

Seyr al-'ebād elal-ma'ād OF SANA'Í FROM GHAZNA AS A POEM OF INITIATION

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In this paper I will try to show some semantic and structural features of the Sana'í's poem, which refer to initiation treatments such as they are described either in the approaches on Persian literature or in the history of religion. Whenever one reads stories originated in an ancient culture, the leitmotiv of which is a journey one may presume a presence of the initiation pattern. The motive of journey as a way of examining of the human being and his self-creation is one of the most generic in Persian literature. The first group of this kind of texts refers to the pattern of an earthly journey according to which the worldly presence of the man is regarded as a gradual movement towards regaining of divine glory (*farr-e izadi*) or recovery of his own self. The journey of Gaštāsb to Rum, the victory of Fereydun over Zakhāk and the Rostam's passage through the seven obstacles to release Key Kāvus should be considered as the examples of the earthly initiation journey. The second group comprises the extraterrestrial travels like the ascent of Zardošt to Ohrmazd and seeing the ideal world, the description contained in the Avestan *Hāduxt Nask* referring to a peregrination of the man's spirit after his death, the inscriptions of Kartir regarding his extraterrestrial journey and examining the realities of the Paradise, the Purgatory and the Hell, and at last *Ardā Virāf Nāmag*, in which *Ardā Virāf*, one noble man, just as Kartir went up to the hidden worlds, which were the places of the man's fall and glory. His journey like that of Kartir was to be an evidence of their existence for the believers after his returning to this world. In this context the Sana'í's *Seyr al-'ebād* is certain continuation of this long and a very ancient tradition.

Considering that brief review of the literary implementation of the motive of terrestrial or extraterrestrial journey one may observe that it has a specific position in the Iranian hierarchy of values, it is not a mere prolific literary figure. Giving a total explanation of the man's existence and his destiny it possess a distinct cosmological and religious connotations. The metaphysical explanation of this concept we may find in the ibn Sinā's *Risāla adhawīya fi amr al-ma'ād*. It presents a doctrine of the "superior wise man" (*al-hukama al-fudala*) who believe in a return of the souls, which during their earthly existence managed to perfect themselves and become liberated from the influence of the Nature. So, the journey as such bears an eschatological message and this aspect differs a literary function of journey in the European tradition from its Iranian version. To make this comparison more tangible shall we say that a motive of journey in the ancient Iranian outlook was like a motive of crucifixion for the Christian Europeans.

The interpretation of the Sana'í's poem as a text referred to initiation rites has been inspired by Gignoux approaches of the Pahlavi accounts on the Vištāsp's, the *Ardā Virāf's* and *Kartir's* journey to the invisible region's of the world in the context of the shamanistic experiences. In order to confirm his approach Gignoux underlines an an-

thropological evidence of close relations between the Siberian cultures and the ancient Iran pointing to the distinctive structural characteristics of the shaman's journey that is based, in Gignoux opinion, on two elements: the stage of an apparent death and the proper journey of the spirit separated from the body to visible or invisible world. Actually both are present in the initiation rites, as well. An apparent death is their obligatory factor whereas the journey of the spirit is a facultative one depending on a type of initiation. In any case both of them are implemented to Sana'i's account. In this approach I will try to show that applying the initiation pattern of interpretation to the Sana'i's poem not only explains more elements of the Sana'i's allegorical journey but unveil his original approach to a writing perceived as an initiation, too.

Before I enter into details let me examine certain philological dealing with the Sana'i's text, which is well spread in the studies on this poet. I would like to show an incapacity of this method for putting together all the elements of the poem within a coherent explanation of its ideological message.

Seyr al-'ebād written during the poet's stay in Saraxs between 513-517 h. (1106-1110) was dedicated to the poet's patron, Qādi Mohammad ibn Mansur – famous theologian and preacher of Saraxs. As entered into the circulation the poem very soon needed a commentary. From the 13th century its fictional part – the above mentioned allegorical journey of the Ego through various worlds – was separated from the whole and functioned as an independent story, the ambiguous expressions and scenes of which needed to be commented. It is noticeable that in the oldest copy of the poem's commentary its panegyric part and even the *hamd* (the address) to the wind were omitted. No wonder that in a common consciousness the whole creative intention was reduced to its one part, namely to so-called spiritual journey. It seems that the Sana'i's intention was illegible for the original addresses and misunderstood. Presuming that the symbols and allegories in cultures with a predominant oral tradition have to belong to the audience before they read them, the need for a commentary to Sana'i's poem had to have special reasons. The problem exceeds the limits of this approach. However it should be underscored that those allegories and symbols should be present in the unofficial Irano-Islamic folk culture. It's true that in the Ghaznavid period there was a deep split between more islamized culture of the cities and the countryside that remained faithful to the ancient rites. Maybe this was the reason that those unofficial symbols should be provided with the law-abiding and the correct explanations. The textual identity of *Seyr al-'ebād* is complicated by the fact of the discrepancy between the mechanical inner titles of its consecutive parts, which probably were added by the author afterwards, and its content. Seyyed Bahā' al-din Ma'ruh, an Afghan philologist, noticed that the titles do not fit to the semantic consecutiveness of the poem.

