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Kārwān's talking forest: Materiality, poetic imagination, and the metaphysics of war violence

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ABSTRACT

Pir Muhammad Karwan's 2000 poetry collection *Da Xāperey Werghowey* traces a history of materiality, emotion, and imagination across human-environmental systems as they are militarized over twenty years in Afghanistan. At the same as it is a unique narration of the wars, this project is a cosmopolitical one. In dialog with other essays in this issue that point to the life of the immaterial in present-day traditions, I show how Kārwān's bottom-up psycho-history draws on Persianate-classical, Pashto-popular, and embodied knowledges to critique both imperial and Islamist modernity on ontological grounds. It aims to undermine the borders of self and other that geopolitical violence embeds everywhere: barriers between human and other beings, humans and other humans, imagination and material.

1. Introduction

Over the first period of Taliban rule, when he lived in refugee camps in Northwestern Pakistan, Pīr Muḥammad Kārwān wrote a striking series of interlocking narrative poems in Pashto about two decades of war in Afghanistan, followed by assorted *ghazals* and *nazms*. He published this collection in 2000 as *Da Xāperey Werghowey* (*The Fairy-Spirit's Palm*). The narrative cycle, framed as a correspondence between the Forest and the Poet, opens with these verses:

> Greetings, my dear Kārwān, greetings!
> Tell me, Love, have you forgotten me
> And my burnt sooty moments,
> My weary camel-driver friend?
> You're not coming for me, you thoughtless one; but I'm following you
> I hear the jangle of your camel's bells
> I hear that *ghazal*, with the hue of blood,
> Which you dedicated to that martyred shepherd. […]
> [My] golden-petaled honeybees are coming.
> Your poem-letters are wandering here and there

With the cages of your phrases shattered,
Those mountain birds now wander all over. […]
At dawn, like a golden boat,
My sun glides across the river of my green embrace.
This martyr-poet's contented spirit
Wanders through the verses of Yā' Sīn[1] […]
Do you remember those green pines,
When the rockets plunged deep inside their heart
Whose white breast was looted and broken
Into whose boughs a red-hot spike plunged?
Now these branches, recovering from these wounds,
Spread clove-necklace scent as the morning breeze blows through them.
As the north wind flirts with them
They spread the jangling of green bangles […]

I first read Kārwān nearly two decades ago, in the early stages of my doctoral research. Like some of my own students did later, when I introduced Kārwān without commentary in the classroom, I initially read a form of romanticism into the talking forest. But these poems never really left me. I spent a few more years researching Pashto poetry; and over the subsequent years, my job increasingly involved teaching Urdu poetry and Islamic philosophy. Finally, I reread the poems. This time, I saw that Kārwān articulated a sophisticated vision of how material, affect, and meaning work amidst globalized war, one which refuses divides between human and nonhuman persons or embodied, imaginal, and conceptual-discursive knowledge. And he phrased this in terms of attachment and care, as he articulated a politics and ethics inseparable from this ontology.

The poems in this cycle narrate how environmental and human selves fuse and transform, as their entanglements with each other grow increasingly violent over decades of war, and how these entanglements propel conflict onward. Reading Kārwān through Perso-Islamic poetic theory in earlier Pashto works, this essay will show how attention to interactions of human and other persons, language, and objects can reorient attempts to understand war's human, environmental, and metaphysical violence, in the conditions of ontological breakdown that extreme violence fosters (Ahmad 2019; Caron and Khan 2022; Lear 2008; Mojaddedi 2016; Rubaii 2018). In this case, Kārwān inverts older Neoplatonic Islamic systems, diffused through borderland education practices and Persianate poetic practice, to derive a process philosophy in which ongoing action in the realms of materiality ripples back to re-texture all reality.[2] The violence of the war he describes is so apocalyptic that as material bodies are reshaped by this violence, it reshapes more and more abstract dimensions of being too.

Speaking most directly to the aims of this special issue, Kārwān presents us with an analytic to which academically engrained dichotomies of real and imaginative are alien. His work is instead premised on structures of reality that have only recently begun to shape anthropological-philosophical arguments about affect, imagination, the self, and a metaphysical 'outside' to human experience. For instance, Amira Mittermaier (2011), Nur Sobers-Khan (2018), and others argue that influential poststructural discussions of self-making in the anthropology of Islam prioritize the actor in an implicitly immanent world, and miss ways in which people themselves live in wider space, extending beyond the conventionally tangible realm, that forms them as much as they act in it. Sobers-Khan in particular notes the political valence of this project, and removes it

from the purely academic. Building on this line of thinking, and referencing Felix Guattari among others, Laura U. Marks claims that 'contemporary Western thought, tired of the sovereign subject, is trying to conceive of an extra-subjective reality that binds individuals ethically to others and to history' – 'a politically efficacious concept of the collective imaginary' that avoids the 'fascistic' potential of such lines of inquiry – and she argues that Islamic process philosophy, including modern everyday articulations of it in arts, already anticipates such questions (Marks 2016, 32). This is, in other words, an attempt to grapple with the same questions, at once analytical and political, that animate Sehlikoglu's theoretical contribution to this issue. Working already within an art form centred upon *takhayyul* as Sehlikoglu formulates it, Kārwān needs not even argue the premises that Sehlikoglu, Sobers-Khan, or Marks does. Rather he can start from this point to advance, organically, a concrete project similar in spirit to what these authors gesture toward.

