

Borders

Itineraries on the Edges of Iran

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Crossing Borders

Iranian Landscapes as Visual Prototypes around the World

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Abstract Some of the typical features of the Iranian landscape are described, together with the ways in which the author came across them on his many journeys in Iran. The presence of the same features in other countries is then described as evidence of the universal nature of some elements of the Iranian landscape which, in this sense, extends outside the current borders. This theory is supported by 50 photos taken in Iran and in other parts of the world. The individual chapters in the article are prefaced by lines from the poetry of Mirzā 'Abdo 'l-Qāder Bidel (1644-1720), meant as an introduction to and evocation of the topics addressed.

Keywords Landscape. Iran. Bidel. Photography.

A man wishes to draw the world. Over the years he fills a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, vessels, islands, fish, houses, tools, stars, horses and people. Just before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines has traced the lineaments of his own face.

Jorge Luis Borges

We are the mirror to mirages of dreams, and there is no way out: the things we are shown always fit our own mode of earthly seeing.

Mirzā 'Abdo 'l-Qāder Bidel

My whole being was lost admiring the images that appeared,
if I look at myself in the mirror, my reflection is only wonder.

I first went to Iran in 1972, by car from Turkey, with my professor Gianroberto Scarcia. A firsthand knowledge of the country was indispensable

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preparation for the Persian language and literature courses that I had embarked on at the University of Venice. I was thus happy to receive lessons in the field by travelling far and wide on the Iranian plateau. The complex and long pondered encounter with the physical feel of the country (not only the geography but also the urban world, art and human relations) led to an extraordinary discovery. It was what made me confirm Persian as the linchpin of my studies, shaping my life to come. Of the many lessons I had on that introductory trip I was most deeply impressed by those on the landscape, both because of the novelty of the teaching method and the fascination of the subject. Everyday we would discuss the aesthetic quality and enjoyment of the various areas. But, most importantly, together we observed and I was taught how to look for the most significant scenes.

The infinite ocean of these visions knows no shore,
here they push out their boats into a sea like a mirror.

Something was made clear to me right from the start on that journey: the kind of landscape we were visiting, studying and enjoying was not only found within the borders of present-day Iran. It also extended into neighbouring countries. The natural continuation of the geography, however, had been violated by modern and often contrived, politically imposed boundaries. I was thus encouraged to see the physical-aesthetic territory as going beyond the state or administrative entities, which was comprehensible also because, although a new acquisition for a neophyte like myself, this geographical truth followed, in a certain way, the logic of history, as recorded in any handbook: Persian culture had expanded (also linguistically) over the centuries to go well beyond the current state set-up. In short, crossing borders in this region was a familiar concept and situation and, far from evoking dangers and threats, suggested superior, more uniform units.

Those bits of dream have gone to the world's four corners,
and the wonder of the mirror has filled emporia and markets.

In the same context I picked up another new and, this time, not yet fully comprehensible idea. My professor had alluded to the existence of two Iranian landscape 'satrapies' far outside the borders of the country and very distant from each other: the northern satrapy of Iceland and the southern satrapy of Yemen. Following the old Persian tradition, he used the administrative term satrapy to indicate the dependence of those two 'regions' on a central, dominant power. In other words, he implied that Iran had two distant remote provinces arranged according to the typical models of its own land. Only, in this case, the 'empire' was not a political empire but a landscape empire. The theory could certainly not be found in

any textbook and so seeking references to it was pointless. It was simply a very fascinating suggestion but with rather unusual, uncertain tones. What crystallized in my mind was the idea that the landscapes I saw in Iran also had distant appendices and peripheries. I had to discover them and determine their substance and form. I didn't immediately follow up this idea (I only went to Yemen ten years later and to Iceland twenty years later), but it always accompanied me on my subsequent excursions in Iran, which I continued to visit on a regular basis.

On seeing that great beauty, the onlooker's gaze is amazed and embellished:
beauty is reflected, and the pattern on the mirror is a weave of blooming petals.

After that experience in 1972, my travels, usually in the company of my professor, were concentrated in Iran for around ten years. It was love at first sight: my first true love for a foreign country, a deep love destined to last over time. Continually revisiting Iran certainly moulded my feeling for the landscape in a very powerful way. The various areas were so different that they satisfied a host of different aesthetic and emotional desires. You find a whole range of environments on the Iranian plateau: dense forests, humid rice paddies, desert plains with oases and palm trees, lake areas with cane thickets and others with brackish water, small groups of trees or isolated trees, rocky mountains, snow-clad in winter, gentle hills with lively colours, grass fields with brightly coloured bushes and flowers, grain fields that are green or golden according to the season, burnt-out expanses with almost surreal tones, and fresh valleys, with streams and trees, enclosed between bare, arid slopes. On my first guided visits, however, I was kept far away from some places in this complex universe. I was warned against landscape iconography considered to be more obvious and banal, and therefore I only made desultory visits to forests, rice paddies, palm trees and rocky mountains. My attention was drawn, on the other hand, to elements and contexts which were less conspicuous and more elusive: paths, solitary plants, clay walls, bushes, coloured lands, water patterns, desert crevices, small donkeys, clouds, some ruins and only an occasional human presence. This was a world made up of a few individual, clear-cut elements, each connected to the others in always evident and unequivocal multiple relationships. The backgrounds containing them were reminiscent of chessboards with only a few pieces left. In this essentialness, simply moving the viewpoint could change both the substance and the logic of the whole. The pictures were made of subjects and perspectives. It was not enough to discover a typical set of elements (for example, a road, low wall and tree). You also had to establish and define a frame with the right relationships between those elements (the horizontal road - to continue with the previous example - parallel and in front of the low wall from which the tree protrudes). Similar kinds of adjustments are necessary for

