



The inner orient in Slovene literature



By closely reading and contextualizing Vladimir Bartol's novel *Alamut*, the paper approaches Slovenian orientalism and the figuration of an 'inner orient' in the beginning of the 20th century. Deriving from orientalist findings, as well as the Western imagination and philosophical thought encouraged by the historical sect of the so-called Assassins, the analysis will focus on textual strategies of self-othering in its relation to European modernity.

VLADIMIR BARTOL, ALAMUT,
'INNER ORIENT', ORIENTALISM,
(SELF-)OTHERING, SELF-SACRIFICE,
TEXTUAL PERFORMANCE,
METATHEATRE OF DRUGS,
PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPERIMENT

Предметом исследования статьи, на примере разбора и контекстуализации романа Владимира Бартола „Аламут“ является словенский ориентализм и конфигурация „внутреннего Востока“, сформировавшиеся в начале XX века. Анализ опирается на ориенталистские сведения, а также на западное творчество и философскую мысль, вдохновленные подлинной сектой так называемых ассасинов, и фокусируется на текстуальных стратегиях самоиначтения в его связи с европейским модернизмом.

ВЛАДИМИР БАРТОЛ, АЛАМУТ,
„ВНУТРЕННИЙ ВОСТОК“,
ОРИЕНТАЛИЗМ, (САМО)ИНАЧЕНИЕ,
САМОПОЖЕРТВОВАНИЕ,
ТЕКСТУАЛЬНОЕ ПРЕДСТАВЛЕНИЕ,
МЕТАТЕАТР НАРКОТИКОВ,
ПСИХОЛОГИЧЕСКИЙ ЭКСПЕРИМЕНТ

1 Cp. <http://outnow.ch/specials/2004/fatihakin>. For the first part on love, titled *Gegen die Wand* (*Head-On*), Akin was awarded the Golden Bear in 2004.

2 The German edition followed the French translation from 1988. The first translations had been into Czech (1946) and into Serbian (1954). In 2005, *Alamut* was dramatized by Dušan Jovanović (*1939) for SNG drama theatre of Ljubljana in cooperation with the Salzburger Festspiele.

3 André Clavel: Ben Laden mode d'emploi. In: *L'Express*. http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/alamut_817384.html (22 November 2001). This quotation was printed on many, including the Slovene editions. Cp. Bartol 2007 [back of book]. The novel is hereafter referred to with title plus page number.

4 For the recent international reception of the book before 9/11, see Košuta 1991.

5 Note also the sympathy of Muslim Bosnia for Germany because of the Nazi-Arab collaboration and the subsequently launched SS Handžar Division.

In 2004, the Turkish-German film director Fatih Akin intended to name one part of his trilogy on love, death, and the devil “Alamut”.¹ This was probably inspired by an eponymous novel published by the Slovenian writer Vladimir Bartol in 1938. Almost forgotten in Slovenia, the book, however, gained attention after 9/11, and was soon translated into German in 2002 and English in 2004, among other languages.² The commentators’ messages were clear: “If Osama bin Laden did not exist, Vladimir Bartol would have invented him.”³ “Alamût” (meaning eagle’s nest in Arabic) was the name of the mountain fortress of a Persian sect of Isma’ilis (as in Daftary’s book title) known as the Assassins. They appeared in the eleventh century, in 1092 to be precise, when the group occupied the Alamut stronghold in northern Persia (present-day Iran) under the command of their leader Hasan ibn al-Sabbah or Sayyiduna (our lord). The sect’s military elite, the fedayeen, were known for their political assassinations. “Alamut”, if spelled in Arabic, without short vowels, is identical with the word “al-mawt” – meaning “death”. Although Akin abandoned his plan several years later, this coincidence in timing sheds some light on certain mechanisms, if not on fashions of reception of novels such as Bartol’s.⁴

When *Alamut* was published in 1938, it was too exotic in regard to both its setting and psychoanalytic approach to receive much attention. Later, against the background of Bartol’s notes to the second edition (Bartol 1958, VIII), it was perceived as a sophisticated allegory and foreshadowing vision of the totalitarian regimes that emerged in Europe in the 1930s: Hitler encroaching on Yugoslavia’s borders with his fanatic SS corps,⁵ Stalin attacking suspected enemies of the nation, and Mussolini subjugating a third of the Slovenians and a large proportion of the Croats. Bartol, himself a Slovenian, was born in 1903 in a village near Trieste (and died in Ljubljana in 1967). Trieste,

