

9 A Mystical Reading of Nizāmī's Use of Nature in the *Haft Paykar*

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چون بدانجا رسی که نتوانی

کز طبیعت عنان بگردانی

(HP26,290)

*When you come to the point that you cannot [go further]
You will turn the reins from nature.*

Scholarly research on Nizāmī's view of nature has generally focussed on his animated descriptions of flora and fauna, gardens and deserts, starry nights and similar natural phenomena. Contrary to Arabic poetry in which nature is treated differently,¹ in the studies on Nizāmī, 'nature' in its literal sense is not the main subject: the discussions revolve around Nizāmī's matchless poetic technique and his use of metaphors (as in Ritter's indispensable analysis of Nizāmī's nature imagery), around his narrative use of nature (as in several of Meisami's studies), around his scientific knowledge of flora (as in a recent study by van Ruymbeke), or around the use of nature as an allegory of the human condition and as a narrative device indicating time and setting.² To my knowledge, there is no study available discussing Nizāmī's view of nature as, on the one hand, an object of reflection that reveals the divine rational order by which man can achieve sublimation, and, on the other hand, as a crypt from which man is supposed to escape.

In other words, there are two different aspects of nature expressed in Nizāmī's romances. Can nature be seen as a spiritual force, a vehicle through which man may achieve the Truth? What does a classical Persian poet mean when he uses the word 'nature' or 'natural'? In short, what is the main function of nature in Nizāmī's romances, and particularly in his *Haft Paykar*?

A close look at the usage of this word in the works of classical Persian poets shows that they are not merely referring to gardens, birds, the sun and the moon, etc., but are often referring to their essence or quality: the colour, smell, light, heat, etc. These essential parts of things form the ontological basis that is independent of our subjective beliefs and view of the world. The medieval Persian poet's idea of nature is essentially based on a

Hellenistic worldview, found in several treatises by Islamic scholars. Amongst these, the famous 'Brethren of Purity' (*Ikhwān as-Safā'*) from Basra propose a Neoplatonic definition of nature in the chapter delineating its essence:

Those among the sages and philosophers who used to talk about cosmic phenomena occurring in the sublunar realm attributed all natural events and processes to tabi'a (...) Know, O my brother, (...) that tabi'a is only one of the potentialities of the Universal Soul, a potentiality spreading through all sublunar bodies, flowing through each of their parts.³

In this philosophy, nature as a force is subordinated to the Universal Soul on whose behalf it operates. In another passage, the Brethren write that nature consists of a group of angels, who are appointed by God in order to protect the natural world. This idea refers to the Neoplatonic emanation theory in which nature is presented as an emanation issuing forth from the First Cause. According to the Brethren, the Universal Soul and Reason play an intermediary role in the creation of the natural world. In this doctrine, the role of God as the supreme creator is indirect: He regulates the matters of the world through his angels. Nature, which is indicated in Arabic and Persian by the word طَبِيعَة *tabī'at* forms just one group of angels: "طَبِيعَة is only one of God's angels, His supporters and His obedient slaves, doing whatever they are commanded to do."⁴

According to this theory, every created entity is made of four 'temperaments' (طَبِيعَة, pl. *taba'i'*): dry, hot, humid, and cold, which are the pure entities (المُفْرَدَات *al-mufradāt*). The Four Elements (المُرَكَّبَات *al-murakkabāt*, fire, air, water, and earth) are each compounded of two of these pure entities. As the essential substance of all material existence, the entire material world belongs to the realm of nature (طَبِيعَة). It is also in this context that the word 'nature' appears in classical Persian poetry: anything created by the Four Elements belongs to nature. Phrases and compound words such as چَهَار طَبِيعَة *chahār tabī'at* literally 'four natures', occur frequently, pointing to the Four Elements or to the four humours. Thus, poetic allusions to nature do not point to natural phenomena such as flora and fauna, sunset or sunrise, and so forth, with which nature is associated nowadays. The word 'nature' is usually associated with concepts such as 'divine essence' (ذَات *dhāt*), 'creation' (خَلْق *khalq*), and 'the existence' (كَوْن *kawn*).