the success of any view, but in Iran they are absolutely crucial and are a basic factor in observation. Difficult to determine, these minimal shifts produce substantially different scenes. You have to follow a procedure that is similar to the very tricky operation when you search for the right perspective of reflections on a window pane: in this case, too, first you find the basic scene with the reflecting surface and subjects reflected, and then you adjust the vision with small, careful studied movements that give rise to the end result. An equally careful approach is required in observing these landscapes: it is an essential part of the overall aesthetic success.

Wonder is the language telling of the boldness of our secrets,
whoever is a mirror by instinct and nature will speak with looks.

It is clearly very difficult, if not impossible, to give a good idea of these landscapes in words, i.e. of the colours and forms of the various elements and backgrounds together with all the relations. Any verbal description turns out to be inadequate and, at most, can suggest a general picture without illustrating or conveying properly the values involved. It would be like claiming to try and make someone love a poem by paraphrasing it or by explaining its meaning without reading the original. On the other hand, the translation of a poem is usually considered as a plausible substitute for the source text. For those who can't read the original, this is the only possible means to become acquainted with a foreign poet's work. In the visual field a similar relationship can be established between a landscape and a photograph of it.

My heart becomes inflamed when I think of the ray coming from such beauty,
it is like a mirror that has the semblance of fire in the presence of the sun.

Taking photographs has always reminded me of translating. In both cases there is an original (the source text/observed scene) which, for the purposes of communicating to others, undergoes an inevitable change (the target text/photographed scene). There are also affinities in the practical choices: just as translation can be literal, free or even creative, so photography also has varying degrees of fidelity to the world represented, ranging from a documentary attitude to completely reworking the image, with all the intermediate degrees of touching up. The result obviously always depends on the skill and sensibility of the translator/photographer, but the quality of the original plays a key role: insignificant texts or scenes are more difficult to render. The parallel between the two activities can even be extended to the possibility of improving on the original or making it worse: according to their greater or lesser flair compared to the poets, translators make versions which can be more or less beautiful than the source texts, just as more or less skilful photographers deliver images

which can be more or less beautiful than the observed scenes. Over and above the final outcome, the set of these common features, however, rests on the presupposition that the translations and photographs are generally acknowledged as two operations capable of reproducing and conveying a copy which corresponds to the original and represents it.

There is no remedy, here dreams and illusions embrace us very tightly:
the heart is a mirror, and it cannot relinquish even one single reflection.

Photographs are thus an indispensable tool for documenting one's own convictions about landscape. This notion coincides with one of my inclinations when travelling: exploring and observing the world inevitably drives me to reproduce it in photographs. It's something I can never give up. I have often heard this need expressed by Abbas Kiarostami, again on the subject of Iran. The famous filmmaker's irresistible urge to photograph arises from the desire to share his feelings with others: discovering beauty and not being able to show that beauty is painful for him. His photographs of the Iranian landscapes, in other words, are the expression of an irrepressible need to communicate. He once told me that he regretted not being able to see the world in a rectangular shape, so that he could always be ready for the click of the camera. It was precisely after visiting so much of Kiarostami's Iran that the same need to document my travel experience with photographs took root in me. Indeed, now I find it painful when I come across beautiful views and can't record and share them. The camera has become an indispensable tool for my movements, almost a natural extension of my visual longing and visual faculty. All of this was in keeping with my gradual education about the landscape of the Iranian plateau. Learning how to observe coincided with my learning how to take photographs. As I mentioned above, this state of affairs lasted for around ten years: the time required to develop a specific, well-defined feeling for landscape inextricably bound to the features of the Iranian world as they had been taught to me. Only then did I begin to travel fairly frequently, no longer in the company of my professor, also outside Iran.

No matter where we turn our gaze, we find a mirror,
but it is only the view of beauty that reveals our traits.