at the time the largest Slovenian city and main port of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was annexed to Italy after the First World War. The Slovenian inhabitants were subjected to violent Italianization, with, for instance, their cultural centre being destroyed by arson in 1920. Not surprisingly, Bartol sympathized with the TIGR (Trst-Istra-Gorica-Rijeka), a militant Slovenian anti-fascist underground resistance group formed in the 1920s, which carried out several bomb attacks in the city centre of Trieste, resulting in two show trials against Slovenian activists in 1930 and 1941. Among those accused was Zvonko Jelinčič, a co-founder of TIGR and a fellow student of Bartol's at the University of Ljubljana. Both studied with the Slovenian philosopher and mountaineer Klement Jug (1898–1924), whose teaching (e.g., on Nietzsche) and world view had great intellectual impact on the younger Slovenian generation of the interwar period. This background gives reason for a more national reading of Bartol's historical novel.⁶

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the Balkans saw a number of assassinations, the most prominent of which were the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914 by Gavrilo Princip, a member of the *Young Bosnia* (*Mlada Bosna*) youth organization who was trained for the terror act by the Serbian secret society *Unity or Death* (*Ujedinjenje ili Smrt*), also known as the *Black Hand*, and the assassination of the Yugoslavian king Alexander I. in Marseille in 1934 by a Bulgarian terrorist known as Vlado Chernozemski, a member of the *Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization* (VMRO) who at that time was in the service of the Croatian Ustaša organisation (UHRO), training its members at camps in Italy and Hungary. Bartol was living in Belgrade in the period surrounding the king's assassination, working as an

⁶ Cp. Hladnik 2004; Bartol 2007, 383–390 (a comment on Michael Biggins's afterword to his translation of Bartol's novel: *Against Ideologies – Vladimir Bartol and Alamut*).

7 Literary historians try to integrate this “most un-Slovene of all Slovene novels” nevertheless into the canon (cp. Paternu 1991) or stress the importance of historical novels for nation-building processes, and repeat allusions to small Slovenia as a fortress that is threatened by its neighbours (cp. Hladnik 2005).

8 With “inner orient” I refer to historical connotations to the highest supervising ranks in the secret society of Freemasonry, as well as to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who in a 1926 speech called upon the legacy of classical antiquity, which is represented as “*unser wahrer innerer Orient, offenes, unverwesliches Geheimnis*”, and as “*eine mit Leben trachtige Geisteswelt in uns selber*” (Hofmannsthal 1980, 13–16) and the new theoretical attempts to classify modes of self-orientalisation (cp. Rohde 2005).

9 Cp. Maria Todorova, who distinguishes “Balkan Otherness” from Said’s Oriental Other in her book *Imagining the Balkans* (Todorova 1997).

editor at the *Slovenian Belgrade Weekly*. These anarchist events are likely to be viewed as a major clue to Bartol’s political allegory on terrorism and self-sacrifice.

The novel *Alamut* will be my starting point for approaching the *Slavia Islamica* from its northwestern edge. Interestingly enough, the question of Bartol’s modern encounter with the ancient Orient did not play any significant role in the discussion that began in the 1990s,⁷ only recently being considered in a sociological approach related to Edward Said’s concept of orientalism (see Komel 2012). In my paper, I will argue that through the interaction of modern aesthetic and religious discourses as well as psychological and philosophical ones, Bartol transformed the fears experienced by the Europeans in their day and their fascination with the other into a provocative textual frame of an *inner orient* – a figure of occidental self-othering *par excellence*.⁸

ORIENTAL CONTEXTS

The fashion of turqueries, which spread through Europe after the Ottoman predominance faded, also prevailed in the area of today’s Slovenia (see Koter 2009). At that time, transients and travellers from the West frequented the Balkans. In travelogues, Bosnia was pictured as an otherness within Europe (see Hadžiselimović 1989), and the Balkans as a bridge and crossroad to the Orient.⁹ Noteworthy in this context are also the books published by the nineteenth-century explorer, soldier, writer, translator, and Islam sympathizer Richard Francis Burton (1821–1890), whose final destination had been the city of Trieste. There, in the position of the British consul, he had time for translating and publishing *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* (1885), *Supplemental Nights* (1886–98), *The Perfumed Garden of the Shaykh Nefzawi*

(1886), and *The Kasidah* – a poem composed earlier on his return from a pilgrimage to Mecca in the early 1850s and presented as a translation, although it more likely was Burton's own interpretation of Sufi thought. All of these texts stimulated the intellectual minds of his time.

