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## The Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real in Nezâmi’s “Haft Paykar”

### Abstract

This article asserts that the poetic intensity in Nezâmi’s “Haft Paykar” is obtained from the intertwining of the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real. The rhetoric of the active imagination, as it is employed in the epic poem, gives access to an imaginary world. The latter is presented as a realm of metaphysical images reflected by the senses. Moreover, it is depicted through mystical visionary narratives. The transition from the symbolic to the real implies a transformation of the being and the spirit. The symbol allows connection to another reality, as it refers to something beyond itself. In the present study, the relationship between the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real in “Haft Paykar” is examined from a psychoanalytic and, above all, Lacanian perspective.

**Keywords:** “Haft Paykar”, imaginal, imaginary, Nezâmi, real, symbolic

Persian literary tradition proclaims Nezam al-Din Abou Mohammad Elyas Ibn Youssouf Ibn Zaki Ibn Mou’ayyad (1141? – 1209), known as Nezâmi, as the absolute master of epic poetry. His *magnum opus*, “Khamsa” or “Panj Ganj” (meaning *Five Treasures*), is considered the pinnacle of Persian classics. It includes the poems “Treasury of Secrets” (1165), “Khosrow and Shirin” (1180), “Layla and Majnun” (1188), “Haft Paykar” (1191), and “Book of Alexander” (1198)<sup>1</sup>, all written in *masnavi*<sup>2</sup>.

Nezâmi shares the view of his contemporary Suhrawardi<sup>3</sup> that the unfulfilled

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<sup>1</sup> The years are approximate and vary from source to source.

<sup>2</sup> Couplets with the rhyme scheme *aabbcc*.

<sup>3</sup> The Persian philosopher and mystic Suhrawardi (1155 – 1191) was the founder of Illuminationism (*Ishrâqiyyun* or *Ishrâqi*).

desires of the righteous are fulfilled in the *mundus imaginalis*, a world containing the richness and variety of the sensible world in a more refined state (Corbin 1986: 297). The *mundus imaginalis*, in which “the spirit is embodied, and the body is spiritualized”<sup>4</sup> (Corbin 1964: 15), is inhabited by both the spiritual and the corporeal. Muslim mysticism places it between the sensible human world and the intelligible divine world. The *mundus imaginalis* is the “eighth clime” that exists beyond the seven climatic zones of the sensible world defined by Ptolemy<sup>5</sup>. It is not a utopian world, but a world of pure spirituality, free from the limitations of earthly things; an ontologically real world that reflects spiritual reality in the images perceived by the imagination; a world that allows it to go beyond symbolic perception. The *mundus imaginalis* can be reached through contemplation or through imagination, in fantasies or in dreams.

Following Jacques Lacan’s (1953: 406) statement that the imaginary element in fantasies and dreams has only symbolic value, I will examine the relationship between the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real in “Haft Paykar” from a psychoanalytic and particularly a Lacanian perspective. In his lecture «Le symbolique, l’imaginaire et le réel» (“The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real”), that he delivered in July 1953 at the inaugural meeting of the French Society of Psychoanalysis, Lacan defines the symbolic as the space of the signifier, the imaginary as the space of sensory imagery, and the real as a reality impervious to symbolization and intrinsic to the imagination. The real denotes a psychotic reality (e.g., delirium, hallucination) built from the signifiers rejected by the symbolic (Roudinesco, Plon 1997: 880).

### Reflections of the imaginary on the structure and topics of “Haft Paykar”

In “Haft Paykar”, the rhetoric of the active imagination provides access to the *mundus imaginalis*, presented as a world of metaphysical images reflected by the senses and expressed through mystical visionary stories. The epic poem narrates the inner experience of the Sasanian<sup>6</sup> shah Bahram V<sup>7</sup>, also known as Bahram Gur<sup>8</sup>. The title “Haft Paykar” (meaning *Seven Portraits* or *Seven Beauties*) hints at the symbolic nature of the work. The connotations of *peykar* are numerous: body, figure; planet, star; portrait, image. The number seven has an important meaning in Islamic beliefs and practices: seven are the conditions of the *Shahadah*<sup>9</sup>; the verses in the surah at the beginning of the Qur’an; the heavens into

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<sup>4</sup> The translation of the quotations is my own.