For Kārwān as for the above authors, ontological speculation has analytical valences and political ones. To start with the former, as a historian I was struck by the disconnect between histories I read of Afghanistan's wars, and the stories I heard from people who lived through them. The vantage points were so different that they felt like they were hardly talking about the same past. Kārwān's narration of war stood out in how it captured long-term change across large systems, but centred affective, cognitive, and spiritual flows of exactly the sort that Marks points to, as real, important phenomena indivisible from political and material change. For him, a history of collective feeling cuts to the heart of 'what really happened' in the war, in the same way that many others who experienced the war talk about it. Kārwān's account of war from Soviet invasion to Taliban thus becomes a counterpoint to the objectifying view that structures Anglophone history-writing, at least: 'Afghan historiography [indeed] remains captive to the categories of colonial and Cold War knowledge originally designed to dominate it' (Nunan 2016, 8; see also Hanifi 2012). It has been inseparable from great powers' self-narration, with Afghanistan as object of intervention more than a narrative subject.

Of course that is true of history-writing about the global South generally, and any manner of counter-narration might help displace this view, especially forms of analysis like Kārwān's that draw on cosmologies from beyond academic mainstreams. Where Kārwān's account intervenes unusually strongly is in its ethico-political formulation. It builds on its relational ontology to produce an original telling of the war, but in so doing, it proposes a critical metaphysics of violence and ways of relating self to other amidst it. This is more than either a historical or conceptual exercise. Kārwān's project is to imagine modes of collective life that decentre the sovereign self and that prioritize mutuality, amid selves' mutual constitution, in hopes of building new life within a violent fractured present. 'Poetic thinking' and its material analogs are at once his epistemic frame, his metaphysical reality, and the form of his activism. This appears in Kārwān's poems as a holistic socio-ecological ethics, but also manifests in the work of his network, the Afghān Adabī Bahīr, to which I return shortly. And further, Kārwān draws from Afghan genealogies of knowledge and modes of life; but those worlds are inter-meshed, by the same violence he describes, with life in the metropole. Kārwān addresses himself to Pashto readers but if logically extended, his ethics is targeted at everyone entangled in global violence thanks to their societies' structural participation in it, including most who read this in English.

For this same reason, overly embedding Kārwān's work into debates within, or even between, university disciplines risks undermining its normative thrust: treating his work as 'local' support for 'universal' theory (Ergin and Alkan 2019). It would mean subordinating it to projects invented elsewhere, for the purpose of scoring points in my own professional career. Beyond that, it would also render invisible the intellectual formations that animate it. As I note elsewhere (Caron 2016), I first came to Kārwān's broader region to research what was initially a social history thesis, and began working with professional and amateur historians, poets, Islamic scholars, and others. These were not always separate categories; academic and grassroots knowledge systems fused in unpredictable recombinations. I had passable language training by then but was weaker in the humanities, so I internalized, as itself my disciplinary training, the borderland processes of affect, aesthetics, authority, and onto-theoretical assumptions that I encountered. When I reread Kārwān's work, it felt like a distillation of much of the thinking I was exposed to at that time, transgressing conventional modi operandi of philosophy, literature, and history as disciplines, and even the boundaries of academic and other spheres of knowledge. Ultimately I learned to write like, and to write to, academics in the disciplined way of what Grosfoguel (2013) calls the global westernized university. But it wasn't always easy to ignore that formative experience.

For these reasons, in writing about Kārwān I feel little choice but to adopt the decolonial ethos in work like Dian Million's 'felt theory' (Million 2009), or Zoe Todd's (2016) discussion of the practical politics of knowledge in which ontological anthropology is situated. That is, I present Kārwān in a way that sidesteps disciplinary debates and heads toward his own questions instead. As a 'thick translation' (Appiah 1993), the following is an academic (re-)creation highlighting a range of assumptions and interests carried by the original text's community and contexts: one that tries to honour the text's own terms with an optimism that it might productively intervene in its new readership's conversations, without bowing to their self-universalizing concerns. All this is to say, in summary, that my translation of Kārwān operates on multiple layers. It is anthropological speculation, counter-historiography, transdisciplinary decolonial critique, and an instantiation of a philosophical-literary mode that does all these things at once. But my primary goal is to centre a borderland conversational world for its own sake – one already intertwined with yet abjected from metropolitan academic disciplines, one that Kārwān and I have shared if from distant corners.

In the next section, I give context for the poems via Kārwān's life, and via Pashto knowledge he draws from (which has also served as theory for me). After that I present the poems themselves, and their exploration of a metaphysics of violence across entangled human-nonhuman worlds. I conclude by underscoring how Kārwān reorients accounts of war, then discussing how this knowledge was generated in everyday experience of war itself along with his worlds beyond it, and what some normative implications of Kārwān's reorientation might be.

