

## Emblematic Cities

A response to the images of Henri Steirlin\*

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The *Parmenides* has the reputation of being one of Plato's most difficult dialogues; only Proclus – the most profound metaphysician of the School – knew (in his great Commentary) – how to give life to the setting and the dramatic presentation. This he did by uncovering their symbolic intentions, implicit in the places of origin of the characters, the order of their appearance, and the place of their encounter: Athens.

On the one hand there are philosophers of the School of Ionia; these come from Clazomene. Now the philosophers of the Ionic school have studied every aspect of Nature, but they have scarcely given a thought to spiritual matters, to 'intelligible and intellectual substances'. And there are, on the other hand, philosophers of the Italian School, represented above all by Parmenides and Zeno. These are exclusively concerned with things of the intelligible order. Between the two is the Attic school, which holds a middle position, because, under the stimulus of Socrates and Plato, a synthesis has been made between the findings of the two other Schools. Ionia is thus the symbol of the school of Nature, Italy of the intellectual; the middle ground is symbolized by Athens, by whose mediation awakened souls ascend from the world of Nature to that of nous, intellect. Thus it is in Athens – and therein lies the fundamental symbol – that the philosophers of Ionia, bringing their knowledge of the physical order, meet with the Italian philosophers, bringing their understanding of the intelligible and intellectual, for just as physical species participate in intelligibles through the intermediary of the psyche, so it is through the intermediary of the Attic philosophers that the drama of the Platonic dialogue makes the philosophy of the Italian school known to the Ionians, and enables them to participate in contemplative philosophy and in mystical vision.

\* ISPAHAN. *Image du Paradis* Bibliothèque des arts, Editions SIGMA, Geneva 1976.

These Clazomenians are types of those souls who have descended into this world who really are in need of the aid of the *daimons*, who are, in the hierarchy of being, contiguous to them. This is why they abandon their house, the body: they emigrate to Athens, because they have the good fortune to be the object of the solicitude of Athene. So they set out on the way from ignorance to knowledge, from *agnosis* to *gnosis*, that is, Athens, where the pilgrim philosophers have not come in order to hold formal discussions, but to participate in the festival of the Panatheneia. They come for the Goddess, whose sacred *peplum* is carried in the *theoria*, or procession of the Panatheneia in celebration of victory over the Titans who unloose chaos. The aim of the *Parmenides* is precisely to reunite everything to the One, and to demonstrate how all things proceed from the One. All the symbolism of the dramatic arrangement of the dialogue is thus illuminated by Proclus: the cast of characters effect in turn their encounter, proceeding from plurality to duality, then to the unique One. Each has his own rôle, each typifies a degree of aptitude or a moment in the reascent of souls towards the divine worlds. For such persons, to come to Athens is to come to the festival of the Panatheneia; for to come to this festival is, for them, to know that it is within the soul that the battle of the giants takes place, in which the goddess is victorious. It is the Panathenians who bring the philosophers together in a place which no longer belongs to the topography of this world: Athens is an emblematic city.

Let us follow now another route, no longer the way leading the philosophers to the Panatheneia but the way taken for hundreds of years by the pilgrims of St. James of Compostella. Here we find the great alchemist, Nicholas Flamel, making that pilgrimage in the fourteenth century, just as the philosophers of Clazomene travelled to Athens. Taking the pilgrim's cloak and staff, he set out, and it was only on his return, after he had received the mystic benediction of the Apostle James, that he was able to decipher Abraham the Jew's book of hieroglyphic figures. This is because in reality the pilgrimage to Compostella is the symbolic description of the preparation of the Stone. The alchemist is a pilgrim, all his research is a pilgrimage, a symbolic journey, accomplished in the oratory-laboratory which he may not abandon for an instant. Day and night he must watch over the flask, tend the fire. According to the authentic tradition deriving from

Jābir ibn Hayyān the alchemical work consists in making apparent what is hidden by concealing the apparent, a bringing to light which occurs in the first place within the alchemist himself. Such is the preparation demanded for the transmutation of common mercury into philosophical mercury. And it is at Compostella that the transformation takes place, but a city of Compostella which is no longer situated in the land of Spain, but in that hidden land which is the innermost being of the alchemist-philosopher. Compostella is an emblematic city.

