or put simply, the signified is totally absorbed in the signifier. One of the examples Austin gave is “I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow” in which the act of betting is nothing other than the felicitous saying of the sentence “I bet”. Examples abound. “I do,” for instance, in a marriage ceremony, or “pardon” in the act of apologizing. In performatives, the doing is *in* the saying as such.

Is it then possible that the modern subjectivation of Hajj Sayyah takes place in the form of a performative which is co-extensive with his travel-writing? It is my hypothesis that indeed this is the case. He does not describe how he himself has changed as he traveled the world, rather, he modestly allows us to see him change as he goes about his encounters in the world through the way he presents them.

Implicit in the foregoing hypothesis is the idea that subjectivation involves the stepping forward of a new modality of ego, a narrating or speaking “I”. What we see over the course of Sayyah’s travels is the self-fashioning of an “I” that speaks as a modern subject. This point is not at all different from the one persuasively made by Karatani Kojin in his *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* where he traces the emergence of the modern subject, or more specifically, the modern “I” in Japanese literature. His central thesis, i.e., the hard labor of giving birth to a new concept of the “I” within the methodology of developing the modern Japanese novel, the emergence of the “I-novel” (*watakushi shosetsu*), in some significant respects applies to Sayyah. He too, albeit performatively and not “creatively” as was the case with Soseki, is engaged in “re-inventing” through an act of translating a new subject, an “I” that narrates the world from the point of view of a new form of subjectivity that is simultaneously individual and national. The term “translation” is crucial here, for in both cases, the new modality of the self is constructed through acts of self-fashioning that come after viewing similar acts in Western life (and literature). The birth of the new subject in both instances was paradoxically both imitative and utterly novel; imitative, because it was based on a non-native concept and model, and novel (and essentially inventive), because its content could not be imported. Consequently, a huge part of Hajj Sayyah’s undertaking consists of “translating” not only names and words, but also ideas, experiences and ways of seeing. Like the writer of the I-novel, Sayyah had to go see and narrate the world himself, or rather become himself by finding his voice inside a narrative, a narrative consisting of a modern type of seeing. The modern Iranian citizen already has the demeanor of a person standing between two locations in the world. He has the look of a translator. Sayyah is fond of saying that he “roamed the world in search of humanity,” presumably because humanity has become by then a global value.

There is another point in Karatani’s study that may help us understand Sayyah’s travel writing better. Modern subjectivity includes a dimension of democratization of

narrative authority. A modern subject is one who narrates not only as himself but also as a citizen. In other words, he or she is one political subject among other subject who has the right to speak (and write) equally. No longer does the king or priest have the monopolistic right to narrate on behalf of a community. Rather this right, or authority, is shared, in principle, by every citizen. As we shall see Sayyah personally, and ultimately seditiously, proactively assumes the position of a citizen and addresses his readers as citizens, even before such a stance existed, or was even known, in Iran.

To recapitulate, Sayyah performs an act of self-fashioning by seeing the world, by seeking a new type of selfhood in the world, and by narrating what he had seen using a process that I earlier referred to as quintessentially translational and proactive. Through this threefold process (seeing/narrating/translating the world) Sayyah fashions or, if you will, reconstitutes himself as a modern national subject. His travel-writing is as much a representation of the modern world (and Iran) to his compatriots as it is a presentation or staging of the modern subject as the one who does the seeing, narrating, and translating of this world. The eyes that see and the voice that speaks, although not represented in the narrative, are the places we should look to see the modern citizen in the processes of subjectivation.

This essay, it must be acknowledged, does not provide the space needed for making this case as fully as possible, but I am hoping that it will make the less demanding case that one can approach Sayyah's travel-writing, and perhaps other comparable writings, from a perspective that is influenced by the notion of performativity. The history of the formation or rather self-fashioning of the modern subject in Iran has yet to be written. If these reflections on one of the earliest records showing the formation of the modern subject in Iran brings us a modest step closer towards that end, then it will have achieved its main objective.

