

THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE IN NAWĀĪ'S WORKS

Hamid Ismailov

In his prose work *Ḩalāt-i Pahlawān Muḥammad* Nawāī relates a peculiar story: One day when Nawāī was taken ill he did what all poets do in such circumstances. He wrote a poem. When he had finished his *ghazal* a visitor arrived, so he slipped the poem into his pocket before answering the door. It was Pahlawān Muḥammad (d. 1493) who had come to visit his sick friend. After touching upon various matters Pahlawān Muḥammad suddenly asked Nawāī: “Whom do you prefer most of all among the Turkic speaking poets?” – “Maybe Luṭfi ...”, said Nawāī. “How could you name Luṭfi (ca. 1367–1463), when there is Nasīmī (d. 1404)?”, Pahlawān Muḥammad replied angrily. “Yes, you might be right”, said Nawāī, “but you know, Nasīmī writes about his love of the Absolute (*‘išk-i mutlak*), whereas Luṭfi’s *ghazals* are more about ambiguous symbolic love (*‘išk-i majāzī*), so in his *ghazals* he refers not only to the love of God, but also to the love of women. That is why I thought of him ...” Pahlawān Muḥammad disagreed: “You are wrong. Listen!” Then he recited the *ghazal* which Nawāī had written that same morning. The latter had to admit that the last *beyt* sounded better with “Ey Nasīmī ...” than with “Ey Nawāī ...”. “You see”, said Pahlawān Muḥammad, “Nasīmī also writes on *‘išk-i majāzī* ...”. “Where did you get this *ghazal* from?”, asked Nawāī. “I heard it ten years ago. A couple of illiterate Sarts where there as well. They could confirm it.” When his friend had left, Nawāī checked his pocket. The sheet of paper with the *ghazal* he had written was still there, and strangely enough, the poem was identical to the one which Pahlawān Muḥammad had just recited.

The next day, so Nawāī tells us, Pahlawān Muḥammad brought the mentioned sart soldiers to his house and they recited the same poem with the *takhalluṣ* of Nasīmī. The fact that illiterate soldiers knew the *ghazal* could only mean that it was famous. Nawāī did not know what to think, but fortunately Pahlawān Muḥammad later confessed to him that he had surreptitiously taken the poem out of

Nawāī's pocket the day before and memorised it in order to tease him. Nawāī concludes his story in a slightly regretful tone with the comment, "The late Pahlawān had this kind of bizarre character".¹

This story lends itself as a good basis for the subject of this paper, "the visible and the invisible", not only because of Pahlawān's clandestine act of replacing Nawāī with Nasīmī, which is to be considered as a theme in its own right, but also because of the deeper opposition of *cis̄k-i muṭlak* and *cis̄k-i majazi*.

Given the fact that we are above all dealing with Islamic Culture here, it seems appropriate to begin by analysing these two opposed concepts in the light of the Quran. Oppositions like "this world" and "that world", *dunyā* and *ākhira*, *zāhir* and *baṭin* are very common in the *Umm al-Kitāb* or "Mother of all books". Later Muslim theologians and philosophers developed the concept of *mulk al-malakūt* and *mulk al-jabarīt*, that is, of the material world as opposed to the spiritual world. There are evidently several layers of visible and invisible worlds in Islamic theology and philosophy. One of them is related to Time: The transitory Here and Now, *dunyā*, versus the everlasting Hereafter, *ākhira*. Another one is related to Space: The physical world as opposed to the transcendental one. The third one is related to human deeds, the forth to human knowledge, the fifth to a word, etc. There is a famous parable in the Quran which unites all these different layers. The parable is about Mūsā and Khiḍr:

Mūsā said unto him: May I follow you, to the end that you may teach me right conduct of that which you have been taught? He said: You can not bear with me. How can you bear with that whereof yon can not compass any knowledge? He said: God willing, you shall find me patient and I shall not in aught gainsay you. He said: Well, if you go with me, ask me not concerning aught till I myself mention of it unto you.