It is no wonder that the word has these connotations in Islamic literatures. If we select the word طَبِيعَة in Persian poetry, we discover a gnostic worldview in which the material world is trapped in the web of fate and man is advised to emancipate from material existence.

The great fourteenth-century lyricist Hāfiz alludes to this term only twice. In both cases he refers to the material world. In the following verse,

he distinguishes between the material and the spiritual worlds by placing the word طبیعت over against طریقت *tarīqat*:

تو کز سرای طبیعت نمی روی بیرون کجا به کوی طریقت گذرتوانی کرد

*You who cannot go outside the house of طبیعت / How can you possibly traverse the street of طریقت?*⁵

By emphasising the contrast between the two worlds, the poet is suggesting here that the first requirement to tread on the spiritual path (طریقت *tarīqat*) is to abandon the 'house of nature.' But what is this house of nature that man has to leave behind? In these types of verses, the poets allude to the four elements and to man's dispositions based on the four humours, as in the following instance by Rūmī:

چار طبیعت چو چار گردن حمال دان همچو جنازه مبا بر سر چارم طواف

*Consider the four 'natures' as the necks of four carriers / Be not like a dead body, walk around the head of the fourth element.*⁶

In the following couplet by the same poet, the immaterial soul is contrasted to man's body made of Four Elements:

این چار طبیعت ار بسوزد غم نیست تو جان هر چهاری

*If these 'four natures' burn / Why be sorrowful, since you are the soul of the four.*⁷

This gnostic worldview is prominently present from the beginnings of Persian poetry. Man is depicted as being 'nailed' in the world of dust by the four elements. The world itself is presented as the deep pit of nature (چاه طبیعت *chāh-i tabī'at*) from which man has to climb:

هر کی در چاه طبیعت مانده ست چاره اش نبود ز فکر چون رسن

*Whoever is stuck in the pit of nature/ has no remedy but to think of a rope.*⁸

There are numerous other allusions in Persian poetry in which the reader is advised to free himself from طبیعت. For instance, in the last chapter of his *Salāmān and Absāl*, in which 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī reveals the symbolic meanings of the characters in the story, he twice refers to the term. In his first reference, Absāl stands for lust, following the decrees of nature:

کیست اِیْسَالِ این تن شهوت پرست زیر احکام طبیعت گشته پست

Who is Absāl? This lust-adoring body/ debased under Nature's decrees.⁹

A few couplets later, Jāmī states that fire, which is referred to in the poem as a means to kill Absāl, actually symbolizes hard ascetic training; the fire is required to annihilate natural inclinations (میل *mayl*, Pl. امیال *amyāl*) and desires:

چیست آن آتش ریاضت‌های سخت تا طبیعت را زنده آتش برخت

What is that fire? It is the strict ascetic disciplines/ to set fire to Nature in the outward form.¹⁰

Nizāmī also associates nature with lust, and suggests asceticism as an alternative:

پرده دری پیشه دوران بود بارکشی کار صبوران بود
بارکش زهد شو ار تر نه ای بار طبیعت مکش ار خر نه ای

(MA36, 60-1)

*The purpose of the world is to tear away the veils/ Those who have fortitude bear the burdens.
If you are not lustful, bear the burden of asceticism/ Do not bear the burden of nature, unless you are an ass.*

The depiction of nature in these poetic allusions is quite different from the one we have learned to appreciate in modern societies. Is this negative picture of nature what a Persian poet wants us to understand? The answer is twofold: on the one hand, nature is a philosophical principle and belongs to the rational order of the Divine manifestation, and man is expected to free himself from it. On the other hand, nature is an object of visual delight, an object on which we can meditate and come to appreciate God's handiwork. The words of Sa'dī are most fitting here:

برگ درختان سبز پیش خداوند هوش هر ورقی دفترست معرفت کردگار

To the eyes of an intelligent person, the leaves of green trees/ are each a book, [unfolding] the knowledge of God.¹¹

