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The Portrait and Its Doubles: Nāṣir ‘Alī Sirhindī, Mīrzā Bīdil and the Comparative Semiotics of Portraiture in Late Seventeenth-Century Indo-Persian Literature

Stefano Pellò

University of Venice Ca' Foscari

pello@unive.it

Abstract

This paper focuses on two late 17th century Indo-Persian stories dealing with “living” portraits: a couplet-poem by Nāṣir ‘Alī Sirhindī and a chapter of Mīrzā ‘Abd al-Qādir Bīdil’s autobiography. I investigate these narratives looking at the creative interactions between the codified models for talking about portraits as they are provided in the pre-Mughal Persian literary tradition, and the “newness” of 17th-century Indo-Persian intellectual space, in a cosmopolitan perspective. Accordingly, I explore how the literary dimension reacted to the notion of the visual reproduction in an epoch of social hyper-exposure of portrait painting, and how the conceptual atmosphere regarding visuality interacted with it. In this perspective, my reading will emphasize the expediency of a comparative approach looking, at least preliminarily, at the complex interactions with the Indic textual domain as well as the overlappings with the Latinate one.

Keywords

portraiture – Indo-Persian – Bīdil – Nāṣir ‘Alī Sirhindī

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Dime, si como yo la vi, la viste,
 el pincel y la tabla en que pintabas,
 y tú ¿cómo no ardéis, cual yo, de amores?

GUTIERRE DE CETINA (SEVILLA, 1520-CIUDAD DE LOS ÁNGELES 1557)



In contrast with the relatively well-known social, political and aesthetic weight of portraiture in the Mughal domain, little work has been done on its rhetorical and metaphorical treatment, and the related processes of poetic grammaticalization, within the vast textual territories of Indo-Persian literary culture.¹ As a matter of fact, the centrality of the role played by the pictorial representation of individuals both as a poetic image and as a narrative subject in Persian literature has been often stressed by scholars, both in inventory studies, such as the brief essay by Johann Christoff Bürgel,² and in more in-depth and theoretical works, such as those by Yves Porter and, especially, Priscilla Soucek.³ However, mostly the attention has been on the Seljuk and Timurid period

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- 1 This essay is partially based on an older Italian article of mine, which has been thoroughly revised and substantially enlarged with both new textual material and very different perspectives of analysis (Pellò, Stefano, “Il ritratto e il suo doppio nel *maṣnawī* indo-persiano di Nāṣir ‘Alī Sirhindī”, in Favaro, R. [ed.], *La mandorla e il mirabolano: esotismi, contaminazioni, pittura e Oriente* [Venezia: Cafoscarina, 2007]: pp. 85-119).
 - 2 Bürgel, J.Ch., *The Feather of Simurgh. The “Licit Magic” of the Arts in Medieval Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 1988): pp. 119-37.
 - 3 See Porter, Y., “La forme et le sens. À propos du portrait dans la littérature persane classique”, in C. Balay – C. Kappler – Ž. Vesel (eds.), *Pand-o Sokhan. Mélanges offerts à Charles-Henri de Fouchécour* (Téhéran: Institut Français de recherche en Iran, 1995 [Bibliothèque iranienne, 44]): pp. 219-31 for a cursory introduction on the portrait theme in Persian poetry, and Soucek, P., “The Theory and Practice of Portraiture in the Persian Tradition”, *Muqarnas*, xvii (2000): pp. 97-108 for a deeper understanding of its cultural diffusion and significance in the Perso-Islamic world. For other considerations on the subject, see Soucek, P., “Nizami on Painters and Paintings”, in Ettinghausen, R. (ed.), *Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, ([New York]: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972): pp. 9-21, and Porter, Y., *Peinture et arts du livre: essai sur la littérature technique indo-persane* (Paris-Téhéran: Institut Français de recherche en Iran, 1992 [Bibliothèque iranienne, 35]): pp. 105-9; Id., “From the “Theory of the Two Qalams” to the “Seven Principles of Painting”: Theory, Terminology, and Practice in Persian Classical Painting”, *Muqarnas*, xvii (2000): pp. 109-18. For a brief historic and artistic survey of the portrait genre in the Iranian context and its relations with the relevant literary motif, see Sims, E., Marshak, B. and E. Grube, *Peerless Images: Persian Painting and its Sources* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2002): pp. 58-60, 268-78, 318-21.

(with a preference for Nizāmī's works), somehow neglecting the Persianate modernity of the Safavid-Mughal period, which saw the widest diffusion of portraiture both as a visual genre and as matter of theoretical speculation. In this paper, I will present two Mughal stories dealing with portraits, by the two most influential Indo-Persian poets of Awrangzeb's times: the painter's tale in a *masnavī* by Nāṣir 'Alī Sirhindī (1638-96), and the story of the author's portrait in Mīrzā 'Abd al-Qādir Bīdil's (1644-1720) autobiographical *Čahār 'unšur*. Following Maurizio Bettini in his study on the anthropology of *simulacra* in the literatures of the classical Greek and Latin world,⁴ I will re-tell these narratives looking at the creative interactions between some (supposedly) canonical models for talking about portraits as they are provided in pre-Mughal production, and the "newness" of 17th-century Indo-Persian intellectual space, in the global perspective underscored, just to mention one of the best recent investigations in the modernity of South Asian thought, by Jonardon Ganeri in his *The Lost Age of Reason*.⁵ Accordingly, I will explore how the Indian "poets of the mirrors"⁶ reacted to the notion of the visual reproduction in an epoch of social hyper-exposure of portrait painting, somehow retracing Lina Bolzoni's investigations in the context of Italian Renaissance.⁷ In this perspective, my reading will emphasize the expediency of a comparative approach looking, at least preliminarily, at the complex interactions with the Sanskritic textual domain – where the trope of the portrait, present in several hyper-canonical works (e.g. Kālidāsa's *Mālavikāgnimitra* and Harṣa's *Ratnāvalī*) is even recorded in the traditional treatises on poetics (*alaṅkāraśāstra*)⁸ – as well as the overlappings with the Latinate one. From the world of the painter to that of the poet, thus,

4 Bettini, M., *Il ritratto dell'amante* (Torino: Einaudi, 1992); a good English translation is available: Bettini, M., *The Portrait of the Lover*, translated by L. Gibbs (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1999).

5 I think, especially, of the first chapter of the book: Ganeri, Jonardon, *The Lost Age of Reason: Philosophy in Early Modern India (1450-1700)* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2011): pp. 11-59.

6 I'm echoing here the title of a book on Bīdil by Muḥammad Rizā Šafi'ī-Kadkanī, *Šā'ir-i āyinahā* "The poet of the mirrors": Šafi'ī-Kadkanī, M.R., *Šā'ir-i āyinahā: barrasi-yi sabk-i hindī wa šī'r-i Bīdil* ([Tehran]: Āgāh, 1374/1995). The reference is to the centrality of the figure of the mirror (and thus of reflections and likenesses) in Bīdil and other authors of his era.

7 See Bolzoni, L., *Poesia e ritratto nel rinascimento*, texts edited by F. Pich (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2008). Ead., *Il cuore di cristallo: ragionamenti d'amore, poesia e ritratto nel rinascimento* (Torino: Einaudi, 2010). On the same subject also Pich, F., *I poeti davanti al ritratto: da Petrarca a Marino* (Lucca: Pacini Fazzi, 2010).

8 An intriguing approach to this well-known *topos* can be found in a recent work by Shulman, David, *More than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 2012): especially pp. 24-50.

in a perspective of Eurasian “embraces” – I am thinking here, among other things, of Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s investigations in the field⁹ – and in a direction specular to the one followed by Amy Landau in her study on the 17th c. Safavid painter Muḥammad Zamān.¹⁰

Nāṣir ‘Alī Sirhindī’s *Naqqāš u šūrat*

Notwithstanding the considerable weight of his stylistic figure in the Persian literary milieu of North India during the second half of the 17th century, Nāṣir ‘Alī Sirhindī has so far received little attention by scholars.¹¹ Born in Sirhind in 1638, he was active in the courtly environments of Allahabad, the Deccan and Delhi – he received patronage by Ṣayf Ḥān, the governor of Allahabad, and, most notably, by Zū ‘l-Fiqār Ḥān Nuṣrat Jang Bahādur, the son of Awrangzeb’s prime minister Asad Ḥān. Late in his life, he affiliated himself to the Naqshbandiyya; he died in 1696. Mostly noted – not always favourably – by some 20th-century critics for the highly refined formal complexity of his *gazals*, Nāṣir ‘Alī Sirhindī appears, in late 17th- and 18th-century *tazkīra* literature, as a leading influence of his own times, and is traditionally considered to be the “second most impor-