Around 1900, Muslim Bosnia, the close – but still *outer Orient* for the Slovene, was moving closer, step by step: The occupation of Bosnia by the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1878 and its annexation in 1908 saw the orientalisised Bosnia undergo a process of modernisation and westernisation, respectively (cp. Gordec 102), although the new administration showed a surprising tolerance towards local traditions and Sufism. Later, in 1918, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was founded (renamed Yugoslavia in 1929), where the Bosniaks or Bosnian Muslims made up the fourth-largest ethnic group – a constellation in which Serbs and Croats claimed particular interests in the Bosnian territory. It was during the interwar period that the first Muslims – although few in number – arrived mainly from Bosnia to settle in Slovenia. Thus, we suggest that Bartol's oriental imagination introduced a twofold cultural encounter with both the Muslim world and Islamic thought into Slovenian literature.

In the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries there is evidence of a new curiosity among the South Slavs for their Slavic Muslim surroundings. A prominent example is *Pisma iz Niša o Haremima* (1897, Letters from Niš on Harems), published by the Serbian traveller and polyglot Jelena J. Dimitrijević (1862–1945). In the *Letters*, she draws on her experiences and talks with her Muslim hostesses to reveal previously secret information about this concept of Islamic culture in a semi-fictionalised historical narrative that is set about fifty years before her own birth in the South-Serbian city of Niš, when it was still part of the Ottoman Empire (see Hawkesworth 1999). It appeared

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The first travelogue from the Balkans and Turkey was written by the Slovene Benedikt Kuripečič, who as an interpreter accompanied diplomats serving Ferdinand I to Istanbul and chronicled this journey in *Itinerarium Wegrays Kün. May pot-schafft gen Constantino-pel zu dem Türkischen Keiser Soleyman* (1531).

11
This topic was popularized in 1864, when Josip Jurčič published *Jurij Kozjak, slovenski janičar* among his Walter-Scott-like historical novels.

12
For the distinction between frontier and erudite orientalism, see Baskar 2005. Aškerc's oriental repertoire ranged from Buddhism, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism to Confucianism (ibid.: 5).

some years after a fictionalized story was published about a Slovene female who was captured in 1478 by the Turks during the besiegement of Villach. The woman was placed in the sultan's harem and forced to convert to Islam, but managed to escape seven years later to return to happiness in her homeland. *Miklova Zala: povest iz turških časov* (1884, German, *Die Zala vom Mikl-Hof*) written by the Slovenian pedagogue and author Jakob Sket (1852–1912) not only became very popular, but was also generally understood as a metaphor for the oppression of the Slovenian in Carinthia.

The Slovenian poet and Roman Catholic priest Anton Aškerc (1856–1912) travelled to Bosnia and Turkey¹⁰ and transmuted many of his experiences into verse and travel writing. He described – in harmony with the Habsburg ideology celebrating ethnic and cultural hybridity – the multiethnicity of Istanbul with particular enthusiasm and ethnographic curiosity. He was also motivated by the pan-Slavic spirit and the exoticism of the Balkans. His poetry collection *Balade in romance* (Ballades and Romances), published in 1890, (Aškerc 1968) includes “Čaša besmrtnosti” (1885, Cup of Immortality), a poem taking its standpoint from the 75th sura of the Koran and expressing great interest in the Janissary elite corps that served the Ottoman Empire (Janičar).¹¹ Earlier, he had enthusiastically reported to a friend about having seen how Slav Muslims bowed to Allah in a mosque in Sarajevo on his first trip to Bosnia, titling a poem drawing on this experience “V Husrev-begov džamiji” (1887, In the Husrev-Bey Mosque). Aškerc is an example of a distinctive change that took place in the oriental discourse of the Habsburg Monarchy's cultural elites regarding a former frontier orientalism.¹²

Thus, in 1927, at the time when Slovenian critic, translator, and politician Josip Vidmar (1895–1992) drew Bartol's attention to the legends

of the Assassins described by Marco Polo, the visual and textual imagination of oriental difference was part of current local discourses. Polo's account was based on stories he had gathered from hearsay in Persia just a few decades after the Mongols had annihilated the fortress of Alamut. He presented the Shi'ite-Islamic faction of the Nezâris as a band of drugged assassins led by a fanatical "Old Man of the Mountain". This version came to be given all the more credit when the French orientalist Silvestre de Sacy apparently confirmed it in 1809, making his point by emphasizing the fact that the word "assassin" in both French and English derives from the Arabic *hashashîshî*, which in the plural form is *hashîshiyîn*, meaning "hashish eater". The phenomenon of the fedayeen was interpreted as follows: The Assassins were small in number, which led them to develop sophisticated strategies for political assassination, with the masters using drugs to prepare their followers for absolute obedience. Another version – similar to, but more elaborated than Polo's account – was discovered in 1813 by the Austrian orientalist Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall at the Imperial Library in Vienna in the form of the Arabic novel *Sirat amir al-muminin al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah* (1430) (Daftary 118–120). These legends pertaining to the Assassins and artificial paradises became anchored in the occidental *imaginaire collective* as historical truth, as drugs and the notion of drug-induced freedom became part of conceptions of orientalism and aesthetic experience.

