IS THE BEARDED MAN DROWNING? PICTURING THE FIGURATIVE IN A LATE-FIFTEENTH-CENTURY PAINTING FROM HERAT

In the study of Persian miniature painting and its development through the fifteenth century, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of the illustrations in the 1487 manuscript of the *Manṭiq al-ṭair* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Three of the illustrations in this manuscript are among the earliest specimens of the “new style” of painting ushered in by the artists at the famed atelier of Sultan Husayn Bayqara, the last Timurid prince in Herat. Over the years, aside from the usual debates about attribution, these enigmatic paintings have enticed art historians’ curiosity and generated a number of largely inconclusive interpretations. The general tendency to explain their content symbolically is ostensibly due to the designation of the *Manṭiq al-ṭair* as “mystical poetry.” Translated into English under such titles as *The Speech of the Birds* or *The Conference of the Birds,* the *Manṭiq al-ṭair* was written by Farid al-Din ‘Attar in rhyming couplets some three centuries before this manuscript was copied and illustrated. ‘Attar’s twelfth-century work was indeed an explicit contribution to the discourse of Sufism, which like its counterparts in Jewish Kabala and medieval Christian mysticism, sought a direct, individual experience of God. Advocating the pursuit of the real—as opposed to the phenomenal—truth, ‘Attar’s work is an allegorical tale presenting the various stages that a seeker of truth must go through in his or her quest for unity with the divine. The paintings in the Metropolitan Museum manuscript have for the most part been understood as literal depictions of events from a handful of ‘Attar’s numerous parables, which elaborate the importance of these stages on the path to Sufism.

Of the eight illustrations in the Metropolitan Museum manuscript, the first four are early seventeenth-century additions. Of the four original illustrations, one does not display the characteristics that distinguish the other three paintings as early examples of the new style. Rather, this fourth painting, “The Beggar before the King,” has been characterized as depicting a “court scene, which has been an integral part of the art of Iran from the Sasanid dynasty onward and appears in all schools of all periods of Persian miniature painting.” My concern here is with “The Bearded Man Drowning,” one of the other three fifteenth-century illustrations, which are stylistically similar enough to one another to be attributed to the same artist or group of artists. According to Priscilla Soucek, the advice given to students of calligraphy by Qazi Ahmad in the sixteenth century reveals the conservatism of artistic education in Iran, which justified two basic mechanisms of continuity in manuscript illustration: literal reproduction and selective adaptation. Taking into account this tradition-bound artistic practice, I have assumed the content of the “Bearded Man Drowning,” and, except for the court scene, of all the paintings original to the manuscript, to have been provided by ‘Attar’s text. Nevertheless, although all three adhere to the convention of depicting the events of the accompanying text, half of each of these three paintings contains images that do not appear to bear any direct link to that text—at least not on the literal level.

I will use the images in the foreground of “The Bearded Man Drowning” (fig. 1) to specify the nexus between ‘Attar’s verbal imagery and the painter’s pictorial play on Sufi discourse, which connects the poetical allusions to the visual signifiers particular to specific Sufi practices popular in contemporary Herat. I believe that the content of the enigmatic foreground of “The Bearded Man Drowning” is best understood in terms of the practices of the vastly influential contemporary Sufi order, the Naqshbandiyya. I will also briefly discuss the two other stylistically similar paintings from 1487, but only in order to corroborate the nexus between text and image in the “Bearded Man Drowning.”

The upper half of “The Bearded Man Drowning” literally illustrates the events described in the first four verses of ‘Attar’s text.
Fig. 1. The bearded man drowning. Folio 44r from an illustrated manuscript of the *Mantiq al-tayr* of ʿAttar, 1487. Ink, opaque watercolor, silver, and gold on paper. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1963.210.44. (Photo © 1998 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art)
In the lower half of the painting accompanying this anecdote, the artist or artists have depicted the following, much to the confusion of many who have attempted to understand it: a man is sawing a branch off a small, leafless tree. To the right of this another man, white-bearded and dressed in blue, sits on a rock; his knees are pulled together and he is positioned so as to have a direct view of the sawing action taking place before him. Three figures—a donkey and two men—crowd the lower right corner of the painting. One of the men strains to pull a load of firewood onto the back of the beast. The other, standing to the right, behind the donkey, is dark-faced and has a white beard and a ring in his ear. He seems motionless but attentive.

There is no mention of any of this in ‘Attar’s text. The narrative says nothing about cutting a tree, gathering firewood, or loading a donkey. Indeed, the nearest explicit reference anywhere in ‘Attar’s text to anything depicted in the lower half of this painting is the mention of a donkey five anecdotes earlier, more than forty couplets previous to the one about the bearded man. But even in that episode, the events and figures have little to do with the actions depicted here.

Paintings from Persian manuscripts have often been studied as works of art independent of the manuscripts for which they were commissioned. This has largely to do with the status of such paintings, many of which exist as single pages that have been removed from various manuscripts and auctioned off around the world as individual, often anonymous, illustrations. Studies that do consider Persian manuscript illustrations in the context of the literary works they accompany may undertake sophisticated analyses of the images from a variety of perspectives but almost never engage the texts beyond summarizing plot, general theme, or genre. In the case of Persian book paintings from late-fifteenth-century Herat, a cursory engagement with the literary text might appear of little use; it is in this period that manuscript illustrations begin to contain scenes with figures and objects that do not seem to correspond to the accompanying text. The debate as to the subject matter of these three paintings, their objective, and the extent to which their iconography corresponds with the literal or figurative language of the accompanying textual passage they ostensibly depict has been varied and sometimes contradictory.

Rachel Milstein’s analysis of one of them, commonly referred to as “The Funeral Procession” (fig. 2), sheds light on the esoteric meaning of what is depicted, mostly by relying on verses from Sufi poetry. Milstein’s overarching claim that iconographic and stylistic elements in Persian miniatures are not mere decorative embellishments is well established today. Although the physical elements in “The Funeral Procession” may lack outward iconographic significance, Milstein states, these elements nevertheless have symbolic meaning that stems from literary similitude. Her observations have contributed to a better understanding of the link between the explicit theme of this particular episode in ‘Attar’s text—death—and certain elements depicted in the upper half of the painting. In the foreground, the image of a coffin borne in a procession, the wailing relatives, the bystander, and the admonishing Sufi standing in front of an open gate are more than adequate representations of the events as related in ‘Attar’s text:

*The son was walking before his father’s coffin*  
Shedding tears, saying “O, father!”
Fig. 2. Funeral procession. Folio 35r from an illustrated manuscript of the *Mantiq al-tayr* of 'Attar, 1487. Ink, opaque watercolor, silver, and gold on paper. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1963.210.35. (Photo © 1988 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art)
Such a day as this, which has shredded my life,
Has never occurred before in all my days.”
A Sufi said, “The one that was your father
Never had such a day either.” (131, 2354–56)

As in the lower half of “The Bearded Man Drowning,”
which I will consider in more detail below, what is
depicted in the upper half of “The Funeral Procession” also refers to 'Attar’s text, but to its thesis of
death, not its literal meaning:

The misery that has befallen the son is nothing.
The matter is much more much for the father.
O you who have come to the world not knowing your
head from your toes,
Miserably traversing the wind,
Even if you rule the nations
You will gain nothing but the wind in the end.
(131, 2357–59)