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- 9 Subrahmanyam, Sanjay, “A Roomful of Mirrors: The Artful Embrace of the Mughals and the Franks, 1550-1700”, in Avcioglu, N., Flood, F.B. (eds.), *Globalizing Cultures: Art and Mobility in the Eighteenth Century* [*Ars Orientalis*, xxxix (2010)]: pp. 39-83.
- 10 Landau, A., “From Poet to Painter: Allegory and Metaphor in a Seventeenth-Century Persian Painting by Muhammad Zaman, Master of *Farangī-Sāzi*”, *Muqarnas*, xxviii (2011): pp. 101-31.
- 11 Nāṣir ‘Alī Sirhindī’s works have been given little attention, and scholarly literature on this author is surprisingly scanty. For bio-bibliographical information on the author and some stylistic remarks on his work, see Anṣārī, N., *Fārsī adab ba ‘ahd-i Awrangzīb* (Delhi: Indo-Persian Society, 1969): pp. 80-94, Ṣafā, Z., *Tārīḫ-i adabiyāt dar Īrān*, v/2 (Tehran: Intišārāt-i Firdaws, 1364/1985): pp. 1340-6, Ṣafī‘ī-Kadkanī M.R., “Nāṣir ‘Alī Sirhindī”, in *Hunar va Mardum*, lxxix (1348/1969): pp. 30-5, Abdul Ghani (‘Abd al-Ghanī), “Nāṣir ‘Alī Sirhindī”, in Badaṣanī, M.B. (ed.), *Tārīḫ- i adabiyāt-i musalmanān-i Pākistān u Hind*, iv (Lāhaur: Panjāb Yūniversitī, 1971): pp. 385-93, Aḥmad, I., *Sirhind mē fārsī adab*, (Delhi: Maktaba-i Jāmi‘a, 1988): pp. 37-87, Subḥānī, T., *Niqāh-i ba tāriḫ-i adab-i fārsī dar Hind* (Tehran: Šūrā-yi gustariš-i zabān va adabiyāt-i Fārsī, 1377/1998-9): pp. 556-7, Anūša, Ḥ (ed.), *Dānišnāma-yi adab-i fārsī, jild-i čaharum: adab-i fārsī dar šibh-i qarra (Hind, Pākistān, Baṅglādiš)* (Tehran: Sāzmān-i chāp va intishārāt-i vizārat-i farhang va irshād-i islāmī, 1380/2001): pp. 1817-8. A recent Iranian edition of Nāṣir ‘Alī’s work is: Nāṣir ‘Alī Sirhindī, *Dīvān-i aš‘ār-i Nāṣir ‘Alī Sirhindī*, edited by Ḥ. Karamī (Tehran: Intišārāt-i Ilhām, 1388/2009-10): pp. 43-154. Its introduction provides the best bio-bibliographical survey on the poet’s historical and poetical dimensions.

tant” author of Awrangzeb’s reign after Mīrzā ‘Abd al-Qādir Bīdil.¹² What I am presenting here is the central tale of a 676-lines *masnawī* in the *hazaj* meter which has been published in Iran in 2001 under the eloquent title *Naqqāš u šūrat* (The Painter and the Image).¹³

After a lengthy introduction of devotional character and a detailed exposition of the doctrine of oneness and uniqueness of God (*tawhīd*), in the 2001 edition the tale begins without any particular notice or remark at verse 187. In fact, there is but one introductory verse, which is revealing of the fundamental metaphorical field that the *masnawī* is built around, namely the very ancient and diffused one of God as the supreme artist, the one known as the *Deus pictor* in the Latinate domain.¹⁴

The spark-painter of the fire-temple of love (*šararnaqqāš-i ātašhāna-yi*
‘išq)
so painted the image of the tale of love.¹⁵

The eternal event of love becomes here a story that is told by a painter (Persian *naqqāš*, which appears here in the compound word *šararnaqqāš*¹⁶) as if it were the case of an illustrated book. Incidentally, a similar *incipit* is found in the well-known *masnawī Nal u Daman* by Fayzī (1547-1595), based the classical Indian tale of Nala and Damayanti: there the narrator is said to be “the painter of the gallery of portraits of love” (*naqqāš-i nigārḥāna-yi ‘išq*).¹⁷ Within a play of symbolic refraction, this ‘painted’ love story has a painter as its main character:

12 See, for instance, Anšārī, *Fārsī adab ba ‘ahd-i Awrangzīb*: p. 80.

13 Nāšir ‘Alī Sirhindī, *Naqqāš u šūrat*, edited by M. Dādāši-Ārānī, in Īmānī, B. (ed.), *Ganjīna-yi Bahāristān* (Tehran: Sāzmān-i čāp va intišārāt-i vizārat-i farhang va iršād-i islāmī, 1380/2001): pp. 219-58. The editor specifies that the text has been established on the basis of two manuscripts copied respectively in the years 1161/1748 and 1171/1757-8 and now held in the Majlis-i Šūrāvi-yi Islāmī Library of Tehran. I decided to make use of this specific edition because it hints to a textual tradition that points to an early independent transmission of the *masnawī* focusing on the portrait story.

14 See Stoichita, V.I., *Visionary Experience in the Golden Age of Spanish Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1995): pp. 103-20 and, especially, Bergmann, E., *Art inscribed: essays on ekphrasis in Spanish Golden Age poetry* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979): pp. 17-70.

15 Nāšir ‘Alī Sirhindī, *Naqqāš u šūrat*: p. 234, v. 187.

16 On the range of the semantic values of the term *naqqāš* in the social context see Floor, W., “Art (*Naqqāshī*) and Artists (*Naqqāshan*) in Qajar Persia”, *Muqarnas*, xvi (1999): pp. 125-54.

17 Fayzī Dakanī, *Nal u Daman*, edited by S.‘A. Āl-i Dāwūd (Tehran: Markaz-i Našr-i Dānišgāhī, 1382/2003-4): p. 114.

An embroiderer of forms, in the far distance of China,
a creator of suns, with his amber quill,

with his sharp brush he blew life into bodies (*jān dar tan damīdī*),
he instilled breath into motionless effigies (*nafas dar qālib-i šūrat kašīdī*)
[...]

If he made the portrait of a gazelle,
fearing escape, he had to enchain its feet.¹⁸

Such a description of the painter and his mastery clearly draws on established formal models. First of all, the painter's character is very canonically linked to China, which is already regarded as the homeland of pictorial art in a well-known passage of Firdawsī's *Šāhnāma*, where Mani, who introduces himself as "prophet through painting", is said to be a painter from China.¹⁹ More specifically, the hyperbolic painter's ability to instil life into a two-dimensional reality that could be mistaken for actual physical existence, echoes other famous poetic lines. For instance, those where the painter Šāpūr – the portraitist of Ḥusraw's court, who served as a 'go-between' for the lovers in Niẓāmī's *Ḥusraw u Šīrīn* – tells about himself:

The effigy whose head I draw moves;
the bird whose wings I paint flies off.²⁰

18 Nāšir 'Alī Sirhindī, *Naqqāš u šūrat*: p. 235, vv. 188-9, 194.

19 Firdawsī, Abū 'l-Qāsim, *Šāhnāma*, VI, edited by J. Ḥāliqī-Muṭlaq and M. Umīdsālār (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1384/2005): p. 336, vv. 568-71 (reign of Šāpūr Zū 'l-Aktāf). On Mani's painting in Persian literary language and the "Chinese mastership" – the other great masters being traditionally the Greeks/Byzantines – see Pellò, Stefano, "A Paper Temple: Mani's Arzhang in and around Persian Lexicography", in *Sogdians, their Precursors, Contemporaries and Heirs* (St. Petersburg: The State Hermitage Publishers, 2013 [Transactions of the State Hermitage Museum, 62]): pp. 252-65.

20 Niẓāmī Ganjavī, Ḥakīm, *Ḥusraw u Šīrīn*, edited by Ḥ. Piẓmān Baḥṭiyārī (Tehran: Kitābfurūšī-yi Ibn Sīnā, 1343/1964-5): p. 41, v.3. For further examples of painters credited with illusionistic and marvellous abilities in Persian literature see Porter, Y., "La forme et le sens": pp. 222-8. It is fascinating to observe the all-pervading distribution of such motifs in classical and Hellenistic literatures as well as in the wider Eurasian milieu. For examples ranging from Greek to Chinese literature see Kris E., Kurz O., *Legend, myth, and magic in the image of the artist: an historical experiment*, preface by E.H. Gombrich (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989): pp. 60-88. More specifically, on painters in the classical literary space and their images' ability to move by themselves see, for instance, Bettini, *Il ritratto dell'amante*: pp. 167-8, 176, where examples are provided of pieces of art that, just

A similar *topos* is also found in the allegoric poem *Husn u Dil* by the Timurid Fattāhī Nišāpūrī (m. 1448), where the portraitist bears the eloquent name *Hayāl*, ‘imagination’.²¹ However, unlike these and other examples from the Perso-Islamic textual past where the pictures produced by the portraitists are essentially instrumental, here it is the painter himself who has the starring role and falls in love with the same face that he himself, by means of drawings and colours:

He happened to paint an image (*šūrat*),
and he fell in love with it, losing any tint and sign of health.²²

It is the artist himself who describes his own paradoxical passion. After having fled to the desert and roamed the wilderness according to the Perso-Arabic literary archetype of the ‘mad lover’/Majnūn (v. 203-9), he meets an unnamed figure (an allusion to Ḥiz̄r, the canonical “eternal” spiritual guide), that shows himself from afar as an “astray spark of the flame of Sinai” (*šarār-i muẓmaḥil dar ātaš-i ṭūr*; v. 210). The mysterious traveller asks the artist to tell him his story, promising him solace (v. 211-28). The painter’s answer is the following:

I am the painter of the country of madness
the lament I raise is a paintbrush that I dip in blood [...]