Having absorbed models and categories, I started to wander round the world to search for and photograph them. This was a way of returning to the scholastic theory of the Iranian landscape 'satrapies', whose meaning I was gradually beginning to grasp. But with a difference that had formed over the years: the suggestion that I should look for traces of Iran in other countries had developed into the need to project an interior awareness outwards. I actually began to observe any landscape I encountered in the light

of my new education. This led me to search in all landscapes for the idea that I had constructed in my mind and spirit and which, by then, was no longer necessarily limited to the country that had generated it. I had been visiting Iran so much that a kind of conceptual landscape had become very familiar and I could gradually find it realized in other countries I went to: a single ideal prototype that fitted into multifaceted realities. My seeking matches for this prototype was driven by a mixture of need and pleasure, and observing and studying landscapes began to coincide with the search for an important part of myself. Photographs thus assumed the function of a kind of mirror, evoking the concept of 'equivalence' put forward by Alfred Stieglitz and then, among others, Minor White. They believed that photographs represent the expression of a feeling and that photographed landscapes are inevitably interior landscapes.

Amidst infinite appearances, don't ignore the only essence,
the mirrors placed in front of us are the fruit of our illusions.

My search was no longer directly inspired by the real nature of a country but by some of its paradigmatic forms. The many years of journeys throughout Iran, filtered in the light of continuous education, had turned into enchanted, essential traces – just as an expanse of brackish water, evaporating in the heat of the sun, leaves behind a few marvellous salt patterns. This testifies to a 'Persianness' that I had become sensitive to in Iran but that had then thoroughly taught me to rediscover its signs also outside Iran. It had taken the form of a universal constant that had soon made me respond only to its call. By binding myself forever to Iran I had, at the same time, created the conditions to free myself from its corporeality. The need for visions that had originated in that land began to be satisfied elsewhere and, paradoxically, I could almost stop going to Iran or begin to travel 'normally' there in search of those same views which I then found in other countries. In a certain sense, the world had become borderless. There had been a kind of landscape globalization: an aesthetic globalization fostered by a country which, in my cultural formation, had become a peaceful, unrivalled exporter of beauty.

No one understands the charmed patterns of the heart,
the drawings you see in the mirror are not by a painter.

Had I been a painter, I could have painted those visions from the closed space of a room without going round the world. But I am not a painter, and I am dependent on taking photographs. At least as an inevitable starting point. For creative purposes I can, however, resort to the new methods of postproduction photography. In this way I can process the images to satisfy the aesthetic criteria now built into my sensibility. Doing so I attempt to realize a presumptuous aspiration: give a helping hand to nature

to make the best of its potential landscapes when it seems to 'neglect' the quintessence of those places as I perceive it. At most, therefore, I can act as a kind of interpreter striving to complete reality, but certainly not like a real painter. In the case of the photographs presented here, there were very few and low-impact reworkings: some clouds made more rarefied, the line of the horizon lowered, a tree trunk highlighted, a sapling shifted and a few bushes eliminated. These alterations take nothing away from the reality of the places. They are possible variations – at other times and from other viewpoints – to the benefit of the overall suggestive power and uniformity of the proposed images.

If you want to make the phrases in the book of what you see clear,
you must wash every single page with the pure wonder of the mirror.

We might define this possibility of integrating photos as an extreme variation of the process of visualization theorized by Ansel Adams in the wake of Edward Weston's thinking: «The term visualization refers to the entire emotional-mental process of creating a photograph, and, as such, it is one of the most important concepts in photography. It includes the ability to anticipate a finished image before making the exposure, so that the procedures employed will contribute to achieving the desired result. This much of the creative process can be practiced and learned, beyond lies the domain of personal vision and insight, the creative 'eye' of the individual, which cannot be taught, only recognized and encouraged» (1980, p. 1). To my mind this is a valid theory, but requires updating in the light of the new 'procedures' possible in postproduction photography. A modern concept of visualization – i.e. still the capacity to envisage the final image in the initial frame – must also include those 'creative' reflections which, whether made on the spot or later, may then be used on the computer, possibly after further revision and honing. At this point the relationship will no longer be between the photographer and reality but between the photographer and photographed reality, with a consequent shift in sensibility. In short, the new technologies offer today's photographer that opportunity for reflection which authoritative artists once considered as significantly absent in photography. On this subject Henri Cartier-Bresson comments: «Of all the means of expression, photography is the only one that fixes a precise instant. We photographers deal in things that are continually vanishing, and, when they have vanished, it's impossible to bring them back to life. We certainly can't touch up the subject: the most we can do is choose from a series of images shot on a reportage. Writers can reflect before words take shape, before putting thoughts on paper; they can thus bring together several elements. There is also a period when their minds 'forget' and their unconscious works on classifying their thoughts. For us photographers, what has gone, has gone for ever. Hence the anxieties and strength of our

