

Poetry of Epiphany: James Wright and Sohrab Sepehri

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Abstract

This paper's aim is to present a comparative study of the poetry of the American James Arlington Wright and the Persian Sohrab Sepehri in order to examine the main ground of convergence in their poetry, which is epiphany or sudden revelation of truth. This revelation is mostly informed by intuitive, as opposed to logical, thinking and a mystical union with nature and natural elements. The poetic art of both Sepehri and Wright precisely consists in reminding the readers of the necessity of redefining and reconstructing the self through an awakening based on spiritual moments. In both Sepehri and Wright, the magic moments are presented through epiphany whose mission is to alert the soul to the absence/presence of what matters, and to the ways of dealing with the problem.

Keywords: James Wright, Sohrab Sepehri, epiphany, comparative literature

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1. Introduction

The present paper will look at two poets: The American James Wright (1927-1980) and Sohrāb Sepehri (1928-1980) from Iran, two almost exact contemporaries who, geography-wise, are separated by an ocean and a sizeable expanse of land. This physical distance, however, is offset by poetic and spiritual affinities that make the experience of reading the works of both very interesting and rewarding. This does not mean the absence of any differences in their works and their outlooks. There can be many, and this is quite natural, given their different cultural, social, political, and literary backgrounds. Nevertheless, as has been indicated, we intend to focus on similarities or affinities, and in this particular case, it is the important concept of epiphany which will serve as a connecting principle in Sepehri and Wright. A reading of one poem—representing the apex of poetic achievement in the later poetic career of Sepehri and Wright—by each of our poets will demonstrate their philosophical outlook as well as the poetic method to give it expression. Moreover, affinities and artistic sympathies between the two are pointed out and highlighted. Also, a short explanation of the concept of epiphany is naturally in order.

2. Discussion

In the realm of literature—particularly modern literature—the word ‘epiphany’ is closely associated with James Joyce (1881-1942) who actually brought the concept to the fore in his works, and made it famous. The word ‘epiphany’ has strong Christian associations, marking the festival on January 6th commemorating the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles in the persons of the Magi. J. A. Cuddon explains more: “More generally, the term denotes a manifestation of God’s presence in the world. James Joyce gave this word a particular literary connotation in his novel *Stephen Hero*....” (2015: 277). He then gives the relevant passage in the novel:

This triviality made him think of collecting many such moments together in a book of epiphanies. By an epiphany he meant a *sudden spiritual manifestation* [my italics], whether in the vulgarity or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments. He told Cranly that the clock of the Ballast Office was capable of an epiphany. (Cuddon, 2015: 277)

As we can see in the above definition, there is an element of excitement and suspense as the movement is from small to big, namely, an apparently insignificant word or event proves conducive to a disproportionate realisation, transformation, or enlightenment that becomes a turning point in the life of the individual. The source of the idea of epiphany is to be found in religion, true, but in literature, more often than not, we find it linked to the name of Joyce who actually made it famous and gave it an extensive circulation. Before going any further, we will provide another definition of epiphany that offers a closer view of this view with a more literary focus: “One of the most common narrative patterns is the archetypal movement from ignorance to insight. The literary term for this climactic moment of insight or revelation, *epiphany*, was popularized by twentieth-century fiction writer James Joyce,” we then continue to read: “the term epiphany is best reserved for stories in which the whole action moves toward a climactic moment of insight into the nature of people or reality or (more often) the nature of God” (Ryken et al., 1998: 845). That a considerable number of literary works of all types throughout the world answers to this definition, is not surprising. To see a

character transformed, or acquiring a particular insight as a consequence of being present in a particular place at a particular time, and exposed to a particular series of circumstances, is a rather common sight both in life and in literature.

There might be many differences between Sepehri and Wright, but the present article will show them in an encounter informed by affinities and likenesses that serve both to gain a closer view and understanding of the concept of epiphany, on the one hand, and a better comprehension of their individual poetic characters. For the purposes of this article we have chosen one poem by each of the poets: “A Blessing” (1963) by Wright, and “The Sura of Seeing” (“Sureh-ye Tamāshā”) (1967) by Sepehri. Each of these poems offers a kind of critique both of the overall intellectual and emotional atmosphere of their creator’s unique times, as well as of the poetic tastes and practices of the early decades of the second half of the twentieth century.

