

## Az and Niyaz, Two Powerful and Haughty Demons in Persian Mythology and Epics

Jalil Doostkhah

Former Professor in Literature at the University of Isfahan,  
Former Assistant Editor of Encyclopaedia Iranica at Columbia University

Amongst all the figures of counter-creator agents in Persian mythology and epics, *Âz* (lit. avarice) and *Niyâz* (lit. want), as described in the young Avestan, Middle Persian and Manichaean texts, and in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, are the most powerful and destructive demons.

The names of these demons are mentioned in the Zoroastrian, Zurvanite and Manichaean sources and in most cases have been indicated as a pair of supernatural beings that are closely connected to each other.

In its mythological and religious aspects, *Âz* always represents gluttony and insatiability, as opposed to *X<sup>v</sup>arsandîh* (lit. contentment) and acts together with *Niyâz*. The Avestan *Âzi-* is not mentioned in the *Gâthâs*; but in the young Avestan texts it is indicated several times and is the opponent to *Âtar* (NPers. *Âðar*, lit. fire; the name of the Fire God, son of Ahura Mazda)<sup>1</sup> and *X<sup>v</sup>ar<sup>h</sup>nah* (lit. Glory).<sup>2</sup> In the Middle Persian texts, *Âz*, both as a demon and an immoral subject in the life of the human being, is against natural and legitimate functions and the most serious menace to *Tuxšagîh* (lit. pious striving) in the service of Ahura Mazda.<sup>3</sup>

One can find several distinctive descriptions of the demonic character and evil actions of *Az* in these texts. For example in the *Bundahišn* we read: "*Âz* is that demon who swallows [every]thing and, when he does not find any thing to satiate his want (*Niyâz*), eats from his own body. That is the demon who will not be filled and full, even though the entire properties of the universe have been given to him. So it is said in the *Avestâ* that the eye of avaricious ones is that plain which has not any frontier".<sup>4</sup>

In the Zurvanite theology, *Âz* has a primary importance as leader of the demonic hordes.<sup>5</sup> *Âz*, plays a major role in the Manichaean Gnostic system. According to a Parthian text, *Âz* is a female figure and she is "mother of the demons (*mâd çe dêwân*), from whom every sin has come".<sup>6</sup> She formed the human body and imprisoned in it the soul (i.e., the particle of light, God's substance). *Âz* is *Hylê*,<sup>7</sup> Matter, Evil itself, as an active, invisible power (*mênôgîh*) of the body, and this demon tries to make man forget his divine origin, thus excluding him (and God) from salvation.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Vendidâd*, 18, 19, 21- 22.

<sup>2</sup> *Yast.*, 18.1.

<sup>3</sup> J.P. Asmussen, "Âz", in E. Yarshater (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, London and New York, 1989, vol. 3, p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> *Bundahišn*, xii (using Farnbagh Dadagi edn.). On the evil deed of Ahriman and demons, sects. 185-186.

<sup>5</sup> *Vicîtakîhâ-i Zâtsparam* [selections of *Zâtsparam*], xxxiv, sects. 32-41.

<sup>6</sup> Doc. M 183 in W. Sundermann, 1973, p. 63 (see n. 8 below), quoted by Asmussen, *loc. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> *Hylô*, a word element meaning 'wood', 'matter' [Gk., combining form of *hylê*]. (*Macquarie Encyclop. Dict.*, Sydney, 1990, p. 457).

<sup>8</sup> Asmussen, *loc. cit.* The Principal text on *Âz* is the Mid. Pers. text TIII 260, possibly from the *Sabuhragân* or from the translation of another work by Mani. See M. Boyce, *Catalogue of the Iranian Manuscripts in Manichaean Script in the German Turfan Collection* (Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin. Institut für Orientforschung 45), Berlin, 1960, p. 132, cf. F.C. Andreas and W.B. Henning (eds.), *Mitteliranische Manichaïa aus Chinesch Turkestan* (Sitzberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften), Berlin, 1932, vol. 1, pp. 177 ff. For the fundamental role of *Âz* as Matter, see Henning, "Ein manichäischer kosmogonischer Hymnus", in *Nachrichten der Göttingische Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften*, Göttingen, 1932, pp. 214 ff, with the Mid. Pers text S 9. See also Asmussen, "Some Remarks on Sasanian Demonology", in *Acta Iranica* 1 (1974): 236 ff., W. Sundermann, *Mittelpersische Kosmogonische und Parabeltexte der Manichäer* (Schriften zur Geschichte und Kultur des Alten Orients; Berliner Turfantext 4), Berlin 1973.