profession. We can't rework the story once we're back at the hotel. Our task consists in observing and recording reality in the sketchbook we call a camera without manipulating that reality, neither during the shoot nor in the darkroom. Such tricks are always noticed by anyone with a good eye» (1952, pp. 3-4 of the preface with non-numbered pages). Conditioned by the historical and technical contingencies of the time, these remarks obviously also now need to be updated. Michele Smargiassi is very clear on the subject: «The *awareness* of being able to resort to easy and powerful postproduction tools now alters *a priori* (much more than in the analogical era) the production plan of a photographic image. Right from the beginning, even before an image is captured, the digital photographer's working method includes the possibility of *improvement*. Cartier Bresson's 'decisive moment' can now be reconstructed at will on a monitor. But if this is the case, why go to such lengths to pursue it in the streets?» (2009, p. 41). Thus it is no longer a question of photographing a 'precise instant', as Cartier-Bresson put it in the passage quoted above, but of identifying that instant and then being capable of reproducing it adequately by resorting to all the existing technical means of photographic production and postproduction. In this way portraying that instant or its optimization may be staggered in time and its extempore capture may give way to subsequent processing. Consequently, the photograph becomes the thought-out rendering of an idea representing reality rather than the immediate representation of reality itself. Photographic processing, on the other hand, has always existed and has always been applied, only the new techniques enable us to do it in fast, perfect and sophisticated ways. Are we dealing more today than in the past with illicit artifices? Or, even worse, with downright deception? Perhaps it would be better to speak of a change in the relationship between the photographer and the world. The works of a photographer are no longer simply live attempts, but are extended to the subsequent stage of a new postproduction. In this process the relationship between the onlooker and the photograph becomes more important than that between the photographer and reality: in the final result the public rather than private tones are accentuated. The emphasis is thus different from Cartier-Bresson's photographic gesture seen as the 'sincere' act of capturing a 'decisive moment' to the possible detriment also of the aesthetic quality of the operation. From our point of view, it doesn't matter much if modern software programs can detect digital touching up. That is not the point. Yet again Michele Smargiassi has some enlightening words to say on the subject: «Today is there even one photograph in the media that reaches its audience without any manipulation? Have there ever been any? Antifraud software demonstrates a truth of which our technologically backward mind has already been convinced for some time, i.e. that to a lesser or greater extent all images lie. So now it is simply a question of not being naive and of making the best use possible of the lies» (2010).

The illusory appearance of our earthly existence was concealed amidst veils, thinking about its deep enchantment is a mirror, and it has disclosed the secret.

We might speak of an ideal world superimposed on reality, admitting the possibility for the photographer to transform varied, contingent situations into a single exemplary picture which, most importantly, as mentioned above, must necessarily be verisimilar, in the sense defined for the Italian equivalent 'verosimile' in G. Devoto and G.C. Oli, *Il Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*: «In keeping with the truth so far as to ensure the probability or credibility of an event that even did not happen, that is not documented or not expected». In Aristotle's view, the poet is privileged compared to the historian because he can narrate not what happened but what might have happened, i.e. possible actions according to the laws of verisimilitude. The poet is thus delegated to represent the universal and not the particular, as we can read at the beginning of Chapter Nine in Aristotle's *Poetics*. To respect these principles, you can't run the risk of falsifying the photographed scene through reworkings that give rise to unreal solutions. An excessive or absurd intervention would only attract attention to the intervention itself and its implausibility, preventing or at least impeding other kinds of reflection (a possible theory but far from my intentions in this context). In short, we can reconstruct the verisimilar but we can't go beyond its boundaries. The aim is to make credible reworkings with a low impact in order to improve the enjoyment of the image (as I have tried to do in the collection published here). In other words, you must avoid undermining the laws governing the scene portrayed. The operation, therefore, can only be successfully undertaken by experts who use their technical capacities not to distance the image from reality but, on the contrary, to improve the image's relationship with that paradigmatic reality built up in mind through meticulous daily observations. In this sense I have followed again the lessons of Abbas Kiarostami who, on several occasions, convinced me of the validity of this philosophy of the image which, applied to Iran, we once defined together as a kind of 'ideal realism' This method has been used by various photographers, also in photo-reportages. An authoritative example in this sense are the adjustments made by Eugene Smith both directly during the shoot and in the printing stage. As he says, they are aimed at «a rearrangement for the benefit of reality», and the whole is based on a kind of emblematic and emotional idealisation of the everyday (Mora, Hill 1998, pp. 16, 337-340).

Everywhere you can see the miracle of that splendour,
doubts and certainties vanish in the mirror's wonder.