I used to give a form (*šūrat*) to the soul of the meaning (*jān-i ma’nī*):
through Majnūn I used to reveal Laylā’s beauty.

From my quill then dripped an image
and with a hundred shades upset my heart and faith [...]

Thus he spoke, and drew from his bosom the picture,
the portrait he had painted on his life’s page.²³

as it is the case with the gazelles of the painter of Nāšir ‘Alī, are bound to prevent them from fleeing.

21 The poem is also known under the title *Dastūr-i ‘uṣṣāq*; see Yazıcı, T., “Fattāhī Nišābūrī”, in Yarshater, E. (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, IX (London-Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1999): pp. 426-7. For a recent edition of the prose epitome of the poem by the same Fattāhī, see Fattāhī de Nishāpur, *Coeur et Beauté, ou, Le Livre des Amoureux*, edited by M. Vossoughi Nouri and C. Ortega (Paris: Dervy, 1997), where a French translation of the Persian text is provided.

22 Nāšir ‘Alī Sirhindī, *Naqqāš u šūrat*: 235, v. 196.

23 Ibid.: pp. 236-7, vv. 229, 234-6.

The complementary relation between form/outwardness (*ṣūrat*) and meaning/inwardness (*ma'nī*) is here clearly stated. The painter can reveal what would otherwise remain hidden and unattainable to the senses through the physical and phenomenal act of drawing figures. If Laylā's beauty – the object of love par excellence in the Arabic-Persian poetic tradition – is a 'hidden meaning' (the *ma'nī* of love), the artist can reveal it through the very sign that mirrors it, i.e. the lover par excellence. Interestingly enough, Ṣādiqī Bīg Afšār describes his work as a painter in a way that is more concise and technically similar to the thought expressed by the painter of Nāṣir 'Alī's *maṣnavī*:

I have walked down the path of portrait for so long,
that from the form (*ṣūrat*) I came to the meaning (*ma'nī*).

However, both Ṣādiqī Bīg Afšār and Abū 'l-Faḏl – who also dealt with the form and meaning dialectics in a famous passage on painting²⁴ – theorise the unattainability of absolute perfection in pictorial reproduction, thus suggesting that any attempt to compete with the Creator would be an act of conceit.²⁵ At line 233 Nāṣir 'Alī's painter goes even further in creating a piece of 'living' art (*jānsirišta* – literally "whose essence is life"). Indeed, the rhetorical nature of such a hyperbole notwithstanding (which, however, is narrative reality of the poem), the use of that nominal compound points out a contrast with the ideas Niẓāmī articulates in the voice of the painter Šāpūr, who thus unveils to Šīrīn the deception of images:

Any portrait (*ṣūrat*) drawn by a painter has not life (*jān*), but resemblance (*nišān*) to life
I was taught in the art of drawing, but the canvas of the soul is elsewhere woven.²⁶

If an analogy is to be found, Nāṣir 'Alī's phrases should perhaps be compared to some celebratory lines by 'Abdī Bīg Šīrāzī (1515-1580) quoted by Porter, where

24 Abū 'l-Faḏl 'Allāmī, *The Ārīn-i Akbarī*, I, translated by H. Blochmann and edited by D.C. Phillot, Delhi, 1873: pp. 96-7.

25 For instance, Ṣādiqī Bīg Afšār states that: "If your aim is the art of portrait painting (*ṣūratgari*), / the Creation should be your Master// Imitation is a frail thought in this vale:/ the gates of Mercy are open to us// No one will ever be free from error, / not even Mānī or Bihzād": Ṣādiqī Bīg Afšār, *Qānūn al-ṣuvar* (Annexe 2), in Porter, *Peinture et arts du livre*: p. 203, vv. 1-3.

26 Niẓāmī Ganjavī, *Husraw u Šīrīn*: p. 50, vv. 15-6.

painters are said to be able to give life (more specifically, they are said to be *rawānbaḡš*, ‘life-givers’) and to create, by means of their quill, according to God’s model (*šuda payraw-i šun‘-i yazdān-i pāk*, ‘they have become epigones of the art of the unblemished God’).²⁷ However, in Nāšir ‘Alī’s poem the physical dimension seems to be a reflection of the reality the Chinese painter creates by means of his paintbrushes. After having listened to the artist’s words, the wanderer tells him that two years before he had arrived in a “world overflowing with beauty (*jahān-ī [...] labrīz zi ḡubī*)” (v. 237-269). where he had met the portrait’s referent. The “painted” beloved makes his first appearance in the *mašnavī* as follows:

A sun rose from the heart of dawn,
nourished by the breeze, veiled by the dew.

You had not seen him before, but you portrayed him:
through arcane love, you created his essence (*zāt-aš āfarīdī*).

He was barely ten, and yet his outstanding beauty
had already put the universe at his feet.

He still is an infant, innocent of any affectation,
a lightning that still is an unconscious spark.²⁸

Thus, the effigy created by the painter’s imagination has an actual referent in the phenomenal reality. Furthermore, the creation of his essence is the direct (and ostensibly paradoxical) result of his portrayal. Following that revelation, the painter goes on a relentless quest (v. 279-284) that comes to an end only two years later, when he enters that “world” overflowing with splendour the wayfarer had described to him. By then, the living portrait is already fourteen years old, *i.e.* the canonical age when, according to Persian poetic anthropology, full beauty is reached.

He found a land full of images worth of Mani’s picture book,
whose verdure made emerald’s green look flat.

Moist, there, could humiliate the roses,
fish or land animal, over there all was the same.

²⁷ Quoted in Porter, “La forme et le sens”: p. 224.

²⁸ Nāšir ‘Alī Sirhindī, *Naqqāš u šūrat*: pp. 238-9, vv. 270-4.

The waves of grace made the flowers dewy,
 blood-red dark clouds, there, had colour of moonlight. [...] ²⁹

The person created by the painter's quill lives in a textual world of pictorial references that, again, distinctly evokes a dimension of visuality: the scenic design of the poem becomes here, to use a pertinent image of the Persian literary code, a true *nigārḥāna*, a "picture gallery", a concentration of beautiful visions; or, to connect to a key concept in Islamic-Sufi thought, a region of the imaginative dimension known as the *ālam-i misāl*, "world of image"³⁰ – a semi-otic realm, so to say, between immanence and transcendence.³¹ Interestingly enough, this particular *locus* of the story finds a close parallel in the *citra-sārī* "painting pavilion" representing the world depicted by God and working as the backdrop of the story of the *Citrāvalī* (ca. 1613), a little studied romance from Awadh by Usmān of Ghazipur.³² Besides the canonical mention of Mani's picture book, the fabled *Arzhang*, the vocabulary of these descriptive lines significantly revolves around the semantic domain of sight and colours. Namely, we find *naqš* "image" (v. 285), *zumurrud* "emerald" (v. 285), *sabza* "verdure" (v. 285), *rang* "colour" (v. 285 and 287), *sīrāb* "turgid" but also "shining" (v. 287), *ḥūn* "blood" (v. 287, translated by "blood-red"), *mahtāb* "moonlight" (v. 287), *nigah* "gaze" (v. 288), *ṣafā* "whiteness" (v. 289), *siyāhī* "blackness" (v. 289), *sāya* "shade" (v. 289). In such a world where physical reality becomes confused with the painter's painting and vice versa, the living piece of art and his creator can't but be bound to each other by a relation of mutual necessity. The painter's

29 Ibid.: p. 239, vv. 285-7.

30 A recent investigation in this field is van Lit, L. W. C., *The World of Image in Islamic Philosophy. Ibn Sīna, Suhrawardī, Shahrāzūrī and Beyond*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017). On the relation with the topology of painting see Nasr, S.H., "The world of Imagination and the Concept of Space in the Persian Miniature", *Islamic Quarterly*, XIII/3 (1969): pp. 129-34.

31 According to the Safavid thinker Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640), who in his *Rasā'il* pays a special attention at defining the ontological status of the imaginative dimension, "when we conceive something rationally, a corresponding image figurizing it comes to exist in our imagination, and when the image in the imagination becomes very strong, it comes to exist externally before our sense perfection" (translation from Rahman, Fazlur, "Dream, Imagination and 'Ālam al-Mithāl", *Islamic Studies*, III/2 (1964), p. 176).

32 See Orsini, Francesca, "The Social History of a Genre: Kathas across Languages in Early Modern North India", *The Medieval History Journal*, XX/1 (2017): pp. 18-23. The pictorial atmosphere of the text has also been underscored in Behl, Aditya, *Love's Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition (1379-1545)*, edited by W. Doniger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): p. 336.

heart is described as upset when he becomes aware of the nearness of his beloved (vv. 91-93), and the latter, even though he is still unaware of anything, feels a deep and unexplainable anxiety (vv. 308-316). His mood is directly related to the decision of the painter, overwhelmed by the awareness of the proximity of his beloved, to withdraw again to the wilderness (vv. 300-307). The following lines describes how the portrait's referent, who is the son of the king of that enchanted realm is overcome by that mysterious:

Clothes tightened around the body of the beloved:
his mind faded, overwhelmed by anxious breathes. [...]

Beauty and love, they certainly are twins:
to them separation is a severe wound and occasion of crying.

That prince felt himself overtaken with great agitation:
the sun had now fallen into the snare of a light atom. [...]