So both set out till, when they were in the ship, he made a hole therein. Mūsā said: Have you made a hole therein to drown the folk thereof? You verily have done a dreadful thing. He said: Did I not tell that you could not bear with me? Mūsā said: Be

¹ Compare "Alīshīr Nawāī", "Hālāt-i Pahlawān Muḥammad". In: *Mukammal atharlar tūplamı*, Tāškent 1999, 103–120 (114–117). The author is quoting Nawāī roughly from memory (the editors).

not wroth with me that I forgot, and be not had upon me for my fault.

So both journeyed on till, when they met a lad, he slew him. Mūsā said:

What! Have you slain an innocent soul who hath slain no man? Verily you have done a horrid thing. He said: Did I not tell you that you could not bear with me? Mūsā said: If I ask you after this concerning aught, keep not company with me. You have received an excuse from me.

So they both journeyed on till, when they came unto the folk of a certain township, they asked its folk for food, but they refused to make them guests. And they found therein a wall upon the point of falling into ruin, and he repaired it. Mūsā said: If you had wished, you could have taken payment for it. He said: This is the parting between you and me! I will announce unto you the interpretation of that you could not bear with patience.

As for the ship, it belonged to poor people working on the river, and I wished to mar it, for there was a king behind them who is taking every ship by force.

And as for the lad, his parents were believers and We feared lest he should oppress them by rebellion and disbelief. And We intended that their Lord should change him for them for one better in purity and nearer to mercy.

And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys in the city, and there was beneath it a treasure belonging to them and their father had been righteous, and thy Lord intended that they should come to their full strength and should bring forth their treasure as a mercy from their Lord; and I did it not upon my own command. Such is the interpretation of that wherewith you could not bear (*Koran*, sura 18, 65–81).

Thus the conclusion is that there are two kinds of reality, that the apparent reality is not equivalent to the actual reality, and that the actual reality is greater and richer than our restricted perception of it. In a certain way it corresponds to the Platonian concept of the corporeal world versus the ideal world. So how does Nawāī deal with these two types of reality? He should have been profoundly aware of them, because his favourite way of characterising someone is by saying that the person in question is equally proficient in phenomenal and secretive sciences, which he does, for example, in

his description of *‘Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī* (1414–1492) in *Khamsat al-mutahayyirīn*.

In view of the fact that Nawāī is neither a theologian nor a prominent Sufi, but a poet, it seems appropriate to focus on one specific aspect of the problem, the linguistic one. For him the concept of the invisible world finds its best linguistic expression in the language of birds or *Lisān al-tayr*. Throughout his life he had dreamt of composing a poem in the language of birds. It was his ultimate project and the fulfilment of all his objectives, ambitions and skills. Yet what did *Lisān al-tayr* really mean to him? When he was a schoolboy he heard others reciting Sa‘dī (d. 1292), Hāfiẓ (1325/6–1390) and Khusraw Dihlawī (1253–1325). In contrast, Nawāī was fascinated with the poem *Manṭik al-tayr*, composed by Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār (1119–1230). His parents decided to deprive the boy of the poem, albeit in vain, because at the time he had already memorised it. ‘Attār’s Sufi poem ultimately descends from the Biblical legend of Solomon, who knew the bird language. It must be noted that ‘Attār’s poem is an original work and not a reelaboration of Ibn Sīnā’s (980–1037) Sufi work, “The Parable of the Birds”.

In his poem, which is to be considered as a masterpiece of world literature, Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār explores the nature of the spiritual path by means of an allegory: A group of courageous birds go in search of their king, a bird by the name of Sīmurgh, which is the equivalent of Phoenix. They pass through the peaks of Exultation, Hope, Reliance and Love as well as through the intervening valleys of Despair and Fear, Repentance and Acceptance, representing the various stages of the seeker’s path towards enlightenment, or rather, stations on his Way, the Sufi equivalent. Of the thousand birds, which originally set out on the journey, only thirty birds, under the leadership of Hudhud, reach Sīmurgh’s kingdom. The word *sīmurgh* has two meanings, one of them being “thirty birds”. The thirty birds in question are aware of this meaning and the fact that their journey as such is a reflection of their goal, i.e. that they themselves are the *sīmurgh*.