In the light of the initial lessons, the first check on this elaborate process took place in the southern 'satrapy' of Yemen. When I got there, however,

I couldn't find landscape situations that completely fitted my purpose. The architecture and specific organization of the area (towers, palaces, terraced gardens) dominated to such an extent that it was difficult to find a perfect likeness with my original models. Although not completely successful, it was an encouraging first attempt. The trip to the second 'satrapy', the northern one of Iceland, also only yielded partial results, due to a different kind of drawback. In this case too I found plausible correspondences in the wide-open spaces, but they were not accompanied by those elements (trees, walls, paths, etc.) required to establish clear affinities with the Iranian world. Over the years I then made some more convincing discoveries (for example, in the United States and Chile), in which the correspondences with the prototypes, both foregrounds and backgrounds, at times reached truly satisfactory levels. The work is still ongoing and the results are proportionate to the amount of research I have done so far. Some other important and promising countries (such as Spain and Australia) still need to be analysed thoroughly and I hope to add them in the near future. For the purposes of further honing my investigations, I decided to establish and explain the state of my work by publishing here a first collection of images. The set has been organized as follows. I chose ten themes from those in the Iran gallery of my old website (<http://old.riccardozipoli.com>; my new website is now online: <http://www.riccardozipoli.com>) and which, therefore, I considered as being typical of that country: roads, bushes, trees, walls, fields, oases, deserts, mountains, clouds and strips. Four themes are more specific (roads, bushes, trees and walls) and four more general (deserts, mountains, clouds and strips), while the remaining two are intermediary (fields and oases). In this way readers will be able to test my theories on different kinds of landscapes. For each theme, first I chose (from the galleries on my website and from my unpublished archive) a photograph of Iran, my model and source of inspiration, which is therefore present ten times in the overall collection. Then I chose another four photographs of four different countries (excluding Iran) for each theme, making a total of fifty images; these countries may be repeated in different series (Chile, for example, is in the roads series and the mountains series). To stress the ideal sense of my work, I decided to specify the geographical origin of individual images and their dates only in a final appendix. Here I simply list the countries with the related number of photos: Canada (1), Chile (7), Cuba (1), England (3), Georgia (1), Iceland (2), Iran (10), Italy (1), Mexico (2), Morocco (1), Oman (3), Portugal (2), South Africa (5), Tunisia (3), United States (7) and Yemen (1). The photographs taken before 2008 are analogical, those after digital.

To understand the hermetic sense of what you say, O Bidel, it is sufficient that the mirror fate has given us reflects properly.

This introduction and the following images are interspersed with lines of poetry by Mirzā 'Abdo 'l-Qāder Bidel (1644-1720), the greatest Persian-writing poet of India. His vast, complex output in prose and verse (his poetry alone amounts to around 100,000 lines) has led to him being labelled in various and, at times, contradictory ways: mystic, materialist, surrealist, realist, existentialist, anti-feudalist, baroque, colloquial, highly imaginative, scientific, idealist, pantheist, Neo-Platonist and anti-symbolist. Although still little-known today, his work exercised a great influence above all on the Indian subcontinent but also on Central Asia and on Ottoman Turkey. In Iran, on the other hand, the novelties of his poetics condemned him to long neglect, only interrupted recently. As proof of the difficulties of his style, in Central Asia it is said that one man who interpreted a line of Bidel in seventy different ways was then later contradicted by the poet himself who, having appeared in dream, told him that none of his interpretations was correct. Bidel's obscurity of expression, an extreme variant of the so-called Indian style, means that – albeit with due caution – it is plausible and certainly suggestive to set his name beside the twentieth-century Italian 'Hermetic' poets. In fact, beyond the evident differences, we find a number of fascinating correspondences that contribute to making Bidel one of the classic Persian authors nearest to modern Western readers' sensibility. From the historical point of view, both the Indian style and the Italian Hermetic style broke with the poetry of the past. Reserved for and only comprehensible to a few, their complex codes gave rise to two kinds of aristocratic, intricate verse in open contrast with the clarity of the classical texts. This led to both movements being harshly criticized by contemporary critics. As regards the mode of inspiration, the Indian school and the Hermetic poets are strongly focused on the interior world and existential reflection aimed at forging poetry as a new reality to be projected on the external world. Indeed no attempt is made at an objective description of reality, which both schools strive to go beyond (with due distinctions: the 'estrangement' in one case is mystical, while in the other it is historical). In this context, in both the Indian school and the Hermetic poets a mood of expectancy and detachment tends to dominate. For the Hermetic poets, however, this mood is a sign of rejection, while the Indian poets describe it as a special 'wonder' propaedeutic to beholding the truth in a sense reminiscent of that wonder understood as the mystical way out of self and as the basis of the philosophical knowledge so well described by Pavel Florensky in his *Dialektika*. But what interests us most here is the common stylistic tendency to 'obscurity'. The main drive in both cases seems to come from an inventive force enabling poets to juxtapose objects and situations without any obvious links in order to forge original relations