From the bottom of his chest, his heart cried out:
"In the desert you shall rip the veil off the secret!".³³

An overlapping of roles between the painter and the living portrait is apparent here. The passage is structured on the reversal of the common *'irfānī* image of the atmospheric dust that seeks the sun. The object of love (*i.e.* the 'sun' in the quoted lines), unaware becomes a lover, falling "into the snare of a light atom" (*ba dām-i zārra-ī uftād ḥwuršīd*). Like twins that are each other's image, "beauty" (*i.e.* the beloved one/portrait) and "love" (*i.e.* the lover/painter) cannot live apart, unless at the risk of terrible suffering. This is a widespread visual-anthropological literary motif that is already to be found, for example, in the Graeco-Roman world³⁴ and that, in some respects, echoes the falling in love at a distance experienced by the two protagonists of the above-mentioned *Nal u Daman* by Fayzī, where the lover's picture plays a major role. Princess Nal and king Daman fall in love with each other at the same time, each one *imagining* the other. Interestingly, when Daman realises she loves that remote and unknown king, she makes to herself a seemingly imaginary portrait of Nal that

33 Nāṣir 'Alī Sirhindī, *Naqqāš u šūrat*: pp. 240-1, vv. 308, 310-1, 316.

34 On the many typological relations between the twin couple and the lovers couple in the ancient world and the specific literary implications related to the portrait theme in that context, see Bettini, *Il ritratto dell'amante*: pp. 113-30.

she worships as if it were an idol.³⁵ Later on in that narrative the portrait is found to correspond to its actual referent, as the princess straightaway recognises her beloved when she sees him for the first time.³⁶ Just as twins, then, the portrait and its referent – that, as we have already seen, are *essentially* one – are physically connected even at a distance. This is clearly shown in the following lines, which serve as a comment on the prince's adventurous escape to the desert to find some respite from his anxiety (v. 317-340):

And whenever the painter pulled out the portrait,
he gave his horse the reins more and more.³⁷

The escape of the prince – who, once he gets to the wilderness of the desert, furiously starts running after a gazelle riding his horse (v. 342-358) – comes to an end in the most predictable way:

He thus reached the place where that roaming man resided,
where the salt of the bitter commotion of the world lay.

The intoxication of love suddenly became a sober consciousness:
behold, from the bosom of love, love's presence appeared.

The sun, master of alchemical arts, there rose,
and the light atom awoke from the sleep of nothingness.

Dust packed its bags and left his eyes for good:
his look smelled the scent of Joseph and emerged from its hideout.

He enlightened his sight and saw the one he yearned for:
he could now see the effigy of the one he had portrayed.³⁸

The painter finally sees the living double of the picture he had once painted. We are dealing here with the vision of a copy of the figurative prototype the poem is built upon: what the painter sees is but an image's image. The second hemistich of v. 363 ("he could now see the effigy of the one he had portrayed") reads *hamān naqš-i nigār-i ḥwištan dād*, which could be literally translated as

35 Fayzī Dakanī, *Nal u Daman*: pp. 140, 143.

36 Ibid.: p. 164.

37 Nāšir 'Alī Sirhindī, *Naqqāš u šūrat*: p. 242, v. 341.

38 Ibid.: p. 243, vv. 359-63.

“he saw the very image (*naqš*) of his own painting (*nigār*)”. In Persian poetic language, *nigār* is a common metaphor for the beloved *tout court*: the portrait is superimposed over its referent first of all from a linguistic-rhetoric point of view. That is to say, what the painter sees in the prince is the effigy of his ‘beloved’ (*nigār*), who paradoxically – and literally – is himself an image. On this point it is interesting to note that *naqš* and *nigār* of v. 363 are listed as synonyms by coeval lexicographers. For instance, in the *Bahār-i ‘ajam*, the authoritative dictionary compiled by ẖek Čand ‘Bahār’ (d. 1766), especially devoted to the poetic language of the Mughal-Safavid period, we read:

nigār: with *kasra* it has the base meaning of ‘effigy’ (*naqš*); figuratively, it means ‘beloved’ and ‘idol’, as idols, too, are effigies.³⁹

In the same dictionary, the entry *naqš* is glossed as “*šūrat, nigār*”.⁴⁰ However, the prince, who is a flesh-and-blood *naqš* of a *nigār* that *has* to be drawn by definition, doesn’t know yet that he has arrived in the presence of his creator. Therefore, he starts investigating the source of the cry that had distracted him from his furious hunt. When he discovers the painter’s hideout, he asks him about his vicissitudes (v. 365-385). To the youth, the painter’s answer is a shocking revelation:

He described everything that had happened,
then entrusted to his hands the painting where he was portrayed.

Beauty, as a veil, covered his face with drops,
and amidst the droplets of a hundred springs moonlight appeared.

His dismayed gaze drank a hundred wine-houses of mystery,
only astonishment remained, shooting its arrows.

39 Bahār, Lāla Tek Čand, *Bahār-i ‘ajam*, edited by K. Dizfūliyān, 3 vols. (Tehran: Ṭalāya, 1380/2001-2): III, p. 2062.

40 Ibid.: p. 2054. Bahār’s definitions draw on those given in the great Persian dictionaries from the Indian 17th century. For example, in the *Farhang-i Rašīdī* (1653-4), the entry for *nigār* reads: “An image (*naqš*) drawn on paper or any other surface. It is also used to indicate an idol. Metaphorically, it indicates a good-looking person” (‘Abd al-Rašīd, *Farhang-i Rašīdī*, edited by M. ‘Abbāsī, 2 vols. [Tehran: Kitābfurūšī-yi Bārānī, 1337/1958]: II, p. 1412). In the *Farhang-i Jahāngīrī*, composed a few decades earlier (1608-9), *nigār* is explicitly listed as a “synonym” (*mutarādif*) of both *naqš* and *but* ‘idol’: Injū Šīrāzī, Mir Jamāl al-Dīn Ḥusayn, *Farhang-i Jahāngīrī*, edited by R. ‘Afīfī, 3 vols. (Mašhad: Dānišgāh-i Mašhad, 1359/1980): II, p. 1576.

Modesty then started burning with the heat of fever,
and sweat became a black mole on that demure face.

In a swift flattering of wings his smile stopped blooming,
like a bud his lips vanished into the mouth.

But since beauty is always eager to manifest itself,
and cannot wait patiently when lovers stand before it,

behold, he started to slaughter every powerful resistance
behold, he started to create a confusion of colors in every heart.

Gracefully he advanced, flashing glaring lightning,
with his gaze he gave his turmoil a powerful voice.⁴¹

As in Niẓāmī's *Šarafnāma*, when an astonished Alexander observes his own features in the portrait the Princess Nūšāba shows him, here, too, the prince unexpectedly sees himself on the sheet of paper the painter has in his hands. But if in the Medieval romance the painting works as a mirror that gives back the exact reflection of Alexander,⁴² in Nāṣir 'Alī's poem what the prince sees when he looks at his own portrait is much more than a mere mimetic reflection. The referent sees in the portrait his own *ma'nī*, the very substance of his own identity. In other words, for the prince to become aware of his own "essence of beauty", he needs to observe his own pictorial representation. Only through this mirror the beloved match the poetic image that is most familiar to him, namely that of a charming youth that makes everyone who sees him fall in love with him.

It is worth noticing here how much, in the Mughal context, the prince's iconified image served the function of establishing the ideal notions of perfection, according to a centuries-old trans-regional attitude which is well documented, for instance, in the Roman-Byzantine world.⁴³ The very ritual of the *jharokhā-i*

41 Nāṣir 'Alī Sirhindī, *Naqqāš u šūrat*: pp. 244-5, vv. 391-8.

42 Niẓāmī Ganjavī, Ḥakīm, *Šarafnāma*, edited by W. Dastgirdī, 2nd ed. ([Tehran]: Kitābfurūšī-yi Ibn Sīnā, 1335/1956): p. 287, vv. 6-7. On the portrait as a means of self-awareness in Niẓāmī see Lameï, M., *La poétique de la peinture en Iran (xiv^e-xvi^e siècle)* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001): pp. 205-22.

43 I follow here Juneja, M., "On the Margins of Utopia – One more look at Mughal Painting", *The Medieval History Journal*, IV/2 (2001): pp. 207-12. On the relations between painting and oral symbology in the Mughal context, see Skelton, R., "Imperial Symbolism in

darshan (“the window of the vision”, where the prince showed himself to his subjects from the distance in the framework of a dedicated window), can easily be understood as a kind of periodic ostension of the prince’s living icon, intensified by the pictorial or architectural setting. Nāṣir ‘Alī’s painted beloved, described as the prince of an ideal “iconic” world, might be also seen as the sovereign who in his own visual representation senses the notion of *insān-i kāmīl*, the “Perfect Man”. Seen in this perspective, thus, the prince seems to become aware of his fundamental role, which he fulfils in the phenomenal world by means of the revealing vision of himself as an icon, a visual hypostasis of the divine beauty on Earth. In this sense, the polysemic figure of the prince can be said to rely on the well-established rhetorical superimposition, in Persian literary culture, of *mamdūḥ* (the object of praise), *ma’sūq* (the object of love), and *ma’būd* (the object of worship).