### A Short Biography

Hajj Sayyah spent 18 years traveling the world and no one can legitimately deny that one of the first and most serious encounters between Iran and the West, and Iran and the modern world, takes place in Sayyah's extensive travels. Before we explore a few key aspects of this encounter from the point of view of it being the first instance of modern subjectivity in Iran, it is useful to remind ourselves of the historical context that led to his travels.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The following summary of Sayyah's life is based on the author's earlier studies. For details and bibliographic data, see: Ali Ferdowsi, "Hajj Sayyah", *Encyclopedia Iranica*, Vol. XI, Fasc. 5, pp. 556-560 and Vol. XI, Fasc. 6, p. 561, 2002 (last updated 2012); idem, "Dur az to nist andiša-am: Bāzgaštegī wa āgāhi-e novin-e melli dar Kāṭerāt-e Hājj Sayyāh," *Barrasi-e ketāb* 14, 1993, pp. 1467-86; idem, "Eating Corpse: The Deplorable Asylum of Hajj Sayyah at the US Legation in Tehran," *Annals of the Japan Association for Middle East Studies* 11, 1996, pp. 251-86; idem, "Hājj Sayyāh wa ezterār-e ta'alloq," *Iran Nameh* 19/3, Summer 2001, pp. 293-334.



Mirza Mohammad Ali Mahallati, his original name, was born in Mahallat around 1836, lived a long life, and died in 1925. He was born to a middle class family with a history of religious learning in the rural district of Arak in central Iran. He was the eldest child, and hence his entire family's hopes rested primarily on him. As a result he was sent to Tehran to pursue his religious learning when he was just about fifteen years of age. This coincided with the chancellorship of Mirza Taqi Khan Amir Kabir, Iran's first major promoter of modernization, circa 1850. The then king of Iran, Naser al-Din Shah, the Qajar king, who had come to power with the help of Amir Kabir as his tutor, soon became concerned with the growing power of his "first person" (which implies that the sovereign, and perhaps by extension, the royal family, belonged to a category all his own). Giving into the pressure of those whose interests were being curtailed by Amir Kabir's efforts at creating a modern centralized state, he had this innovative and able prime minister killed. This unjustifiable act may have had a strong impact on the young Mirza Mohammad Ali, especially considering that both hailed from the rural district of Arak.

Later, Mirza Mohammad Ali was sent by his uncle to continue his religious studies at the seminaries of holy shrines in what is today Iraq. This exposure, coming on the heels of his dismay at the killing of the most promising political figure to appear in Iran for a long time, may have put the thought of traveling the world in Mirza Mohammad Ali's mind. When he returned to Iran from his religious studies, apparently without having completed them, he was 23 years old. His uncle, who had paid for his expenses while a student in Iraq, now wanted Mirza Mohammad Ali to marry his daughter. Faced with choosing between a completely traditional and pretty much predictable life as a clergyman married to his cousin or risking an utterly new and unpredictable life as a world traveler, Mirza Mohammad Ali chose the latter. He left home in 1859 with virtually no money, no contacts, no travel gear, and no plan whatsoever. On the first day, he walked alone and for so long that by the nightfall, when he curled up under a tree in a mountainous wilderness, his canvass shoes, *givehs*, were soaking in blood.

Sayyah arrived in the Caucasus via Zanjan and Tabriz. In Tabriz, he approached merchants who had contacts in his hometown of Mahallat and falsely reported that a certain Mohammad Ali of Mahallat had passed away en route to the city. The news was conveyed home, and his father, laments Sayyah years later in his book of domestic travels, died broken-hearted. He proceeded to learn Armenian, Turkish and Russian languages, enough to get by, while gaining employment as an instructor of Arabic and Persian in a school in Tbilisi. From Tbilisi he moved to Istanbul and learned French. To these languages he later added English and German during his European and American travels. After Istanbul, he then visited many European countries, much of Asia and North Africa before going to North America. All told, these travels lasted a full eighteen years. In his travels, he met with many prominent figures including Pope Pius IX, the Risorgimento hero, Garibaldi, Germany's Otto von Bismarck, King Leopold of Belgium, and the Russian Tsar Alexander II, just to name some of the most prominent figures. In the US, he met the greatest freemason of his time, the larger than life General Albert

Pike, and he met King Kalakaua of the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), who was on a visit to the US as the first ever head of state to visit that country. He was also invited to the White House by none other than the US President Ulysses S. Grant, the hero of the Civil War on the side of the North.