No doubt that same road of St. James communicates with other emblematic cities, for it is in following that road that we discover the spirit, the hidden significance of which a body, or a building, is only one typification. And this is why, in the poems of William Blake, amid the jumble of unknown worlds, the turmoil of skies and heavenly beings with strange names, the reader suddenly comes upon places whose names are familiar, unexpectedly inserted into those mystic worlds. For, beneath the appearance of day-to-day London, William Blake discerns a London more real than the London visible to bodily eyes, and for which it is accountable. Hence all the removals from one district to another, just as from one geographical country to another, are transformed into so many conquests of the *mundus imaginalis*. This is because different visionary experiences correspond to as many different districts, each district having in some sense its especial visionary vocation. Taken together these regions constitute an emblematic city, and the emblematic cities intercommunicate with one another. Thus, in the long poem *Jerusalem: the Emanation of the Giant Albion*, by the super-imposition of two cities, London and Jerusalem are 'imaginalized' into the City of Golgonooza. By virtue of the visionary vocation of each place, each word of the Bible signifies a living message in the present. Thus the map of Jerusalem enables us to decipher the map of London. But the cartography is that of the *mundus imaginalis*. London and Jerusalem are now emblematic cities.

For Proclus, the Athens of Plato's *Parmenides* was emblematic of the interworld, the meeting-place between philosophers of nature and philosophers of Ideas. For Nicholas Flamel the emblematic city was the city of Compostella hidden within the pilgrim himself. For William Blake the emblematic city, by placing in correspondence two cities of this world, translates both to the realm of the visionary

interworld. In every case it is not sensible perception which determines this, but an 'image' which precedes and imposes order on all empirical perceptions. The dominant 'Image' in the examples here given emerges as the *Imago Templi*.

As author of this preface I shall avoid, in these pages, the attraction presented by variations on a favourite theme. I have attempted to evoke, by allusion, considerations suggested at the time when Henri Steirlin kindly came to show me his 'images' of Isfahan, collected in the present book. The unique – incomparable – quality of these must have its secret. If a painter had produced them he would have been congratulated on his 'visionary' gifts. But here they are produced by the medium of one of those 'mechanisms' included under the general malediction incurred by technology. But for the visions of Isfahan which we owe to Henri Steirlin, the camera is merely what it is: all depends on the visionary gift of the user. Henri Steirlin's gift is already clear in his earlier books. Here again certain chapters of his text illuminate in depth the secret of the *Imago Templi*. Finally, from certain references to myself, I foresaw that we were to be partners in a single effort to elucidate the secret message of the spiritual world of Iran. From this point how could I refuse to accept his kind invitation to participate, in a few introductory pages to this book devoted to the enchantments, indeed the 'magic' of Isfahan, that same magic which makes it an emblematic city?

I have joined the words – as they are joined in Jacob Boehme – *imago-magia*. And I believe that this corresponds perfectly to the intention of Henri Steirlin. I would say that for him architectural monuments must be transposed to images in order that we may perceive all their perfections, virtues, and virtualities. Therein lies what I see as our complicity, for, as one who seeks in metaphysics for the *Imago* and the active imagination, I had already divined this in the subtitle of the book, 'Image of Paradise'. The author is at pains to inform us that for him it is a question of 'deciphering the message left us by the builders of Isfahan who, between the eleventh and the eighteenth centuries, made that unique city one of the architectural wonders of the world'. A message to be deciphered implies a secret to rediscover. The mission Henri Steirlin has thus set himself can only succeed on condition that we accompany him to this rendezvous; a rendezvous at which the mere historical tourist is fated never to arrive.

It is now thirty years since, at a sharp bend of the road, a traveller arriving from the south by the Shiraz road, suddenly beheld the 'emerald vision' of the gardens of Isfahan, its 'paradises', above which rose only the domes – themselves greenish in colour – of its mosques and *madrassah*. To be sure, our Iranian friends had been vigilant in the preservation of whatever it was possible to preserve, but it is virtually impossible that urbanization should leave everything intact. Yet one can still find in modern Isfahan a structure of space which is the form imposed by a certain way of life. This Henri Steirlin analyses methodically, drawing attention to the differences from the aspect of a modern Western city, where the houses are as it were in relief, whereas here there is by contrast rather a continuous plane surface from which open islands forming spaces of courts and squares. One passes from one enclosed space to another without break in continuity, for these enclosed spaces simply form a rhythm on the continuous surface. To pass through them is an adventure – already perhaps a symbolic journey.