2. Social, personal and intellectual context

Kārwān grew up in a seasonally migrant family in the montane forest of Tani District, Khost, near the Pakistan border. He studied basic Islamic and Persian arts and sciences as a child before entering a local lycée in the eighth grade; at the tenth grade he enrolled

in the Khost Mechanical College, graduating in 1977 at the age of 17. He worked in textile factories in Baghlan and then Qandahar until the Soviet war (1979–1989) began. During the war he worked in cross-border trade, but also took to literature. In the late 1980s, *Spedey* magazine held a poetry competition; Kārwān's submission was called 'The *Chinār* Tree Speaks'. Said *Spedey's* editor: 'We were delightfully surprised that [the winner] was an unknown Mujahid from Tani with the pen-name Karwan. This man, who keeps sending us poems, sometimes uses the bark of an oak tree as his pen' (Shpoon 1988, 54). '*Chinār*' drew an account of war from the experience of humans and of a tree, and this perspectivist move, as much as the prestige that the prize offered, gained Kārwān attention from critics and other poets.

Shortly after, Kārwān moved to a refugee camp in Peshawar, Pakistan. He worked for a variety of independent expatriate cultural organizations, but alongside this, he and six friends soon set up the Afghān Adabī Bahīr. Initially a private salon, this ultimately grew to become Kabul's leading Pashto literary circle, and its live, print, and call-in radio activities now enjoy nationwide interactive participation by men and women of all ages and classes, urban and rural alike. The Bahīr indexes tectonic shifts in sociocultural boundaries amidst the upheavals of war; but just as salient here, the Bahīr brought diverse experience into conversation. As such, it foregrounds lineages of change in affective and embodied knowledge on the collective scale. This open-but-unwritten history is both context and theme in the works I discuss here, and is reflected in the name Bahīr itself: literally 'camel-chain', and also 'tradition'. Kārwān uses this exact keyword-image to connote ongoing sedimentations of affect and meaning, as we will see.

The narrative cycle that occupies the first half of *Da Xāperey Werghowey*, the cycle I read here, traces rural society from the beginnings of the Soviet war in 1979 to the consolidation of the Taliban state. Its characters are both human and nonhuman, as in Kārwān's early poem '*Chinār*', but this exercise is more deliberate and elaborate. The cycle portrays various Kārwāns over time but also shepherds; rural women and children; *mujāhidīn*; poets and editors in the Pashto literary formation; *ṯālibān* and their government; animals, trees, and the Forest as a whole; and objects like mortars and missiles. These selves and the worlds they express are discrete but porous, evolving as they merge with, assimilate, or destroy each other. And, Afghanistan's human and environmental devastation, to Kārwān, are linked by spiritual devastation. So, he works in metaphysics along with physicality, by engaging the imaginal domain of reality (on which I expand).[3] Kārwān's main tool in exploring this is poetics, broadly construed, including its expression in material reality.

2.1. Poetry and embodiment

The interplay of material life and poetry is the topic of the next two subsections. That is, before presenting the poems, I discuss Islamic-metaphysical knowledge circulating in recent Afghan life, so more readers can track key elements in his poetry when we do come to it. This too is context.

Kārwān's work resynthesizes popularized elements of elite traditions; and most central are theories about poetry itself. From *qaṣīdas* by seventeenth-century poet Khushḥāl Khān which most modern aspiring poets will know, to theoretical works by mid-twentieth-century borderland scholars still popular now, theories of Pashto-Islamic poetic

knowledge fuse embodiment to the *ma'nawī* world. In canonical Pashto theorization, the *ma'nawī* generally refers to a layer of reality in which material things' intelligible aspects (*ma'nā*), immaterial yet perceptible by the 'inner senses', exist in their own right.[4] One way to tap this meta-reality, in Persianate poetics, is to draw pictures using conventionalized thought-images, or *maẓāmīn*, in mutually-constituting relationships. A familiar example is 'moth and flame': each build on each other for identity, but get new shades of meaning each time the pair is used. Novel redeployments actualize new dimensions of being for these figures, and for their intersubjective relation, in the *ma'nawī* domain. A 'meaning' conceived as *ma'nā*, then, is actually the unique total interrelation of two things, things which are only constituted by being in a relationship. This is true of mental objects, but this form of 'meaning' also exists between physical objects. Physical moths and flames also exist.

Much Pashto work in this mode has emphasized how things' physical and intelligible reality are one, in contrast to the more common Islamic norm that sees abstract form or essence as ontologically more stable and separate from contingent matter (Elias 2012, 199).[5] In a well-known treatise-poem (Khaṭṭak 2001, 6–12), the aforementioned polymath Khushḥāl assumes the body is indivisibly physical and *ma'nawī* at once; and poetic imagination ('the menstruation of men') is usually an involuntary function of this body. But while under-disciplined ('bad') poetry gives reign to disorderly superficial thought habits, careful and deliberate play in poetic-*ma'nawī* images operates in metaphysical reality – creating and transmitting new image-borne meanings to other beings and imprinting these onto the material of their souls. This has wide transformational effects. Khushḥāl contends that *i'tidāl* (internal, reflective balancing of ideas and drives), in any entity or action that is a key part of any material-social-ideational assemblage, radiates outward to contour all the assemblage's individual constituents harmoniously. Externally, *i'tidāl* fosters *'adl* (balanced social justice, from the same lexical root as *i'tidāl*). And interior-psychic imbalance, and external-social injustice and chaos, also constitute each other. In all this, practices like Khushḥāl's favourites (medicine, sex, combat, falconry) seem to work like poetry for him. After all, all are internal-external, psychologically taxing practices that transgress boundaries of the subject to change two beings at once. Khushḥāl even privileges embodied over linguistic practices: unlike the wordplay of 'bad poetry,' he intimates, these run less risk of straying into random superficiality.