<sup>5</sup> According to the Egyptian geographer and astronomer Claudius Ptolemy (90 – 168), climate influences the inhabitants of the climatic zones.

<sup>6</sup> The Sasanian dynasty reigned in Persia from the 3rd to the 7th century.

<sup>7</sup> Bahram V (406 – 438) ruled Persia from 420 to 438.

<sup>8</sup> Onager – a wild donkey common in Asia.

<sup>9</sup> The testimony of faith.

which Muhammad ascends during the *Mi'raj*<sup>10</sup>; the *Tawaf*<sup>11</sup> around the Ka'bah<sup>12</sup>; the running back and forth between Safâ and Marwah during the Hajj.

The structure of "Haft Paykar" is determined by the dialectic of the imaginary and the imaginal<sup>13</sup>. Bahram Gur's inner experience is achieved in four stages: cynegetic epic, heroic epic, love epic, and mystical epic. The most voluminous part, the third, focuses on the search for love as the source of happiness, whose upward movement goes from the profane to the sacred. Incidentally, Nezâmi's poem can also be seen as an initiatory journey into the otherworld.

Driven by love-longing, Bahram V visits successively the palaces of the seven beauties, representatives of the seven climatic zones of the world, under the sign of seven planets. The colours of the clothes and of the palaces correspond to the seven days of the week. Each night spent in the company of one of the princesses reveals a certain side of love to the Sasanian shah through the story that is told. Each palace symbolizes his inner world and each princess – a part of his soul. The princesses are like talking mirrors through which Bahram Gur communicates with his inner world and unconscious (Firouzâbâdi 2012). Each tale is linked to a key concept: a mood, a virtue or a moral. Each colour signifies a different stage of the transformation of the Shah's soul during his ascent, from story to story, to the Doors of Jannah<sup>14</sup>. The seven colours symbolise the seven phases of Bahram Gur's individuation process, the seven stops on his spiritual journey, the seven levels of his soul's ascent: black, the "carnal soul"; yellow, the "self-blaming soul"; green, the "inspired soul"; red, the "appeased soul"; turquoise, the "God-satisfied soul"; sandalwood, the "God-satisfying soul"; white, the "pure and perfect soul" (Barry 2000: 89).

Nezâmi wants to transcend reality through imagination. But the power of his imagination is neither phantasmagorical nor utopian. Situated on the border of the real and the imaginary, his imaginal world is not the product of a desire to reach the world of full *jouissance*: it is not the divine paradise, but a dreamed-of place. "Haft Paykar" fascinates with the indomitable passion to introduce us to a wondrous universe, an intersection of the real and the imaginary, the named and the unnamed, the visible and the invisible. Pulling us into the otherworld, the epic poem carries us into the imaginal.

Let's consider for a moment the Lacanian concept of *jouissance*, meaning enjoyment. On the one hand, Lacan places it "beyond the pleasure principle" outside the symbolic order, in the order of the real: while in "On Narcissism" (1914) Freud postulates that to experience pleasure we need the mysterious Other, Lacan states that to experience *jouissance* we need to have loss (Lacan 1991: 143). On the other hand, Lacan directs desire towards the struggle for the recognition of

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<sup>10</sup> The Prophet's Ascension.

<sup>11</sup> The circumambulations.

<sup>12</sup> The Shrine of Islam in Mecca.

<sup>13</sup> The Muslim mystical tradition considers the imaginary unreal and the imaginal real.

<sup>14</sup> The Gates of Paradise in Islam.

the object, which is not desired in itself, but only as it is desired by the Other, or rather by many others.

The symbolic world of speech determines the subject's position according to their place in this world. The subject's position requires the inclusion of a third element in the relation between the imaginary and the real, namely, the symbolic, which turns out to be essential for the representation of the world (Lacan 1975: 95). Language allows the passage from the imaginary to the superior symbolic thanks to the primacy of the signifier.

### **Symbolism of the Tale of the Red Palace's Princess**

The fourth portrait of Nezâmi's poem is set at the centre of the love epic. The epiphany of beauty and the knowledge are at the heart of the story, told on Tuesday under the sign of Mars by the red-clad Slavic princess in the red palace. The hero hopes to win the heart of the Mistress of the Fortress, with whom he fell in love after seeing her portrait. Moreover, he wants to avoid the fate of all the suitors who preceded him, namely death by decapitation. Showing a remarkable ability to solve riddles and decipher signs, he manages to overcome the pitfalls of the first three trials. But then the Mistress of the Fortress decides to subject him to a fourth trial before she agrees to marry him. The princess asks her questions not verbally, but through the pearls she exchanges with the prince. The pearls actually "are the signifier of something signified" (Orsatti 2019: 86), that the prince must guess, and his answers are conditioned by his understanding of the stages of the symbolic game led by the princess.