Bartol's philosophical-psychological approach to conspiracy and assassination exceeds echoing sources such as Niccolò Machiavelli's *Prince from 1532*, and links the Slovenian author – who had studied biology and philosophy first in Ljubljana and then at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1926–27 – to writers and thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Sigmund Freud. The intertextual potential of

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In this early poem, Poe referred to the intermediate world of the Arabic mythology: a world between heaven and hell, without both punishment and that blissful happiness which is promised for paradise. It is inhabited by two groups: those who live searching for “knowledge”, and those who are at a spiritual impasse and will never attain the absolute, cp. Kupfer 1996, 529f.

14

By Džemaludin-efendij Causević and the Hafiz Muhamed Pandže. Only recently, the Koran was translated into the Slovenian language: in 2003, Klemen Jelinič based his translation on the Bosnian text, and in 2004–05, Erik Majaron translated the Koran from the English edition.

15

However, Ivanov’s most comprehensive monograph on Alamut (*Alamut and Lamasar*) was published only first published in 1960, in Tehran. Confucianism (ibid.: 5).

Alamut includes not only Marco Polo’s travel-account but also Edgar Allen Poe’s poem “Al Aaraaf”¹³ from 1829 – with Bartol also referring to this place from Arabic mythology – and Charles Baudelaire’s *Artificial Paradises* as well as Omar Khayyám’s *Rubáiyát*, which he may have read either in Fitzgerald’s edition or the Bosnian translation by the poet and orientalist Sefvetbeg Bašagić (1870–1934) from 1920 and 1928.

Bartol is said to have studied historiographic sources as well as the Koran for his novel. If so, he probably consulted the Koran in the German translation. The first translation into Bosnian was published in 1937.¹⁴ He could have been familiar with the occidental authorities on Islamic studies, who in the early twentieth century were Russian orientalists: Vasilij Vladimirovič Bartol’d (also known as Wilhelm Barthold, 1869–1930), who at that time had published already three authoritative monographs on the history of Islam: *Islam* (1918), *Muslim Culture* (1918), and *The Muslim World* (1922); and his student Vladimir Alekseevič Ivanov (b. St. Petersburg, 1886, d. Tehran, 19 June 1970), whose lifelong interest was Ismā‘īli manuscripts, and who investigated Persian manuscripts from the Alamut and post-Alamut periods of Nezāri Ismā‘īli history that had been preserved in some districts of Badakšān (q.v.) in Russian Central Asia – a region now divided between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The first Nezāri Ismā‘īli texts were published in 1922 and Ivanov went to Persia himself in 1928 to collect manuscripts for the Asiatic Society. On this occasion, he made the first of several visits to Alamut and other Ismā‘īli strongholds in northern Persia. Largely thanks to his pioneering research and numerous contributions,¹⁵ the Nezāri Ismā‘īlis of the Alamut period were no longer judged by serious scholars as a fanatical sect of drug-consuming assassins.

META-THEATRICAL ORIENTALISM

Starting in 1927, it took Bartol exactly ten years to finish his novel. The outcome blends *histoire* (the narration of the emergence of the Assassins, the Shi'ite-Islamic faction of the Nezâris) with textualized performance (the description of various aspects of the narrative's *mise-en-scène*) in an attempt to re-present the order's teachings, practice, and occult knowledge.¹⁶ Within the confines of the mountain fortress Alamut, the intellectual head and god-like master Hasan ibn al-Sabbah is modelling a state within the state according to his grand plan, which also foresees a paradise as pictured in the Koran, with the latter being a stage for experiments on the human psyche. The intention of this ingenious and ambitious architect and dramaturge is to train disciples to be reinspired by a belief in Mohammed, in paradise, and in their spiritual leader, who holds the key to a paradise he can make accessible to aspirants entirely at will. Illusionary power is gained by means of a (ritual) drug, with a theatric performance serving as a rite of passage for the fedayeen – the *Opfergänger* (Gelpke 275) or self-sacrificing ones. Based on strategies of disguise – simulation and dissimulation – the theatre's *procédé* questions the relationship of power to ethics as well as the legitimization of totality and the absolute. In order to pass his legacy on to two *deys*, ibn Sabbah divulges his conviction and goes about putting his plan into action. He escorts the two chosen men into a concocted paradise – a beautiful garden – clothed in magnificent costumes. His instructional speech to them in the garden functions as a prologue to the drama, introducing the coming proceedings and casting a godly spell on the entire situation:

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Here, I come back to my former essay on Alamut (Petzer 2003).