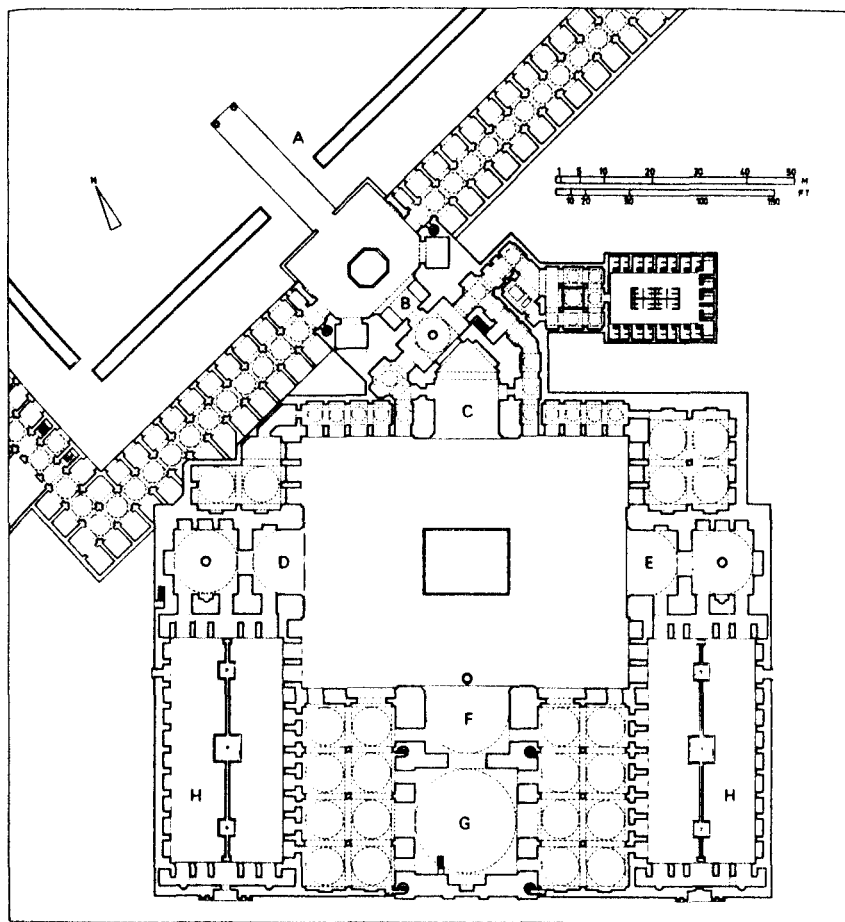
Among these spaces, the space *par excellence* is that of the Persian mosque. In Isfahan the mosque *par excellence*, the Royal Mosque (*Masjad-e Shâh*) and the so-called Friday Mosque (*Jom'eh*). The author reminds us here of the technicalities of the structure: a square or rectangular court forming four internal façades; in the centre of each of these façades rises a great vaulted niche, named *îwân*, each opening into a vast hall. The vast enclosed space of the Persian mosque is thus ordered according to a cruciform plan with a rigorous double axiality, and it is within this enclosed space that the surface of polychrome ceramics is displayed. Nevertheless this space open to the sky is neither an atrium nor a narthex – 'we are at the heart of the edifice. It is a space designed to put the believer in communication with divinity.'

It seems to me that it is precisely by this structure of its space that the Persian mosque arises from the original idea of the *templum*, the *temenos*. Originally there was the idea of a space imaginatively circumscribed in the sky, there to observe and interpret the flight of birds. The temple is a terrestrial projection of this heavenly *templum*, through which indeed the terrestrial temple is the place of communication between heaven and earth. This communication is the very concept of the temple, which 'temenology' may discover wherever this *Imago*

Templi is established, that is to say no less when we are considering the Temple of Solomon than the future Temple of Ezekiel, or the Temple of the Graal on Mont Salvat.