Nature as an icon of meditation is not exclusively Islamic or Persian: in sixteenth-century Dutch paintings, especially in Pieter Bruegel's (ca. 1528-

1569) famous Series of the Seasons, natural scenes are used as a meditation on the Divine. As Falkenburg's excellent analysis shows, there is always a symbol, an image in the paintings, which functions as a key to interpret the entire scene.¹² Nasr suggests that "Nature may be studied as a book of symbols or as an icon to be contemplated at a certain stage of the spiritual journey and a crypt from which the Gnostic must escape in order to reach ultimate liberation and illumination (...)."¹³ This is one of the most important functions of nature in Persian poetry.

In what follows, I will first demonstrate how nature is used in the *Haft Paykar* as a self-contained aesthetic entity, but most importantly as a set of icons to be contemplated during the stages of the protagonist's (spiritual) journey. Secondly, I will show why nature is a crypt from which the traveller must escape. My intention is not to dismiss other secular interpretations of this complex romance, because a secular reading is necessary and the poem's erotic and entertaining aspects are indispensable. In fact, the question is why Nizāmī used so many symbols to narrate the life of the Sasanian king Bahrām Gūr (r. 420-38 AD) and how we are entitled to interpret these symbols. A learned and mystically minded poet such as Nizāmī must have had something deeper in mind than eroticism and entertainment when writing his narrative. He warns in the epilogue of the romance that his poem has at least two layers of interpretation:

وز درونش درونیان را مغز
وز عبارت کلید پر دارد

پیش بیرونیان برونش نغز
حقه ای بسته پر ز در دارد

(HP38,25-6)

*In the eyes of those who look at its outer appearance, the outside is fine/ While for those who have an eye for the inside, it has a core.
The poem contains a closed case full of pearls/ The key to which is a poetical expression.*

The "outer appearance" refers here to the factual story of Bahrām, including his journeys, hunting, and erotic escapades, but his story has another layer of meaning, which is wrapped in a constellation of metaphors and symbols. In the same way that we have to find the key to understand the inner meaning of Pieter Bruegel's paintings, in Nizāmī's romance, the key is a metaphor.

Nizāmī's use of nature as a set of icons for meditation, in the *Haft Paykar*, is by no means new. He had already used this technique in his other poems, notably in the *Makhzan al-Asrār* and in *Laylī u Majnūn*. I will cite only one example from each of these epics and will then concentrate on the *Haft Paykar*. In the *Makhzan al-Asrār*, Nizāmī gives several dazzling descriptions of the night before he describes the narrator's spiritual development, achieved by journeying through all the compartments of

one's own heart.¹⁴ For a Persian poet, the heart is the seat of the human soul, the essence of man connecting him to his divine origin and offering him the prospect of eternal life. The narrator in the *Makhzan al-Asrār* embarks on a journey into the heart after withdrawing to meditate on the beauty of night in absolute solitude. While beholding this beauty, the narrator hears a voice (هاتف *hātif*) whispering to him the mysterious qualities of the heart, reminding him that the heart is his trainer (رايض *rāyiz*), and that he can unfold hidden parts of the heart through ascetic training. The voice urges him on an internal journey to develop his potential qualities, to become a better human being, and ideally a perfect man. The exquisite nocturnal descriptions are not merely decorative pieces to embellish this mystical poem, they are natural and religious symbols reminding man of his unique position in the rational order of the divine.