To continue on poetry, the above makes clear that poetry's scope extends far beyond individual poems. When poetry forms networks, as poets compose in collaborative conversation and build vast intersubjective ecosystems of imagination, it creates what positivist historians call 'real-world' effects. This applies to Khushḥāl's elite precolonial activities: he was a clan patriarch seeking to discipline his region's lineages into 'civilized' organized hierarchies that could resist Mughal power, and his *ma'nawī* poetry-pedagogy was part of this effort. But the principle drove less hierarchic histories in the recent past too. The 'Awake Youth', for instance, was a mid-twentieth-century underground pro-democratic network, and the *ma'nawī* was the mode in which its activists conceived their activism. Their 1947 manifesto and essay anthology begins:

> Awake Youth: a sacred pure utterance! It emerges from the heart into the mouth as sacred hope and pure aspiration! This hope is lofty: an exalted aspiration! So lofty and exalted, it only arrives by a flight of the *rūḥ* [universal soul]! May the One Who sent this *ma'nā*

from the *lā-makān* [outside space–time] to earthly hearts, and then familiarized people's ears with it in materialized words, nurture and protect it here! (Benawā and Khādim eds. 1947, 1)

In adapting *ma'nā* theory to activism, then, the Youth created egalitarian social-material networks between scholars, financiers, oral poets, and village preachers, and the audiences they interacted with (Caron 2011), through explicit reliance on language's relationship to both mental and extra-mental reality.

2.2. Embodiment and poetry

But what of nonhuman beings? In *Xāperey*'s preface, writing about his own poetic formation, Kārwān discusses his attention to the relational worlds of animals and objects as 'a child's poetic state' (*da māshūm shā'irāna kayfiyyat*) and says this kind of knowledge, as valid as rationality ('*aql*) or more so, arose in him before his full command of language did. And his father reinforced it in parables about conjoined stars in the midnight sky, seeing in them the archetypical lovers Layla and Majnun; and especially in his commentary, delivered while domesticating wild bees with young Kārwān in their oak forest. Bee society appears as a parallel world, complete with a bee-prophet sent from the *ma'nawī* world to guide beekind, and bees' honey production is a *ma'nawī*-physical process like alchemy is. Beekeepers cannot merely appropriate bees' labour; for a colony to thrive, humans must conduct themselves with regard for bees' interior life. For Kārwān's father, this requires a rigourous ethics within the human society that constitutes beekeepers: inter-human injustice will radiate into disharmony amongst the bees they live with too.

In this preface, Kārwān alerts us that his poems assume the physical world is alive with meaning-making, and that poetic semiosis in thought-images is not different from physical semiosis (akin to 'biosemiosis'; Kohn 2013; Nodari 2015; von Uexküll 2010). With this metaphysical sameness as a lens, material-environmental violence and human-social violence emerge as fractal iterations of the same *ma'nā*. Going further, Kārwān even says that embodied semiosis sometimes speaks when language cannot, despite the latter's greater precision (for humans). He says this about childhood, when one has less facility in language; but his poems say this also about war, when chains of signification are destabilized and widescale violence makes it difficult on a cognitive level to imagine any connectedness to other beings' worlds – as we will see Kārwān describe in detail. Finally, as one might suspect, this physical semiosis has a macro-texture. In Pashto social history, we saw above, networks of poetic-imaginative activity acquire machinic properties, becoming agents of large-scale change. The point here is that in *Xāperey's* poems, physical life turns out to be like this too. The forest feels, thinks, and speaks its own poetry: the totality of physical interaction among plants, animals, humans, objects.

To summarize: for Kārwān, the interface of any two beings' physical worlds creates relations that are the same as those of poetic dyads (like 'moth-flame') on the *ma'nawī* level. Poetry can translate human and nonhuman worlds due to this metaphysical dimension that matter and imagery share, and both operate upon the same 'meanings'. The Xāperey cycle is textured by the repeated juxtaposition of instances of poetic and physical meaning-making; and, its titular 'spirit-fairy' (*xāperey*) of poetry is an intelligent faculty of translation between these realms: an entity, simultaneously intensive and extensive to the mind, who grants insight into a univocal reality.

Now, this was a rough schematic of some of the metaphysics that Pashto audiences would presume, if in a piecemeal way; the poems wouldn't work otherwise. In contrast, Kārwān writes fluidly and contextually, not systematically, and it would be misleading to think that his aim is to develop a coherent system as a cosmologist. That is not because it is poetry: theorists like Khushḥāl ask as much rigour from poetry as from any intellectual work. The reason is that Kārwān's project is rather a form of poetic-ontological activism too. I come to this in the end; now, I turn to Kārwān's poems to show these ideas playing out in his bottom-up, felt history of ontological breakdown and reconstitution amid war.