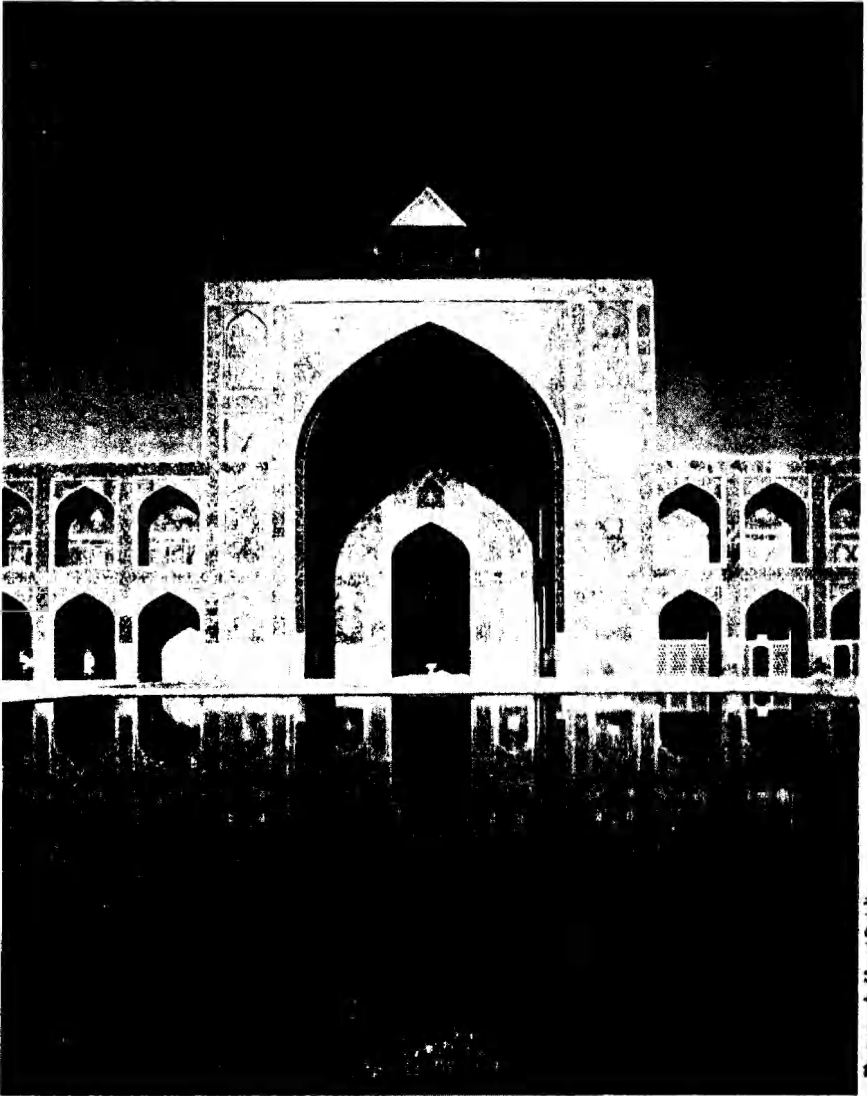
This essential function of the Temple is ensured in a specific manner in the concept of space which determines the structure of the Iranian mosque. At the geometrical centre of the enclosure we find a basin whose fresh water is perpetually renewed. This is a *water-mirror* reflecting at the same time the dome of heaven, which is the real dome of the *templum*, and the many-coloured ceramic tiles which cover the surfaces. It is by means of this mirror that the *templum* brings about the meeting of heaven and earth. The mirror of water here polarizes the symbol of the centre. Now this phenomenon of the mirror at the centre of the structure of the *Templum* is also central to the metaphysics professed by a whole lineage of Iranian philosophers, among whom the most famous lived, at one time or another, in Isafahan. Thus there must certainly have been a link between the different forms of the same Iranian conception of the world, perhaps a link so essential that it will explain how the painters and miniaturists of Islamic Iran in no way felt that their art was subject to the traditional anti-iconic interdict. They had produced neither sculptures in space nor easel-paintings. All their images are appearances in a mirror, the mirroring surface of a wall, or the page of a book. How is it possible to exercise iconoclasm against a semblance?