In *Laylī u Majnūn*, Nizāmī depicts several fantastic natural scenes. Several of these descriptions are narrative devices indicating time and setting, transitions between chapters, and symbolic emblems of a protagonist's unexpressed feelings, but one description of night clearly functions as a meditation. This is the scene where Majnūn hears of his father's passing away. From this time onwards, he radically avoids the community of men and chooses to live among the beasts of the desert. In this beautiful description of the starry night, Majnūn prays to the planets Venus and Jupiter to change his ill-fortune, but later realises that these planets and stars are icons of the divine power. Meditating on these objects in nature, Majnūn realises that he has to turn to God and asks him for redemption.¹⁵

Meditating on nature brings man to a realisation of the divine and helps him to develop his human potential for union with his Creator. Man has to cut all his bonds to nature in order to achieve his goal. Matelda leads to, and gives way to, Beatrice in the *Divine Comedy*, and in Eliot's *Ash Wednesday, the hawthorn blossom and a pasture scene / the broadbacked figure drest in blue and green, who enchanted the maytime with an antique flute* becomes a distraction and is left behind, *fading, fading ... climbing the third stair*. In these three poems, we distinguish between the turning away from nature, and a gnostic rejection of nature. For Nizāmī, Dante, and Eliot, the meaning of nature lies outside nature, and since nature is nothing without its meaning, one must turn away from nature to find that which will redeem nature (or 'redeem time' in Eliot). In Nizāmī's *Haft Paykar* too, after the episode of the seven princesses, Bahrām returns to his kingdom and redeems it, setting it in order and preventing the Chinese invasion. Yet ultimately, he disappears into a cave, leaving the material world behind, as all mortals must. So we move from the world as moral educator, to turning from the world, to returning to the world and redeeming it, and ultimately to leaving the world: a far more complex scheme than that found in gnostic literatures.

This process of seeing, gaining insight into nature, and finally renouncing the material world is strongly expressed in the 'seven princesses' section of the *Haft Paykar*, in which nature is represented by different symbols, the most important of which are the seven princesses themselves. They are the lovers, and educators, of king Bahrām. They stand for the seven planets, which rule over all earthly events; thence symbolising the seven basic colours, seven days of the week, seven regions of the world, etc. The central theme of the poem revolves around the development of human potentials to perfection, how to gain self-knowledge, to act justly and to become an exemplum of the perfect human being (نمودار آدمیت *namudār-i ādamiyyat*).¹⁶ The perfect man is a mediator between God and his creation: in a religious context, this function is fulfilled by the Prophet Muhammad but in the secular context of this poem, it is king Bahrām who is the mediator.

At one level, the episodes of the seven princesses are erotic and entertaining, but they are understood as allegories when we examine these seven princesses and their love relationship with Bahrām. The conspicuous aspect of these beauties is that, unlike Nizāmī's other female protagonists, the description of their physical forms and character traits is minimal. The narrator mentions their names only once (HP 13, 10-16). Their physique is overshadowed by several sets of seven concepts: seven planets, colours, days of the week, etc. Nizāmī emphasizes their fundamental nature, their essence, from which they are created: their colours and dispositions. In fact, if we desire to know more about the princesses' physical and moral characteristics, we should examine their congruity with astrological signs and other elements referred to in the stories they tell Bahrām. For the sake of convenience, I give a diagram of the signs associated with these princesses:

	Planets	Princess	Colour	Day	Humour	Temperament
1	Saturn	Furak	Black	Saturday	Black bile	Melancholic
2	Sun	Yaghma-Naz	Yellow	Sunday	Yellow bile	Choleric
3	Moon	Naz-Pari	Green	Monday	Phlegm	Phlegmatic
4	Mars	Nasrin-Nush	Red	Tuesday	Blood	Sanguine
5	Mercury	Azaryun	Turquoise	Wednesday		
6	Jupiter	Humay	Sandalwood	Thursday		
7	Venus	Durusti ¹⁷	White	Friday		

Furthermore, their personal contacts with Bahrām are barely mentioned. At the beginning of each episode, each princess welcomes Bahrām to her pavilion and immediately starts to tell a sensual but didactic story; the narrator ignores their feelings for one another. Instead of their personalities or their relationships with Bahrām, the stories and their symbolism come to the foreground. The narrator ends each episode by focusing on the

significance of the colour corresponding to the princess.¹⁸ Why does Nizāmī, who usually describes the psychological subtleties of his characters, neglect the feelings of Bahrām and the princesses?