3. The poems

The cycle opens with 'A Letter to the Poet from the Forest', introducing a number of themes that recur across the whole. The forest first asks Kārwān why he no longer accesses its meaning-world, or even human poetry. Let me repeat some stanzas with which I opened this essay:

> […] You're not coming for me, you thoughtless one; but I'm following you
> I hear the jangle of your camel's bells
> I heard that *ghazal*, with the hue of blood,
> Which you dedicated to that martyred shepherd.
> These days you aren't writing joyous songs
> I realize your pen's nib is broken
> Amidst these blue stars, your little poet's heart
> Is breaking on the crescent moon's scorched-black peak […]

But the forest reassures him. The next verses, alongside many others in a long sequence, remind Kārwān how poetic meaning still plays out in the interactions of the forest, and is also preserved on another plane by the reality of the transcendent Qur'ān and its manifestation of cosmic order, which pervades and regenerates life in the world. The forest translates this order as its inhabitants recite, in their own language, al-Raḥmān: the Qur'ānic verse describing how God blessed all creation with systematicity amidst multiplicity, and blessed humans with language as a microcosm of this:

> […] At night a nightingale sits on a branch
> Chanting the Zabūr's[6] melody
> It adds its burnt voice to the *maḥshar*,[7]
> Recollecting the secrets of Kōh-i Tūr.[8]
> Then proclaims a Bilālī[9] cry at the white dawn,
> As it recites the Qur'ān in a sweet tongue,
> And all the cosmos resounds with appreciation
> As it recites al-Raḥmān in tarannum.[10] […]

Kārwān's human-linguistic capacity to engage meaning is exhausted by trauma – the 'cages of [his] phrases shattered'; '[his] poem-letters wandering like birds' – but this is an opportunity amidst calamity. It deformats the human being and its conceptual 'idols'; meanwhile, the forest's physicality preserves and generates meaning that can be remade into new modes of human life, even a sensuous spirit of Islam for the Taliban age:

> […] If you need epics, if you need *jalāl*[11]
> I've got the wild eyes of a spotted leopard
> And for the delicacy of *jamāl*[12]

Look! I've got the timidity of a doe's eyes
When I spread my north wind through the willows,
You will forget the scent of your beloved's tresses.
You'll swing the sledgehammer of *khayāl*.[13]
You'll break and forget your rigid idols of stone.
I'll bring you a spirit, O poet,
In the form of a lost Eden of fairies.
I'll weave the golden threads of the sun for you,
Into the form of nomad-tents filled with songs.
If you'd just kiss the fairy-spirit of music!
Come here; take a few steps ahead of yourself!
You hear the sound of my green bangles, don't you?
They're shouting out *nāras*[14] for you, Karwan! […]
So return me a letter; it'll arrive at once!
Yes; it'll arrive carried by a dove of *ilhām* [15]
If the hawks don't plunder it, send me an answer
With a dove of green Bagram.
I offer my loving praises to the lovers of your bahīr;
My *jholī* [16] is full of verdant prayers and well-wishes.
I accept that the tradition may become one of candles;
My rucksack too is full of martyrs. […]
So: have you forgotten me? You've forgotten many things.
I'm saying that you should come one more time,
On all the ancient bridges lying around you.
My dear Karwan, you'll definitely come once again!

This poem sets the collection's central theme: apocalyptic violence has exceeded humans' ability to make sense of the world, disrupting prior transmission-chains (*bahīr*) of affect and meaning, but the biological environment's ability to incorporate trauma and adapt is an invitation for Kārwān to recover from this ontological breakdown. It invites him to write again from beyond the human-centric understandings of the world that he absorbed as he grew to adulthood amid modern war (this socialization is the story of the next few poems); and it suggests that new forms of collective life might be built by re-knitting threads from older imaginal, linguistic, and physical worlds. But across the next poems, Kārwān can't bring himself to answer the Forest. Instead, he narrates how humans lost all that the forest says he's forgotten, amid ever-widening spirals of violence, self-defense, and suspicion: especially, his sensitivity to one's connections to worlds other than one's own particularized ones. The next few poems narrate these connectivities amidst an increasingly dystopic society, from the beginnings of the Soviet war up through the Taliban. The poems should ideally be taken as a whole but space precludes this, so I present key vignettes in sequence.

Violent changes in human worlds of emotion and poetic knowledge appear in the third song as the war advances, one titled 'Wait up for me a bit, Traveler!' An anonymous other-worldly voice speaks to Kārwān, telling of the pain it felt when he came to sever himself off from the *ma'nawī*, while also reminding him of that realm's reality. After an introduction describing blood and trauma amidst the beginning of the Soviet war, Kārwān talks of how expression was divorced from reality for him as an adult, as he began publishing. The scene begins with Kārwān's editor, Asad Dānish, arriving and telling Kārwān to write simple love songs, to write diversionary entertainment for a popular market instead of songs that interrogate the violence that is fundamentally transforming his society.[17] The two fall out, and Kārwān's poetic 'heart [falls] off a cliff and [goes] silent'.