Ibn Sabbah, our prophet and vicar, the Lord said. “Take a good look at our gardens. Then return to earth and build an exact replica of them behind your castle. Gather young beauties in them and in my name command them to behave as houris. Into these gardens you will send the most valiant heroes who have fought for the just cause. As a reward, let them believe that we have received them into our dwelling place. For it is given to no one, save the Prophet and you, to cross over into our domain during his lifetime. But because your gardens will be identical to ours, the visitors to them will be deprived of nothing, if they believe. When they die, a resumption of those joys will await them in our realm for all eternity”. (Alamut 180–181)

The scenario of the Prospero figure holding all strings to the plot in his hands follows the quinary partitioning, which had already been chosen by Seneca as a fixed structure for his revenge drama and which – taken up by Shakespeare – became part of the canon of forms. (In fact, ibn Sabbah himself compares the performance in process with a Greek tragedy.) In the first act, ibn Sabbah announces his decision to open the gates to paradise to the fedayeen. For their journey to paradise he will provide them with food and drink, with hashish and wine. In the second act, the fedayeen become actors on a stage they are unable to distinguish as either dream or (manipulated) reality. This act comprises the stay in an artificial paradise, the pleasures of carnal play with the houris, and the consumption of wine – until a second drug induces sleep and returns them to their master. The title chosen by ibn Sabbah for the third act is “The Awakening” or perhaps “The Return from Paradise” (Alamut 251). Throughout this act, the fedayeen proclaim their belief in the real existence of paradise and their blind obedience to the master. In doing so, they, at least in words, present evidence that

a change has take place within them, affecting their souls. Finally, in the fourth and fifth acts, the stage is translocated to the exterior. The theatre performance then becomes a rite of participation that will arouse and overwhelm the audience in a state of intense perception. Thus, the forth act becomes a public spectacle surrounding the experiment of altering human nature within the fortress. Two fedayeen commit suicide at the master's command – one by stabbing himself, the other by jumping to his death – to confirm their loyalty, their absolute obedience, and a conviction that is deaf to any reason. They are, in short, proof of a change in the human soul.

Ibn Sabbah's play as described in Bartol's novel surpasses the imagination of even the most inventive Greek playwright; it is a precisely calculated and frightening play, with no boundaries between actors and spectators. The fifth and last act stages ibn Sabbah's appearance in front of his followers and his proclamation that the waiting for the Imam Al-Madhi (who mysteriously disappeared and is expected to return¹⁷) should now be ended. Although ibn Sabbah had not declared himself an imam,¹⁸ he did confer the iman's authority on others on earth, through whom the divine mission – unquestionable in the eyes of his believers – is to be carried out. Through the imam, the divine truth becomes visible and is transformed into living evidence of God on earth. After the fifth act, Sabbah disappears from the worldly stage to devote himself to recording his doctrine, which in the form of the play text to the dramatic performance is actually his testament enacted.

The "theatre of drugs" during the first three acts is not addressed to a public of spectators, but is intended instead as to be an augmentation of consciousness. It represents a mirroring of the unconscious, of the human psyche. The drug consumers themselves should transform their environment into a theatrical space and shift their perception of reality

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The 12th Imam, born in direct descent to the prophet's son-in-law, Ali, disappeared mysteriously in 868. The uninterrupted existential presence of the Imams is of most eminent importance to Shi'ites.

18

This was done by Hasan II., the fourth leader of the Assassins, shortly before the fall of the fortress of Alamut in 1256 and the burning of all original writings by the Nazâris, during the conquest by the Mongols.

19

Théophile Gautier gave this name to the circle that included Balzac, Flaubert, Nerval, and Moreau de Tours in his eponymous novel published in 1846. He had stimulated the circle's interest in hashish intoxication.