The absence of physical, emotional and psychological depictions of these princesses sharply contrasts with the treatment of Bahrām's favourite slave girl, Fitna, whose elaborate description comprises more than ten couplets (HP 20, 12-17; HP 21, 46-58). The end of Fitna's episode, which is followed by a war against China, is the beginning of the section of the seven princesses. Why is this episode placed before the seven princesses stories? The answer should be sought in the poem's structure. Bahrām's life is divided into three periods, the first extending from his birth to the end of his experience with Fitna. He is sent to Yemen where he is educated by Nu'man, a vassal of the Persian king. Nu'man trains Bahrām in many virtues so that he may become Persia's rightful king. This first period stands for the material world. The second period comprises his stay with the seven princesses, representing the astral world. The third period – the world of universals – is epitomised by his disappearance into a cave while hunting a wild ass.¹⁹ This order symbolises the three stages in the progress of the human soul.

In showing how Bahrām frees himself from the world, how he becomes a perfect man through love, reason and justice, and his union with the divine, symbolised by his disappearance in a cave, Nizāmī uses patterns offered by previous poets, particularly 'Uthmān Mukhtarī (d. ca. 1118-21) and Hakīm Majd ad-Dīn Sanā'ī (d. 1131). Since Nizāmī explicitly states in his introduction (HP4,24b) that he will "thread the half-pierced pearl" (سفته را سفتم *gawhar-i nīm sufta rā suftam*) left unfinished by Firdawsī, scholars have usually turned to this latter poet as a main source of Nizāmī's epic. Although there are a number of overlaps between Firdawsī's episode of Bahrām and Nizāmī's story, in Nizāmī's retelling, the exploits of Bahrām are significantly different. At the surface level, Nizāmī follows the epic tradition he inherits from Firdawsī, but at another – symbolic and didactic – level, Nizāmī is recounting a mystico-ethical story based on a different genre and tradition, whose characteristics are visible not only in the formal presentation of the poem but also in the poem's contents. Nizāmī's choice of metre is significant since a metre commonly establishes the genre in Persian poetry.²⁰ Nizāmī is one of the originators of this tradition and he will inspire a large number of followers. The choice of metre thus gives clues for classifying and interpreting a poem.

Why should the choice of metre matter in a discussion of Nizāmī's mystical view on nature? The answer lies in the fact that in poems written in this metre before Nizāmī, a neat depiction of the natural order, the search for a specimen of human perfection, and an escape from the forces of nature lie centrally. The *Haft Paykar* is couched in the *khafīf* meter. One of the earliest *mathnavī* poems written in this metre is the *Hunar Nāma* of

‘Uthmān Mukhtārī.²¹ There are several similarities between this poem and the *Haft Paykar*: the most obvious being the detailed description of heavenly bodies, the depiction of the three kingdoms of creation (mineral, vegetal and animal), the important role of astrology and the attributes of a perfect man, treated through riddles.²²

Another poet who used the *khafīf* metre is Hakīm Sanā‘ī. Nizāmī knew Sanā‘ī’s poetry well and refers to him for the first time at the beginning of his *Makhzan al-Asrār*, a poem written in the same metre and following the example of Sanā‘ī’s *Hadīqāt al-haqīqa*. In the *Haft Paykar*, there are several indications that Nizāmī is imitating Sanā‘ī’s allegorical poem *Sayr al-ibād ila ‘l-ma‘ad* (The Journey of the Faithful to the Place of Return). The central theme of this poem revolves around the development of human potentials to those of a perfect man. The poet uses detailed descriptions of the natural order of the world as symbols to remind mankind that his goal in this world is to untie his bonds with nature. De Bruijn’s characterisation of how to read the *Sayr al-ibād* equally applies to the *Haft Paykar*: the text is “to be read as a Gnostic tale, as the description of the development of a human mind towards the understanding of the symbols presented to him by the natural world.”²³ This latter is introduced as the seven fathers (*aba‘i ‘ulwi*, ‘sublime fathers’), and the ‘four mothers’ (*ummahat-i arba‘a*), a reference to the seven planets and four elements.²⁴ In both poems, the development depends on deciphering elements from the natural world, which are both the key symbols and the vehicles to bring mankind to Gnostic knowledge.