The poem then tells us, though, that even this loss – a breaking point for Adult-Kārwān – was not so traumatic as the changes that war produced in everyday patterns of feeling. The narrator reminds him how sentiments of attachment, love, and care began changing long ago, as violence suffused them with violent affect. This following sequence rewinds to the early 80s, to recall a party of youths in the early stages of becoming-*mujāhidīn*: accumulating within themselves the pain and trauma of all they care for and wish to protect; releasing it as a mix of sorrow, ecstasy, and defiance:

> […] Perhaps you've forgotten
> You were a child, if you still remember
> Much time has passed
> The day when that platoon showed up
> In our village; that troop of young-men?
> Red-lipped beautiful youths
> With lion-whiskers and wild locks
> And penetrating eyes black like *gurguras* [18]
> Almost-auburn like *kirkan̲s*
> Intoxicated from their cries of the *takbīr* [19]
> From drums and *atan̲s* [20]
> Do you remember those six young-men
> Whose clapping grew hot and fast
> Who whipped their turban-tails around,
> Who slicked back their long hair
> When they gave off those clipped cries
> When they drew out the final syllables of their *t̲appas*? [21]
> With a single *t̲appa* for a martyr
> They moistened the whole world's eyes!
> Those ones who were all saying, God!
> You have put out the eyes of death itself!
> Who, with their hashish pipe
> Turned their own eyes red and bloodshot
> They were sitting next to the spring
> On the bank of the spring there was a poplar
> In the poplar sat a turtledove
> Cooing again and again.
> My tawny camel was following behind me,
> Its bells jangling
> They all lifted their eyes up at me
> And inside them sat a city of love
> Within the heart of that city
> There was a caravan loaded with *t̲appas*
> And the clothes on that crowd of strangers
> Were woven out of sacrifice and lamentation.
> Right to its pillaged heart went
> A sorrowful strain of sitars.
> And around this city of love
> A great serpent encircled itself
> Those six young-men came out
> Hunting that dragon […]

The dragon, and those who fight it, then take the form of shifting constellations of celestial bodies, summarizing the war's early upheavals in explicitly metaphysical terms. Celestial bodies, parts of the intelligent higher spheres, usually move predictably and

govern the material realm. This chaos in them is an inversion: the fabric of all reality itself is changing as a result of the all-encompassing destruction below. While drawing on older systems, this imagery also draws upon contemporary Afghan philosophical poetry, especially Professor Bahā' al-Dīn Majrūḥ's magnum opus *Azhdahā-yi Khudī* (Majrūḥ 1989). Majrūḥ's *azhdahā*, or dragon, is the *ma'nawī* body of a world-encompassing accumulationist economy, of the Leviathan state system[22], and of those systems' fractal, mutually-constituting iteration within the human psyche: all manifest, on various scales, the *nafs-i ammāra*, the 'imperious ego-soul' that tries to control and remake the world in its own image.

Continuing on from this abstract interlude, the poem returns to its narrative present (here, the early-mid 1980s) to illustrate processes of the *ma'nawī* and the physical in historical time again. Kārwān, now a teenager, is back: he's riding in a caravan smuggling a cargo of missiles, chewing on a sugarcane, and idly slapping his camel with it. Suddenly a Soviet jet tears into the sky. Those six youths with their penetrating eyes return, also in a line of camels. And Kārwān?

[…] You took the sugarcane on top of your arm
And held it like a rocket
And your left hand's index finger
You bent like a trigger
You released a laughing shout
And the pilot caught sight of you
He tightened his lips in a grim steely smirk
That Master of Iron
That one who poured bitter poison
Into all your sugarcane's segments
In the sky, his airplane
Curved around in your direction.
He aimed his cannon
At your sugarcane and your shoulder
Just before shooting
He sweetened the mouth of his gunpowder heart[23]
Then, on that mountain, whose peaks
Reached almost to the sky
Against which cloud-camels
Formed and broke apart
Right at its sharp peak
Six real camels showed up
And while the pilot was confused
Their eyes' lethal *nazar* found a sweet target[24]
In a blink of their eyes
[The pilot's] shot crashed into the mountain.
Like a sledgehammer, it smashed
One of the mountain's round boulders
And a sharp sliver of granite
Grabbed the hawk-plane with its beak
Like a scythe in its chest.
You'd swear it shrieked hysterically
As it turned around in the air.
It started zigzagging,
The airplane broke up,

And it flew right into the cliffs.
On its wings, monkeys
Jumped around, screaming.
Some particularly brash monkeys
Started pissing all over it. […]

So Kārwān and the pilot emerge as weapon-human hybrids. The pilot internalizes the modern military macrocosm he is part of, including the inherent violence built by design into the hardware he fuses with bodily. Kārwān channels the *mujāhid* affect he just witnessed, the *ma'nawī* violence of the missiles he's transporting, and sedimentations of still older violence: the events resurrect folk tales about events in Kārwān's region, in which the insurgent Faqir of Ippi's devotees slew dozens of British troops with tree limbs that they picked up as imaginal weapons after their rifles' ammunition ran out; the enemy's bodies were found riddled with rock fragments.[25] The narrator reminds him of this:

[…] When that sugarcane was on your shoulder
In that moment, that shoulder of yours
Seemed even sweeter than the sugarcane.
We all said
Congratulations on your shot!
God be with you! in these mountains
May you go far in life!
But then, unexpectedly,
A state came over you
Tears welled up in your eyes
And a *kayfiyyat*[26] came over you
Like a poet, a rare type
Of poetics came over you
We recounted our folktales
But *ḥaqīqat*[27] came down upon you. […]