and concatenations. Here I'm thinking not only of metaphors, similes and analogies but also synaesthetic language. As Giuseppe Ungaretti once remarked: «Today's poet will thus strive to juxtapose distant images with no linking threads» (1974, p. 760). In both worlds this evocative power is highlighted by concision: the independence of the lines and, in some cases, of the hemistiches in the Indian style corresponds to the brevity of Hermetic poets' 'illuminating' expressions. This reveals a great interest in content rather than in formal perfection. We must also remember the importance of some shared linguistic choices, such as the personification of concepts and the use of abstract nouns in the plural. There is, however, one substantial difference between the two styles: understanding the texts is possible in the Persian case through thinking based on an in-depth knowledge of the motifs and procedures of the tradition, whereas in the Italian case comprehension requires intuition and sensibility. Bidel, as mentioned above, is the extreme exponent of the Indian style and also because of that style's modern connotations, he is my favourite Persian author. I find the lines of verse dedicated to the mirror in his ghazals particularly fascinating. For years I have been working on these lines in which his inventive flair reaches great heights, and every time I have to choose some Persian poetry to be translated I am inevitably attracted to them. And that is what happened this time too. Consequently, the lines published here all contain the word 'mirror'. In this case the occasion was congenial because the theme being dealt with focused on our capacity to observe and distinguish between models and replicas - between the uniqueness of a vision and its multiple reflections. Choosing the verses was far from easy. Bidel can attribute even opposite meanings to the same subject and action according to the theory he is exploring at the time. Given my illustrative purpose here, I decided to overlook this stylistic tendency and selected fairly uniform lines with the emphasis on univocal messages, rather than attempt to show the complexity of the expressive universe. I have made a few adaptations, including always translating the poet's interlocutor (the 'Beloved') in the third person so as to establish more easily a suggestive association with the landscape. In this introduction, the lines of verse are meant as titles for the individual paragraphs, and in the collection of images they mark the beginning of each of the ten thematic sections. The texts of Bidel are from the first volume of the edition published in Kabul (1962-1966). The page numbers in that edition for the verses translated here are as follows. Epigraph: 94; Introduction: 1108, 20, 14, 82, 481, 260, 93, 182, 33, 308, 82, 386, 14, 41, 531; images: 315, 456, 305, 880, 14, 1027, 1111, 1116, 158, 185.

Wonder enchains us and there is no escape,
wherever you look, you're faced with a mirror.

The first quotation from Bidel, used in the epigraph, is preceded by the translation of a passage on a similar topic from *El Hacedor* by Borges (2005, p. 248). Like Bidel, Borges includes the mirror among the most important objects in his poetic thinking. I feel that Bidel and Borges, two equally complex and, at times, contradictory personalities, with their poly-semantic labyrinths, albeit with obvious differences, would have enjoyed each other's company. The Argentinean author's work has many references to the Islamic world and he even mentions some classic authors of Persian poetry. In this context, it is particularly interesting to note Borges' admiration for the mystic parable of the *Manteq ot-Teyr* by Farid od-din 'Attār (died circa 1221). The parable ends with thirty birds (in Persian *si morgh*) seeing their own image reflected, also linguistically, in the Simorgh, the fabulous mythical bird that the thirty birds sought and whose function, in this case, can be compared to that of a mirror. This theme links up with the two initial quotes.

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I find myself at every step I take to reach my longed-for aim,
the love I feel has made my road a dazzling set of mirrors.



roads



roads



The multiple world is a true amulet and protects the supreme One's value,
the plants are a mirror that faces the strength shown by every single seed.



bushes



bushes





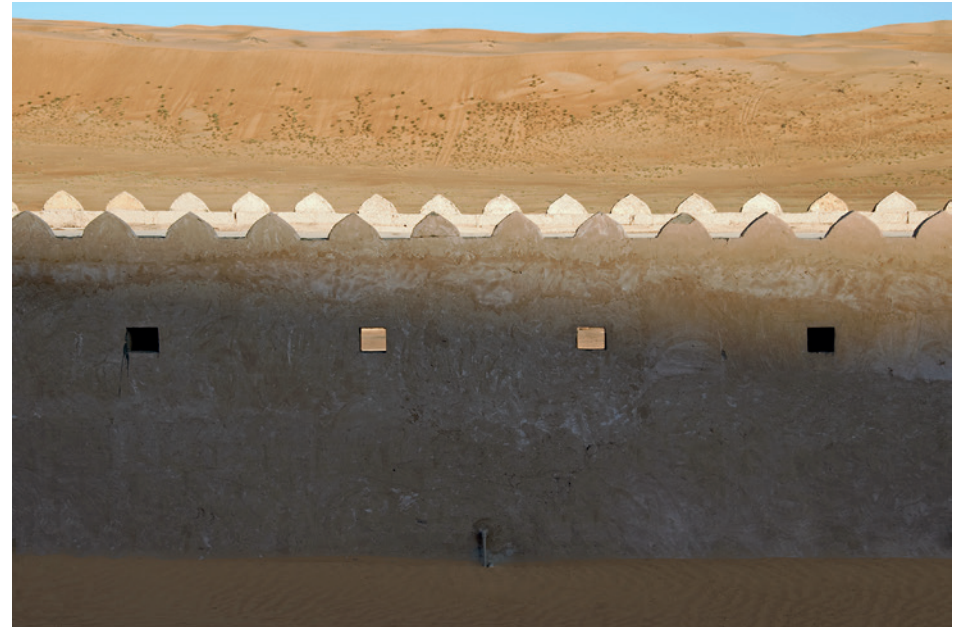
The beloved image and no other image lies pleasantly in my heart,
the mirror is where wonder dwells and certainly not reflections.