As in the *Sayr al-ibād*, some of the geographical names – also mentioned in the *Haft Paykar* – are chosen for metaphorical values and are incorrect according to the geographical knowledge of the time. Overlooking the symbolism of names such as Yemen, commentators and scholars have thought that Nizāmī had little geographical knowledge when he located the castle of Khavarnaq and its ruler Nu‘man in Yemen rather than in Iraq. But al-Awadhi, in her recent monograph on the *Haft Paykar*, refers to Yemen’s symbolic values in mystical literature and claims that this placement was intentional. Yemen, she concludes, is the “rightful place of the exiled soul.” Bahrām’s stay in Yemen, where he completes his education and sees the portraits of the seven princesses for the first time, has a similar symbolic weight. The Arabic ruler Nu‘man is Bahrām’s spiritual guide and is a symbol of Islam.²⁵

Another similarity between the *Sayr al-ibād* and the *Haft Paykar* is the theme of travelling. In the *Sayr al-ibād*, the human embryo travels through the three kingdoms of the creation: mineral, vegetal and animal. Later, when he is born, the novice traveller meets a guide, who accompanies him on a journey through the natural world, showing him the hidden and the apparent significance of the universe, especially the seven planets. In both poems, there is a horizontal and a vertical journey. Bahrām’s

successive visits to the princesses on each day of the week can also be interpreted as a gradual ascent from the lowest to the highest region, from darkness to absolute illumination. Although at first sight the journey in the *Sayr al-'ibād* appears to have a horizontal trajectory, a large part of the journey actually takes place in the domain of the fixed stars and beyond. It is an ascending journey through the spheres, resembling in many ways the Prophet's Ascension (معراج *mi'rāj*). Both the traveller and his guide go beyond time and place, and reach the "highest realm of being" where only pure light exists.²⁶ In both *Haft Paykar* and *Sayr al-'ibād*, descriptions of natural order and the development of the protagonists are based on Hellenistic natural philosophy, showing how to free oneself from the world of nature. De Bruijn's lucid delineation of this order in respect to *Sayr al-'ibād*, can be applied seamlessly to *Haft Paykar*: the order of the cosmological system "is presented as an analogy of the structure of the universe. The three main divisions of the latter – viz. the material world, the astral world and the world of the universals– symbolize the three levels on which the human souls may be."²⁷ Considering the number of similarities between the poems, we may surmise that Nizāmī was inspired by the ascension theme Sanā'ī used in both *Hadīqāt al-Haqīqa* and the *Sayr al-'ibād*.

Nizāmī is the first to place the description of the Prophet's ascension in an epic romance and he has been imitated by dozens of other poets. The main narrative function of such a religious story in a romantic epic is to foreground the poem's didactic, mystic and ethical dimensions, indicating the possibility of several layers of interpretations. Some scholars consider Nizāmī's introduction of the Prophet's ascension in a pre-Islamic and Persian narrative plot as a flaw in Nizāmī's poem, but it is a device that reconciles the Persian tradition with the values of the new faith. In both *Haft Paykar* and *Sayr al-'ibād*, the ascension is a model for a universal journey, showing how an individual can reach the supernatural, beyond time and place, when he escapes from the dictates of nature.

In the *Haft Paykar*, there are several symmetries between Bahrām's and the Prophet's journey. In the same way that the Prophet leaves his material existence to pass through seven stages that are symbolised by the seven planets, Bahrām's visit to each of the princesses shows his gradual progress. Each pavilion corresponds in colour, and appearance with a planet. As de Fouchécour has shown, the Prophet's journey can also be divided into seven stages:²⁸

- 1 ll. 1-22 Gabriel invites the Prophet to accompany him, while waiting with the miraculous mount Burāq;
- 2 ll. 23-29 The Prophet accepts the invitation;
- 3 ll. 30-39 The Prophet mounts Burāq and starts his journey;
- 4 ll. 40-49 The Prophet journeys to the seven planets;

- 5 ll. 50-60 He reaches the highest sphere where he leaves behind
Gabriel and Burāq;
6 ll. 61-71 He meets God in a place beyond time and place;
7 ll. 72-75 He achieves his goal: to redeem his people from their sins.