One of the places he visited, Japan, merits special mention. Leaving from San Francisco, he most likely arrived at the port of Yokohama sometime in the summer of 1875. Interestingly, he reports that in Japan he met a certain Hajj Abdollah Bushehri, who had been living there for the previous forty-five years! If this claim could be confirmed, then the presence of Iranians in Japan and possibly the origin of intermarriages between the two peoples in modern times would be shown to go back to the first half of the nineteenth century.

A few words should be said about Hajj Sayyah after his return to Iran on July 26, 1877. Shiraz was the first major city that he entered. Prince Mo'tamed al-Dawla, the Governor General of Fars, summoned him to admonish him to "not speak of civilization in Persia. It can cost you your life." In Isfahan, he had a similarly disappointing audience with Hajj Shaikh Mohammad Baqer, "the chief of the ulema of Isfahan". The themes of corrupt, arrogant and tyrannical government officialdom and hypocritical, backward and self-serving clergy form the central preoccupation of Sayyah's domestic *Memoirs*, and are the sources of his suffering throughout his life. More than a century and three regimes later, this book continues to be banned in Iran!

He arrived in Tehran on December 4, 1877. All sought to see him, including Naser al-Din Shah himself, who summoned him almost immediately and asked him to compare the Shah of Persia with the rulers of other countries. Hardly six months after his arrival in Iran, Sayyah embarked on a tour of the country that lasted nine months. For the next decade, his life alternated between periods of residence in Iran, building up to a suffocating sense of the prevailing corruption and oppression, then giving way to spells of release from this tension through traveling within and outside the country.

Almost a year after Sayyah moved to the court of Zell al-Soltan in Isfahan, Sayyed Jamal-al-Din Asadabadi (Afghani), the famous revolutionary cleric, stopped at Bushehr on the Persian Gulf on his way to Najd in August 1887. Hajj Sayyah sent him two telegrams inviting him to visit Isfahan. Hajj Sayyah then hosted and provided him with some financial support, as did Sayyah's patron Zell al-Soltan after the famed Sayyed arrived in the city. Sayyed Jamal then went to Tehran and shortly thereafter was forced to leave Iran. Sayyah's troubles were soon to follow, partly because of his having hosted Sayyed Jamal. The tyrannical prince Nayeb al-Saltana Kamran Mirza, the Governor General of Tehran and Zell al-Soltan's rivalrous brother, was the major instigator of Sayyah's troubles, in this and other incidents to follow.

Sayyah tried to avoid further trouble by withdrawing to his hamlet, but when trouble followed him there he was summoned to Tehran and told to leave for internal exile to Mashad. The order for his exile may have been issued by the Shah himself. His



agonizing exile to Mashad lasted for fourteen months. Soon after Sayyah's return to Tehran, Sayyed Jamal made a second visit to the city, this time by royal invitation. But his presence proved too much and in the end he was dragged out of his asylum (*bast*) and escorted out of Iran, by order of the king himself.

The disgraceful expulsion of Sayyed Jamal was followed by a period of heightened political agitation in Iran. This period was also marked by intensified pamphleteering, including the distribution of what are usually referred to as "newspapers." Two of these periodicals, Malkom Khan's *Qanun* and Sayyed Jamal's *Abu-nezara*, Sayyah received regularly and passed on to trusted acquaintances to read and distribute. Mirza Reza Kermani, the future assassin of Naser al-Din Shah and an anguished devotee of Sayyed Jamal, was one of them.

In April 1891, with Sayyah's encouragement and participation, hundreds of clandestine letters were sent to the Shah, top officials, urban notables, and the clergy in different regions of the country. Several days later Mirza Reza Kermani was arrested, and, under torture, implicated Sayyah and others. As a result, Sayyah was imprisoned for more than twenty months, from April 25, 1891 to early January 1893. He devotes ninety pages of his domestic journals to detailing his time in jail. These ninety pages stand as the first prison memoirs written in the history of modern Iran.