The narrative continues leaving no room for doubt about the portrait’s poetic role as a means of knowledge and of revealing the truth. Finally, aware of his own absolute beauty, the prince comes back to his town and, after having declared himself tired of the desolation of wilderness, orders a great banquet to be held on board a ship (v. 401-28) to which he invites also the painter:

His smile became a flower-seller of intoxicated joy,
his gaze became crazy for holding the lover in his grasp.

He sent some to summon that hermit,
the creator of the bubble where love had manifested itself.⁴⁴

The painter is therefore the creator of a ‘bubble’ (*ḥabāb*) by which the “epiphany” (the text reads *jilwa*, v. 430) of love in the phenomenal world is possible. The evanescence of such a metaphor is apparent. That image is indeed as insubstantial as a bubble whose existence as something distinct from the body of waters is in itself but a vain illusion,⁴⁵ and yet is a fundamental means of

Mughal Paintings”, in Soucek, P. (ed.), *Content and Context of Visual Arts in the Islamic World* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988 [Monographs on the Fine Arts, 44]): pp. 177-87. Observations on the Byzantine context in Belting, H., *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Age of Art*, translated by E. Jephcott (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994): pp. 117-22.

44 Nāṣir ‘Alī Sirhindī, *Naqqāš u šūrat*: pp. 246, v. 429-30.

45 See Zipoli, R., “Note ai testi tradotti”, in Mirzā ‘Abdolqāder Bidel, *Il canzoniere dell’alba*, edited by R. Zipoli and G. Scarcia (Milano: Ariele, 1997): p. 161, n. 5. The ‘bubble’ is one of the dominant recurring textual objects in the poetic speculation of Seventeenth century Persian authors. For instance, the word *ḥabāb* is used as *radīf* in four *ḡazals* from the

knowledge, a *furṣat* ‘opportunity’ – to put it in Bīdil’s language – to retrace the noumenal dimension in the realm of Nature. Following a narrative pattern that is most common in Persian poetry, the mutual relation between the two interdependent poles of that narrative *avatāra* of the transcendent love (*i.e.* the painter, that is the ‘wound’ and the ‘nightingale’, and the living portrait, that is the ‘balm’ and the ‘rose branch’), cannot be made public. With respect to that structural obstacle, the prince, who, through the vision of his painted self, has suddenly become aware of the esoteric truths, delivers a long didactic speech. Among other things, he tells a short allegorical story about a musician and that focus on the mystical values of love and the need for a total ‘annihilation’ (*fanā*) of the lovers’ individuality in order that that love may be fulfilled (v. 440-550). After the prince’s speech, the narrative comes to its end: the painter, accordingly, throws himself into the water, and the prince can’t but follow him, “as a hunter follows his fleeing prey” (vv. 551-555). The story closes with the following lines:

A group of divers, then, plunged into the water,
striving to find that unobtainable pearl.

When all hopes were lost, they brought up
a being that was half-cloud and half-sun,

On one side, a full moon that was showing its face,
on the other, a narrow crescent covered with a veil.

The heart who fidgeted so much in the fire of love,
it is in this way that, at the end, embraces his beloved.

How boundless are the hues of love! Yes, there is no doubt:
Love has its countless ways, doesn’t follow a single path.

That was the portrait both of the lover and the beloved:
painting and painter had now oozed one in the other.⁴⁶

Şā’ib-i Tabrīzī’s *dīvān*: *Dīvān-i Şā’ib-i Tabrīzī*, edited by M. Qahramān, 1 (Tehran: Şirkat-i intişārāt-i ‘ilmī va farhangī, 1375/1996-7³): pp. 427-9, 446, as well as at least in four *ġazals* by Bīdil (1998-99: 497, 501, 507, 509).

46 Nāşir ‘Alī Sirhindī, *Naqqāş u şūrat*: pp. 252-3, vv. 551-60, 563-8.

Thus, after the fundamental identity between the portrait and its referent has been asserted, the illusory duality of creator and creature also comes to an end with the two lovers' dive into the ocean – an apparent metaphor and symbolic archetype of the indistinctness of the absolute and, therefore, of the truth of the bubble – and their subsequent resurfacing as one. In conformity with this monistic context, the last line seems to stress the above-mentioned ontological pre-eminence of the idea/image over his earthly referents. Here the painter fuses not with the prince but with his picture (*naqš*) and, as the choice of the verb *tarāviš kardān* suggests,⁴⁷ he himself crystalizes in an image. The metaphorical model of the God-‘Narcissus’, that is typical of the aesthetic system of Islamic Gnosis (where God loves his own image in the ‘mirror’ of man and has his love returned) is here added to that of the God-‘portraitist’. In some lines in *ramal* meter found in manuscripts (arguably added by the copist, and expunged by Dādāšī-Āzād), the summary of the story is given as follows:

There was a painter, a magic brush of love,
whose page was the page of the will of love. [...]

Suddenly, an image spilled out from his hand,
and it shot an arrow into his heart. [...]

He found the bedrock of that aforesaid image
and a flood of bravery took away every pettiness. [...]

Finally, they became the limbs of each other:
they drowned, and became a single substance.⁴⁸

Lina Bolzoni has noticed the wide diffusion, in the Italian renaissance, of the “narcissistic” literary *topos* according to which “ogni dipintore dipinge se medesimo” (every painter depicts himself). While highlighting its deep connection with Ficino’s neoplatonic philosophy, she also quotes some prose works by Leonardo da Vinci and poems by Michelangelo Buonarroti which appear to be strikingly pertinent to the theme dealt with here. A good example is made by this stanza from a poem of Michelangelo:⁴⁹

47 This verb refers to the ‘exudation’ or ‘dripping’ of a moist substance through a surface (as, for instance, a sheet of paper). See the entry given in the *Bahār-i ‘ajam* and especially the textual references drawn from Šā‘ib’s lyrics that it provides (*Bahār, Bahār-i ‘ajam*: I, p. 504).

48 Nāšir ‘Alī Sirhindī, *Naqqāš u šūrat*: p. 234, n. 6.

49 Bolzoni, *Il cuore di cristallo*: p. 146.

così, signor mie car, nel petto vostro,
 quante l'orgoglio è forse ogni atto umile;
 ma io sol quel c'a mme proprio è simile
 ne traggo, come fuor nel viso mostro.⁵⁰

Just like Michelangelo's self-reflective act of creative affection (the heart of the beloved and the lover's face are each other's mirror), the two lovers' dive into the sea evokes – as a comparative suggestion – the Narcissus' dive into the mirror or the fountain. In other words, God, who is the only real existent, can paint nothing but self-portraits. In the Indo-Persian context, similar concepts are expressed already in the following lines by Mas'ūd Bak (a mystic of the time of Fīrūz Šāh Tughluq) quoted by Simon Digby:

The designer (*naqqāš*) who without instruments made a picture (*taṣvīr*),
 See that the painter (*muṣavvīr*) is not separate from the image (*ṣūrat*);

If the eye of contemplation should be opened
 In the depth of each picture (*naqš*) you will behold what things it is.⁵¹

The portrait may well be a *seminarium doloris*, the evidence of an absence as in Fulgentius⁵² or in Niẓāmī's *Husraw u Šīrīn*. Yet this is true only until one realises the essential unity of the painting, the painter, and the painted image, which recasts the fundamental, traditional unity of love (*īšq*), lover (*āšiq*) and beloved (*mašūq*). Again, the comparison – at least from the typological point of view – with the Latinate domain is very promising: as Bolzoni observes, a comparable idea of narcissistic fusion is instrumental in constructing the discourse on the “crystal heart” – the pure mirror, the transparent glass showing the superior unity of exteriority and interiority, of face and heart, of lover and beloved – of the “visual” novel *Gli Asolani* by Pietro Bembo.⁵³ It is not even necessary to leave Nāṣir 'Alī's Delhi, however, to find relevant poetic elaborations of this “narcissistic” *topos*. Mīrzā Bīdil, for instance, writes the following lines

50 Quoted in Bolzoni, *Il cuore di cristallo*: pp. 145-6. “So, my dear ladies, in your heart/every humble act is equivalent to pride;/ but I take only what is similar to me/as I show outside in the face”.

51 Digby, S., “The Literary Evidence for Painting in the Delhi Sultanate”, *Bulletin of the American Academy of Benares*, I (1967): p. 54.

52 See Bettini, *Il ritratto dell'amante*: p. 58.

53 Bolzoni, *Il cuore di cristallo*: p. 122.

while describing the first oniric encounter with his evanescent master (and alter-ego) Šāh-i Kābulī:

I am that anxiety searching itself in its own dust:
I created a path in the heart of the goal, and I then follow it.⁵⁴

Every act of (poetic) speech is a reflection in a mirror, the reiteration of a self-portrait. An actual painted portrait of Bidil is the protagonist of the following poetic story.