In this paper in order to appreciate this remark and to draw an original intention of the poet from his text I will follow the continuous text without considering its titles, which have more philosophical and moralistic character and seem to be a good examples of a taming the non-conformist elements of the poem.

The separate circulation of the allegorical account, its semantic obscurity and the apparently structural dissemination of the whole text caused that de Bruijn, an outstanding Dutch Iranist, concerned a generic identity of the poem as a homiletic masnavi ornamented with mystical and religious topics. In this way all the elements of Sana'i's poem are ancillary to the main relation between the patron and his client. Looking for the unity of the poem de Bruijn replaced the philological dispersing and vagueness of the text with the semantic minimalism. All the allegorical and mystical contents became a medium for the realization of the pure picturesque and occasional pragmatic

function. In order to complete de Bruijn's provocative opinion on Sana'i's poem let me quote the conclusion of his examinations:

The work must, undoubtedly, be regarded as the poet's first step in the direction of the didactic matnavi. The preliminary material has a value of its own as a succinct presentation of a moral doctrine in an allegorical form. If we relate this to its panegyric function we might regard this part of the poem as a summary of the homiletics of Sana'i's patron. (de Bruijn, 218)

De Bruijn's determination to consider *Seyr al-'ebād* as an example of certain moral principles and the rhetorical trick defined by the two addressees – the patron and the original public does not allow him to regard some semantic evidences and lead to misreading.

The close reading of the poem actually confirm an opposite assessment – the lack of any moral teaching. The moral doctrine and principles – whatever they would be – assume the clear criteria of evaluation of the man's deeds and the transparent system of rewards and punishments. Their manifestation in the religion is the notion of the hell, the purgatory and the paradise. Unlike the *Ardā Virāf Nāmag* in Sana'i's allegorical journey there is no trace of that doctrinal severity. On the contrary, the moral instructions of the poem are based on such immoral teachings like the necessity of the passage through the punishments of the hell and inevitability of the experience of the evil. According to the Baghdadli Vehbi's manuscript the name of hell (*duzax*) appears for the first time in the beyt no. 259 when The Young Man and The Old Luminous Man access the sixth stage of their spiritual journey. Even before on the first stage of their peregrination the dark and frightening underground region has nothing to do with the concept of hell as a place of eternal punishment unless after the suitable ideological commentaries. Not properly interpreted the horrible and ugly monsters they see can be equally well treated as a representation of the evil powers that necessarily exist in the human being's spirit. Especially that any kind of moralizing instruction addressed The Young Wayfarer does not accompany the descriptions of those monsters. Even during their journey in the daylight, which should be considered as a positive region The Luminous Man and The Wayfarer do not see the unblemished people. For example they meet the pious men but the religion is a prison for them. Seeing the people The Luminous Man instructs The Wayfarer to carry the fire within himself all the time to burn *qibla* in every moment and even to burn those who need the *qibla*. There are many places in Sana'i's poem where one can observe what I call a kind of value crossing, according to which the author induces the reader to perceive the relativism of the moral values and to see the positive in the negative and *vice versa*. That is why, I think, Seyyed Bahā' al-din Ma'ruh, an Afghan philologist, was right that:

Here (in *Seyr al-'ebād* – M.S.) the traveler i.e. the human spirit crosses over the regions full of fires, serpents and scorpions, but this is not the way of the punished and the sinners. The way of the hell in the *Seyr al-'ebād* is an inevitable passage of every human spirit, which is looking for his own truth and longing for the return to himself.

I feel sure that those value crossings expressed in the equivocal moral teachings and behaviors can be reconciled and explained by referring them to the shamanic initiation rites. The essence of initiation is based on the kind of transgression beyond certain limits such as age, social group or a taboo in order to experience a different and an unknown reality becoming capable of mastering it. This experience is resulted in the fundamental metamorphosis of one's personality.