When Sayyah was finally allowed to go home, he felt quite vulnerable, and immediately, sometime in early January 1893, he asked his family in Mahallat for his American papers to be mailed to him. He then took the papers to the US legation and obtained a receipt. These papers included a certificate of his naturalization in the US. Fearing for his safety, he took asylum at the US legation on Tuesday, February 21, 1893.

Sayyah's shelter in the legation received widespread attention. And although the date of his final departure from the legation is uncertain, it came perhaps sometime during the second half of July 1893, almost five months from the time he was given shelter there.<sup>3</sup>

Sayyah's political influence during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah's successor, Mozaffar al-Din Shah, and the period leading up to the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 grew to an extent that he could meet the highest offices of the land as well as the leaders of the revolutionary movement at will. The role of Hajj Sayyah in the Constitutional Revolution is appreciably greater than meets the eye, in part because he preferred to act behind the scenes and with considerable caution.

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<sup>3</sup> I have dealt with this episode in some detail in my earlier writing, particularly in two places. Please see: Ali Ferdowsi, "Eating Corpse: The Deplorable Asylum of Hajj Sayyah at the US Legation in Tehran," *Annals of the Japan Association for Middle East Studies* 11, 1996, pp. 251-86; and idem, "Hājj Sayyāḥ wa ezṭerār-e ta'alloq," *Iran Nameh* 19/3, Summer 2001, pp. 293-334.

When Ahmad Shah, the last Shah of the Qajar dynasty, succeeded to the throne, the elderly regent Prince ‘Azod al-Molk asked Sayyah to be one of the tutors of the minor king. Debilitated by cataracts, the aged Sayyah could only perform his duties a few times. Unhappy with the cabinet of Reza Khan, Hajj Sayyah retired from politics shortly after this appointment. He died on the evening of Friday, September 25, 1925.

### **Fashioning a Self by Exploring the World**

It is time to resume our earlier discussion and show how Sayyah presents modernity and its proper selfhood performatively. Owing to the limitations of space, I will proceed by presenting and discussing a few “strategic anecdotes,” to borrow from the New Historicists that I believe reveal Sayyah’s mode of enacting the modern subject, instead of discoursing about it using his travel writings. The first one is an episode from his travels in Europe in which we see him assuming the position of a citizen where no such position as yet existed in the context of his native land. Such a situation can only be ironic and he is well aware of that as such. I will then discuss two other episodes from his journal of travels in the U.S. In the first, he introduces Christopher Columbus and George Washington in an ironic religious narrative (i.e., a narrative that displaces religion) through which he subversively puts forth a republican notion of state, once again by presenting a case rather than discussing it. In the second example, we witness Sayyah as he tries to convey the totally alien notion of citizenship to his Iranian readers by presenting it as a given, without pausing to define it. The fourth and final case comes from an interview he gave to a San Francisco based reporter apparently a day before he left the city for Japan. The interview is printed in the Saturday, June 12, 1875 issue of *Inter-Ocean*, a newspaper published in Chicago.

In two of these four anecdotes (first and the fourth) Sayyah presents himself, literally and obviously ironically, as a “representative” of Iran and more broadly the Orient. In the other two (second and the third) we see him present a theory of democratic (republican) state by way of showing us a picture of it first as a form of government and second as a form of citizenship. What is common in these four anecdotes is that Hajj Sayyah remains completely true to his position as a *sayyah*, a traveler with a purpose, or more precisely, a traveling-reporter, and not as a tourist. It is this assuming of the role of a reporter-traveler and maintaining it unfailingly throughout his writings that forms the core of his act of fashioning himself into a subject.

### **Anecdote I: Reporting for Iran as a Job in the Future**

This is an early episode in Sayyah’s travels. It is 1864, the fifth year of his travels, and he is on board a ship on the Thames heading to Anvers in Belgium. It was almost noontime when the ship entered the sea and the captain began to check the list of passengers. Reaching the name Mirza Mohammad Ali, the captain was unable to pronounce his name [all the emphases below are mine].

“Where are you from, and what is your occupation?” asked the captain.