There is an unmistakable note of pessimism in 'Attar’s proclamations about our transient life and its inevitable end.13 The theme of death in this passage, in contrast to many other Sufi verses, is not entirely about the death of carnal desire or one’s extinction in the union with the Divine Beloved. For 'Attar, death here is primarily natural death—an inexplicable, inescapable phenomenon facing all the living.14 The absolute universality of this event makes obvious, as the Hoopoe points out, the futility of any long-term measures against it.15 This is how the Herati artists of “The Funeral Procession” seem to have grasped 'Attar’s presentation of death in this passage. His notion of mortality is acknowledged in the scene of a cemetery in the upper half of the painting, where laborers are depicted as busily engaged preparing burial places, which are in various stages of completion. The centrally placed image of two men, one pouring water from a clay jug and the other mixing mortar with a shovel, is an innovative insertion by the artist, a clear reference to God’s creation of man out of clay in the Qur’an (e.g., 6:2: “It is He Who created you from clay then
determined a term [of life] for you…”) and to the old and widely utilized trope in Persian poetry, known best to readers of English from Edward Fitzgerald’s rendition of Khayyam’s Rubā‘iyāt:

And strange to tell, among that Earthen Lot
Some could articulate, while others not:
And suddenly one more impatient cried—
“Who is the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?”16

or, as Rumi writes, praising the Almighty,

آب را و خاک را برهم زدی
آب و گل نفس تن ادم زدی

You mixed water with dirt
You gave the shape of man to water and dirt.17

Before Rumi, 'Attar too had maintained that there is no part of earth that has not been previously a human being, and that every speck of the earth’s dust is a deceased person’s body.18

آرزو ای چرا نگفت ای مشت خاک
تا شود این مشت خاکت جان یالک

Your hope will not come to pass—you, handful of
dust!
Until the handful of dust that you are becomes a pure
life.19

'Attar refers to Qur’an 32:7, “Who made all things He created excellent; and first fashioned man from clay,” in the introduction to the section of the Manṭiq al-ṭayr that deals with the subject of death, a few anecdotes after which we read about the funeral scene. In the introductory passage on death 'Attar has the Hoopoe chastise a hesitant bird who, afraid of dying, is content to forego the journey to the ideal king:

تو یگر الوده گر پیل آدمی
قطره چهب که با خاک آدمی

Whether you came here impure or pure,
You are a drop of water that came mixed with dirt.

Although it is demonstrably true that the text of the anecdote accompanying “The Funeral Procession” makes no literal mention of a clay pot or jug of water, we can see that the artist’s depiction of the clay pot and the image of water being mixed with dirt is nevertheless a deliberate but oblique means of connecting the painting to what 'Attar’s text alludes to—our lives and death in “the wind”—rather than what it literally says.

The artist reinforces 'Attar’s understanding of natural death and its fearsomeness by inscribing two Qur’anic passages, “God is sufficient for us, and the best of protectors,” and “How excellent a helper, and how excellent a protector is He!” at the center of the
white flag held by the weeping man on the lower left side of “The Funeral Procession.” The context of both proclamations (from Qur’an 3:173 and 8:40) has to do with increased faith in God when one is faced with the fear of annihilation, as if in answer to ’Attar’s warning words at the beginning of the section on death:20

Don’t you know that whoever was born died,
Was buried in the dust, and wind took away whatever was his?

Sufism or no, the notion that death is not the final end of man is perhaps the most fundamental doctrine for the faithful. This notion of death as merely a passage into the next world is announced by the artists through the inscription over the door that opens into the cemetery: “The tomb is a door though which everyone passes.”21 As Rumi repeatedly emphasizes in his Masnaví, death is the beginning of the life that really matters:

Your intellect lies; look upon yourself in reverse.
It is this life that is death, O fool!

and

There is no dead man who regrets his death;
He only regrets his lack of provisions.22

Attitudes towards “spiritual devotion and death,” the predominance of Sufi trends at the court of Sultan Husayn Bayqara, the influence of the Naqshbandi Sufi order, and the particularity of Naqshbandi practices are also reflected in certain details in the upper half of “The Funeral Procession.”23 The oil lamp and the “guardian” cat lying in front of a tomb monument at the top left are related to Sufi literary tropes as well as to contemporary popular Sufi beliefs.24 The turbaned man sitting next to a grave on the right side, for example, is clearly not another one of the laborers in the cemetery, nor is he facing the grave, as would a relative of the deceased. Rather, as the direction of the grave itself indicates, both he and the deceased are facing the direction of the qibla. The visiting man is gesturing as though addressing the buried person, a practice that in the context of the contemporary Herat and the immediacy of Naqshbandi influence at the time is reminiscent of the teachings of Alauddin al-’Attar, who as the Naqshbandi spiritual leader (d. 1400), is supposed to have said, “To be near the graves of pious people has a good influence, but it is better to direct yourself to their souls.”25

As Annemarie Schimmel and Milstein have pointed out, the equation of soul with birds is an old trope (used by, among others, Avicenna and ’Attar), and the Herati artists’ depiction of the birds among the branches of the ancient tree at the top center of the painting alludes to the same metaphor.26 The particularity in the painters’ depiction of details, such as the inclusion of crows (evoking the material world) among the generic birds, or of a snake (representing carnal appetites) sliding up toward an unprotected nest, reflects ’Attar’s equivocal understanding of death, in the face of which one’s fear ought to be predicated on how one has lived.27 Although death is a difficult road through which all must pass, ’Attar’s Mantiq al-layr clearly indicates that it is also a road where the grave is only the first stop:

Look at death to see what a difficult road it is
In this path, the grave is only the first stage.

The notion that illustrations of the manuscript should be understood via the text they illustrate should hardly need justification. Art historians in the field have by no means shunned textual analysis as a means of understanding the illustrations from Persian literary texts. Cynthia Robinson and Oleg Grabar have recently undertaken comparative text-and-image studies and called for others.28 Lisa Golombek, writing in the early 1970s, demonstrated the significance of a tree stump in a painting from the Great Mongol Sháhnama simply by examining the accompanying text.29 As M. Glütz observes, it is more likely that Sufi poetry aims to instruct rather than to “obscure things by making ambiguous statements.”30 If anything, the fact that these Herati illustrations are for a Sufi text should
make reliance on the text for their analysis even more crucial. A more detailed look at “The Bearded Man Drowning,” will better demonstrate the links between them and ‘Attar’s text. But before discussing the nexus between painting and text, it is important to consider the particular passage that was chosen for illustration in the context of the literary work as a whole.

The *Manṭiq al-tayr* is an allegory describing the difficulties faced by a group of birds in their journey to the Qaf Mountain in search of their rightful king, the mythical bird Simurgh. This allegory is mostly a dialogue about the “trip,” its various stages, and whether it should be undertaken at all. The actual journey itself is relayed only briefly, near the climactic end of the story. The birds’ journey as a framing story allows ‘Attar to accommodate numerous possible questions or concerns that a Sufi seeker might have about an analogous journey toward truth and unity with God. The birds’ discussion unfolds in various didactic tales (hikayat) and parables addressing thinly veiled questions about the path to becoming a Sufi.

The Hoopoe, who in the Qur’an (27:20) is King Solomon’s messenger, here serves as the closest thing to a protagonist, the most assiduous seeker, who rallies and leads the other birds. Metaphorically, the Hoopoe may be seen as the Sufi master who guides the other seekers. The cycle of questions and answers, followed in each case by a few didactic anecdotes meant to reinforce the point already made in the answer, is the structural trope ‘Attar uses to present his thesis on the necessary process through which one can achieve perfection and an intuitive knowledge of the divine truth. Simply put, different sections of the narrative refer to the stages involved in becoming a Sufi. The successive repetitions of “another one said to him” or “he asked” (digār guflash or pursid) to introduce a question and of “he said” (guft) or variations of this to mark the beginning of the Hoopoe’s reply divide the text into separate units, each addressing a separate concern, as recognizable to a listener as to a reader. The process of achieving a state where the carnal self (nafs) is eliminated—a key goal if one is to achieve perfection (kamāl)—and the difficulties and sacrifices involved in the process constitute a recurrent theme. “The Bearded Man Drowning” belongs to a unit entirely devoted to expounding the necessity for eradication of one’s carnal self.