As we can see in the excerpt below, at each stage during his passage through the spheres of the planets, the Prophet leaves behind one aspect of his material being even as he offers something to the planets, until he has totally divested himself of all worldly entity. Likewise, Bahrām's visit to the seven pavilions is vertical. He starts his visit with the princess from India in the black pavilion on Saturday, and ends his visit in the white pavilion on Friday with the princess Durustī ('Rightness') from Persia. The Prophet, first bestows his "own verdant nature" upon the moon; then, with his silvery hand, he offers a "bluish shade of leaden glaze" to Mercury. Afterwards he goes to Venus to which he offers the white veil taken from the moonlight. When he approaches the sun, he crowns the sun with gold made of the dust raised from his path. To Mars he offers red colour and when seeing Jupiter's head in pain, he treats it with sandalwood; and finally he wraps the flag of Saturn in black ambergris:

در نشت این صحیفه را اوراق	چون محمد به رقص پای براق
دوری از دور آسمان برداشت	راه دروازه جهان برداشت
شاهراهی به شهیر ملکی	می برید از منازل فلکی
داد سر سبزی از شمایل خویش	ماه را در خط حمایل خویش
رنگی از کوره رصاصی بست	بر عطارد ز نقره کاری دست
برقعی بر کشید سیمایی	زهره را از فروغ مهتابی
تاج زرین نهاد بر سر مهر	گرد راهش به ترکناز سپهر
سرخ پوشی گذاشت بر بهرام	سبز پوشید چون خلیفه شام
دردسر دید و گشت صندل سای	مشتتری را ز فرق سر تا پای
در سواد عبیر شد علمش	تاج کیوان چو بوسه زد قدمش

(HP3,40-9)

When he with Burāq's dancing feet / inscribed that volume, sheet by sheet,

*He left behind the worldly road / and far above the heavens soared;
Cut through the station of the sky / with angel's wings, a broad highway.*

*From his own verdant nature, he / gave to the moon new verdancy.
His silver-work to Mercury gave / the bluish shade of leaden glaze.
O'er Venus, from the moon's bright light / he drew a veil of silvery white.*

His dust, as he attacked the heavens, / set on the sun a golden crown.

Green-robed like Caliph of the West, / red garments bright to Mars

he left;
 And, finding **Jupiter** consumed / by pain, rubbed **sandalwood** there-
 on.
 when **Saturn**'s crown his feet had kissed, / he placed its **flag** in
 ambergris.²⁹

This *mi'rāj* story is unique. It is usually the heavenly bodies which offer their attributes to the Prophet, not the reverse. In the *Sayr al-'ibād*, the traveller's journey through the heavenly bodies is also described as a process of detachment from the natural world. During his visit to each of the planets, the Prophet leaves behind one aspect of his humanity at each planet. He passes beyond the world of nature, which is made of the Four Elements, until he reaches the world of pure spirit. In this respect, Nizāmī's poem comes close to Sana'ī's poem. The Prophet passes through the Lotus Tree, which marks the boundary between the material and spiritual worlds. Even angels are unable to reach this place, which the Prophet is allowed to enter. He experiences a "sea of selflessness," in which the six directions and all dimensions are gone. Here, there is no other reality than God, Who becomes the Prophet's cupbearer, pouring knowledge in his cup of bliss. Nizāmī then describes how the Prophet, after long prayers, descends and shares his knowledge with his friends. Although Nizāmī is referring here to Gnostic knowledge, the passage implicitly points to another category of knowledge: knowledge of each and every object of nature, which is one rung of the ladder used to climb out of the pit of nature. Nizāmī's message is clear: knowledge of the world and of oneself is the key to escape from the confines of nature and to return to man's original spiritual place.