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The central idea of which would comprise art, the artificial, the longing for an ideal world, and the quest for alternative realities, while the experience of intoxication is regarded to be the key to revelation.

in favour of the notion of possibility. Ibn Sabbah, as well, interprets the artificial paradise as the hallucination of a particular wish, an approach to the human psyche that can be linked to psychoanalysis and Sigmund Freud's *Traumdeutung* (1900), in particular. Life is a hall of mirrors full of illusions, and the theatre of drugs is a dreamt world, a stage with no borders between fiction and reality. On the question of when in life illusion begins, of when truth ends, ibn Sabbah answers:

Only our consciousness decides whether something is "for real" or just a dream. When the fedayeen wake up again, if they learn that they've been in paradise, then they'll have been in paradise! Because there's no difference between a real and an unreal paradise, in effect. Wherever you're aware of having been, that's where you've been. (Alamut 203)

Bartol's textual theatre is a theatre about the theatre of life, a "metatheatre" (Abel 1963) which – in contrast to tragedy – adheres to two guiding principles going back to Shakespeare and Calderón: "life must be a dream and the world must be a stage" (79). The theatricality seems to draw heavily on experiences with drug experiments in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; consider Thomas de Quincey's "Opium-eater", whom the drug leads into imaginary worlds of perception, or the *Club des Hachichins* in Paris,¹⁹ which postulated the juxtaposition of literary production and drug consumption as an aesthetic program, or Charles Baudelaire's *Artificial Paradises* (1860).²⁰ Baudelaire described the three phases of drug ecstasy – culminating in the joyfulness of the *kief* – as the *Théâtre de Séraphin*. "Those who have not been initiated into the drug experience imagine intoxication by means of hashish as a dream world, as an immeasurable theatre performed by tricksters and conjurers" (Baudelaire 23–55). Moreover,

the similarities between the stages passed through during drug ecstasy and a theatre performance when perceived under the influence of drugs makes it possible to order the different perceptions. Therefore, the stages during drug use are structured as a “staged play” (Marschall 1–9), just as in Bartol’s novel, through which the occult teachings and practice on the basis of the Holy Koran come to be represented as a “textual performance” (Lee 80) with a rather stereotypical stage decorated in accordance with Western imagination of Islamic order and the Koran’s paradise.

Although the use of drugs by the Nezâris is confirmed neither by Isma’ili nor by serious Sunni sources (Lewis 11–12, 112), let us suppose, nonetheless, that taking hashish to induce ecstatic visions of paradise before setting out to face martyrdom was practiced. The narcotic effects of hashish were no secret at that time and could have served as explanation for the mystery of the fedayeen. Condemning hashish on moral terms because it weakened the will, Baudelaire explains – in reference to the Assassins – the impropriety of hashish by pointing out the Assassins’ cult of Eros as exemplified by their adoration of the houris (cp. Baudelaire 68). For Baudelaire, the Assassin sells his soul in order to pay off the most exciting love services and the friendship of the maidens in Mohammed’s paradise, and buys the paradise for eternal bliss (cp. 82). However, as Baudelaire states, the brain and organism on which hashish has an effect induce only ordinary individual phantoms, which – even if increased in number and intensity – nonetheless always correspond to their source. The state of ecstasy achieved causes nothing extraordinary, for the power of imagination has already anticipated the ideal of ecstasy: in other words, the drugs evoke an “artificial ideal” (15), and the human cannot escape the fate of his or her physical and moral disposition.²¹

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In Bartol’s novel, this is illustrated through the different reactions of the fedayeen. Although all of them had been submitted to a rigid training in the ascetic life and the teachings of the Koran, and their belief should already have been firm enough that the experience of a drug-induced paradise should only have enhanced it, there are very different reactions to this experience: One tried to fight off the hallucinatory phantoms falsifying reality around him. The second considered two possible explanations for his state: Either the paradise is the effect of the drug or the Isma’ili doctrine and Sabbah’s claim to hold the keys to paradise are proven. The third, however, who is already suspicious of the reports by those who have returned from “paradise”, rejected the illusion entirely. Enacted in the narration as the refusal to take the drug, this act symbolizes rather his lack of faith and immaturity (in line with Isma’ili doctrine), meaning, therefore, that his death is imminent.

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What is more, Bartol also includes a legend that arose during the thirteenth century, linking Nizam al-Mulk with Hasan ibn al-Sabbah and Omar Khayyám, one of Persia's greatest astronomers, mathematicians, and poets. According to the legend, the three had been fellow students and contractually agreed that whoever of them achieved success first would help the others with their careers. The juxtaposition of these men is quite natural but very unlikely, for Nizam was about thirty years older than the other two. This legend, however, entered the Western imagination through the preface to Edward Fitzgerald's translation of to some of Omar Khayyám's *Rubáiyát*.