The Story of Bidil's Portrait

The relation between image and reality, and especially pictorial simulacra and their referents, is at the core of another Indo-Persian authoritative literary evidence from late 17th century. I am talking of a lengthy passage in Mīrzā Bīdil's *Čahār 'unşur* ("The Four Elements", an autobiographical work in highly refined rhymed prose, interspersed with verse, completed in 1704), whose peculiarity had already been noticed by some twentieth century scholars,⁵⁵ and which has recently been the object of an article by Prashant Keshavmurthy, particularly devoted to its "iconoclastic" perspectives and the Sufi poetics involved.⁵⁶ This document is particularly significant also in consideration of the close connections between Bidil and Nāşir 'Alī. The two authors, indeed, not only were contemporaries who shared a common literary language, the same intellectual panorama and similar stylistic choices, but they also knew each other in person and at least for a time (around the last decade of 17th c.) were active in the same Delhi milieu as respected masters.⁵⁷ Such a socio-textual proximity between two of the most influential Indo-Persian poets of that time allows us to use their texts as mutual interpretative keys as far as their views on images

54 Bīdil, Mīrzā 'Abd al-Qādir, *Kulliyāt-i Abu 'l-Ma'ānī Mīrzā 'Abd al-Qādir Bīdil*, IV, edited by Ĥ. Ĥalīlī (Kābul: da Pohane vizārat, da Dār al- ta'lif riyaşat, 1344/1965-6): p. 157.

55 See for instance Akhtar, 'I. *Bedil* (Lahore: Idāra-i Thaqāfat-i Islāmiya, 1952): pp. 79-81, Bausani, A., "Note su Mīrzā Bedil (1644-1721)", *AION*, n.s., VI (1954-6): pp. 172-3, Abdul Ghani, *Life and Works of Abdul Qadir Bedil* (Lahore: Publishers United, 1960): pp. 57, 67-8. The story, perhaps not so much appropriately, has been sometimes compared to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Honoré de Balzac's *La peau de chagrin*.

56 Keshavmurthy, P., "Bidil's Portrait: Asceticism and Autobiography", *Philological Encounters*, I (2015): pp. 1-34.

57 The rivalry between the two authors is well described by Abdul Ghani, *Life and Works*: pp. 76-9.

are concerned. The text under discussion here is from the fourth section or 'element' (namely, the earth) of Bidil's book, which is devoted to strange, inexplicable events witnessed by Bidil during his life. It is, as we shall see, also a significant evidence for the extraordinary 'contextual' importance attained by portraiture in the immediate milieu of Delhi's late Seventeenth century poetic *maktabs*. The story is introduced by the ubiquitous theme of the *Deus pictor*:

The painter of the workshop of manifestation and secrecy, in tracing the picture-gallery of essences, is endowed with the ability of drawing the illustrations of secrets without the movement of the brush of dexterous natures, and of continuing in the frenzy of making prodigious crafts without asking for the approval of the pages of substances. The rhythm of the chain of this movements comes from the eternity without beginning, and the connected continuity of these images goes to the eternity without end.⁵⁸

The *topos* is here richly developed, and the parallel with a whole set of close in time, if not in space, Renaissance and Counter-Reformation writings and expressions is compelling: for instance, the well-known Spanish *pincel divino* (divine brush) of Gutierre de Cetina (1520-57) and Don Luis de Góngora (1561-1627), or the Italian *dorata cornice dell'interminata deità* (the golden frame of infinite divinity) where God works "on a canvas of divine essence, with the brush of divine intellect", according to the Neapolitan counter-reform writer Antonio Glielmo (1596-1644).⁵⁹ Again, much more immediate interlocutors can be found, for sure, in the Safavid-Mughal textual domain: a good example is the image of the God-'portraitist' elaborated by Dūst Muḥammad in his preface to the *Bahrām Mīrṣā* album (1544-5), which is related to some Islamic traditions about a chest containing God-made portraits of the prophets and later copied by the prophet Daniel; as far as the Indic vernacular milieu is concerned, a truly striking parallel is made, again, by the already mentioned *Citrāvalī*, where the whole story relies on the trope of the Creator as a painter (*citerā*).⁶⁰ Broadly speaking, in any case, a dialogic connection in textual iconography with the New Latin world might be here more than a suggestion: it is a very well-known fact, for instance, that the story of king Abgar of Edessa

58 Bidil, *Kulliyāt-i Abu 'l-Ma'ānī Mīrṣā 'Abd al-Qādir Bīdil*: p. 281.

59 See Stoichita, *Visionary Experience*: p. 106 and De Maio, R., *Pittura e controriforma a Napoli* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1983): p. 91 n. 12.

60 Roxburgh, D.J., *Prefacing the Image. The Writing of Art History in Sixteenth-Century Iran* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2001): pp. 96-7, 170-4.

and the portrait of Jesus had a direct Persian rendering done by Jesuits at the Mughal court.⁶¹ Be that as it may, Bīdil has no doubt in locating the activity of the divine *naqqāš* in the wider framework of the unexplainable, to the human mind, marvel of creation:

On the background of the crafts of the miracles of creation, since everything from the particle of dust to the sun is a flesh of the embroidery of magics, and everything from the drop of water to the ocean is the mirror of the production of wonders, sometimes a subtle fact happens to take the form of contingency, such that, notwithstanding how much the nature of madness of man raises dust from the deserts of potentialities, it will never reach the hem of the dress of its comprehension; and no matter how much all the intense drunkenness of the investigation for understanding put the mirror-house of the skies upside down, he will never be able to place the glass-tile on the ceiling of its imagination.⁶²

In the intrinsically marvellous background of manifestation, says Bīdil, some events take the shape of pure – and instructive, as far as the limits of human knowledge are concerned – bewilderment, such as the one he is going to narrate. Immediately after, the character of the painter is introduced. He is Anūp Chhatr,⁶³ regarded by art historians as one of the most important portraitist of the times of Šāh Jahān and Awrangzīb:

Anup Chatr is the name of a painter around whose brush the spirit of Mani used to roam with a earth-colored robe, and in front of whose skill the nature of Behzad used to blush in humiliation behind a veil of shame. The art of full colour (*rangāmīzī*), thanks to his mirror-like palette, had the honour of embellishing Europe, and ink-drawing (*siyāhqalamī*), thanks to the capital of his charcoal, had the ability of soothing India. When the dust of his pouncing-powder avoided the page remaining suspended in the air, the perturbations of the mind of the air fluttered a fan of peacock feathers; and when the hair of his brush sifted dripping paint on the earth, the madresses of the nature of spring broke the chain of

61 See Moura Carvalho, P., *Mir'āt al-quds (Mirror of holiness): A Life of Christ for Emperor Akbar*, with a translation and annotated transcription of the text by W.M. Thackston (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2012): pp. 29-31, 139, 241-2.

62 Bīdil, *Kulliyāt-i Abu 'l-Ma'ānī Mīrzā 'Abd al-Qādir Bīdil*: p. 281.

63 See Verma, S.P., *Mughal Painters and their Work. A Biographical Survey and Comprehensive Catalogue* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994): pp. 61-2.

color. In every house where he depicted the image of sunrise, the assault of breath became a refusal for the light of the lamp of the night; and on every wall where he painted the sun, the shadow of blackness could be seen only in deep sleep. It was enough for him to raise his brush to depict a shoot, that the desire of blossoming grew up in the shadow of its scruple; and it was enough for him to bind himself to the depiction of a chain, that imprisonment started moaning because of the thought of its situation. Effortlessly, his painted cup possessed wine-drinkings, and his depicted bottle amassed drunkenesses.⁶⁴

The *contemporary* Anūp Chhatr is rhetoricized as superior to the already discussed prophet-painter Mani and Kamāl al-Dīn Bihzād (c.1450-c.1535), the most renowned (and proverbial) of the Timurid artists. In other words, he is compared, and favourably so, both to the classics and to the moderns. Striking is the absence of any reference (here and in the whole story) to China and/or Greece, the traditional “lands of painters” in Persian poetic *langue*. A new canon is actually established: China and Greece are substituted by Europe (*Farang*) and India (*Hindūstān*), identified by two different techniques, respectively, color-painting and ink-drawing, as in the common-place Venetian-Florentine antagonism described by Vasari – re-employing as well the paradigmatic connection between India and the black colour. This “life-endowing” artist, a friend of Bīdil, insists on making a portrait of the poet. After an initial resistance – Bīdil describes the idea of being portrayed as vane – the painter succeeds:

[...] at last, he traced down the image of this essence of weakness on the page of sign. Such a quality became the object of contemplation that verification itself, confronted to it, walked on the path of doubt, and the mirror, in front of it, gave nothing more than reflections. Notwithstanding how much I strived attentively to penetrate the differences, I could not distinguish my own individuality from that simulacrum.⁶⁵

The portrait, which is extraordinarily resembling to its referent – thus bewildering Bīdil – is put between the pages of a book. Ten years later, in the year 1100 of the Hijra (1688-89), Bīdil falls seriously ill. An acquaintance of him who goes to visit him opens that book and, to his great surprise, finds that the portrait colour and that the lines of the drawing are nearly invisible:

64 Bīdil, *Kulliyāt-i Abu 'l-Ma'ānī Mirzā 'Abd al-Qādir Bīdil*: p. 282.

65 Ibid.: p. 283.

Ah! A spell has been casted on this mysterious drawing, and this spring of contemplation has been trampled upon by the break of colors! The sun has not shined on it, so to make the oil paint to melt and to expose the colour covering to stains, nor the shame of being unveiled has caused the paper portrait to blush so that the assault of sweat could ruin it so much! If it were the humidity of the air to infect it, the other pages as well should have got soaked! It looks like an innocent child has rubbed its wet hand on the surface of the page, erasing the colors for fun.⁶⁶