Everywhere there is an insistence on the essential phenomenon of the mirror. The four cardinal points (north, south, east and west) are given by the four *iwâns*. These remain horizontal: it is the mirror which gives the vertical dimension, from the nadir to the zenith. Then what really happens, since the centre of the basin is inaccessible, if we place ourselves on the axis of one of the four *iwâns*? We look at the same time at its reversed image in the water. But this inverse image is the result of the virtual image produced in the first place by its reflection on a mirroring surface. Let us now transpose this idea of a virtual image to the plane of a mystical reflection. To transpose the image of virtuality into actuality is to accomplish the very operation which, for metaphysicians of the school of Sohrawardi, signifies penetration into the *mundus imaginalis* (*'âlam al-mithâl*), the 'eighth clime' or world intermediate between that of pure ideas and the world of sense-perception.



**Great mosque of the Shah, Isfahan (Iran), built 1612–30 by Shah Abbas the Great.**

Because of the necessity for the *mihrab* to point east the mosque forms an angle of  $45^\circ$  with the Maidan-i Shah (A), on to which the entrance portal (B) gives. C) north iwan, D) west iwan, E) east iwan, F) main iwan, G) domed sanctuary, H) lateral madrasahs.



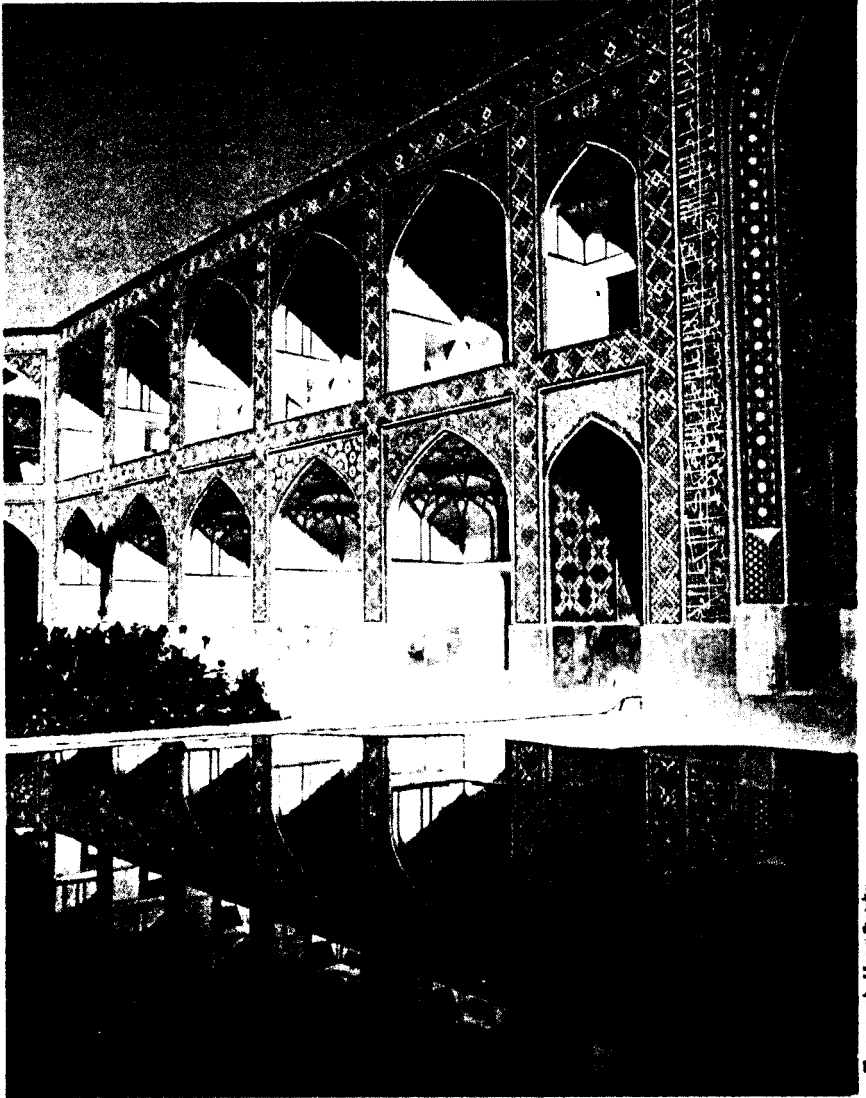
The west iwan of the Great Mosque of the Shah, Isfahan