Like all the other separate units of the narrative, the segment begins with a question asked of the Hoopoe and ends with the posing of another question on a different issue. To present his thesis on the folly inherent in the presumption of “perfection,” ‘Attar relates seven parables, which are introduced according to the formal structure of the *Manṭiq al-tayr*: a bird asks a question and a response containing the parable follows. The reply acquaints the reader with the proper (Sufi) perspective on the essence of the raised concern and can serve as the key to deciphering the moral of the parables that follow. In this case, the reply unequivocally condemns and warns the “arrogant one” about any presumption of kamāl before offering words of advice about the need to curb one’s “carnal self” by abandoning all worldly concerns and possessions. The intended addressee could as well be an adherent of orthodoxy as a follower of any number of Sufi orders; he could, in fact, be anyone conceited enough to presume sufficiency in his devotion to the Divine Beloved.

The first of the parables that follows Hoopoe’s chastising reply is about Shaykh Abu Bakr of Nishapur, who is affronted by a donkey breaking wind. The nextparable is an exchange between Satan and Moses; in reply to the prophet’s inquiry, Satan warns him against putting too much stock in his ego. Then a man of pure faith (pāk dīn) opines that it is better for a neophyte to be completely in the dark at the beginning of his journey lest he be beguiled by any (har chīz) false ray of light and become an unbeliever. The fourth story is about a shaykh who does not shun a dog that “defiles” him, for reasons that have to do with the appearance of purity as opposed to the condition of one’s soul: the dog is “unclean” on the outside no more than one’s carnal self is so on the inside, so there is no need to pretend that the dog is going to cause any more harm than what one possesses within one’s heart. The next two parables both involve men with beards—a supposed sign of piety. It may plausibly be argued that they are the same man in both anecdotes, which certainly convey the same idea. Significantly, the first bearded man is no “fool” (ablāh), but rather a devout person (‘ābid) who lives during the time of Moses. He inquires from the prophet about his own lack of inspiration and inability to achieve the ecstasy that comes only through unity (sahadat). The archangel Gabriel also makes an appearance, and reports back on the reason for the bearded man’s lackluster achievements in spirituality: he is too vain—too preoccupied with his beard, which is an insidious contradiction of his presumption about being detached from worldly cares. The last couplet of this parable
warns that with such a beard “you will be at sea” (dar daryā shavt). After this comes the story of the “fool” with a “very large beard,” who is presumably already in the water when he is introduced to the reader. The precise nature of the difficulty he is having there is not clear. His exchange with the man on the shore implies that the beard is hampering his ability to swim or perhaps has wrapped around his neck and might choke him. Regardless, the implications are that the beard may well cost him his life, for which reason he is admonished by the other fellow. The point of the last anecdote, about a Sufi’s futile attempts at washing his robe, is that appearances do not matter, and that he should “wash his hands clean” of such earthly concerns.41

Among these seven parables, it was the text of the sixth tale, about the bearded fool, that was selected for illustration. It reads as follows:

A fool who had a very large beard
Suddenly found himself drowning in the waters of the sea.

[2975] From the dry land only a sincere man saw him.
He said, “Throw off that feed-bag from round your head.”
He replied, “This is not a feed-bag, it is my beard.
It is not this ‘beard’ that causes my trepidation.”42
The other said: “Bravo! This is your beard, and this is what it does for you!
Having succumbed to the body in this way will kill you wretchedly!”
You, who like a goat, have no shame about your beard,
Who are captivated by it without ignominy:
So long as you have the carnal soul and Satan within you,
There will be a Pharaoh and a Haman in you.

[2980] Distance yourself from the raucous world as Moses did,
Then take this Pharaoh by the beard.
Seize the beard of this Pharaoh and hold tight.
Wage war like a man, fight one-on-one.
Step forward, abandon that beard of yours.
How long will you keep this beard? Be on your way!
Though your beard brings nothing but anxiety,
You have not, even for a moment, concerned yourself
with your "injury."43

On the road to faith, the one who will be sagacious
Is the one who has no comb for his beard—
[2985] Making himself aware of his own “beard,”
Spreading his beard for the feast upon the Path.
He will find no water but tears of blood,
He will find nothing but a charred heart.
If a washer, one who never sees the sunshine;
If a farmer, one who never catches sight of water.

The upper half of “The Bearded Man Drowning” depicts the events from lines 2974 to 2976 of 'Attar’s poem. Most studies of this manuscript cannot avoid approaching its paintings by way of 'Attar’s text, but no analysis I am aware of has considered the remaining verses of the parable. Even a formalist approach to the text, however, would demand a reading of the entire segment. If a parable is a short narrative about humans that stresses a tacit analogy, which, according to M. H. Abrams, has a “general thesis or lesson that the narrator is trying to bring home to a potential audi-
ence,” then not only is this passage a good example of a parable, but it is also clear that the short narrative about the bearded fool is, literally, only the half of it. The “general thesis,” or tacit analogy—in fact, the very raison d’être for the short narrative about the drowning man with a beard—is in the verses that follow. That some verses in this manuscript run onto the following page does not make them any less relevant to the parable or, for that matter, to the illustration of it. It is on line 2979 that the thesis or explication of the short narrative commences. The two previous verses—the couplet immediately following the main anecdote (i.e., line 2978)—serve as a salutation of sorts, where the narrator turns from the tale to directly address the reader (the original questioning bird, as it were), who expects the anecdote to have a moral point but may be uncertain whether he is going to find out more about the fate of the bearded man. The first word—Ay (O, you!)—used in the “salutation” couplet (2978) ostensibly addresses the reader/listener, who is having a similar problem:

آي، يو، غيش خود، شرميت نه
بر گرفته ريش و آزمیت نه

You who, like a goat, have no shame about your beard,
Who are captivated by it without ignominy:

This couplet leads to the actual thesis of this segment; the “moral” of the story about the drowning man with a long beard who, as will be revealed in the verses that follow, has only his own pride and vanity to blame. The moral of the story has, of course, everything to do with this stage on the path of Sufism and serves as a warning to all those arrogant enough to presume that they have truly overcome their egos and succeeded in abandoning all worldly concerns.

Written in the second person, the couplet establishes, through pejorative epithets, that the moral of the tale just recounted applies not merely to the drowning fool but to anyone who is shamelessly negligent in restricting his wants. The conditions and symptoms presented in the anecdote are here summarized, just as an apothecary (‘attār) who, after hearing the account of a malady from a patient, might chaste the sufferer for his carelessness—So you’ve been acting like a goat...?—and goes on to summarize the causes and the effects of the malady, the “thesis” of the parable:

This is a summary statement of the problem that is under discussion in this passage; indeed, this is the theme of this entire unit of the Mantiq al-tayr: so long as you concern yourself with your carnal self, you will not be free from the qualities of the damned (e.g., Pharaoh and his servant Haman) and will likewise deviate from the true path. Until evidence to the contrary is presented, we can do no better than to assume that any pictorial depiction of this passage must on some level contain at least its main thesis, which these lines encapsulate. It is exactly at this point, in the very verse that explicates the thesis or the moral of the anecdote, that we may begin to follow what is pictorially represented in the lower half of “The Bearded Man Drowning.”

The three focal points in the foreground of the painting are, clockwise, a man sawing the last branch off a tree; a bearded man in blue sitting on a rock, apparently watching the sawing action of the man to the left; and two men, one of them loading firewood onto the back of a donkey standing between them. I will have more to say about the seated man in blue later on. Of the others, two figures gain prominence due to their animated state: the one sawing and the other loading the beast. Their prominence seems further reinforced by their direct involvement with the element that is emphasized pictorially more than any other: firewood. To rephrase Lisa Golombek’s question, which was prompted by the prominence of a tree stump in a painting from the Great Mongol Shāhnāma, why should firewood be given such prominence in “The Bearded Man Drowning”?