“I am a reporter **for** Iran,” replied Hajj Sayyah.

The captain was so intrigued by Hajj Sayyah’s fluency in a number of European languages and his knowledge of the world that he invited him to his cabin.

“Where did you learn all these languages?” asked the captain.

“In Iran’s **public schools**,” answered Hajj Sayyah.

Their conversation continued.

“How much does your **government pay you for reporting** the news of the world to your people?”

“In my country, one does not get paid unless one can demonstrate that what he does is of value either to the state or to the nation. Unfortunately, I could not obtain a certificate in my country to present to Iranian ambassadors or consulates to receive recompense for my travels. But I am determined to do as great a job as I possibly can, and present the results of my work to Iran’s parliament and receive my just rewards based on the merits of that work” answered Hajj Sayyah.

Now this seems like a straightforwardly factual conversation for those who do not know about the Iran of the time, but its irony cannot be lost to anyone with the slightest familiarity with the situation of Iran in that period. There were no public schools in Iran at that time, and hence Hajj Sayyah is really pointing to the space, or to the location, of something that did not exist yet. There were no public schools where foreign languages were being taught. This observation would stand, I believe, even if we infer that Hajj Sayyah was clandestinely pointing to Dar al-Fonoon, a school proposed, planned and built by Amir Kabir, who unfortunately did not survive to see it inaugurated.

But that is not the only thing ironic. Anyone familiar with Iran’s clannish and corrupt government of the time and the clientelist way by which offices were distributed knows all too well that the thing that mattered least in official appointments was merit. Hajj Sayyah is being outrightly factitious here. And of course, there is no need to point out that there was no parliament in Iran at that time; in fact one could argue that even the demand for it had just barely become a real and effective historical demand in the country. Iran did not have its constitutional state until after 1906, some four decades later.

Sayyah cannot be said to be lying to his Iranian readers, for whom the report was intended. They knew that such institutions and ideas did not exist in Iran. He stirs readers by the subterfuge of imagining their presence. A new Iran, an *inexistent Iran* (inexistent in the sense that French philosopher Alain Badiou uses the term) is presented as an existing Iran, all too naturally, like it is already firmly in place! And within this *inexistent* Iran, he places himself, not exactly as an inexistent of an inexistent situation but as an already existing one! The subject, or reporter, pre-exists

the world in which he can be so. Here, the subject is a constituent force of a world before he is constituted by that world. The citizen comes before the citizenship. The Iran of free public schools in which multiple foreign languages are taught for free and where offices of the state are not up for grabs by the highest bidder, and people are rewarded based on their merits by an elected parliament as the locus of sovereignty (and not a king) is not yet present, but its proper subject is already busy anticipating it. In this “back to the future” scenario, a reporter from the future is reporting for an audience that would be constituted by this very address.

Let me repeat. Everything about this picture is nonexistent except for the reporter who is doing his reporting before there is even a name and a position for what he does; his activity already marks the rupture in the existing situation. Sayyah, as the reporter, existed there and then and was engaged in the reporting of it. This is not a simple imagining of a forthcoming subjectivity in a future. It is rather an enactment of that; it is, it follows, a performative speech act.

### **Anecdotes II and III: Subjectivation as Translation**

The next two anecdotes are meant to make it even clearer that the construction of a new subject in a non-Western society, in a situation that already beholds modernity, in a visible form, as a real historical phenomenon, involves or rather is ultimately an act of translation from a source domain (the West) to a target domain. The subject comes before its world precisely because it already beholds its own future in the present mirror of the other.

The first anecdote comes from the brief introduction Sayyah gives about his visiting Washington. As he says so himself repeatedly, he is not interested in telling the history of how Washington came to become the seat of the U.S. Federal Government. He also resolutely refrains from interrupting his narrative as a travel writer to provide explanatory glosses or analytical discourses on the places and peoples he visits. Yet entering the US capital, he makes a rare digression about who George Washington was and why he gave his name to the city. This is so rare of an interruption that it tugs at the reader for attention. Sayyah’s dilemma is giving an account, without resorting to an explanatory digression, of the place of Washington in the American polity and mindset for his Persian readers who lack a comparable figure and historical context. He opts for a quasi-religious language. Washington is presented as an ecumenical prophet, the inaugural figure of a “civic religion” – a prophet whose love and vocation extends not to the faithful in one religion, but to the people of all creeds. Themes of emancipation from foreign domination, critique of monarchy as a hereditary regime, etc., are also included in this rather terse account.