In the New Persian texts and lexicons, *Âz* is used in the sense of Greed, Lust, Avarice, Avidity and Concupiscence. According to Dehkhoda, there are 28 cases of the usage of *Âz* in the text of the *Shâhnâme* and 48 cases of it in the poetries of 12 poets since the tenth until the fourteenth centuries A.D.<sup>9</sup> But Wolff has gone further and recorded 109 cases of the usage of *Âz* in the *Shâhnâme*.<sup>10</sup>

Zaehner has supposed that *Az* has, at least in one of the cases of its usage the *Shâhnâme*, the sense of "death".<sup>11</sup> To prove his concept of the case, he has referred emphatically to a single verse of the introduction of *The Story of Rostam and Sohrab*:

All [of the human beings] have gone above to the door of *Âz*;  
[But] the door of the secret, did not open towards any one.<sup>12</sup>

But the carefully conveyed sense of *Âz* in all the New Persian texts, and especially in the *Shâhnâme*, including this special verse, shows us that the key term *Âz* has in none of the cases held the meaning of "death", and from the mythological point of view it does not represent the demon of death. This demon in the Avestan texts, has been named *Asto.vidotu* (lit. He who dissolves the bones, Bone-breaker, Divider of the body)<sup>13</sup>. He destroys life in cooperation with *Vayu* (The demon of the injurious weather) and none can escape him.<sup>14</sup>

In the Middle Persian literature, *Astvihâd*<sup>15</sup> is identified with *Wây-i vatar* (The evil Way) who carries the breath-soul away.<sup>16</sup> He was sent by *Ahremen* (Av. *Angra Mainyav*)<sup>17</sup> to cast his fatal noose on *Gayômar*d (The Primordial Man),<sup>18</sup> and he is one of the evil assessors of the soul at its judgment.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, *Âz* "brings about death as it destroys man's physical strength",<sup>20</sup> and through such an evil deed, is only one of the cooperators of the death demon. "According to the Zoroastrian eschatology, he and *Ahrîman*<sup>21</sup> are the last demons to be defeated".<sup>22</sup>

Here in such a short and limited essay, I cannot put my finger on the all of the cases where *Âz* has been used in the text of *Shâhnâme*; but to throw light on the darkness of the problem, I suggest only a discussion on the same verse to which R.C. Zaehner<sup>23</sup> and some other analysts paid so much attention.

Various studies in *Shâhnâme* lead us to a key methodological point that, to recognize the exact sense of each term which has been used in each part of it, we have to find the word's organic connections with other parts of the poem and in particular the other usages of the same term in the very same story. Thus for the story in question, i.e., *Rostam and Sohrab*, when we come across the term *Âz* in the above-quoted verse from the introduction of the poet to this sensitive narrative, the understanding of its real meaning can only come by attending to the other cases of the usage of the word in the story, if not in the entire poem.

<sup>9</sup> A.A. Dehkhodâ, *Loghat-nâme*, Tehran, n.d., 1990 edn., s.v., *Az*, pp. 79.80.

<sup>10</sup> F. Wolff, *Glossar zu Firdosis Schahname*, Bad Godesburg, 1935 (1965 Berlin reprint), p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> R. C. Zaehner, *Zurvan: a Zoroastrian dilemma*, Oxford, 1955, p. 172.

<sup>12</sup> A. Ferdowsi, *The Shahnameh* (ed. D. Khaleghi-Motlagh, Bibliotheca Persica, New York, 1990), vol. 2, p. 117, v. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Vendîdâd*, 4.49; 5.8-9. See also L.H. Gray, *Foundation of the Iranian Religions* (reprt. from *The Journal of the K.R. Cama Oriental Institute* 15), Bombay 1929.

<sup>14</sup> *Aogemadaêcâ*, 57.73.

<sup>15</sup> Mid.Pers. form of the Avestan *Astô.vîdôtu*.