Whether firewood (ḥizum) is representative of some word or concept in 'Attar’s text or not, the artists of “The Bearded Man Drowning” have clearly chosen to emphasize it pictorially. It is presented on the ground in two separate clusters, one of which is further distinguished by its placement in the horizontal center of the illustration, in front of the man in blue. A larger mass of it is also being loaded onto the back of the donkey at the lower right. Although there is nothing in the text that directly refers to firewood, branches, or kindling, the depiction of firewood pictorially is
related, indeed pivotal to, the theme of this section of the *Mantiq al-tayr*, and in fact central to the entire discourse on Sufism in general. Firewood, as fuel, is a substitute for temptations or stimuli in the discourse on the carnal self (*nafs*) and is one of the numerous ways in which the appetites and passions of the body have been figuratively conceptualized in Persian verse throughout the centuries.

The use of the Arabic word *nafs* in Persian might be rendered into English simply as “ego,” but depending on the context it can also mean self, soul, essence, life, carnal desire, passion, or—literally—penis. Writing in the fourteenth century, ʿAbd al-Razzaq Kashani described *nafs* as “a phrase defining the pure, vapor-like essence that carries the power of life, senses, and motor-skills...called animal spirit.” Ultimately a Neoplatonic concept, *nafs* could be understood as an essence contained in all things—from rocks to angels—with an intrinsic worth that increases with closer proximity to God, so that the human soul is inherently worthier than that of a cat, and a cat’s soul worthier than that of a beetle, which is in turn of a higher rank than that of a plant, and so forth. As already mentioned, at this stage of the journey the seeker must be wary of the “carnal soul,” the part of man that is shared by lower life forms. In the context of ʿAttar’s text, the complete subjugation of *nafs* is as a proto-id, as he is by the conventions of rhyme and meter, he plays with the language and emphasizes this explicit reference by stringing the word together with those for Satan, Pharaoh, and Haman—all standard allusions to *nafs* in its baser sense.

The notion of *nafs* as Satan (ʾShayṭān) is itself an allusion to a hadith of the Prophet, which relates, “There is not one of you who does not have the ʾShayṭān in him. They said, ‘And You, o Prophet of God?’ He said, ‘Even I, except that my Lord has helped me so that my ʾShayṭān has turned to Islām.’” Due to the repeated Qur’anic references to Moses’ ordeals with the evils of the ancient Egyptian “false god” (e.g., 7:103–141 and 28:2–10), the Pharaoh and, less often, Haman are regularly used in Sufi literature as metaphors for the disobeying and baser manifestations of *nafs* and the mischief caused by them. “Pharaoh” has been explicitly defined as an “allusion to vainglory and pride, to out-of-control *nafs*.” Haman, who is mentioned in the Qur’an (e.g., 40:24) as one of Pharaoh’s men, like his master refused to accept Moses’ God-given authority and accused him of being a lying magician. In light of all this, ʿAttar’s use of Moses as a metaphor (2980) is a fitting antonym that neutralizes what’s tolerated, as it were, by the Pharaoh and Haman of one’s *nafs*. In short, the text of the *Mantiq al-tayr* is as explicit as can be in stating the thesis for this whole section: *gar tū rā nafṣ...buwād* (if you have [any] *nafs*...remaining [in you]), then it follows that *dar tū firʿawwān...buwād* (you [still] have some [qualities of the infidel] Pharaoh in you). After this diagnostic statement encapsulates the “problem,” the text continues its explication by offering the “prescription” for the sufferer. The prescriptive, as will become clearer presently, is exactly what animates the images in the foreground of “The Bearded Man Drowning.”

It is clear, then, that the nexus between the text and the image is the carnal soul: the word itself—*nafs*—and the metaphors alluding to it—Satan, Pharaoh, and Haman—all appear in ʿAttar’s text to help him state the thesis of this particular parable. The image of the firewood, an extension of the Pharaoh metaphor, strewn about the lower half of the miniature in bunches and piles, is the pictorial representations of *nafs* in the painting. The conventions of Sufi poetry corroborate this link. The use of the phrase “firewood of Pharaoh” is common enough in Sufi literature to warrant its own entry in literary lexicons, where it is defined as “carnal cravings.”

Having already dealt with several attributes of carnal desire earlier in his narrative, ʿAttar is now addressing worldly desires of a more complicated sort. Aside from ignorance, lust, and envy, our carnal souls will also be lured by a phenomenal world that can co-opt and subvert the disciplinary mechanisms we adopt to restrict it. In this case, the supposedly religious man’s conceit is exposed when his beard, while evincing the extent of his devotion, itself becomes a problem, unknownst to him, until it is perhaps too late. A seeker (ṣālik) must be ever so vigilant, making sure that all concerns with the phenomenal world and worldly possessions are eliminated from his or her soul. Seen in this light, the image of the dead trunks and branches about to be hauled away on the back of a donkey begins to take on a new meaning. Rumi’s *Mevnovî* abounds in similar metaphors, even with verses that pair “Pharaoh” with “firewood”:...
How ruined a cursed ego would make you,  
Would throw you off course fast and far.  
Your fire lacks the firewood of the Pharaoh;  
Otherwise it would blaze like the Pharaoh’s.

Despite the nuances in reception of such verses by various readers over time—as is obvious from numerous works of commentary on Rumi’s *Masnavi*—the refer- 
ent for Pharaoh and firewood almost always remains intact. The same tropes with the same connotations vis-à-vis the carnal self had been used by ṬAttar in the *Musibatnāma*:

> ۪س مرا فرعون نفس هست نيز ۫کو ندارد جز شهادت هیچ چيز
> 
> Then I also have a pharaoh in my soul,  
> Which has nothing left but to profess the faith.

In the *Mantiq al-tayr* ṬAttar uses imagery that is suggestive of a variation on what is depicted in the foreground of “The Bearded Man Drowning.” It comes after the prologue, when the birds have begun to gather. As Francolin is being welcomed, we read the following lines:

> نفس را همچون خر عیسی بسوز ۫پس چویعیسی جان شووجان برفرورز
> 
> (36, 644-45)

> Burn the carnal self, like the donkey of Jesus that it is,  
> Then, like Jesus, ignite your spirit for the Beloved.

Referring to the beast that carried Jesus to Jerusalem, “the donkey of Jesus” has allowed Sufi poets to oppose the negative attributes of the donkey to the positive attributes of its rider, who exemplifies a perfect soul. Rumi is fond of contrasting the two:

> هیه به هر مستی دالرغه مشو ۫هست عیسی مست حق خر مست جو
> 
> Behold, o heart! Do not get false hopes with every intoxication:

Jesus is drunk with Truth, his donkey drunk with barley.

But even without reference to Jesus, the donkey remains a stand-in for carnal desires, as in ṬAttar’s *Asrānāma*: “The kind of nature a donkey has is due to abundant dry wood,” or, in the *Musibatnāma*:

طبع خر داری نگویم مردمت ۫جوخورای خرای دریغای گذمتم

You have the nature of an ass; I will not call you human. Eat barley, you donkey! Wheat is too good for you.

Or, as Rumi later writes,

نفس ما را صورت خر بده او ۫زانهک صورت تها کد بر وافق خو

Our carnal soul is given the visage of a donkey by Him  
So that it might appear in conformity to our nature.
ily took advantage of the imagery available in these literary sources.

So the abundant appearance of firewood in the painting is directly related to the overarching issue being addressed in the textual passage, namely that of the carnal soul. But what are we to make of the tree, or what seems to remain of one, whose branch is being sawed off in the lower half of “The Bearded Man Drowning”? Although visually it is linked to the firewood—it is the source of at least one pile on the ground, if not both—there is no mention of any tree in the text, at least not literally.