Having fallen in love with this poem at the beginning of his life, Nawāī decided to compose a *naṣīra* and dedicate it to ‘Attār towards the end of his life. By that time he had already composed four divans of *ghazals*, as well as the five poems of the *Khamsa*; he had achieved everything he wanted in Turkic and Farsi, and speaking the language

of birds became his ultimate goal. How does he describe the language of birds?

O'z vujudingga tafakkur aylagil,
Har ne istarsen o'zungdin istagil ...

Senda ham bilquvva ul mavjud erur,
Fe'lga kelsa davo maqsud erur.

Qobil etmay o'zni gar qil avji so'z.
Zohir etsang dor ila solmoqqa tuz.

Kimki bu ma'nidin ogoh o'ldi bil,
Kim kesildi onga so'z ayturga til.

Onglokim, so'z o'zga, ma'ni o'zgadur.
Ma'ni ongmos, shog'il ulkim so'zgadur.

Bo'yla ma'nikim manga bo'ldi ayon,
Ayladim qushlar tili birla bayon.

Kim takallum onda shirkat topmag'ay,
Bikri ma'nining uzorin yopmag'ay.

Qush tili bilgan so'zum fahm aylagay,
Fahm etardin ham base vahm aylagay.

Lek ziyrak qush chu bildi bu maqol,
Onglag'aykim nedurur bu so'zda hol.

Barcha so'zlar mushkilidur by hadis,
Bezabonlarning tilidur bu hadis ...²

The paradox here is that the language of birds is conveyed by means of the human language. This could be seen as a way of overcoming

² Quoted from chapter 169 of *Lisān al-tayr*. The author has transliterated the lines from Cyrillic into the Latin-based alphabet, which has gradually been introduced in Uzbekistan since 1996 (the editors).

the language by means of the language itself, of creating existence on the basis of non-existent language, of looking at the invisible world with means applicable to the visible world, of going beyond human dimension into the divine world. However, in which way is the human language converted into the language of birds? Hāfiẓ once said:

Ân kas ast ahl-i bashārat ki ishārat dānad,
Nuktahā hast basī, maḥram-i asrār kujāst?

That person is a human being who knows hints.

There is a lot of wisdom, but where is a friend of mysteries?

These lines correspond to Nawā'i's final words on the language of birds. The human language is only to be regarded as a tool employed to convey the non-existent, or rather, imperceptible language of birds, which exists within and simultaneously beyond human language. Yet this is only the outer layer of the paradox. One could hold that the mentioned phenomenon applies to almost all of Nawā'i's works: His *ghazals* are indicators of a different reality; they tell us about the relationship between a lover and his beloved, meaning the mystical relationship between a human being and God. I have already described the universal patterns of *ghazals* in detail elsewhere,³ however, what must be noted here is that the space between a lover and his beloved, which is covered by Separation, with forces supporting the lover and others opposing him, is to be considered as the pattern of any human activity. What is even more important in the current context is the fact that Nawā'i also understands the concept of Separation between a poet and God in

³ See Ismailov, H. & R. Sultanova: "K metodologii issledovanija pjatiričnogo kanona v chudožestvennom tvorčestve Vostoka (na primere "Chamsy" i "Šašmakoma")" In: *Metodologija analiza literaturnogo processa*, Moskva 1989, 227–237; Ismail, A.: "Kaši yasinmu deyin..." In: *Šarq Yulduzi* 1995, Nos. 1–2. 197–204; Ismailov, H.: "K Poetike klassičeskoj uzbekskoj gazeli". In: *Očerki uzbekskogo soznanija*, 41–56, www.ferghana.ru/another/uzbek.html.

philological terms:⁴ He speaks to God in Turki, while God has manifested Himself in the Arabic language of the Koran. This is the true meaning of Separation in Farsi and Turki poetry, which is not to be confused with the Separation referred to in millions of faked stories about unfortunate poets, whose beloved ladies have been abducted by khans and padishahs for their harems. However, the *ghazal* does not only tell us one thing while indicating another in connection with the theme of Separation; every layer of the *ghazal*, i.e. rhythm, rime, vocabulary, content, symbolism, deals with this ambiguity.