Photograph: Henn Steirlin

The west iwan of the Friday Mosque, Isfahan



Photograph: Henri Beulin

The arcades opening in the court of the madrasah  
of Shah Sultan Husain, Isfahan

The phenomenon of the mirror enables us to understand the internal dimension of an object or a building situated in the space of this world, because it leads us to grasp its spiritual dimension, the metaphysical image which precedes and shapes all empirical perception. It enables us, at the same time, to understand the mode in which the whole spiritual entity is present within the world of volumes perceived by the senses. Cosmology is the succession of apparitional forms, hierophanies, in as many places of apparition (*mazâhir*) as constitute what we call 'matter'. To see things in the mirror is, as an Iranian Sheikh expresses it, 'to see things in Hûrqalyâ', highest of the mystic cities of the *mundus imaginalis*, or 'eighth clime'. The mirror simply shows us the way to enter Hûrqalyâ. Fascinating, in this context, is the photograph of the west *îwân* of the Royal Mosque lit by the rising sun and reflected in the water of the central basin. I had never before known what that power was (as it is presented to us by Henri Steirlin) of opening inexhaustible dwelling-places to contemplation. And there are others throughout the book. Of these the attentive reader may make the stages of his inner pilgrimage, meditating on them and penetrating them as we do before a mandala.

This exemplification of the *Imago Templi* presented by the Iranian mosques is still further defined by the structural allusions to the number twelve, the key-number of the arithmosophy of duodecimal Shi'ism. The minute analysis of the geometric and mathematical structure of the enclosed space of the mosque, allows the author to draw attention to many indications of this. These indications are confirmed (should confirmation be needed) in the wide band of script surrounding the south *îwân* of the Friday Mosque, dating from Shâh Tahmasp and carrying invocations to each of the 'Fourteen Immaculate Ones' (the twelve Imâms, the Prophet, and his daughter Fâtima). The Shi'ite intention is clear. Qâzî Sa'îd Qommî, one of the great philosophers of the School of Isfahan, equated the twelve edges of the structure of the cubic temple of the Ka'aba to the pleroma of the Twelve Imâms' secret message of the Temple, which renders it an emblematic Temple.

To decipher this message completely would involve deciphering the motifs which cover the immense surfaces of glazed tiles. Pure ornament, or symbolism? We are grateful to the author for his efforts to discover the origin (in Kashan, whence the term *kâshî*) and the

technique of this ceramic art, still a living tradition in Iran to this day. As a thoughtful pilgrim I stood for a long time, one day, before those semblances of high windows, or doors, entirely covered with glazed tiles. False windows? False doors? I mentally recalled a cathedral window filtering the external light, only admitting the subtle quintessence, coloured with its own colour, to penetrate the interior space of the Temple. Must we then qualify as false openings the high windows whose embrasure is entirely made up of a surface of glazed tiles? But in what sense can we say they open 'onto nothing'? In reality the substitution of a tiled surface for a window does not for that reason make them pseudo-openings. If the surface is contemplated as if in a mirror, it opens to the observer the whole space of its interior being, which it illuminates in order that the observer may there complete his symbolic pilgrimage, like the pilgrim-chemist of Compostella. That space is the 'eighth clime', that which Sohrawardī designated – again in Persia – *Nā-kojā-ābād*, 'the country of no-where', that is to say, no-where in this world. Thus it is on this 'no-where in this world' that the high windows with their glazed surfaces open, if we regard them as a mirror.

Neither did the *vâr*, or paradisaal enclosure of Yima (*Jamshīd*), sovereign original source, open on the exterior. It too conceals its own light. The Iranian surface of glazed tiles, like the Byzantine mosaic surface, secretes its own light. Some years ago the School of Ravenna exhibited in Tehran a number of reproductions of mosaics, whose tradition is still preserved there. The very keen interest which our Iranian friends showed in these Ravenna mosaics suggested to the investigator that there must be something in common between the two traditions. Indeed is not the proper function of emblematic spaces precisely to communicate in secret ways which owe nothing to the jurisdiction of History? Some years ago I walked through the interior of the Royal Mosque in the company of an eminent Iranian scholar. Our conversation turned to the religious Orders known by the term *foṭowāt*. My companion said to me, 'You may be sure that such a building would not have been possible but for these knightly builders'. 'You delight me', I replied, 'we say the same thing about our cathedrals'.