Unlike the Pharaoh or Moses, “the tree” is not an allusion or metaphor developed within Persian poetry as it evolved throughout the centuries; rather it is a direct reference to verse 35 of the sura al-Nūr in the Qur’an. Kashani understands the “blessed olive tree” (shajarat al-ṣayyūna) mentioned in this Qur’ānic passage, which is the most pivotal template of Sufi ideology, as a specific reference to the kind of nafs possessed by humans: an intermediary between mind and body.71 Sometimes this “blessed olive tree” is also understood as the “tree of humanity.”72

As mentioned above, other than the carnal soul, which signifies passions such as lust, the concept of nafs also includes the idea of the soul in the medieval Christian sense—that is, the undying spirit of man, which other animals lack, and which in us is worth saving (or damning). ‘Attar’s counsel on the need for curbing one’s carnal desires in this passage does not concern an absolute beginner, who first and foremost must bring his or her unregenerate (ammāra) soul under control. Several attributes of this state are addressed in the earlier question-and-answer episodes of the Manṭiq al-tayr, where an anecdote about copulating foxes, for example, rebukes one of man’s baser drives (112, 2023–26). Didactic poetry often advocates “killing” this particular carnal desire altogether, a trope that ‘Attar himself uses on occasion.75 At a later station (maqām), the seeker must contend with his or her reproachful (lavwāma) soul, one that is desirous of a whole array of worldly needs that remain even when the baser desires are eliminated. At a later stage still, the soul is in a state where all becomes tranquil (mutma’ina).74

What we encounter in the episode about the drowning fool and his beard is an explication and rebuke aimed at a Sufi devotee who has become complacent and presumptuous. At this stage, it is the censuring soul (nafs-i lavwāma) that is of concern. In the text, the beard is a stand-in for frivolous worldly preoccupations. ‘Attar, playing with the double meaning of ṭısh as “beard” and “lesion,” advocates warring against it (2981), abandoning it (2982), or making it one’s concern (2983), but never, either directly or implicitly by the use of common tropes such as ṭıshkan (uprooting), does he suggest eliminating it. It is by overcoming this stage that the soul will achieve, in turn, tranquility, content, subtlety, and finally perfection.75 The end goal of drowning in the “sea of unity,” often conveyed through the image of the drop of water merging with the ocean, is, of course, the ideal ultimate desire, but such a drowning is metaphorical.76 The “fool” in ‘Attar’s anecdote may not be drowning literally, but he is certainly not going to achieve annihilation in the “ocean of oneness” unless he abandons his worldly concerns.77 The fool’s problematic drowning is a variation on the prototypical Qur’ānic story in which Pharaoh, who did not listen to Moses’ call to faith, drowned in the Red Sea.78

For Sufism the human soul is perfectible, and it is in this sense that the tree mentioned in the Qur’an often symbolizes that soul. The allusion to the Almighty as “gardener,” though not very common, does occur in Sufi poetry.79 Such an analogy is predicated on the idea of the human soul as a tree in need of care.80 Rumi’s figurative language, as we have already seen in another example above, at times seems to describe more of what the Herati painters may have had in mind:81

باغبان زان می برد شاخ مضر
تا یابند نخل قامت ها و بر

The gardener cuts off the harmful branch
So that the tree can gain height and fruit.82

Elsewhere Rumi even combines the metaphor of firewood with our carnal bodies and the need for removing from ourselves this fuel, which serves no purpose except to feed the fires of hell:

هیزم دوزخ تن است وکم کنش
وربودهیزمی زورنکش

Firewood of hell is the body: trim it,
And should more firewood sprout, remove it.83

The verse of the poet ‘Abd al-Rahman Jami, who was a contemporary of the artists at the court of Sultan Husayn Bayqara, and whose works had a great influence
on their artistic imagination, also utilizes the concept of carnal needs as branches or firewood:

وَقَالَ يَا بَنِي عَادَ، يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ عِنْدَ الْمَلَائِكَةِ مَنْ كَانَ شَكَرًا

O you who like the branch of a plant are attached to

You who are moved by the wind of carnal desires

and

وَقَالَ يَا بَنِي هَيْدَرِ السَّبأَةَ وَلَيْسَ مِنْهُ شَيْءٌ مِّنْ مَوْتٍ

He has gone to hell, don’t follow him.

Don’t become the firewood of hell like him.

and again, as if describing what the painters had in mind,

شَجَاعُ الْجَوْفِ بَرْغَةٍ أَرْضَى أَنْدَرَخَتْ مَيْوَةَ دَارٍ

What is a branch without leaves on a fruit-bearing tree?

If it does not bear fruit, it is nothing but firewood.

Related to all this is the dark-skinned man standing behind the donkey on the lower right, whose earring suggests that he is a slave (ghulam or hindu). Anecdotally, such a stereotypical character in Persian literature (e.g., the story in Rumi’s Magnavat of the hindu slave who secretly lusted after his master’s daughter) is often used to signify a person with base morals or an outright infidel in need of conversion. By his depiction next to the firewood and the donkey, the slave is clearly implicated and no doubt expected to exit the picture leading the mule and its load (see line 2982, above).

The depictions of the donkey, the slave, the tree being trimmed, and the firewood in the lower half of “The Bearded Man Drowning” can indeed be described as a gloss, as earlier studies of this painting have suggested, but it is a gloss not of the image from the upper half of the painting but rather of ‘Attar’s own complex system of imagery. Intertextually, Moses and the Pharaoh as well as firewood and the donkey are all part of the discourse of Sufism. Just as in ‘Attar’s figurative language, the lower half of the painting is meant to advocate resolve, in order that the seeker eliminate all traces of earthly desire associated with the carnal soul.

Perhaps due to the striking blue color of his robe, the final figure in the lower half of “The Bearded Man Drowning” draws greater attention than the rest. This man, with a gray-white beard and a skullcap, is shown sitting on a rock just to the right of the vertical center of the painting. In the context of contemporary Herat, he represents not just any man but rather a dervish, or Sufi master.

A common ritual performed by virtually all Sufi orders during the late fifteenth century was zikr, or remembrance and recollection of God. As a form of meditation, zikr typically requires that the pupil or spiritual disciple (murid) repeat at least part of the profession of faith (la ilaha illa Allah) a specific number of times throughout the day, and in a particular manner. The Naqshbandi order, to which many members of the court and the leading artists of Herat belonged, is almost unique in having the silent zikr at the center of its pupils’ training; members of almost all other Sufi orders engaged in the loud zikr, sometimes accompanied with music. Togan points out that Naqshbandi insistence upon the silent form of zikr for its murids can be traced back no further than the second half of the fifteenth century, and was mainly due to growing emphasis on the authority of the Sufi shaykhs (sing. murid) over their pupils. In fact, however, the gradual shift towards sanctioning the silent zikr appears not to have taken firm root until nearly a century after the execution of “The Bearded Man Drowning.”