From the very beginning of Sana'i's poem the reader's imagination follows the mysterious play between the three powers of nature: the wind, which is the main addressee of the invocation, the water and the fire. Among them the wind is presented as an intermediary between water and fire. The invocation reminds more the shamanic calls addressed to various representations of nature than a praise of The Almighty. The summons to the transgression and metamorphosis appears as a climax of this archaic encounter of nature's powers in the final part of the invocation. The poet, linked to the wind, after having praised its versatility and nimbleness requests the wind, which is his *alter ego*, to free itself from the water and fire:

Like an angel free yourself from The Water and Fire

Rise up over The Ether and Ocean
 Put a tent on the summit of The Pleiades
 For a while listen to the secret of the ego's creation
 Through the language of my revelation

In this summons there are three elements that define the symbolic dimensions of the proceeding rite: the juncture of water and fire, the language of revelation and the secret of the ego's creation. Each of them refers to a particular realm of the initiation experience: water, fire and the language as well as the text define a symbolic, instrumental space of the transgression while the ego's creation leads to the real personal metamorphosis. Let me explain that in the above quoted beys "ramz-e āfarineš-e man" may be understood in two ways: first as the secret of my creation and secondly as the secret of the ego's creation. Both are well founded. Nevertheless, considering the further evolution of the poet's vision in which the first person narration is preserved, I follow the second option. So, the narrative "I"/ ego works on two levels: as the writer's ego, which moves within the space of the text, and its different manifestations in the course of the related story. As a result of the latter the individual ego becomes a universal ego of the human being. The similar split within the structure of the "I" is noticed by Gignoux in the relations of Kartir as well. The French Iranist observes the two forms of the relating "I": "the one, which is living here and now" and "that one, which exists over there and is its *ravān* and its *din*, which come to see it". Gignoux sees the reason of this state in the shamanic conviction about multiplicity of the souls and the various parts of the soul. The same duality of the "I" occurs in the invocation of *Seyr al-'ebād*. What is distinctive and worth being underlined is that from the beginning the ritual scenario proceeds within two textual levels and two semantic dimensions: the linguistic author's level where he is meant as a traveler across the length of the text and the level of narrated story. Both become the space of the specific initiation experience. The concept of language as an inseparable element of this shamanic initiation rites evolves in the first meeting between The Young Wayfarer and The Luminous Old Man. The Old Man explains the nature of his soundless language. He advises The Young Man not to sacrifice chastity and cleanness of the language to the nights and days by which The Luminous Man means everything what is visible in this life. The Master's instruction has an immediate connection with the journey that is to occur exactly within the limits of night and day. The aim of the journey, which is précised during this first meeting has a pure initiation character as well. The Luminous Man says to The Young Wayfarer that his only food supplies in this journey is fire and adds:

The fire which is not the reason of weakness
 The fire which is a source of The Water of Life

So, it is clear that the task of the young adept is to have a sway over the fire within which is paradoxically hidden the secret of the water that preserves the life. In my view this is the same phenomenon, which is described by Eliade in some initiation and shamanic rites all over the world among which the Tibetan practices are the most significant and influential. The name of this phenomenon is "the psychic, the mystical or the magic warmth". This warmth is produced and preserved by the body of a young initiated man. In Tibet this ritual consists on drying the wet sheets off immediately on the naked body of the candidate for the shaman among the snowy and cold night. The ability to control this inner mystical warmth shows that the initiated person transgressed the limit of human condition. It is the right thing to write here that this *coincidentia oppositorum* compound of the water and fire is well grounded in the Iranian cosmology. The divine glory (*farr-e izadi*) the nature of which is of the fire hid itself far from the attempts of Ahriman in the bottom of the lake.

Another element of the Sana'i's imagination, which is explicable by referring them to the shamanic ecstasy and recitals regards the treatment of the space. One of the characteristic motifs of the shamanic journey is the presence of the so-called "paradoxical or difficult passages", which are much smaller than the initiated man. In the Altaic ritual there is a description of the descent into the hell, which is worth of attention. Having crossed over the mountain the shaman approached the hole named "the chimney of the Earth" or "the jaw of the Earth". Without any difficulty he passes the obstacle and access the plain and the sea. He crosses it over by the bridge, which has a breadth of a hair. In *Seyr al-'ebād* The Wayfarer reaches the third stage of his long journey and in order to cross over the mountain he becomes as thin as a leaf.

The explanation of all elements of the Sana'i's poem exceeds the frame of this presentation. Applying the initiation pattern I just wanted to show that the invocation of the poem is not its separate part, which has no continuation in the structure of the whole text as de Bruijn seems to state.