In other words, Kārwān took this as a horrifying lesson how violence replicates fractally across nonlinear, imaginal-material systems. This includes an ecstasy in violence: pilots celebrate firing on children, and animals establish territorial dominance by pissing gleefully on outsiders' corpses. Both manifest the damage wrought by the collective absorption of violence as it sediments in material and *ma'nawī* worlds alike. Taking this in, Young-Kārwān unties and frees his camel *bahīr*. Again, this word 'chain' evokes psychocultural sedimentation, concretized here as a cargo of material-imaginal violence. So, freeing the camels is an attempt to arrest an onward caravan of violence by repudiating humans' tendency to assimilate other beings into militarized networks.

But Kārwān encounters more perilous bahīrs as he and they mature amid war. The next poem 'I'm Killing a Poet; I'm Committing Murder' narrates a traumatized Kārwān dismembering himself. He has the local blacksmith fashion a serious (*drund*) axe from the shrapnel of a Soviet rocket that killed a friend, and he uses it to fell that same chinār tree whose selfhood he poetically wrote, years ago. He rebuffs his mother's love and solidarity, telling her he must kill Poet-Kārwān. He gnashes his teeth and rends his tutelary spirit-fairy's clothing as he murders his poetic faculty: that which allowed him as a child to sense other beings' subjectivities. And while severing himself from all other worlds, he berates himself for letting himself be 'ejected from the orbit of intellect (*'aql*) by the

bewitching power of passion', rather than being a serious 'Afghan' 'man'. This feeling shows up in Kārwān's anti-*ma'nawī* violence; but for Afghan readers it also evokes a blend of sentiments that constituted an ideal adult manhood in the context of great-power patronage of patriarchal militia factions: a manhood defined by 'serious' gravitas, by being 'substantial' or 'consequential' in temporal politics (all glosses of *drund*). It was a sentiment at the heart of discourses of *mujāhidīn* leadership in the 80s and 90s and pervaded a ubiquitous new wartime genre of political, rather than mystical, songs. Such ballads propelled militancy against the communist state and supported local domination by *mujāhid* commanders (Edwards 1993; see also Siddīqī (1992) for a collection of songs from Kārwān's broad region). So to murder a poet is to reject all but an emergent wartime configuration of the masculine-human-rational-material.

Into the later 1980s, violent affects begin emerging everywhere in everyday life. In the next poem, 'The Smell of Gazelle's Milk,' Kārwān describes how trauma assimilated both human poetry and the forest's physical poetry into militarized assemblages. The action shifts up the mountains, as Kārwān focuses on a child bride after her wedding. This microcosm parallels the sequence of how Young-Kārwān turned sugarcane into an imaginal weapon. But unlike Kārwān, this girl was born within the violence of war, will be subjected to more violence now, and reproduces even more still:

> Our life is the girl from our village
> Who was born during a day of battle
> And came of age during a night of battle
> She looks into her beauty's mirror
> She smiles, then starts cackling bitterly
> As her antimony-eyeliner case becomes the cartridge
> Of a twenty-shot carbine and
> The applicator stick becomes a Kalakov's broken firing-pin
> She tattoos her chin with a bayonet's tip
> From an unexploded mine she carefully removes delicate wires
> And strings on beads and pearls
> She has hidden mirrored glass-fragments amidst her clothing's tassels
> To make necklaces and garlands
> And if Death raises his eyes and face again like a contemptible-husband
> She'll immediately slice his lips with them!
> As she starts laughing, she goes completely green
> Similarly: near the top of the mountain
> A party of *mujāhidīn* are climbing
> And there, up above near the peaks
> An aircraft is hovering in wait, and
> There, made from the skin of a wolf
> A tambourine. She plays it in her hands
> That maiden of the high mountains
> She sings *ṭappas*
> Disturbed poems, like those that Malalai sang[28]
> These are stories of the time of war
> Red right through with blood
> No sooner does one end
> Than a hundred more follow […]

So commonplace objects become violent ones when her traumatized *ma'nawī*-material body fuses with theirs, driven by her life-instinct in the face of impending

doom: another weapon-assemblage in the ongoing militarization of daily life. As her emotions transform objects into weapons in her imagination, she broadcasts disturbing songs back as weaponry into the imaginal domain. But, predation of children is not a human phenomenon alone. The poem begins a forest parallel:

> […] Aha – yes! I know you, in your heart
> Must be burning with suspense
> Who killed the wolf!?
> The one whose skin was made into the tambourine
> That, when the girl's long fingers played it,
> Turned her songs into flame-tongues?
> Well listen up, my Dear Heart, I'll tell you the story!
> You see this great green forest?
> Endless like a vast ocean?
> Washing over it, waves of misty rain?
> Across its surface, the golden boat of the sun sailing?
> With rainbows rippling above, presiding over the breezes?
> This forest: it's also the kind of forest
> Into which, from time to time, hailstones of iron rain down.
> Once in a while, through its warm embrace
> Rips a searing wind of gunpowder
> And in the middle of the night, missiles rain down
> Like stars born of Hellfire.
> Anyway, deep in this green forest's embrace,
> There lived a golden gazelle
> Radiant: she drowned out the white stars above
> As she walked, she was a golden moon gliding through the sky
> But that was when this gazelle was a healthy gazelle, intact.
> Not deranged like now […]