So, the Mistress of the Fortress takes two small pearls off her ears and has one of her maids bring them to the suitor. He inspects the pearls, adds three more pearls of equal value, and returns them to the princess. She examines the five pearls, grinds them into powder and mixes the pearl dust with sugar. The prince dissolves the mixture in a glass of milk, which he gives to the princess. She drinks the milk, collects the residue and weighs it: the weight matches that of the five pearls. The princess gives her ring to the suitor, who puts it on his finger and in turn gives her a magnificent pearl. The princess unstrings an equally beautiful pearl from her necklace and hands the two pearls to the young man, who, finding that the pearls are identical, adds a blue bead. She hangs the pearls on her ears and puts the bead on her finger (Nezâmi 2000: 213 – 215).

Then, the Mistress of the Fortress requests that the preparations for the wedding begin, recognizing that the young man is superior to her in knowledge. She satisfies the curiosity of the audience by revealing the symbolic meaning of the pearl game (Nezâmi 2000: 215 – 216). The first two pearls exchanged with the prince signify the transience of life. The three pearls added to them show that, whether it lasts three or five days, life is always fleeting. The next question shows that voluptuousness (the sugar) relates to life (the pearls). By drinking the milk with the dissolved pearl dust in it, the princess obeys the prince. By giving him

her ring, she agrees to marry him. The precious pearl he presents to her means that she will find no other husband like him. The identical pearl from the princess's necklace defines her as his companion, equal to him in dignity and wisdom. The blue bead, which, as we know, guards against evil eye, is a pledge of eternal love.

The pearl game between the Mistress of the Fortress and her suitor symbolises both the clash of two very intelligent persons and their intense non-verbal communication. However, it also contains a strong erotic charge. The jouissance of the communication, developed between the real and the imaginary, accomplishes "the linking of the symbolic and the imaginary in the constitution of the real" (Lacan 1975: 88).

The theory of the *mundus imaginalis* considers the imagination as dynamic and active. Higher than sensory perception, the imaginal perception allows the transcendence of archetypal symbolic representations. The metaphor plays a specific role in the poetic re-creation of this world: by translating the imaginal into images, it activates the symbolic function of the archetypes. "Persian poetry is essentially symbolic" (Seyed-Gohrab 2011: 1), and the 12th century is an age of refined metaphorical language (Clinton 1979: 76). Nezâmi contributes greatly to this with his exquisite, often cryptic and even hermetic metaphors. The erudite and sophisticated poet, who has mastered in depth the allegories and the symbols of classical Persian poetry, draws on this lyrical heritage with extraordinary creativity. The interpretation of pearls as metaphorical objects in his work is reinforced by the fact that in classical Persian poetry the pearl takes on multiple connotations: a word and in particular a poetic word; a tear or a raindrop; a young and beautiful maiden. Thus, the symbol always refers to something outside itself, allows the connection with another reality, links the near and the distant, the present and the absent, the immanent and the transcendent. As far as the passage from the symbolic to the real is concerned, it implies "the transformation of the being and of the spirit" (Corbin 1964: 14).

## Conclusion

"In the imagination, the authentic form of the otherworld becomes a mere illusory veil" (Jambet 2000: 348), which "is the metaphor most frequently used to express man's relation to all that captivates him" (Lacan 1994: 155). The illusory veil guides the game of seduction in "Haft Paykar". Its mysteriousness amplifies its key function as a symbolic object. While veiling has an irresistible attraction, unveiling generates eroticism. The veiling and the unveiling of the imaginal body heighten the charm of Nezâmi's poem. They allow it to be perceived as a mirror reflecting the beauty that cannot be contemplated directly and that is revealed through its reflection. The real is therefore manifested through its reflected image, the portrait. His epiphany transforms the things of the world into spiritual matter, troubles the senses, penetrates the depths of the soul, and shows another dimension of reality.

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