People worship three persons in America; in so far as I can tell. One is Jesus Christ, whose worship is restricted to faithful Christians only. The next one is Christopher Columbus, who, by enduring innumerable hardships, made this part of the world known to the rest of humankind. Jews and Christians both like him and adorn their homes with his pictures. They say Jesus Christ does

not have as much right over us, for we were among the unknowns of the world, and Columbus made us well known, and thus has the right of existence over us. The third is Washington. They say our debt to him is still greater for he freed us from bondage. Without him we would have continued to be the subjects of others, but now we are our own people because of his dedication and sacrifices. In this world, anyone who endures such hardships does so for his own sake or the sake of his offspring, but this man had no motive other than the welfare of the nation. No person like him has ever come into existence.

Every one of his fellow beings loves him from the bottom of his heart because he wished all of them well. They go on and say that every religious community loves its prophet to the same degree the prophet loves his religious community, but since Washington loves all human beings equally, irrespective of their faith, he is loved by all, the religious as well as the non-religious.

In reading Sayyah's travelogue, we should constantly bear in mind that he is involved in a very specific hermeneutic act, an act of communicating across the chasm of two speech communities, not from the inside of a single tradition. It is not, as we say in Islamic exegesis, a *ta'wil*, but a translation. He is presenting not simply a new picture, or even a picture of something new, but a *whole new mode of picturing*. He is writing about things for which his compatriots did not have concepts; for which, really, they could not have formed a concept as yet. How does one in the most succinct way introduce the concept of republican presidency, the concept of secular state, while not losing sight of the liturgical aspect (if you will, the intense religious-like feeling that modern patriotism needs and solicits) of this new form of social contract? How does one do that without resorting to a long essay?

Here Hajj Sayyah is involved in a twofold act. On the one hand, he compares that which is modern (republicanism and also a new kind of "discovery" which for Hajj Sayyah is "making the world known or making one known to the world") with that which is traditional (monarchy, exclusivist religions), and on the other, he posits the superiority of the former over the latter, of the U.S. over his native land. We see a discontinuity that is inscribed within a continuity. This succinct presentation may or may not be considered a great literary achievement, but it certainly shows how the new subject attempts, and arguably succeeds, in crossing the chasm between his two worlds by an act of translation.

We see the same thing in the report of Sayyah's meeting with the U.S. president Ulysses S. Grant. President Grant (1869-1877) invited Sayyah to the White House after local papers wrote about this man from Persia who speaks many dead and living languages and who uncovered the inauthenticity of an artifact in the Smithsonian Museum. Of the many interesting points that one can dwell on regarding this meeting, the reader's attention is called to the way Sayyah strives to communicate the concept of "citizenship" for which neither the word nor concept existed in the Iran of the time. Here he performs an incredible feat of combining multiple aspects of the concept in the U.S.

with, one could say, a natural understanding of certain terms, like brotherhood, to convey this incomprehensible notion to his Persian readers.

Two days after the publication of the original article, I received a card from President Grant in which he said, "I wish to meet you. If you would, we can meet at ten o'clock tomorrow morning." I wrote back, "It would be my honor."

... I spent the night thinking about what I should tell the President tomorrow. When tomorrow arrived, I got up and took a carriage to get there. It was very close to my place. I got off at the entrance. The guard inspected the card and asked that I sit outside in the waiting room to announce my arrival. He returned shortly and asked me to enter. I entered the room. The President was sitting on a chair. He got up, pulled up a chair and gestured me to sit. "Do you know English?" he asked.

"Enough to get by in the marketplace," I replied. He praised me a lot.

"Where did you learn it?" he asked.

"Iran," I replied.

"Are there foreign language colleges in Iran?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied. "Except that other students are more talented than me, and learn to become completely fluent in the language. As I am deprived of this God-given talent, I did not learn it so well."