The point of all this, relative to “The Bearded Man Drowning,” is that the seated shaykh in the blue robe and the younger man to the left engaged in sawing off the tree branch are manifestations that signify the kind of meditation practiced by Naqshbandi initiates called “the sawing meditation” (zikr-i arra). This ritual, named after the heavy sounds made by its practitioners, is a type of loud zikr that later became associated with the Rifa‘i dervishes. The saving zikr was allegedly begun by Ahmad Yasavi (d. 1166), whose student under Yusuf al-Hamadani, a shaykh in the chain of leadership of what later came to be called the Naqshbandi Sufi order. Yasavi became one of Hamadani’s leading disciples (khalifas), and his vocal sawing seems to have had a lasting influence over the Naqshbandis, the order to which he originally belonged, even though he formed his own Central Asian Yasaviyya order. Togan, citing Joseph Fletcher and the sixteenth-century Naqshbandi Sufi Khoja Ahmad Kasani,
suggests that although the Naqshbandi leaders preferred the silent \( \text{zikr} \), the sawing \( \text{zikr} \) was still both acceptable and practiced more than fifty years after the Herati images were painted.\(^{101}\) Apparently, the use of vocal \( \text{zikr-i arra} \) was deemed especially helpful for new initiates.\(^{102}\)

It is important to emphasize that the dervish in blue is not engaged in \( \text{zikr} \). His particular pose is unlike those associated with the rituals of meditation. Both he and the younger man who is sawing are depicted open-eyed and directly in each other’s line of vision, as though gazing at each other. The eyes of the dervish suggest that he is occupied solely with watching the young man who is sawing a branch off the tree in front of him. Baha’ al-Din Naqshband himself is supposed to have taught that the pupil “must not turn his face to anything in this world except to the master who will take him to the Presence of God.” According to him, there are three ways that “those who know” (i.e., Sufi masters) attain their knowledge: contemplation, vision, and reckoning. The permission for the \( \text{zikr} \) must be given by the master, and the seeker must direct his heart toward the spiritual master.\(^{103}\)

Perhaps the most authoritative source on this point is the leading figure of the Naqshbandi order in Herat, the poet Jami.\(^{104}\) The influence of Jami’s literary imagination on the court painters of Herat, as exemplified by the depiction of Zulaykha’s palace in an illustration of the \( \text{Bustan} \) of Sa’udi, may also help explain the depiction in the foreground of “The Bearded Man Drowning.”\(^{105}\) In the first book of his \( \text{Silsilat al-dhahab} \), Jami explicates his opinions on orthodox rituals as well as types of conduct associated with Sufism, such as asceticism, solitude (\( \text{khalwat} \)) and meditation (\( \text{zikr} \))—both the “manifest” \( \text{zikr} \) (\( \text{jalt} \)), and the silent \( \text{zikr} \) (\( \text{khaft} \)).\(^{106}\) Writing on the virtues of these two methods of meditation, Jami seems to be an advocate of silent meditation (\( \text{zikr-i khaft} \)):

\[
\text{ذکر گنج است و گنج پنهان به جهید کن داد ذکر پنهان ده به زبان گنگ شو باطلب خاموش نیست محرم درین معامله گوش.}
\]

\( \text{Zikr} \) is a treasure, and treasure is better kept hidden. Make an effort, do justice to the hidden \( \text{zikr} \). Be dumb in your tongue, silent in your lips; One’s ear is not a confidant in this transaction.\(^{107}\)

After expounding on the benefits of \( \text{zikr} \), including the orthographic significance of \( \text{lā ilāha illā Allāh} \),\(^{108}\) which the initiate is required to recite repeatedly during \( \text{zikr} \), Jami condemns noisy public meditations, characterized by singing (\( \text{avāz} \)) and dancing (\( \text{raqs} \)). He does this by devoting a whole section to “reproaching” those who organize and partake in such exhibitionism in what he entitles:

در منمت آنان که به جهید اجتماع عوام و استجابه مناقص معاش از ایشان مجالس آرایند و به سبيل جهید و اعلام به ذکر حق سبحان و تعالی استغال نمایند

On the reproach of those who, in order to gather common people and gain another means of livelihood, populate their assemblies with them and openly and publicly engage with \( \text{zikr} \) of the Almighty, Glory be to His Highness.\(^{109}\)

This is followed by an illustrative anecdote in which the term “saw” (\( \text{arra} \)) is itself implicated in Jami’s condemnation:

حلقة از صوت پر خراش درد

\( \text{گرند نوق را به اره برده} \)

His throat gets torn by the harsh sound; He cuts the neck of joy with a saw.

However, a bit further on (line 514), Jami also censures those who place their heads on their knees in a sitting position and do not make sounds or noises with their breath.\(^{110}\)

\[
\text{…those who claim to conduct their \( \text{zikr} \) in their hearts and assume the outward appearances of such practice and consider it to be silent \( \text{khaft} \) \( \text{zikr} \) but don’t know that it also has the same command as the public \( \text{zikr} \), and in fact even public \( \text{zikr} \) would be better than this, because at least in public \( \text{zikr} \) the essence of meditation is investigative...unlike the silent \( \text{zikr} \).}
\]

Finally (lines 575–617), Jami explains that his real intention is to condemn neither the silent nor the loud \( \text{zikr} \) but only to reproach those who abuse such practices for carnal pleasures, and that to be delivered from self-involvement and selfishness is impossible except in the service of a \( \text{pīr} \) (a spiritual guide, shaykh, or \( \text{murshid} \), but literally an old man).
Shaykh Mahna, in great sadness, 
Went to the wilderness, with anguished heart and 
eyes bloodshot with tears. 
He saw from a distance an old peasant 
Driving a cow: he shone with light. 
The Shaykh went toward him and said hello and 
Explained to him the condition of his great sadness. 
(184, 3303–5)

This story about Shaykh Mahna is one among several anecdotes used by the protagonist (the Hoopoe is no longer mentioned by name) to describe the first of the seven valleys on the way to Mount Qaf.119

The Herati painters of “Shaykh Mahna and the Old Peasant,” have depicted melons clustered in the upper half of the painting, not unlike the firewood in “The Bearded Man Drowning.” To the left, behind the seated man in green, we can see one mass of them; they are of the variety identifiable as kharbuza. More of the same variety can be seen piled into a pan of the scale held by the standing man in the upper center. The seated man in green is also holding one such melon in his hand. This image of country people weighing and apparently selling melons bears no apparent relation to ‘Attar’s anecdote about Shaykh Mahna.

Again, any comprehensive approach to deciphering this painting must consider the theme of ‘Attar’s anecdote. At this point in the narrative, the cycle of questions and answers deals with the details of the actual journey to Mount Qaf. The story of Shaykh Mahna belongs to a section in which ‘Attar, having enumerated the seven valleys through which the birds must travel, uses parables and anecdotes to explain the first of them, the Valley of the Quest (talab). The problem under discussion here is the need for volition on the part of the seeker to seek, to know, and to become one with the Beloved. In this first stage on the path to Sufism, through the Valley of the Quest, the seeker must be eager in his pursuit; as ‘Attar writes:

سرطلب گردد ز مشتاقی خوشیش

(181, 3244)

Your head will turn to the quest from your own eagerness.

and

مرد پايد کزطلب در انتظار
هرزما نی جان کند در ره نتار

(183, 3285)

What we see in the lower half of “The Bearded Man Drowning” alludes to a seeker who is engaged in the “saw” meditation: he is “rejecting evil whisperings and the ego’s insinuations” under the supervision of his Sufi shaykh, his pir.114 In other words, what we see is the young (beardless) pupil or seeker (murid), who is in effect performing the “saw meditation” — literally and figuratively, that is, manifestly and metaphorically — under the gaze of his Sufi shaykh; all the while, he does not turn his face to anything in this world except his master. As mentioned earlier, this is exactly what ‘Attar’s text prescribes. The image of the young man sawing the last branch off the tree is a pictorial allusion both to the concerns raised by ‘Attar’s text and to a contemporary practice that addresses such concerns — the sawing zikr.