The portrait is thus reflecting his referent's conditions, not differently from a truth-revealing mirror. The poet himself asks to see the painting and, having verified that that was not at all an optical illusion, throws away the portrait, unwilling to investigate further in his weakness. It takes seven months to the poet to recover from his illness. Finally, Bīdil asks his friends to see the portrait again.⁶⁷

At once, just like a lamp which is taken out from under a cloth in a dark house, or when a cover is removed from a burning brazier, the curtain boy of the hidden world teared open the veil of unawareness, and with a thousand flashes the beam of beauty glowed uncovered. It was as if a tongueless Bidel was ready to begin the concert of speech, and the forgotten spring one more time was showing his face in the morning of smile; in such a manner that in the world of creation there was nothing comparable to this freshness, and in the brush of the painter, there was no way to draw the meaning of gracefulness with that appearance.⁶⁸

The colours are more brilliant than ever, and the image is even clearer than before, contending reality to his referent. Scared and bewildered, Bīdil instinctively reacts by tearing the portrait into pieces, which are then buried in the earth. The event is subsequently explained by the poet as "a marvel of the powers of the world of inscrutability", a fact proving the inability of man to understand the deep dynamics of Creation. In his own words: "Only the hidden world itself can polish the mirror of the cyphers of its qualities". However, at the very conclusion of the chapter, he briefly gives his own interpretation of the strange phenomena observed:

66 Ibid.: p. 284.

67 Ibid.: pp. 284-5.

68 Ibid.: p. 285.

The truth of that portrait was part of the specific properties of the Bīdilian substance, and Bīdil just like the person represented in the painting was deprived of the pearl of awareness.⁶⁹

There is no substantial difference between Bīdil and his portrait, the one being an unaware image just as the other. Here also, as in the case of Nāṣir ‘Alī’s poem, portrait and referent share a common existential dimension: the sign fades on reality at least as much as reality fades on the sign. Anūp Chhatr, who has produced so vivid a simulacrum that Bīdil is not able to distinguish the original from the copy, has indeed painted – in the textual reality of the fictive dymension – the essence (the *ma’ni*) of his friend, undishtinguible from him. In conclusion, there is no copy, nor is there an original: portraits are nothing but *us*. Looking, again, to the Persian textual past, the views expressed here are, I would argue, at the least alternative if compared to the ideas on the value of icons and portraits attributed to Rūmī (1207-73) by his biographer Aflākī (d. 1360). In two anecdotes found in his biography, even though he doesn’t deny the value of images *a priori*, Rūmī is said to have emphasised the vanity both of attempting to create a perfect pictorial reproduction of a face and of putting any painting, albeit miraculous, before the phenomenal reality of the Creation. Bīdil’s story may actually be juxtaposed with a relatively well-known anecdote concerning ‘Ayn al-Dawla in Rūmī’s biography,⁷⁰ to which Bīdil seems in some respects to ‘answer’, getting to alternative conclusions. In Rūmī’s biography, the Christian painter ‘Ayn al-Dawla is not able to produce an accetable portrait of the poet, because the latter’s appearance keeps changing.⁷¹ In Bīdil’s account, on the other hand, the Hindu painter Anūp Chhatr produces a painting that is so consistent with its referent that it reflects the poet’s physical changes. In this respect, it is worth reading what Bīdil himself very clearly writes in the *Āhār unṣur* about the inextricabilty of the relevant, underlying dynamics of signification: “What is exterior (*ẓāhir*) and what is interior (*bāṭin*) are one the mirror image of the qualities of the other, like the light that comes from the sun; the expression (*lafẓ*) and the meaning (*ma’ni*) are separate and yet united like humidity and water, like the foot and the head. No expression has ever made its appearance which has not brought with itself any meaning; and no meaning

69 Ibid.: p. 286.

70 See Aflākī, Šams al-Dīn Aḥmad al-‘Ārifī, *Manāqib al-‘ārifīn*, 1, edited by T. Yazıcı (Ankara: Anjuman-i Tārīkh-i Turk, 1959): pp. 425-6 and 552-3). A summary of the two anecdotes along with a brief commentary is found in Soucek, “Theory and Practice of Portraiture”: pp. 102-3.

71 Aflākī, *Manāqib al-‘ārifīn*: 1, pp. 425-6.

has ever blossomed which was not in itself an expression".⁷² Witnessing the vitality of such a debate in the intellectual milieu of late-17th-century Mughal India, the *tazkira Mir'āt al-ḥayāl* relates an episode where Bīdil and Nāṣir 'Alī themselves discuss, with divergent views, about these very notions. Replying to Nāṣir 'Alī who had claimed that "Meaning is always subordinate to expression, because when the expression is known, the meaning manifests by itself" Bīdil shows, according to the *tazkira*, a subtler approach, reportedly winning the debate: "The meaning, which you consider as subordinate to expression, is itself an expression: as far as *what the thing comes from* [in Arabic in the text], that is the meaning, which does not enter any expression".⁷³ As I have tried to show preliminarily in a recent paper devoted to the conception of language in the *Chahār 'unṣur*, for Bīdil the semiotic capacity of any metaphor – verbal as much as visual ("every image that you see", writes Bīdil in a crucial passage "is a word that you hear"⁷⁴) – manifests itself precisely while simultaneously negating any referentiality for itself. Just like words which only speak for other words, both the "real" Bīdil and his portrait are, thus, icons pointing to other icons, expressions referring to other expressions, synonyms inhabiting an ideogrammatic cosmos where the existential continuity of Pure Being ("what the thing comes from"), can't but *precede* the phenomenological emersions of linguistic semiosis: thus escaping the correlative, essentializing logic of the meaning/expression mechanics attributed to Nāṣir 'Alī in the *Mir'āt al-ḥayāl*.⁷⁵

A World of Images

In a sonnet inspired by the portrait that Michelangelo Caravaggio had made of him, Giambattista Marino (1569-1625), the most influential baroque Italian poet, refers to his own pictorial reproduction in terms which are, at least formally, strikingly reminiscent of the stories described above:

Vidi, MICHEL, la nobil tela, in cui
da la tua man veracemente espresso
vidi un altro me stesso, anzi me stesso
quasi Giano novel, diviso in dui. [...]

72 Bīdil, *Kulliyāt-i Abu 'l-Ma'ānī Mīrzā 'Abd al-Qādir Bīdil*: p. 235.

73 Lūdi 1998: 250; this episode has been partially translated in English in Abdul Ghani, *Life and Works*: p. 76, and deserves a separate discussion.

74 Bīdil, *Kulliyāt-i Abu 'l-Ma'ānī Mīrzā 'Abd al-Qādir Bīdil*: p. 193.

75 These and other related issues are discussed in Pellò, Stefano, "L'elemento parola. Appunti intorno agli assoluti del linguaggio nei *Chahār 'unṣur* di Mīrzā 'Abd al-Qādir Bīdil", in Raveri, M., Tarca L.V. (eds.), *I linguaggi dell'Assoluto* (Milano: Mimesis, 2017): pp. 207-28.

Piacemi assai che meraviglie puoi
 formar sì nõve, ANGEL non già, ma Dio:
 animar l'ombre, anzi di me far noi. [...] ⁷⁶

Before than any possible conceptual parallelism, what seems to me to compelling to be at least hinted at here are the comparable replies of literary culture to the “era of portraiture”, in Caravaggio’s and Marino’s Naples as well as in Anup Chhatr’s and Bīdil’s Delhi. If in 17th c. France we find works such as *l’Île de la portraiture*,⁷⁷ where all the inhabitants of a fantastic island work as portraitists for European commissioners, it is worth remembering how, in 17th and 18th c. North India, painters appear as literary characters in Persian *šahrāšūb* compositions.⁷⁸ The description of the personal acquaintance of Bīdil with Anup Chhatr (as real as that of Marino’s with Caravaggio) hints to new dynamics of interaction beyond the courtly domain, in an age in which, as in the case of Mīrẓā ‘Azīmā-yi Iksīr, painters appears to operate as poets (or vice-versa) in Indo-Persian *tazkīra* literature.⁷⁹ In such a context of renewal and growth of the role and importance of image in its relation with the literary community, the manifold connections to the variegated 17th-century northern Indian intellectual space are not of course limited to social aspects. Particularly promising, in this direction, is an exploration of the interaction with the textual reception and recasting of Sanskritic ideas about the visual within the Persian cosmopolis, an attempt which I’ll just roughly draft here with a brief example. As it is well known, the notion – adumbrated especially in Nasir ‘Alī’s *masnavī* – that the experienceable world that man can describe through senses and intellect is but an imagination and a mental projection of a single and undivided consciousness, is a common idea in Vedantic thought. The *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, in particular, presents a systematic discussion of these notions, resorting to a number

76 Quoted in Bolzoni, *Poesia e ritratto nel rinascimento*: pp. 147-8: “I saw, MICHEL, the noble drawing, where/by your hand truly expressed/I saw another myself, or no, myself/divided in two, similar to a new Janus. [...] I am delighted that you can give shape/to such unprecedented marvels, not actually an ANGEL, but God:/giving life to shadows, or no, making us of me”.