trees



trees



That sun shines and with its blinding light cancels out the reflections in the mirror as with shadows on walls.



walls

walls



All we have harvested in the world's fields is wonder,
mirrors will sprout if a seed is sown by wise looks.



fields



fields

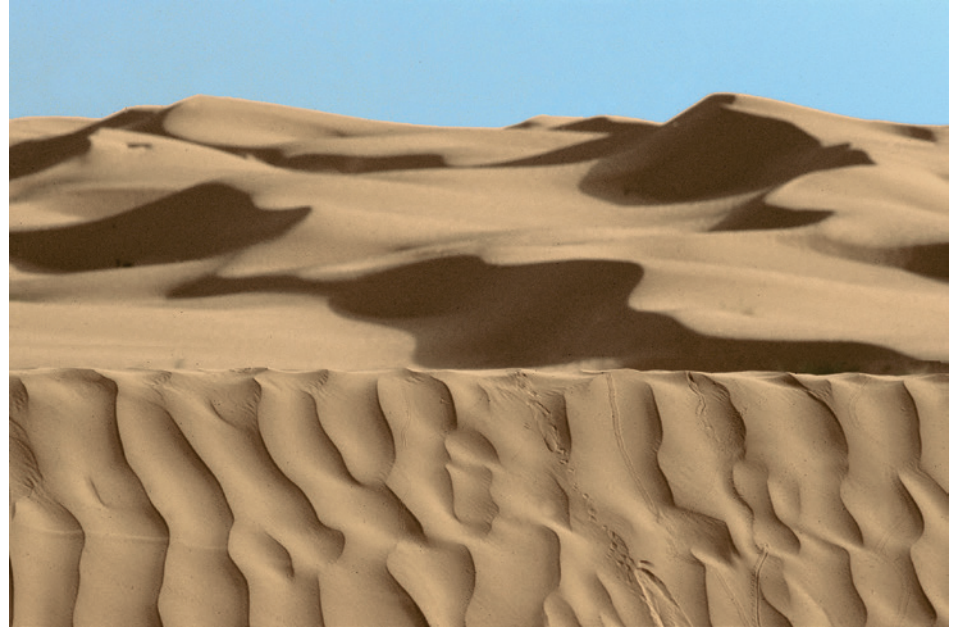


Of every vision the mirror shows only a simple reflection,
no painter knows how to make a drawing of the human soul.





We are dust risen from our reflections but the weight of dreams will keep us, like wonder itself, bound to the mirror for ever.





No image appears still and firmly in a conscious heart,
even the reflections of the mountains move in the mirror.



mountains



mountains



The scattered dust of many illusions has long been raised in storms,
here the source of the mirror is a wave that is made only of mirages.