Seen in the historical context of late-fifteenth-century Herat, where the practice of composing elaborate riddles such as acrostics, chronograms, and enigmas was an obsession, it seems only appropriate that the artists of this and the other two miniatures in the Mantiq al-tayr would also indulge in a bit of pictorial riddlemaking.115 In fact, contemporary accounts reveal that Mir ‘Ali Shir Nava‘i — the friend, confidant, and “foster brother” of Husayn Bayqara, who may well have been the patron of this manuscript — coveted riddles, especially enigmas (mu‘ammât).116 Whoever the patron and whatever the particulars of the commission, the general disposition favoring riddles at this “center of literary and artistic life” would be perfectly in line with the composing of enigmatic illustrations.117

The notion of pictorial riddle also comes to mind given certain depictions in the last original painting in the manuscript, the nexus between whose enigmatic elements and ‘Attar’s accompanying text corroborates the analogous relationship in “The Bearded Man Drowning.” This miniature, “Shaykh Mahna and the Old Peasant”118 (fig. 3), illustrates ‘Attar’s anecdote about the two named characters but again contains unexplained figures and details that begin to make more sense in relation to the content of ‘Attar’s text. Here too we have a divided picture, half of which — in this case, the lower half — depicts literally the events described in the anecdote about Shaykh Mahna:

پیر چون یافته‌ی زوج مگسل
ورنک یکم زجستوج مگسل

If you find a pir do not detach from him; 
If not, do not cease your search for him.115

(183, 3285)
Fig. 3. Shaykh Mahna and the old peasant. Folio 49v from an illustrated manuscript of the *Manṭiq al-ṭayr* of ‘Attar, ca. 1487. Ink, opaque watercolor, silver, and gold on paper. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1963.210.49. (Photo © 1986 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art)
In anticipation of the quest, a man must
Bequeath his life on the path at any time.

However, the anecdote about the old peasant giving advice to Shaykh Mahna is specifically about a concern that is collateral to the quest, namely, patience (sabr). The tālibān, or seekers, must possess limitless patience if they want their quest to come to fruition. As the enlightened old peasant tells Shaykh Mahna:

طايلب را صبر مي بايد بسي
طالب صابر نه افتد هر كسي

(185, 3311)

Much is the patience that seekers need;
Not every one can be a patient seeker.

The necessity of patience, repeated by mystics and poets in thousands of homilies such as “Only through patience does the fruit become sweet,” is well known to the students of Persian and Sufi poetry. The word for patience, sabr, also designates aloe, a plant known for its bitter taste. The compound name for kharbuza melons. Rumi exalts the whole field of sweetness. Sadi in his Gulistān satirizes corrupt judges who used as an antonym for both sourness and bitterness.

The image at the upper right of a third man, who holds a large, empty bag, may help us understand the painters’ own sort of wordplay with bitter “patience” (sabr) and the sweet taste of kharbuza melons. It is easy to accept that this man is depicted as either waiting or seeking (tālab): leaning slightly forward, he holds the bag open, as though ready for it to be filled. Without taking into account the significance of other details in the painting and their relations to the text—such as ‘Attar’s specific reference to idols (185, 3318) and its relation to the Buddha-like figure seated under the tree next to the leashed dog—we may construct the following narrative involving the image of the three men in the upper half of “Shaykh Mahna and the Old Peasant”: a man is waiting patiently for his fill of “sweet taste” (as kharbuza could be translated literally), or until the bitter (sabr) taste of waiting with patience (sabr) is recompensed with a bag of sweet melons (kharbuza). One can imagine that the depiction of melons and what they allude to would have been much more pleasant to decipher for residents of Herat, a city closer in proximity to Bukhara and Khwarazm, regions supposedly known for cultivation of this particular melon.

Alternatively, we can see the waiting man as a seeker (tālib), seeking (tālab) cantaloupes (tālib) in the Valley of the Quest (tālab), for the Herati painters have, in fact, depicted at least two varieties of melon in this painting. Among the cluster of melons on the left, behind the seated man in green, the uppermost melon visible is distinctly different from the rest. This round, beige, corrugated melon resembles a variety of cantaloupe, the Persian word for which—tālib—is a homonym of that for “a seeker.” Three anecdotes earlier in this same section of the Makīt al-tayr, when ‘Attar describes the Valley of the Quest, we read, that is, “You must seek thus, if [you are] a seeker [tālib]” (182, 3271). In Persian this pun sounds indistinguishable from, “you must seek thus, if [it is] a cantaloupe.” The addition of this kind of melon to the pile may have been a pictorial pun: the fact that tālab, tālib, or tālibān (quest, seeker, or seekers)
occurs eight times in the story about Shaykh Mahna may well have caused the artists to make an association with “cantaloupe” (tālibī), leading to yet another pictorial play in the depiction of the text. An account of a banquet attended by dignitaries and artists in contemporary Herat at which the local literati engaged in flights of ribaldry and bawdy rhetorical exchanges is replete with verbal examples of such sophisticated repartees and puns.128 It is clear, at any rate, that word association lurks behind the iconographic program for “Shaykh Mahna and the Old Peasant,” just as it does for “The Bearded Man Drowning.”

Maria Eva Subtelny has traced the evolution of literary genres and tastes that culminated in verbal puzzles of various types becoming “something of the rage” in Herat during the last decades of the fifteenth century.129 If “riddle-like verse forms,” such as the enigmas presented at court banquets or other forums for rhetorical exchange, were so complicated “that the solution was often provided beforehand,” then the allusions made by the images in the lower half of “The Bearded Man Drowning,” and the upper half of “The Funeral Procession” and “Shaykh Mahna and the Old Peasant,” must have seemed delightful and comparatively easy to decipher.130 Certainly these images were an acceptable form of “pictorial acrobatics.”

The selective adaptation of the received Timurid painting conventions that led to the appearance of the “new style” in Persian miniatures without disturbing the basic mechanisms of continuity in Persian manuscript illustration seems ultimately linked to Sufi literary discourse in late-fifteenth-century Herat. The poetic genealogy of Sufi verse is a rich tradition of metaphorical and figurative language from which, as I have argued, Herati artists, consciously or otherwise, seem to have appropriated certain tropes for pictorial depiction. I have also suggested that the practices of the vastly influential contemporary Sufi order, the Naqshbandiyya, inspired the painters’ imaginations, notably in their proclivity for details. In particular, my close study of the images in the foreground of “The Bearded Man Drowning” confirms what the cursory analysis of the other two contemporary paintings also indicates: that the three paintings in the Metropolitan Museum Manʿiq al-ʿayr contain pictorial wordplays analogous, but not identical, to the verbal allusions of the text they accompany. That a similar approach to images in other manuscripts will affect the ways we understand the iconography of Persian manuscript painting during subsequent decades is an exciting prospect awaiting future studies.

Columbia University

NOTES

1. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fletcher Fund, 63.210. The date specified by a formula in the colophon of the manuscript has been variously interpreted as 888 (1483) and 892 (1487); see Ebadullah Bahari, Biḥzad: Master of Persian Painting (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), 48–49.


5. Accession no. 63.210.44, fol. 44r.


7. Unless otherwise stated, all verses from the Manʿiq al-Ṭair are quoted from ʿAṭāʾī, Manʿiq al-Ṭair, ed. Sayyid Sadiq Gūharīn (Tehran: Intishārāt-i ʿIlm va Farhang, 1381/2003), followed by the page and line numbers. English translations are mine unless otherwise noted. For an excellent English translation, see that of Darbandi and Davis (cited in n. 3, above), 152–53.

8. This verse is worded exactly as it appears on the upper left side of the painting.

9. Rish can mean either “beard” or “wound, injury.”


12. Accession no. 63.210.35, fol. 35r. Milstein states that the artists of such illustrations have abandoned “the narrative event” and painted “scenes irrelevant to the progression of the actual story but reflecting a spiritual condition or stage on the Sufi path.” However, as I argue here, ʿAṭāʾī’s narrative, including all the various anecdotes, is about spiritual conditions and stages on the Sufi path. See Rachel Milstein, “Sufi Elements in the Late Fifteenth-Century Painting of Herat,” in Studies


14. As Bādī’ al-Zāmān Fūrūzānfar points out, the Hoopoe’s answers to the questions about the Path are sometimes “defective and unacceptable.” Here, for example, it is unclear whether the questioner, who uses the excuse of death to forgo the journey, is afraid of natural death or of a metaphorical death related to the required abandonment of the mundane ways of life. It is unclear why the risk of natural death is any greater for a Sufi initiate than a layperson, yet both Fūrūzānfar and Helliμ Ritter treat ‘Attar’s reference to death in this passage literally, not metaphorically. See Bādī’ al-Zāmān Fūrūzānfar, *Shark-i aḥvāl va naqd va tāhlīl āḏār-i Shaykh Fāvīd al-Dīn Muḥammad ‘Attār-i Nishābūrī* (Tehran: Dīlkhūdā Publishers, 1555/1974), 317 and 374; Helliμ Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul: Men, the World, and God in the Stories of Farūd al-Dīn ‘Attar*, trans. John O’Kane (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), 42.