77 The work was completed in 1659 by Charles Sorel (see Pommier, Edouard, *Théories du portrait: de la Renaissance aux Lumières* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998): 245.

78 For instance, a classical description of the painter can still be found in Matan Lāl Āfarīn *Kāshī istūt* (Lakhnā’u: Naval Kishor, 1873): p. 35, a 1778 celebratory Persian *masnavī* devoted by its Kayasth author to the sacred city of Varanasi.

79 Hindī, Bhagwān Dās, *Safīna-yi Hindī*, edited by S. Shah Md. Aatur Rahman (Patna: The Institute of Post Graduate Studies & Research in Arabic and Persian, 1958): pp. 3-5.

of images that it draws from artistic mimesis.⁸⁰ For instance, at the beginning of the sixth and last book of this work, phenomenal and mental reality is likened to a relief sculpture (*śālabhañjikā*):

Everything that exists is a relief sculpture carved into the stone of consciousness.

Everything that does not exist is a relief sculpture carved into the stone of consciousness.⁸¹

In her analysis of the role of portraits in Rājaśekhara's Sanskrit drama *Viddhaśālabhañjikā* (9th-10th c.), Phyllis Granoff has pointed out the probable dependence, either direct or indirect, of the philosophical views that shape the 'image theory' present in that play upon those expressed in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*. In particular, she has stressed the centrality of the notion that reality is but an artistic creation where the boundary line between what is 'true' and what is 'false' is questioned and where both artists and their artwork share the same ontological status, inasmuch as, in the last analysis, they both are equally simulacra and occasions of knowledge. Granoff's following remark on the above-mentioned lines of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* may well serve as a gloss on both the introductory verse and the epilogue of Nāṣir 'Alī's poem: "since consciousness is both the primordial material and the agent of creation, the sculptor, then the sculpted relief is also the sculptor".⁸² The hypothesis of an actual interaction between the fundamental notions expressed in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* and those of Nāṣir 'Alī's *maṣnavī* is as just as plausible as that of a relation between the Vedantic treatise and the *Viddhaśālabhañjikā*. As a matter of fact, the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* was one of the Sanskrit religious works that were given most attention by the translators and commentators writing in Persian in late 16th- and 17th-century India. In a professedly incomplete list, Fathollah Mujtabai reports the existence of at least nine either partial or complete Persian rewritings of this work.⁸³ Of these, at least two were personally commissioned by

80 See Granoff, Ph., "Portraits, Likenesses and Looking Glasses: Some Literary and Philosophical Reflections on Representation and Art in Medieval India", in Assmann, J., Baumgarten, A.I. (eds.), *Representation in Religion. Studies in Honor of Moshe Barasch* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2001): pp. 84-90, whose comments I take here as a starting point for my own remarks on the subject.

81 *Yogavāsiṣṭha* (1937: II, 883, v. 11).

82 Granoff, "Portraits, Likenesses and Looking Glasses": p. 85.

83 See Mujtabai, Fathollah, *Aspects of Hindu Muslim Cultural Relations* (New Delhi: Dr. Zakir Husain Educational and Cultural Foundation, 1978): pp. 81-4.

Akbar, two were prepared for the intellectual training of Jahāngīr, and one was written at the court of Prince Dārā Šukūh. Furthermore, Akbar's poet laureate Fayzī is credited with the composition of a work based on the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, while a commented anthology of the same text circulating under the title *Muntaḥab-i Jūg* is by the Iranian philosopher Mīr Abū 'l-Qāsim Findiriskī (d. 1640-1).⁸⁴ The composition and circulation of those authoritative translations, or explanatory versions, of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* took place in the same milieu that produced the great 17th-century Indo-Persian poetry, that is that of the Mughal courts. It seems reasonable to me to suggest the possibility of an at least 'contextual' proximity between the semantic functions of the artistic simulacrum in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* and those of the portrait in Nāṣir 'Alī's *maṣnavī* and Bidil's autobiography. I will limit myself to mention three short but significant passages from the sixth *prakaraṇa* (*parkaran-i šišum*) of the Persian translation of the *Laghu-yogavāsiṣṭha*, not so much to yield new interpretative insights – for which a comparative assessment of the key conceptual dimension of the above mentioned *'ālam-i misāl* in 17th c. Islamic thought would be of course very much required – as to point out the need for more in-depth and broad-reaching analyses. The phenomenal world is here linked to the dimension of the oneiric vision and the multiplicity of its images is said to conceal a single essence:

Like the world of dreams (*'ālam-i ḥwāb*), the experienceable world (*'ālam-i mašhūd*) also is but a reverie of imagination. The world's appearing and disappearing depend on the movement and the stopping of the heart. The countless images (*šūrathā-yi gūnāgūn*) that exist through the one and only Truth are the veil that hides that same Truth.⁸⁵

This world made of illusory images is not seen as meaningless. In fact, it is regarded as a necessary mesocosmos:

There is no Being in this world, yet the world should not be regarded as non-Being. [...] Think of the world as being in between non-Being and

84 In 1976 Mujtabai prepared the critical edition and English translation of this work for his PhD dissertation. His edition and study of the text have been published in Iran in 2006: Findiriskī, Mīrzā Abū 'l-Qāsim, *Muntaḥab-i Jūg Bāsašt*, edited by F. Mujtabā'ī (Tehran: Mu'assasa-yi Pažūhišī-yi Hikmat va Falsafa-yi Irān, 1385/2006).

85 Tārā Chand, 'Abidī, S.A.H. (eds.), *Jūg-bashist* (Aligarh: The Aligarh Muslim University, 1967): pp. 252-3.

Being, and hold firmly in your hand the strand of the thread of those two worlds.⁸⁶

In this context of such an 'actual' evanescence, it is precisely the image re-created through art that, as it was the case for the portrait of the main character of Nāṣir 'Alī's *maṣnavī* and his 'painted' story, becomes sign and occasion of knowledge:

This is the meaning of our love for images: since those who live in this world think that the image/form (*ṣūrat*) is close to them, whereas the meaning (*ma'nī*) is far, first of all perfect masters look closely with their eyes at an image, so that their confused mind may concentrate. Then, gradually, they shift their attention from the world of image (*'ālam-i ṣūrat*) to the true object of research.⁸⁷

The connections, at different levels, of Nāṣir 'Alī's pictorial *maṣnavī* with the Persian rewritings of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* and Bidil's *Chahār 'unṣur*, whatever their degree of plausibility, surely don't exhaust all the possible intertextual relations between this poem and the culture of its times, and the wider world. As we suggested, the story of the painter and the portrait falls within a vast and authoritative poetic tradition (or, a cluster of Eurasian traditions) of pictorial effigies, which includes Modern Europe and for which it may be even possible to identify classical and Hellenistic antecedents: besides the suggestive comparison with the Narcissus myth justified by the last part of the *maṣnavī*, the same love of the artist for his creation that is the main theme of Nāṣir 'Alī's poem is found not only in the well-known myth of Pygmalion (as it appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*), but also, for instance, in the less known story of the painter Philopanax who, as Aristaenetus (5th-6th c.) tells in one of his letters, fell in love with the image of a girl he had painted.⁸⁸ Only a deeper, more detailed knowledge of the poetic ecology of the portrait theme in the Persian

86 Ibid.: p. 255.

87 Ibid.: p. 215.

88 Hercher, R. (ed.), *Epistolographi graeci* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1965): pp. 164-5. It would be tempting to speculate about some sort of relation with the *Kitāb 'āshiq al-ṣūra* ("The Book of the Lover of the Image", or "of the portrait"[*?]), whose title, as noted by Capezzone, L., "Innamorarsi di un ritratto. Presenza di un motivo classico nella cultura araba medievale", in Favaro (ed.), *La mandorla e il mirabolano*: pp. 23-32, is mentioned in the *Fihrist*: Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-fihrist li'l-Nadīm*, edited by R. Tajaddud (Tehran: Maṭba'-i Dānishgāh, n.d.): p. 365. Unfortunately, there is no other information available about this book at the moment.

context in general and in the Indo-Persian milieu in particular, especially with regard to the *maṣnavī* and *ġazal* genres, would gradually complete the very partial picture I have painted so far. In fact, the multilingual character of Mughal literary universe underscores the need not to limit investigation within the confines of a single linguistic literary production, but to carry out comparative research and philological ‘digging’ in Sanskrit, Persian and the Latinate sphere as well as in vernacular traditions.

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Biographical Note

Stefano Pellò is Associate Professor at the University "Ca' Foscari" of Venice. His expertise is in pre-modern and early modern Persian literature, and his broad research interests include the diffusion and reception of Persian linguistic and literary culture in Eurasia – focusing especially on the Indo-Persian space – the intellectual history of the Persianate world, 17th c. Persian poetry

and the native tradition of philological disciplines in Persian. Among his main publications are *Tutiḡān-i Hind. Specchi identitari e proiezioni cosmopolite indo-persiane (1680-1856)*, a book on the textual ecology of Hindu Persian poets in and around Indo-Persian biographical writings (Florence, Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2012) and the first Italian complete annotated translation of the *Divan* of Hafez of Shiraz (*Canzoniere*, Milan, Ariete, 2005, with Gianroberto Scarcia). He has recently edited a collection of essays: *Borders: Itineraries on the Edges of Iran* (Venice, Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2016).