Notes

- 1 Several studies are available on nature in Arabic literature. Von Grünebaum (1945) gives a negative appraisal: "If now we compare the part accorded to feeling for nature in Arabic poetry down to about A.D. 1000 – and, therewith, indirectly the part played by an aesthetical or sentimental response to nature in the Arab's spiritual economy – with the part accorded it in Western poetry since the Renaissance, it becomes evident that, on the whole, nature means considerably less to the Arab than to the occidental artist, both as source and as object of his inspiration." He concludes that "the poesy of nature does not, in the realm of Arab literature, hold the importance it attained in the literatures of the west." Meisami (2003) 347 ff. has responded. Bürgel (1983) gives the background of the humanization of nature in Arabic literature.
- 2 Ritter (1927); Meisami (1995) and Meisami (1985); van Ruymbeke (2000) and (2007); Seyed-Gohrab (2003) 311-36; Würsch (2005a) 39-42, 54 and 190 in which it is stated how the Prophet journeys beyond the phenomenal world.
- 3 As cited by Pingree (2000).
- 4 Ibidem.

- 5 Hafiz-Khanlari (1362) 290, gh. 137, l. 7 and 844, gh. 414, l. 7 for the second reference of the term.
- 6 Rumi-Furuzanfar (1336) III-130, gh. 1305, l. 13812. The phrase "walk around the head of the fourth element" is a difficult allusion which in my opinion refers to the fourth element (fire): the mystic lover should leave behind all material existence represented by the four elements. Another possible allusion is چهل تکبیر or an absolute renunciation of the world.
- 7 Rumi-Furuzanfar (1336) IX-82, gh. 2747, l. 29204.
- 8 Rumi-Furuzanfar (1336) IV-236, gh. 2012, l. 21260.
- 9 Jami-Gilani (1366) 363.
- 10 Jami-Gilani (1366) 364.
- 11 Sa'di-Iranparast (1356) 408, gh. 299, l. 4.
- 12 Falkenburg (2001) 253-76.
- 13 Nasr (1993) 2.
- 14 Würsch (2005a), chapter 5.3, especially 207-14.
- 15 Seyed-Gohrab (2003) 177-8.
- 16 Armaldez (1971).
- 17 The word can be read both as Durustī and Dur-sitī on the metre, and Nizāmī must have had both these readings in mind.
- 18 Black: HP26, 515-20; yellow: HP27,226-9; green: HP28,250-3; red: HP29,301-5; blue: HP30,442-6; sandalwood: HP31,355; white: HP32,320-2.
- 19 Bürgel (1989) 1-11.
- 20 I am aware that a metre such as *mutaqārib* is used for heroic, romantic and mystical epics, but as de Bruijn (1994) 37 has rightly pointed out, the choice of a metre is "part of the formula for a *nazīra*, the 'emulation through imitation' of a great classic."
- 21 Mukhtari (1962) 699-745.
- 22 It is beyond the scope of the present study to compare the function of riddles in Mukhtari's and Nizāmī's poems. See the excellent study of Krotkoff (1984) 106-7 on colour and number symbolism in *Haft Paykar*, which shows that the key to the complex structure of the romance is in the central story, the story of the Slavonic princess in the red pavilion, who confronts the prince with several riddles. See also Piemontese's contribution to the present volume.
- 23 de Bruijn (1983) 201 and 65, where he states that 500 distichs out of the total 800 present "a didactical allegory illustrating the doctrine of man's vocation to develop his potential qualities to the full during his lifetime."
- 24 Kubra-Meier (1957) 67-75.
- 25 Al-Awadhi (2001) 75.
- 26 de Bruijn (1983) 205.
- 27 Ibidem.
- 28 de Fouchécour (1989) 99-108; English translation: de Fouchécour (2000) 179-88.
- 29 Nizami-Meisami (1995) 8, ll. 38-47.