Both America and Iran were experiencing revolutions of various kinds in those years. The sixties in America were pregnant with political, social, economic and cultural cataclysms, each driving the nails ever deeper into the coffin of the old world. America was now reaping a good political harvest in the post-war era, establishing increasingly its image of a superpower, making plans for the distant futures of the world, and at the same time facing serious challenges in all areas. Examples include the cold war with communist Russia, a general social-cultural-political awakening pioneered and led by students who sang a different tune and made their own different claims, the futile adventurism in Vietnam, the shocking assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and the voices of resistance, and liberation and independence movements in oppressed and colonial countries, and much more. The post-war era in America also witnesses great changes in the production and consumption of artistic and

literary works. A new poetic generation emerged in this period from an older generation of modernists like Ezra Pound (1885-1972) and T. S. Eliot (1888-1965). A redefining, reworking, and redirecting of modernist poetic theories was on the table, and a creative and fruitful tension informed the poetic atmosphere.

Sixties Iran, too, was going through similar cataclysmic changes that included emerging from a traditional toward a strange modern world, moving toward democracy, experiencing huge political and cultural changes, destruction of communal forms and norms and slipping toward an uninspiring individualism, developing a modern artistic and literary taste, and so on. This is the basic context informing the work of both poets, the backdrop against which their activities may be appreciated and assessed. The background hinted at above will serve as a preamble to a study of the above poems.

Both poems occur at the height of their creators' poetic ability and achievement. Before the publication of these poems, both poets normally succeeded in expressing the vagueness and confusion of the world of experience in a vague and confusing way. After this period, they come to a remarkable maturity, and we see them expressing the vagueness of life in an incandescent and lucid style. The arguably clear language and mature style betoken a mind whose peace is not a result of having arrived at the truth, but of having realised that all thought of arriving is not a priority in life at all; it is perhaps even a deviation. This attitude is an outcome of having tested the limits of reason. The aridity of reason may be seen reflected in the closed form chosen and practiced by both poets before experiencing a spiritual transformation marked by an intense attention to intuition and its powers and potentials. This intuitive approach or outlook is matched by an appropriate language and an open form possessing navigational powers suitable for addressing the mysteries of life. This whole new intuitive approach – both in life and in poetry – may be seen as a

metaphoric redefining of reason itself. In other words, due to its repeated failures and disappointments, reason is depicted as blind, whereas intuition is presented as a means enabling us to see the blindness of reason, and render visible the dark mysteries of life.

The long trajectory of theory and practice in both poets does confirm the point of view that the intuitive approach is not a kind of submission to the darkness impervious to reason; rather, it shows itself as a genuine discovery of the nature of life and its various (and mostly inscrutable) ways. Both Wright and Sepehri, in their mature poetic period, practice a poetics whereby the darkness becomes momentarily visible, a moment to be cherished and celebrated as one finds oneself at one's closest to the sources of life.

3. Analysis

A brief encounter with Wright's and Sepehri's poems will demonstrate the relative value of what has been said so far. The explosive, lightning-like opening of Wright's "A Blessing" coupled with the pressurising and the stretching of language in order to catch the experience in flight as well as the essence of the moment, evidences a new poetics that feeds on new ideas and looks for new means: "Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota, / twilight bounds softly on the grass" (Wright, 1971: 135). "A Blessing" is from Wright's third poetry collection *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963), and is generally regarded as very popular and successful among his free-verse experiments. His early preoccupations with rhyme, meter, and so on, have given way to a concentration on what Robert Kelly in 1961 referred to as the 'deep image' (Bushell, 2015: np). Robert Bly defines the 'deep image' in the following way:

Let's imagine a poem as if it were an animal. When animals run, they have considerable flowing rhythms. Also, they have bodies. An image is simply a body whereby psychic energy is free to move around.