The same can be said with respect to the general concept of the *Khamsa*, Nawā'ī's five poems. In the 1980s Razia Sultanova and I published an article dealing with the question why Nawā'ī had chosen to convert the *Khamsa*, originally composed by Nizami as five separate poems, into a composition of five poems, or rather, into one poem divided into five separate sections. We arrived at the conclusion that the Sufi concept of *wahdat al-wujūd* led to the mentioned structural changes, with five poems representing the five universal human concepts of Truth, Goodness, Beauty, Prosperity and Power. Each of the poems focuses on one of these concepts. In addition, the poems constitute a paradigm of human activity. In this sense all literary titans like Shakespeare, Goethe, Pushkin or Dostoevski consciously or subconsciously repeated the structure of the *Khamsa* in their works. At the time I was convinced that we had revealed almost everything regarding the structure of the *Khamsa*, yet Nawā'ī's works defy a comprehensive interpretation owing to their depth. In his *Lisān al-ṭayr* the poet himself mentions two further references to his *Khamsa*, i.e. the five pillars of Islam and the Five Prayers of the Muslims. Hence one can go deeper and deeper without ever grasping the full referential and symbolic meaning of Nawā'ī's works.

The second layer of the paradox leads us to the following question: In which way does *Lisān al-ṭayr* differ from all previous works composed by Nawā'ī? Paradoxically the birds which the poet strives to imitate express themselves in human language. The matter is even further complicated by the fact that Nawā'ī claims that he is

⁴ See Ismail, A.: "Kaşı yasınmu deyin...". In: *Şarg Yıldızı* 1995, Nos. 1–2, 197–204.

merely translating *‘Attār*, thereby referring us to another work. One could thus speak of reflections of a reflection, or mirrors in a mirror. On the one hand Nawā‘ī assigns a new status to human language, which is simultaneously the language of birds, that is, he demonstrates that human language is the only tool to grasp transcendental reality. He devoted his entire life to elaborating this tool and attained an almost impossible level of perfection, the level of bird language. On the other hand, having accomplished the highest possible degree of mastering it, Nawā‘ī is also aware of the fact that language is merely a tool employed to hint at another, non-linguistic reality which is intangible like a ray in a mirror reflected in another mirror. This is reminiscent of the words “nūrun ‘alā nūr” (light upon light) in the Koran, one of the greatest secrets of this world according to Nawā‘ī:

Kimki bu ma’nidin ogoh o’ldi bil,
Kim kesildi onga so’z ayturga til.

If someone became aware of this meaning, know
That his tongue was cut to say a word.

Nevertheless, human curiosity makes us persevere like birds in flight, and even the process of writing a scholarly article could be described as a strenuous journey through almost all the stages of exultation, hope, reliance and love, with perceptible or imperceptible moments of despair, fear and repentance, culminating in the final acceptance of what has been accomplished. In Nawā‘ī’s poetry, and particularly in *Lisān al-tayr*, we can detect many layers of the opposition of the “seen” and the “unseen”: the visible and the invisible, word and meaning, human language and bird language, thirty birds and *Simurgh*, human and divine, this world and the Hereafter, etc. The similitude of these oppositions suggests a system in which one entity refers us to another entity of the same side. They are isomorphic and one could hold that a word is a reference to the human language and to the human world, whereas meaning is a reference to the so-called bird language and the divine world. The Koran repeatedly tells us, “these are signs for thoughtful people”, and for Nawā‘ī the visible side of the universe is a sign which reflects the veiled and invisible universe of God. From Nawā‘ī’s point of view the only possible way

of studying the invisible world is by studying the visible one, and *ışk-i majazı* is the only way to *ışk-i mutlak*.

Nawārī's *Lisān al-tayr* is like a quantum theory: It is non-existent language which exists, and human insight, grasping what is beyond itself. The question is whether I have been as successful as the thirty birds or whether I have at least, like *Hudhud*, been able to hint at the true meaning of Nawārī's ultimate experiment. Or is it only the effort that matters? Only 30 out of 1000 have been enlightened, and one can only hope that a drop of water will reflect the ocean. Is my situation similar to that of a *kanizak* in the famous tale composed by Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, the maiden who looks through a keyhole and only sees what she is allowed to see? Have I not seen that which I am leaving unseen?