Finally, *Alamut* turns into a laboratory for experiments on the human psyche, a laboratory for producing a new human, and disciples loving death and following their leader in total obedience. (This scenario has been enacted on the political stage.) In Bartol's novel, the radical absoluteness of assassination is depicted in the example of the grand vizier of the Saljuq Sultan, Nizam al-Mulk, who was one of greatest ministers in Persian history and among the first of the Assassins' victims – because he regarded the Isma'ilis as an internal threat to the state and had called for military action against them.²²

The Oriental Syndrome

If all proceedings of the illusive paradise theatre are based on strategies of disguise, they subsequently compel us to question what can legitimise this totality and absoluteness. In *Alamut*, the figuration of the knowledge and power of a leader as demonic and charismatic ibn Sabbah, the lord of the Assassins, is ambivalent in the guise of his “blind” military elite, the faithful and valiant fedayeen. Nevertheless, there is a certain fascination for this praxis, suggesting that this characteristic ambivalence be regarded within a larger context of reception of the “free” Islamic thought in the Occidental philosophical tradition, which inspired a symptomatic romanticism towards the Arabo-Islamic Orient.

One major indication of this is the adoption of Nietzsche's view that perspective shapes perception, the only approach – according to Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* – that can lead to a more objective understanding (cp. Nietzsche 124). Thus, the novel fuses the perceptions of initiates and outsiders, followers and enemies, and witnesses and more distant observers in presenting internal and external viewpoints. The figure of ibn Sabbah, the master of the Nezâris, the Old Man of the

Mountain²³, has archetypal features; to the outsider and uninitiated, he is an embodiment of Satan masquerading as God, pretending that his worldly paradise is the heavenly one. From an occidental perspective, he would be a political ideologist utilizing the paradise as a means to his ends, a seducer abusing the eternal longing of the human being for paradise, transforming the fedayeen into will-less instruments of his daemonic will to power.²⁴ And in this, the Assassins have deduced and defined anew the rules for conduct on behalf of a higher truth in politics, power, and morals. The truly daemonic is the fact that mystics utilize assassination as a political means in their attempt to combine esoteric spirituality with military methods (cp. Gelpke 292–293).

Nietzsche, in “What is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals?”, the third essay of his *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), defines the assassins as an “order of free spirits *par excellence*” (Nietzsche 163). However, according to Nietzsche, nothing was really more alien to those so-called free spirits than freedom and their absolute belief in truth was unparalleled. For Nietzsche, the unconditional will to truth is the belief in the ascetic ideal itself, even if only subconsciously. It is the belief in a metaphysical value that presents a value of truth as it is inscribed into that ideal. The ascetic ideal stands above any philosophy – for truth equals being, the divine, God. As the expression of a certain form of will, the ascetic state is the will to nothing. While the lowest ranks of Assassins lived in a state of discipline such as no order has ever attained, the highest bore a burden founded in the symbolic axiom “Nothing is true, everything is allowed” (164),²⁵ which, according to some sources, may derive from the Kalif al-Hakim (996–1021). According to Nietzsche, this *secretum* would lead to the renunciation of affirmation as well as negation. For Bartol, it is the decision to ascend the Al Araf, which in Islamic mythology symbolizes the standpoint

23

The title “Old Man of the Mountain” was used only in Syria and among the Crusaders. “Old Man” is a literal translation of the Persian word *pīr* or the Arabic *shaykh*, “master”, common terms of respect among Muslims.

24

For Bartol’s concept of the daemonic, cp. his study on Goethe (Bartol 1932), where, as a catchphrase, he uses verses from Plato’s *Symposium* in which Diotima and Socrates discuss Eros as a “daemon” – a spirit-like man who fills in the space between God and man, so that the whole is bound more closely together.

25

This axiom is linked to the question of nihilism and to Fyodor Dostoevsky’s position that “if there is no God, than everything is permitted” in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

of all those whose eyes have been opened, and all those who have the courage to act according to their knowledge: “Al-Araf is the balance of good and evil” (Alamut 337).

The Assassins, at least the initiated, seem to have terminated the escape from that dreadful labyrinth of our world with its main driving forces of error and illusion. According to Bartol’s ibn Sabbah, illusion should no longer be regarded as an evil for mankind, but as a necessity for living, to which one has to adapt sooner or later:

Delusion as one of the elements of all life, as something that’s not our enemy, as one of a number of means by which we can still act and push forward at all – I see this is the only possible view for those who have attained some higher knowledge. (Alamut 202)

The ecstatic obsession with which the Nezâri elite, the fedayeen, have pursued the annihilation of their enemy, sacrificing their own lives for the benefit of the community and the right belief, must appear incomprehensible to the outsider. This obsession, however, can perhaps be explained by the occult practices of the order. The readiness to self-sacrifice could possibly be grounded in the belief that physical death serves to purge, making it possible to enter a higher spiritual level.