Psychic energy can't move well in a non-image statement. (Bushell, 2015: np)

Bly's words do give the impression of being an updated, transformed version of Ezra Pound's Vorticistic principles. Nonetheless, they foreground the powers of the image to capture the mysteries of experience.

Wright and Bly started a correspondence in the late 1950s, and together they formed and, in a sense, formalised, the basis of the deep image school of poetry that made itself heavily felt throughout the 1960s. "A Blessing" provides the reader with a rare opportunity to learn about the quiddity of the deep image and how it operates. The image of the two ponies running wildly and happily about in a Midwest pasture fills the speaker and his friend (one cannot help speculating that they are Wright and Bly) with such joy—the consequence of a sort of deep empathy with nature and its mysteries—that is very much like an epiphany. The nature of this kind of experience is such that it cannot be put into words, or formulated in a frame of reason, and appreciated. The language that seems to convey an experience of this kind is nothing more than a loaded code or a metaphor (in its radical sense of a bridge that carries and connects) that simultaneously keeps the poet himself connected to his own (im)mediate experience and assures him of its validity, and offers to help the reader 'see' at least the shadow of the original experience and maybe reconstruct it for him/herself in an inventive, imaginative way. More important than this restaging of the experience, however, is to emphasise that such experiences in general are still possible and perhaps available to every individual.

The first two lines literally hurl the reader headlong into a world of dark irrationality, embodied in the strange statement "twilight bounds," which, looked at from another perspective, can make very

good sense in the overall conceptual and linguistic context of the poem. The statement “twilight bounds” has great interpretative potentials including: darkness has appeared as dark-coloured ponies that are bounding about; two ponies—that have become one with the dark mysteries of nature—are happily bounding about; etc. The next two lines continue the mysterious atmosphere: “And the eyes of those two Indian ponies/ Darken with kindness” (Wright, 1971: 135). The intention here is not to pursue a precise rendition of the meaning of such lines; suffice to say that the lines just quoted create a mental and psychic atmosphere that serves as a potent image conveying an emotional package. The images contained in the lines given so far communicate – basically through the ponies and darkness – freedom, naturalness, sympathy, unsophisticated pleasure, and so on.

The above quoted lines assume yet more significance when we read the next two lines: “They have come gladly out of the willows/ to welcome my friend and me” (Wright, 1971: 135). Is this where we should look for the meaning of the title? Have the ponies come out of darkness to offer their visitors “a blessing”? Or is vice versa: they have come out to be blessed by two humans—representing the human world?—who somehow have been awakened to the true essence of blessed nature. Or maybe the title means that a peaceful connection between the creatures of this universe is a blessing? The title is quite capable of meaning many other things. A whole lot is packed into the next lines that refer to the degree of the ponies’ happiness and especially their “loneliness” and “aleness.” Now, this is the core of the poem in terms of the concept of paradox the understanding of which itself is a blessing in so far as the act of reading is concerned. It is not difficult to notice that as the number of obstacles in the way of relationships and connections increases—“barbed wire,” “darkness,” “loneliness” and “aleness”—a warm, sympathetic relationship starts forming between the ponies and the speaker and his

friend. This is an important paradox that informs the basic thinking of the poem. It might be explained by saying that each living entity – human or animal – is first assured of, and defined by, its or his private and independent world (which is in a sense also its freedom), and then becomes ready to reach out for the hand of the other, and available for a relationship, howsoever fleeting and short.

The speaker does not give the impression of being a naive observer; rather he seems to be acutely aware of what is going on; he knows, for instance, that the ponies are “alone” and “lonely”, and not in spite of, but perhaps because of it, “they love each other” (Wright, 1971: 135). If there is agreement on the statement that love is not love if not generous, then we do appreciate the way the ponies behave toward the visitors who in different circumstances, not informed by love, may be looked upon as potential threats. We see the consummation of the ponies’ generosity and trust in the metaphor of touch. This, however, is not as straightforward as it seems. It was implied that generosity and trust naturally lead to wanting to take a relationship to a tactile plane. True, but the tactile experience itself becomes a metaphor for trust and generosity. More mysterious and important than metaphor’s magic power of establishing and recording connection and love is its power of metamorphosis: “Her mane falls wild on her forehead/ And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear/ That is delicate as the skin over a girl’s wrist” (Wright, 1971: 135). The association of the pony’s ear with “the skin over a girl’s wrist” is a clear example of metamorphosis, which catapults the poem into its climactic image – one of the most famous instances of the deep image, too – of sudden metamorphosis and realisation: “Suddenly I realize/ That if I stepped out of my body I would break/ Into blossom” (Wright, 1971: 135).