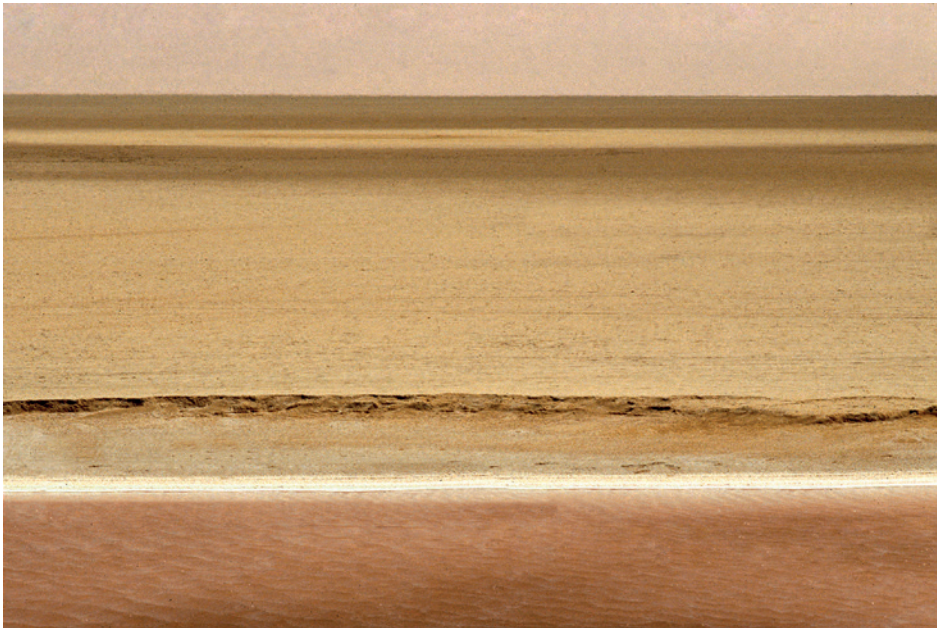
clouds



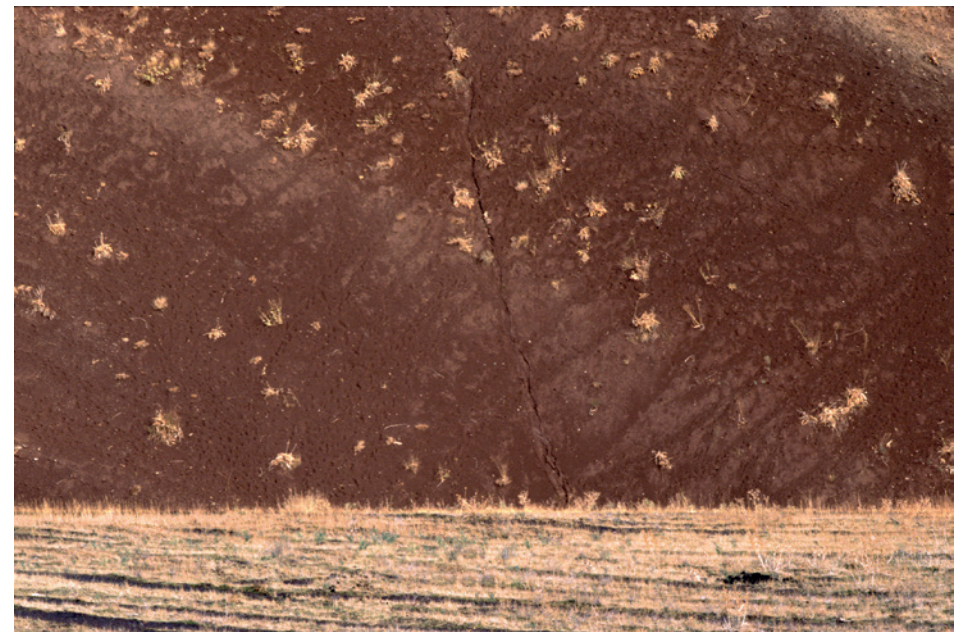
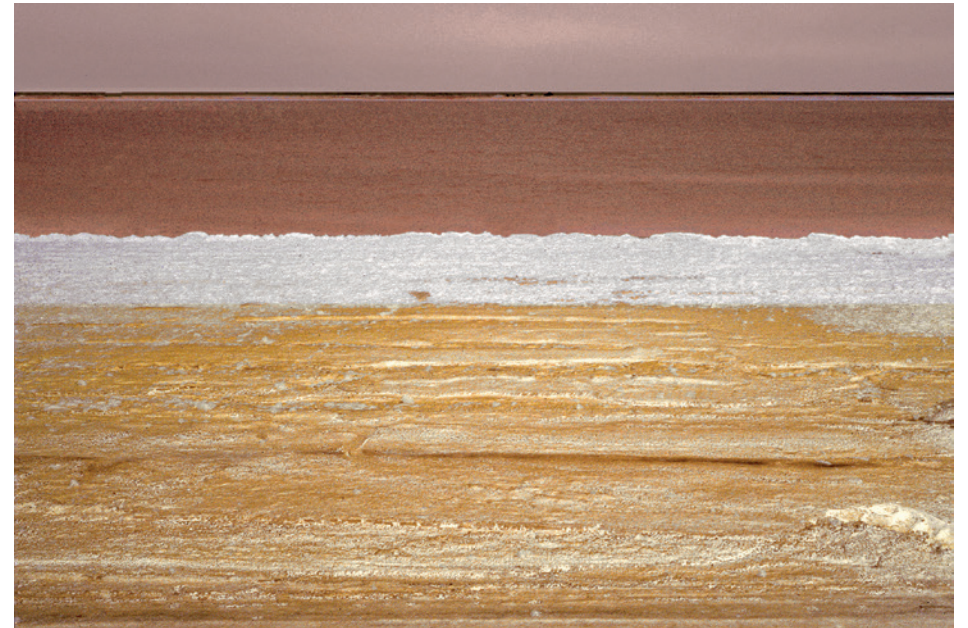
clouds



I fail to comprehend the patterns of this illusory world,
I know that false it appears in the mirror and vanishes.



strips



strips

places and dates

Roads p. 367

Morocco 2003

Chile 2008

Oman 2010

United States 2009

Iran 2001

Bushes p. 371

Portugal 1980

South Africa 2005

Iran 2008

United States 2009

England 1998

Trees p. 375

Tunisia 2006

Portugal 1980

United States 2009

South Africa 2005

Iran 2008

Walls p. 379

Oman 2010

Yemen 1982

Chile 2008

Iran 1975

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Fields p. 383

Iran 2008

South Africa 2005

England 1998

Canada 2005

Cuba 2004

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Chile 2008

United States 2009

Georgia 1989

Mexico 2007

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Deserts p. 391

Oman 2010

South Africa 2005

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Mountains p. 395

Iran 1975

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England 1998

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Italy 2005

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Iran 1980

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Strips p. 403

South Africa 2005

Tunisia 2006

Chile 2008

Mexico 2007

Iran 2004