Obviously, Bartol had in mind the poets and mystics who had acclaimed Eros and ecstasy to be the keys to the secret, for the prison of one’s own ego – founded in time and space – must first be overcome, before a glimpse of paradise can be had (Gelpke 277). This paradise is more than just the quintessence of perfection and vision of eternal harmony described in the Koran in words whose music exerts a never-heard, untranslatable spell. The paradise in Bartol’s imagination can thus be understood as a particular level of spiritual illumination that

is attained by particular people during their lifetimes, people who after their physical deaths simply enter a state of definite and absolute realization (Gelpke 291–292). Wine as the beverage for the chosen ones in paradise thus symbolises revelation, truth, and divine ecstasy. The images of worldly love and alcoholic consumption – activities traditionally forbidden in the Islamic world but nevertheless referred to by Islamic mystics – stand for Eros and drunkenness, divine love and ecstasy.

The Shi‘ite faith’s imam embodies a type of perfect master, whose spiritual authority is unanimously acknowledged. Accordingly, Bartol’s protagonist claims as the spiritual leader of the Assassins that he holds the keys to paradise. It is the master who provides the fedayeen access to secret knowledge, giving them the means to decipher the Koran’s mysteries and enigmas. Thus, intellectual knowledge, but also existential esoteric knowledge, is reserved exclusively for the initiated. The only method of imparting this latter form of knowledge is through a rite of passage – an archetypical concept of death and rebirth foreseeing a transition from one stage of being to another. The initiation rite serves to prepare a person for an ecstatic experience surpassing normal human limitations and for a mystical union with the divine. The highest goal of being is to free the self from physical dependence and to experience the ecstatic union with the ONE, i. e. God, who is beyond anything rational and is the source of the entire universe.

My analysis of literary frame and intertextual devices suggests that the quite common oriental frame of exoticism, mystery, and threat was scenery for the narrative foreground of intellectual exclusiveness as well as an agency of otherness within the Western culture around 1900. A more general reading of *Alamut* shows that its standpoint regarding contemporary discussions on the nexus of (higher or secret) knowl-

edge, power, and political praxis is ambiguous, twofold, and at least limited to the Western perception of the Orient. In the performative frame of Bartol's self-reflexive metatheatrical plot, oriental otherness is approximate to the inner orient of European modernity, not only in its dialectic approaches to the afterlife of antiquity, medieval thought, and religion – climbing up and defending a new Olympus of thought –, but – seen through a psychoanalytic looking glass – also to the emerging obsessions and visions mirroring the darker sides of its cultural subconsciousness that were unfolding their theatricality on both the artistic and political stages. ♡

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Резюме

Около 1900 года, в результате некоторых изменений на политической арене „ориентальные“ Балканы приблизились к Словении, что дало толчок для развития корреспондирующих дискурсов. Роман словенского писателя Владимира Бартола „Аламут“ (1938) рассматривается в качестве яркого примера возникшего интереса к исламской мысли, проходящего все же сквозь призму западного восприятия. Философско-психологический подход Бартола к мотивам заговора и убийства, а также проблематизация аксиомы ассасинов „ничто не истинно, а значит, все дозволено“, связывают его с такими писателями и мыслителями, как Фридрих Ницше, Федор Достоевский, Зигмунд Фрейд, а с эстетической точки зрения – с Шарлем Бодлером.

Бартол, отталкиваясь от достоверной восточной истории об ассасинах, употреблявших, как принято считать, наркотики, об искусственном рае за стенами горной крепости Аламут, о современных политических неурядицах и убийствах в королевстве Югославия и прочих странах Европы, отталкиваясь от эстетических, религиозных, психологических и философских дискурсов эпохи модерна, выдвигает на передний план неоднозначное сочетание тайного знания, власти и политической практики. Анализ литературной структуры и интертекстуальных переключений подводит к мысли, что довольно часто восточное обрамление экзотичности, таинственности и угрозы служит исторической декорацией для первостепенного нарратива, транслирующего интеллектуальную исключительность, равно как и мощь инаковости (otherness), присущие западной культуре рубежа XX столетия.

В перформативном обрамлении саморефлексирующей метатеатральной фабулы Бартола выявляется, что ориентальная инаковость задумана как „внутренний Восток“ европейского модернизма – не только в ее диалектическом подходе к наследию античности, средневековой мысли и религии, взбравшихся ввысь и защищающих новый Олимп мысли, но – взглянув в зеркало психоанализа – еще и в подступающих видениях и наваждениях, отражающих затемненные стороны ее культурного подсознания, которые разворачивают свою театральность как на художественном, так и на политическом уровнях.

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