This is a very sensitive and significant point in the poem inasmuch as—if the metaphor may be allowed—the soul or the essence of the poem, too, breaks out of its body or the materiality of its language and

seeks a meeting-touching point in the reader. The message—if again we may be allowed the use of this old-fashioned word—of the poem, we believe, consists in the fine balance and delicate play between openness and closure, reflected not just in the conceptual universe of the poem, but also in its practical poetics. The poem is a poetic rendition of the idea (read dream, though a legitimate one) of the possibility of reaching out of (“breaking out of”) one’s closed self and sense of identity, of opening up to the world of creation, and experiencing oneness with it. Rather than being a source of fear and anxiety, transforming into a floating signifier becomes the source of peace and security. The floating quality of the self is a sign of compassion on the poem’s speaker’s part, bringing him to the sudden realisation that he is all other creatures, and vice versa, that he is part of a larger self that evinces itself in myriad ways. This mystical outlook finds its poetic double in the openness of form, and it was mentioned earlier that “A Blessing” belongs to the free-verse period when Wright had “broken out of” the body of traditional poetics which emphasised and valued strict poetic rules and regulations, especially those related to meter and syntax.

In the light of what has been said, we may have a better view of the meaning of the title of the poem. Some thoughts have already been offered, but more can be added. For instance, we may venture to say that the “blessing” of the title refers to the experience of oneness with nature and all its creatures. It can also be interpreted on a smaller, more individual scale: the speaker and his friend blessing the ponies and the ponies blessing them through the communion of touch. And it may be a reference to the blessing that is free-verse which is capable of catching spiritual blessings. So this way, the concept of epiphany may be understood in the sense of a showing forth in which what is shown forth is not only the possibilities of an open soul, but of an open poetics. A little stretched, this could be an allegory for the relationship between the concepts of form and content. The epiphanic, anti-habit, qualities of the poem make this appreciation feasible.

“The Sura of Seeing” by Sepehri marks one of the notable heights of his poetic achievement and philosophical maturity. It has many affinities with the later period of Wright’s poetic practice, especially with the overall intellectual and conceptual atmosphere of “A Blessing.” The attitude to form, too, is reminiscent of that of Wright, who in “A Blessing” and similar poems demonstrates a bid for at least a relative freedom from the strictures of form in its comprehensive sense. The epiphanic mode in “The Sura of Seeing” serves to highlight a momentous dichotomy that separates the sacred from the profane, each expressed and manifested through different metaphors.

The language promised in the title is the serious language of sacred religious texts, meant to effect an awakening in the reader or the hearer of the message. In this particular case, the word ‘sura’ refers to an organising principle in the Holy Quran. It resembles the concept of chapter, and it contains smaller units called ‘*āyeh*’s. So, the word ‘sura’ connotes the significance and the urgency of the message as well as its scale and proportion. In terms of method of presentation, Wright’s is soft and low-key, whereas Sepehri’s is direct and unceremonious in so far as his poem goes for the Godly mode of directly addressing man and what is lacking in him. In Wright’s case, we see the speaker’s response to a call, only the call is similar to John Keats’s “unheard melodies,” it is an undercurrent beneath nature’s surface (Mack et al., 1995: 821). “A Blessing”, however, faces the reader directly with the urgency of the need to “see” the world in the real sense of the word. It comes like a command from God; the command is a replica, an imitation; but it is an imitation of high value because it is issued from a fellow human being who has ‘seen’ the inside of things, and now wants to share his knowledge with others.

“The Sura of Seeing” opens with an oath: “By seeing/ And by the beginning of the Word/ And by the bird’s flight from the mind/ That a word is encaged” (Kakhi, 2009: 530). The opening of the poem is

something of an early climax in so far as it foregrounds the value of “seeing” to the extent of making the impression that “seeing” is the very purpose of creation. It is such a holy act that the speaker-prophet swears by it at the outset.