"Which languages do you know well?" he asked. "Which do you know best?"

"I do not know any language perfectly," I said. "I know them well enough to get by."

"What brought you here?" he asked.

"Traveling and exploring the world and seeing its peoples, and the conditions of their countries," I said, "Had I not come here, for instance, I would not have had the honor of your audience."

Our conversation turned to many subjects, but he never for once talked of his own or others' religions; whereas any one I saw elsewhere would say something about his, or one of his subordinates would broach the subject.

"What could these brothers do for you?" he asked.

"Had I spent millions, I would not have had as much pleasure as I found in this country," I said.

"What gave you this pleasure?" he inquired.

"I see how free my brothers are, and came to appreciate the meaning of freedom in this country," I said.

"Ours is not the only country where people are free," he replied.

"I agree," I said, "but only in form and not in substance."

"You are right," he agreed. "We too are grateful to you for your kind thoughts. What can we do for you? You did not say," he asked again.

"Now that you insist, since you agree that I am no cause for disgrace for any nation [*mellat*], would you please accept me as a fellow brother?" I said, "If this is not a cause of shame for you, it certainly is a point of honor for me."

"It is truly embarrassing," he said rubbing his hands, "for the laws of this land require that a person stay here for at least five years, go through three sets of



applications, and take an oath about each of them, before he or she may be granted citizenship [*hamshahri*] and receive a certificate to that effect.”

“The point for this lengthy process,” I said, “is certainly none other than testing the worthiness of the applicant. I am sure you would agree, as everywhere I went people did so, that I am worthy of it and have no malicious motives seeking it. You asked me to write down your name in my travel book. I am afraid I must also write that I was asked to request a favor, and after much insistence, I asked for one which in no way imposed on their here-and-now and thereafter. I was denied my wish.”

“Why do you wish to become a fellow citizen [*hamshahri*]?” he inquired.

“Thank God, I enjoy full respect in Iran. There, no one harasses anyone. Moreover, I am not too eager to become a US citizen. My purpose in obtaining a certificate of naturalization is to be able to gain entry into China, if life permits me,” I explained.

At that moment, another person asked for permission to enter. It was granted. He was a handsome man.

“This is Mr. George Pike,” the President introduced him to me. “He is related to General Albert Pike,” he went on praising him lavishly.

I too expressed my pleasure in meeting him. Later, I learned that he is a brother. “I am very eager to meet with you at your convenience,” he said.

The President brought up the topic of my wish to become a US citizen. “You are a lawyer and a congressman,” he turned to Mr. Pike. “Is such a thing possible?” “No,” he replied.

“Stay in touch with him,” the President told me. “If it could be arranged, we would get the certificate to you wherever you might happen to be at the time.”

One can write an entire essay on the narrative of this meeting! It is incredibly well crafted. Every word, every turn of the conversation, is used to delimit the concept of citizenship. Sayyah does not have to report that in a conversation about his desire to become a US citizen no question was asked of him about his religion. Of all that remains “unsaid,” he simply chooses to mention one, namely the topic of religion. It is supremely significant that he does, for the question of religion, or rather its official absence, is germane to the topic of modern citizenship. Citizenship is a secular concept, subtracted from any religious denomination.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that he uses two terms to convey the sense and meaning of citizenship: brotherhood and being a fellow of the city, a city-fellow (*hamshahri*). In English, the term citizen partakes of both a political and a topographic meaning (of course in the political culture of the West both are founded on a juridical notion): a citizen is someone who is a member of a state, but also someone who is a member of a civil society in the form of a township. In Persian, for instance, in translating the famous movie by Orson Wells, “Citizen Cain”, the word citizen was rendered as *hamshahri*, presumably because the word “citizen,” *shahrvand*, had not yet been coined. The notion of brotherhood is well known in the Islamic world also as a sort of semi-juridical concept. Brotherhood, or “*okhovvat/ukhuwwah*” (as practiced for

instance in some Sufi orders) designates something of a mutual aid society, or even membership in the *umma*, the Muslim community that involves reciprocal obligations. But also, brotherhood, or its French equivalent *fraternité* (with *liberté* and *égalité*) is a quintessential aspect of the trinity of the modern political community. Sayyiah does not pause to give his reader any historical or ideological explanation of the modern and democratic notion of citizenship; he sneaks them in through an act of translation that implies these backgrounds.