<sup>16</sup> *Bundahišn*, 43.10

<sup>17</sup> Counter-creator and chief of the all demons in Persian mythology and the Zoroastrian doctrine.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. The noose of the Vedic *Yama*.

<sup>19</sup> M.F. Kanga, "Astvihâd", in *Encycl. Iran*, 1987, vol. 2, p. 873.

<sup>20</sup> Asmussen, in *ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 168.

<sup>21</sup> Counter creator and chief of the all demons in Persian mythology and the Zoroastrian doctrine.

<sup>22</sup> Asmussen, *loc. cit.*, p. 169.

<sup>23</sup> Zaehner, *Zurvan, op. cit.*, p. 172.

So that we find two more examples of it, later in the story, itself. The first one is:

[Even] the quadruped recognizes its child  
 So does the fish in the sea; so does the zebra on the plain  
 [But] mankind who is troubled by *Âz*  
 Does not distinguish an enemy from his own child!<sup>24</sup>

And the second case is:

The whole bitterness [of life] is caused by greediness  
 Let there not be relationship with *Âz*!

Both of these cases, as well as the first one, do not come out of very the basic structure of the narrative but have obviously have been added to it by the poet himself, as his ethical and philosophical conceptualization of events in the final composition of the poem. Consequently, on deeper reflection, one finds that the appearance of the word *Âz* at the beginning of this noteworthy episode of the Persian epic is not at all unexpected, but comes to bear full organic connection with the two posterior usages of the same term.

In the first case, the poet, in a general indication to *Âz*, has considered it as the main reason of the disastrous events in a man's life, such as the combat between father and son, the latter being murdered by the former. So, to follow a traditional method of introducing the stories in Persian poetry, the poet is going to prepare the mind of the reader to face the main scene of the catastrophic event, and therefore he provides a key-term for his readers in this pursuit. In the two later indications to *Az*, Ferdowsi has reminded the reader to be careful about the dangerous actions of *Âz*, if not as a demon in a mythological conception, at least as a temper of immorality in human life.

Finally, to give a short comment on the first case, it is arguable that the compound *dar-e râz* (lit. the door of the secret) in the second half of the first quoted verse, is not, as Zaehner and some of the other analysts of the *Shahnameh* have supposed, identified with *dar-e âz* (lit. the door of avarice) in the first half of the same verse. The poet states that, although the whole of humanity have gone above to the door of avarice (i.e., they have tried to be owner of the entire powers and properties of the world), they cannot overcome the secret power and sovereignty of death and the door of this secret; neither has the door been opened to any one, nor would the problem be resolved for humans in the future.

On the other hand, the compound *dar-e râz* refers to such words as *marg* (lit. death), *râz* (lit. secret) and *pardeh* (lit. curtain) in the two preceding verses:

If *death* is justice, then what is injustice?  
 [So that] what is the reason of the too many noises and cries about justice?  
 Your soul is not aware of this *secret*  
 [And] you are not permitted to pass over this *curtain*.<sup>25</sup>

As a result of my discussion, I emphasize the point that the word in the compound *dar-e râz* has not any denotation to *âz* in the first half of the first quoted verse; but it has obviously the sense of the "secret of death" and the word *pardeh* (curtain) represents the mysterious nature of death.

In another part of his great epic, Ferdowsi has introduced *Âz* and *Niyâz*, as two powerful and haughty demons, the first one being the opponent to *kherad* (lit. reason, intellect, wisdom) and never

<sup>24</sup> *The Shahnameh, op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 172, vss. 672-673.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117, vss. 3-4.

being satisfied in full, while the second one is always sorrowful, painful, blind and pale.<sup>26</sup>

Needless to say, such a description of the two demons has had roots in the poet's sources, based on Persian mythology and Zoroastrian demonology, as well as on ethical principles underlying both. On the other hand, Ferdowsi's references to these demons shows clearly the philosophical and humanistic standpoints of the poet, himself. He believes that *avarice* and *want* are the main reasons of the evil deeds and catastrophes in human life, which draw people toward a badly omened death.

That is a matter of fact throughout world history and in today's life, it is clearer now than at any other time!

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, [Moscow edn.], vol. 8, p. 196, vss. 2442-2443, 2446-2449.