One can say with a high degree of confidence that ‘seeing’ is the message of both poems, only each putting it in its own way. In “A Blessing”, for example, the speaker comes to a final realisation whereby he ‘sees’ that he and the pony are one, with him wanting to “break out of” his body into a “blossom.” While the “blossom” preserves its seeming naturalness, it also becomes a symbol of a rebirth marking a new life and a new beginning. Again, in this sense it might be suggested that both poems contain a desire to return to the beginning of things, a time and a place devoid of the trappings of rationality and the limiting sophistications of civilisation where one can see things for what they are, not in terms of having a special type of knowledge about them, but in terms of how to appreciate and live with them in harmony and peace.

We continue reading in “The Sura of Seeing”: “My words were as clear as the green grass./ I told them:/ There stands a sun at your door,/ And should you open up the door,/ It shall shine on your way of living” (Kakhi, 2009: 530). The speaker’s words possess the fire and light of original language that has an immediacy still uncontaminated by the corruption of the world. The speaker-prophet who seems to have the best interests of his audience at heart goes on inviting people to move beyond the surface of things and see their essence and how that essence is related to one’s destiny in this world:

And I told them:

The rock is not an embellishment in the mountain
Just as the metal on the axe is not an embellishment.
There is an invisible gem in the earth’s hand

Whose light dazzled the eyes of the prophets.

Go in search of that gem.

Take moments to mission's pasture to graze. (Kakhi, 2009: 530)

The above lines are concerned with only one thing: people have a tendency to take things for granted, and because of this, they have lost the capacity to see things; things have become only senseless, significance-less, inert objects that are simply there. Now, Sepehri believes that the most seemingly insignificant object or creature, no matter how apparently unimportant or unseemly, is as fraught with meaning and significance as the most celebrated and elevated being in the world. This can and does include the apparently simple language of Sepehri who sees—not unlike William Wordsworth (1770-1850) according to Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)—the magic side of the plain and the ordinary; no, not even that: what seems ordinary to the eye is actually extraordinary. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge emphasised the presence of the supernatural in the natural, a view shared by Sepehri. This mental attitude is related to the epiphanic mode in general. Imagination, according to a Romantic like Wordsworth, has the power to render the natural, supernatural, not least by offering a potent, suitable image – an awareness of the ‘deep image’ in the context of the present essay will help appreciate both Wright and Sepehri better – that serves as a bridge between the sign and its desire to refer. Here is Robert Langbaum in this connection:

What we have here is a magic realism – the *natural supernaturalism* of the plan according to which Wordsworth and Coleridge cooperated on *Lyrical Ballads*. According to the plan as Coleridge describes it in *Biographia Literaria* (Ch. 14), Wordsworth was to choose subjects from ‘ordinary life’ and excite in us ‘a feeling analogous the supernatural’ by lifting ‘the film of familiarity’ from our eyes. (Langbaum, 1983: 336)

The intention here is not to discuss Wordsworth and his poetics; however, the above quotation does offer a valuable perspective that contributes to the present context. The heart of the above passage is the technique of making strange, or defamiliarization, a concept intensely at work in Sepehri's (and Wright's) poem. What is shared in both poems is the idea of opening up to the world, "breaking out of" one's body and mind, breaking into a "blossom" as we have in "A Blessing". In other words, one must try to leave the prison of his/her private self, the prison of his/her closed world in order to be able to "see" the world properly, without the obstacle or veil of self, or self-centeredness. This centrifugal movement – present and welcomed in both poems – is what expedites the epiphanic mode. The secret of communication with nature and the beings of the world is an open one in the context of both poems: the five human senses assume a different quality and perform in an unbelievable and supernatural-like way when the mental and the psychic attitude change. The eyes really see, the ears really hear, the touch is deep and effects a real communion, and so on. Their profound and high-performance powers are released when the individual breaks the mental chains. What naturally follows is that every moment of the individual's life can assume an epiphanic quality, every experience becomes a revelation, which is the consequence of breaking out of one's sick and possessive self, a condition that does not allow one to see other beings as they really are. When the narcissistic attitude is changed, the other can be seen, seen without being violated.