#### **Anecdote IV: Self-Authorization of the Oriental Subject**

Our final and concluding anecdote comes from an interview that Sayyiah gave to a reporter from *Morning Call*, a San Francisco newspaper. The interview, however, was published in *Inter-Ocean*, a newspaper based in Chicago.

The exact date of the interview is not known, but it is probably in the last day of his travels in the US, just before taking a steamship to Japan. Sayyiah must have arrived in San Francisco sometime before May 25, 1875, for on that day he finally became a naturalized US citizen at the city's 12<sup>th</sup> District Court. Just around that time, a certain physician by the name of Dr. Loryea with the help of a powerful US Senator built a bathhouse in the city named, literally, *Hammam*. This was an incredibly ornate structure designed by the great artist Paul Franzeni. This is what Sayyiah tells the *Morning Call* reporter in the interview:

Imagine my astonishment when walking along one of your streets I see a building so purely Oriental in character so suggestive of home and the land of my fathers that I could not restrain myself from walking in to examine this vision of the East on your Western shores. They told me it was the *Hammam* – the new baths. I was shown the apartments. The frescoing, perfect arrangement for the distribution of hot air, the rich decorations of the apartments exceed anything I have ever seen, either in Cairo, Constantinople, or my own country. I consider it superior to those in Smyrna, which are the finest in the East. I have conferred, according to my right, the badge of the first order on Doctor Loryea, and have also written to the Shah, recommending Monsieur Franzeny, the artist, and Dr. Loryea for the Order of the Crescent.”

What is interesting about this excerpt? It is the role Sayyiah assigns himself as the representative of the Orient and more specifically as the official representative of the Shah of Iran! In that capacity he judged the quality of things Oriental and conferred recognitions and awards. One may see this as a joke or prank played by Sayyiah on an unsuspecting American reporter, for Sayyiah had no such official authorization. Perhaps. But it is also possible to interpret this boastful claim differently by reminding ourselves of the innumerable times in which the situation was reversed. There were many instances in which Sayyiah was compelled to defend his native people, whether Iranian or Asian or Muslim. This is an experience not unfamiliar to those who live or travel in other lands. Every now and then the traveler or expatriate during his encounters with others winds up finding himself the spokesperson for his native land. Sayyiah, too, often

had to defend Iran, Asia, or Islam. Islam, for instance, was being negatively questioned with exactly the same accusations for which it is being condemned today. A Jesuit priest in St. Louis Missouri, for example, tells Sayyah that Islam is an inherently violent religion, which makes Sayyah remind the priest of the atrocities of the Christian West in Africa and the savage burning down of The Imperial Gardens in China (*Yuang Ming Yuan* or Gardens of Perfect Brightness).

Yes, there seems to be something of a joke going on here. It seems as if Sayyah is having fun at the expense of Dr. Loryea, and the readers of the newspaper. He is playing a hoax. Yet it is here that he reveals his full understanding of what it means to be a subject. Here, he reverses the table, not by rejecting his objectification, or denying the Orientalist bifurcation of the world into an Occident and an Orient, but by taking possession of it. In this instance, he is not the one who is cornered into a defensive position. He is not the reactive object of Western gaze. It is not he who he is objectified, but the West. He acts in the position of the Oriental subject. It is he who observes, evaluates, passes judgment, and rewards and punishes.

This allows us to make our notion of the self-fashioning of the Oriental subject, as a mode of translation, a little more precise. The Oriental subject not only imitates but also inverts the Occidental subject in fashioning itself. He does not become simply a replica of its Western counterpart, but also becomes a response to it. Its subjectivation was a post-colonial act before such terms were even invented.

As mentioned, the interview was perhaps conducted a day before Sayyah departed for Japan. On that day, not only was he a US citizen, but, if this reading is accurate, also a self-authorized Oriental subject.