As I accompanied Henri Steirlin through his text and his visionary 'imagery', I felt that we were companioned by all those philosophers

and mystics whom I have already proposed to group under the name of the School of Isfahan. A strange fact: would anyone venture to speak of Greek civilization in ignorance of all its philosophers and Schools of thought? The *madrāsah* where these philosophers taught are still there – the Sadr *Madrāsah* where Mīr Dāmād taught, the master of a whole generation; the Shaykh ‘Abdollah *madrāsah*, where Mohsen Fayz Kāshānī taught, the most celebrated pupil of the master whose personality dominated the school as a whole – Mollā Sadrā Shīrāzī (d.1640). So it remained until the vicissitudes of time led at the beginning of the 19th century to the founding of the School of Tehran, replacing that of Isfahan. Other Schools also sprang up at Khorazan and at Kerman.

As for Sadrā Shīrāzī, he, and others contemporary with him and after him, continued the line of Sohrevardī (d.1191) who, in the twelfth century, deliberately set about the revival, in Islamic Iran, of the philosophy of Light professed by the Sages of ancient Persia. He it was who first established the ontological basis, in Iranian Islamic philosophy, of that interworld which is mid-way between the world of pure Intelligence and the world perceived by the senses. This is the *mundus imaginalis*, already mentioned above, so essential in its function: the ‘eighth clime’ (in addition to the seven of classical geography) the *imaginal* world, which it is essential not to confuse with the *imaginary*. And it is to the *Ishrāqiyān-e Irān*, the Persian Platonists (as described in my works) that the Irano-Islamic philosophy owes the birth and the profound investigation of a metaphysic of the Image and of the active Imagination, without which, according to Sohrevardī, all the visionary experiences of the prophets and mystics would have no basis in the place where they ‘take place’, and thereby lose the reality proper to them. Of that interworld Western rationalism has deprived our philosophy for many generations; so that now there is no differentiation between fantasy and vision!

Our *ishrāqiyān* philosophers of the interworld are present throughout this book, since the project conceived and executed by Henri Steirlin goes alongside that metaphysic of the imaginative vision professed by our Persian Platonists. The philosophy of *Ishrāq* is the ‘Oriental Philosophy’ (the word *Ishrāq* signifies the light of a star as it rises). The *Ishrāqiyān* are the ‘oriental’ philosophers not in the geographical but in the metaphysical sense of the word. The philosophy of *Ishrāq* itself sets

out to be an interworld, an intermediary (*barzakh*) whose task is not to separate but to conjoin and to cumulate the research of the philosophers and the experience of the mystics. In the same way the *mundus imaginalis*, as the leitmotif of its metaphysics, is the interworld necessary for communication between the intelligible and the sensible.

So, therefore, perhaps, through the connivance of the 'imagineur' and the philosopher, we are in a position to envisage Isfahan as itself an 'emblematic city' par excellence. To come to Isfahan will be to come to the Royal Mosque as a place of encounter between the *imaginal* universe of Hûrqulyâ, highest of the 'emerald cities', and the architectural marvel perceived by the senses. It is also to come to the *ishrâqiyyân* philosophers whose metaphysics of the Imagination makes that encounter possible because it opens to us that interworld which intermediates between pure intelligibles and the senses. Henceforth to come to Isfahan will be for us what their visit to the emblematic city of Athens, meeting-place of the philosophies of the schools of Ionia and Italy, was for the pilgrim philosophers of the *Parmenides*. Henceforth we will also know that to travel to Isfahan is a symbolic journey, like that of Nicholas Flamel the alchemist to an emblematic city of Compostella, which was within himself. And this because we will have learned to read the topography of Jerusalem.

It is written 'Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee!, (Gen.12.1.) The pilgrim of emblematic cities will hear this call as if addressed to himself. Perhaps he will hear as a response Blake's verse (in the poem Milton)

And if he move his dwelling-place, his heavens also move  
Where'er he goes . . . (M.29.12-13.)

Translated by Kathleen Raine