21. Ibid.


24. ‘Attār in his *Musībatnāma* associates oil lamps with life:

می ترستی کای چراغ زود مر
زود مرده گر توانی زود گیر
گریمیده یی چراغ تلگی
ره بساردند افی درجه
چون چراغ تو بمرد ای بی خبر
نه نشان مادئ آزو ننه اثر


تنت دمیست یان مر غریزه‌ست
نافذ دنیا یان تا خود همه‌چنست


40. Ibid., 164, ll. 2953ff.

41. Ibid., 167, l. 2993.

42. Rūk can mean “heard” or “wound,” a verbal pun (*ībām*) by ‘Attār.

43. *Pārvā means “care,” “fear,” or “concern.”


45. See Ritter’s rendition of this anecdote in *Ritter, Ocean of the Soul*, 355.

46. Golombek, “Classification of Islamic Painting,” 27.

47. Sîrût Shamsî, *Farhang-i ishârît-i adabiyâr-i Farsî: Asâtîr, sūsn,
تا غرفشود در آب فروعن هوی
فرعونی مبن‌ه دست فروعن‌ه‌

Until this pharaoh of lust drowns in the water
Give my “Pharaohness” to the Pharaoh.


50. Shamîs, Farhang-i ishârât-i adabîyât-i Farsî, 781.

51. 'Attâr, Mantiq al-tâyîr, ed. Gûharînî, 332 (explanatory note for l. 2979).


56. Rûmî, Ma'navî-i Ma'nîvî, bk. 3, II, 974–75.

57. For example, see Rûmî, Ma'navî, 6 vols., ed. Muhammad Istîlâmî (Tehran: Zavvâr, 1360/1990), vol. 3, 262.


60. Rûmî, Ma'navî-i Ma'nîvî, bk. 4, l. 2692.

61. 'Attâr, Naqqashîn, 169.

62. 'Attâr, Mushbahnâmâ, 85.

63. Rûmî, Ma'navî-i Ma'nîvî, bk. 5, l. 1394.


65. Schimmel, Two-Colored Brocade, introduction.


67. Thomas W. Lentz, and Glenn D. Lowry, Timur and the Princely Vision: Persian Art and Culture in the Fifteenth Century (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1989), 251–53 and 285, where the authors state that poets and artists of this period “were expected to know the work of earlier masters and to be able to incorporate minor details and entire compositions from the past.” Also see Basl Gray, “Timurid Pictorial Arts,” in The Cambridge History of Iran, 7 vols. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1968–91), vol. 6, The Timurid and Safavid Periods, 889; Melikian-Chirvani, “Khvâjeh Mirak Naqqâsh,” 134.

68. Kâshânî, Istâlîhât al-sâfîyâ, 144.

69. Sâyîdî, Farhang-i istâlîhât, 381. W. C. Chittick points out that

70. In the theophany of Ibn ‘Arabi, and thence of Jami, the [perfect] individual as an example of a manifestation of God is symbolized by the tree: see W. C. Chittick, “The Perfect Man As the Prototype of the Self in the Sufism of Jâmi,” Studia Islamica 49 (1979): 155.


75. On the “Primordial Ocean,” see Rîter, Ocean of the Soul, 631.

76. Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions, 113.


80. The gardener is also used as a metaphor for the sorrowful Sufi in need of seeing his “garden,” as in this couplet by Jâmî, “O God, please do not hold so much back from the gardener, so that I can have one look at the newly blooming garden of mine”; see Sâyîdî, Farhang-i istâlîhât, 692, Jâmî, especially in his Subhât al-abrâr, makes repeated references to trees and uses the expression shaghâra-dîl (tree of the heart), apparently with the idea that the Beloved should, as the gardener or otherwise, tend to his heart: see Nûr al-Dîn 'Abd al-Rahmân Jâmî-i Khurâsânî, Ma'navî-i haft awrang, ed. Mutâzâd Mudârîs Gilânî (Tehran: Kitâbûrûsh-î Sa’dî, 1361/1982), 462, 467.

81. Parenthetically, the poet Jâmî, who was an influential Naqshbandî leader and a friend of Mir 'Ali Shir Nâvâ'i as well as of the Timurid sultan, is recorded on one occasion to have been mistaken specifically for a hizam-kash (firewood carrier) due to his clothes and personal appearance. See ‘Ali Shir Nâvâ'i, Divân-i Mir ‘Ali Shir Nava’î-i fənti, ed. Rûkîn al-Dîn Majîr al-Mûrçî, 3 vols. (Tehran: Daftar-i Mûrçî-i Maktûb, 1378/1999), 76.

82. Ibid., bk. 5, l. 1394.


85. Jâmî, Haft awrang; see Sâlamûn va aâbhâ, 444, l. 1045.


87. Rûmî, Ma'navî-i Ma'nîvî, bk. 6, II, 249–352.
See also “The Tale of an Indian King,” Attar, Maniq al-Tayr, ed. Gharari, 149–50, ll. 2667–85.

It is possible to see in almost any image what Melikian-Chirvani, “Khwaje Mirak Naqqash,” calls “the perishable character of life in the transient world.” This observation has been repeated by others, as most recently, Eleanor Sims, Peerless Images: Persian Painting and Its Sources (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 168. Regarding the artist of these illustrations, Melikian-Chirvani writes, “Il témoigne de la connaissance approfondie qu’a l’artiste de l’oeuvre d’Attar et de sa démarche dans la voie soufie. Comme les choix précédents, celui-ci confirme son indifférence foncière à l’égard du contenu narratif.” “Khwaje Mirak Naqqash,” 126–28, 132.


For other depictions of Sufis in a similar pose, see “A Seated Sufi Hugging His Knees,” Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 57.51.30, reproduced in Sims, Peerless Images, 259, fig. 174. Also see reproductions in Muhammad Khaz’in, Elksir of Painting: A Collection of Works by Masters of Islamic Painting and a Review of the Schools of Painting, from “Mongol” to “Safavid” (Tehran: The Art Bureau of the Islamic Propagation Organization, 1989), 424, fig. 286; 323, figs. 284, 285.


Trimingham, Sufi Orders in Islam, 194.


Netton, Sufi Ritual, 266; Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions, 366.


By 1550, but even then “also giving a place to the vocal one”: ibid., 32.

Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions, 176; Trimingham, Sufi Orders in Islam, 197.

Trimingham, Sufi Orders in Islam, 54, 58–60.

Togan, “Controversy in Central Asia,” 32–33.

Ibid., 97, n. 35.

Kabbani, Naqshbandi Sufi Way, 207.


Jamī, Haft awrang; see Siyāsah al-dhahab, 80, ll. 405–6.

Jamī refers to the tā’ in the Profession of Faith as “two sappings,” conjuring the image of what is being sawed in the painting. See Jamī, Haft awrang: Siyāsah al-dhahab, 78, l. 369.

Ibid., section heading on 82.

Ibid., 83, 464.


Accession no. 63.210.49, fol. 49v.

In earlier centuries it was held that there were seven stations (maqâmāt) on the path of Sufism, in addition to ten states (ahuwāl). The names and numbers of these varied and changed over time. See ‘Attar, Maniq al-tayr, ed. Gharari, 333, n. 3225.

Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions, 124.


Ibid., 669.

Rūmī, Maqāmāt Mu’ānavī, bk. 2, l. 1517.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

Ibid., 613, l. 1106.

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