In such a heightened consciousness that does not see the apparent distance between one's self and the other as a threat and an unbridgeable chasm, things are experienced in a different way. For instance, "colours intensify" (Kakhi, 2009: 530). The objects are the same, only they are experienced in another way. Langbaum puts it best when he says this of Wordsworth: "The difference between habitual

and epiphanic seeing is the essence of Wordsworth's art;" (Langbaum, 1983: 339) and it is the essence of Sepehri's art, too. Dāryush Āshuri, speaking of Sepehri's thought and art while discussing "The Sura of Seeing", confirms the truth of Langbaum's words: "Habit blocks vision and insight" (Āshuri, 2013: 140). Āshuri then gives the following lines as evidence from Sepehri's poem:

We were under a willow,
I picked a leaf from an overhead branch and said:
Open up your eyes!
Are you seeking a better sign than this?
I could hear them saying to one another:
He knows magic, he does. (Kakhi, 2009: 531)

The poet-prophet is regretfully referring to the ignorance of the common individual whose only art is the art of denial, callous and impervious to the truth and beauty of things. The poet-prophet, then, reacts to an ignorance of this scale in a final passage, and records the deserved punishment meted out to the deniers by God:

Every time they saw a prophet on a mountain
They hid under the cloud of denial.
We sent the wind
To blow hats off their heads.
Their houses were full of chrysanthemums,
We had their eyes closed.
We cut their hands from the branch of intelligence.
We filled their pockets with habit.
Through the sound of mirrors journeying
We gave them sleepless nights. (Kakhi, 2009: 531)

The punishment, as can be observed, is the worst kind according to the speaker, and it simply (and painfully) consists in keeping deniers—who insist on the rightness of their perspective—in the darkness of their ignorance. There is nothing more painful than this because it goes against the reason for man’s creation, which is communion with nature as well as appreciation of beauty. The poetic art of both Sepehri and Wright precisely consists in reminding the readers of the necessity of redefining and reconstructing the self through an awakening based on spiritual moments. In both Sepehri and Wright, the magic moments are presented through deep images whose mission is to alert the soul to the absence of what matters, and to the ways of dealing with the problem.

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Appendices

Appendix A

A Blessing (By James Wright)

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies
Darken with kindness.
They have come gladly out of the willows
To welcome my friend and me.
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness
That we have come.
They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.
There is no loneliness like theirs.
At home once more,
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the
darkness.
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.
Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.

Appendix B

The Sura of Seeing (by Sohrāb Sepehri)

By seeing,
And by the beginning of the Word,
And by the bird's flight from the mind,
That a word is encaged.

My words were as clear as the green grass.

I told them:

“There stands a sun at your door,
And should you open up the door,
It shall shine on your way of living.”

And I told them:

“The rock is not an embellishment in the mountain
Just as the metal on the axe is not an embellishment.
There is an invisible gem in the earth's hand
Whose light dazzled the eyes of the prophets.
Go in search of that gem.
Take moments to mission's pasture to graze.”

And I gave them good tidings

Of the footstep of the messenger,
And of the approach of the day, and of the colors growing,
And of the resonance of the red rose,
Behind the hedge of rough words.

And I told them:

“If you behold a garden,
In the memory of a wood,
Your face shall be exposed to the breeze
Blowing from the grove of the eternal thrill.
If you befriend the flying bird,
You shall enjoy the sweetest dream in the whole
world.”

We were under a willow,
I picked from an overhead branch and said:
“Open up your eyes!
Are you seeking a better sign than this?”
I could hear them saying to one another:
“He knows magic, he does.”

Every time they saw a prophet on a mountain
They hid under the cloud of denial.
We sent the wind
To blow hats off their heads.
Their houses were full of chrysanthemums,
We had their eyes closed.
We cut their hands from the branch of intelligence.
We filled their pockets with habit.
Through the sound of mirrors journeying
We gave them sleepless nights.

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