Moving into animals' perception, the poem goes on to describe how the forest changed: how its own poetry was altered, how portions of it too emerged as weapon-like. The gazelle leaves her fawns to sleep in the sun while she goes out to eat, so she might be able to produce milk for them. We begin 'seeing' through the fawns' bodies as the sun takes on doe-like characteristics, licking them with its tongue-rays and nuzzling them with its horn-rays. And then:

> […] The gazelle went off into a green meadow: the sort of meadow
> Where ploughshares and swords are buried
> Empty mortar casings littered the area
> This grass, nurtured in gunpowder
> Was more than a little bitter
> It was bitter just like poison
> Still the gazelle ate it with relish
> I guess there must be a God: that grass tasted sweet to her […]
> [But] her wild eyes
> Reddened, and started spinning; they danced.
> They flashed, like a lioness's,
> Glowing like two burning lamps
> Picking her way step by step,
> She's outside herself; intoxicated.
> Look at this golden gazelle today
> She's a carafe of poison-green wine.

Over her heart she's blown the smoke of
A rampant scorpion's stinger [29] […]

She suddenly hears a rustling and sees a wolf, face bloody, where she left her fawns. In her poisoned state her emotions of care resurface as violence, paralleling mutations in *mujāhidīn* affect:

[…] Like a battle-horse, she leaped upon that wolf.
With one caress of that gazelle's horn
That forest wolf's heart was pierced like a bead
From that heart emanated the smell of gazelle's milk
From the gazelle's milk emanated the smell of solar radiation.
And from the sweet voice of that tambourine?
A smell emanated, of scorched songs.

So body, chemical, energy, affect, and meaning fuse into violence-assemblages via *ma'nawī* confluences. The all-pervasive violence of modern war pulls in even the forest's embodied poetry. And completing the circle, inversions of care and predation – a mother gazelle killing a wolf with a caress – emanates a musical instrument for human weapon-poetry earlier in the poem.

But processes of interlinking can demilitarize intersubjective encounters too, with careful *ma'nawī* work. The next poem, 'Give them a Language with *Ṭappas*', centres the same two-line genre, a bit like a social haiku, that the girl sang. *Ṭappas* are stereotypically seen as drawing on bodily emotion, but with persistent reference to contradictions of the social world (Majrūḥ 1988). They circulate as the rhythmic accompaniment to practices like *ataṇ* dancing, and everyday improvisational deployment in speech, especially by women. They are thus a sort of bridge between physical life and language, and can be a site to reimagine both.

The poem begins with mountains crumbling. Parched orchards and their 'mother-trees' lose their child-fruit in the harsh sun amidst wartime deforestation. The poem then moves into an image of parrots: animals who spread chains of language but are traumatized and silent now. With this, the Forest calls Kārwān to break barriers and generate new tradition-chains of meaning and feeling that span material and imaginal environments, ones built on genres like *ṭappa* that break dichotomies:

[…] In the name of your dear homeland
Take up a Farhādī axe [30]
And carve stone gateways
Through these mountains' peaks upon peaks. […]
Imprisoned in these mountains are
Rainbow flights of parrots. […]
Fill their hungry bellies with crystal-sugar.
Ground down by the fate of death:
May you satiate them with song […]
Heal them with *ṭappas*
Give them a language with *ṭappas*
Bring them to uninhibited laughter
Bring them back voices
Set them to flight again,
Across the blue sky of the homeland […]
As a broom to sweep up the smoke of war.

Make them beads in a garland of peace.
Lift them up away from this burning fever, flying
To the pounding of the *dhol* drummer.[31]
The *dhol*'s penetrating sound
Is the voice of a household of *tappas*
And as the stars revolve with time in the sky's embrace,
These voices will accumulate, and echo through the cliffs. […]

And what of the trauma that pervades *tappas* now, like those the girl sang? Repurpose it, just as trauma repurposed care and affection into violence in earlier poems:

[…] Go now, get some projectiles and a sling:
Let's go hunting for wolves!
We'll bring some new *tappas*.
Let's head out, crying out '*qurbān*!' and '*zār*!'[32]
See, these will be our slogans,
And they will be a blow inside the wolf's head too.
We don't want an entry wound to its side;
That would put holes in its skin,
And then what we're doing wouldn't turn out right. […]
[But we are] Ready to kill them without mercy.
We, a hundred gazelles and a thousand fawns.
We will then, with the greatest of art, dry out
Those wolves' skins.
We'll shave them of
Their hair, whether coarse or adolescent-green.
Next: In our homeland there are countless
Heavy, serious, manly mortars.
Pot-bellied like *dhols*,
Mouths agape like cooking-pots.
And emerging from those mouths is
The roaring of demons.
The fires of their shouting
Have killed their own personal fairy-spirits,
And burnt down their homes.
But we'll exorcise the demon-voices,
We'll take out that clamorous shouting.
Over each mortar's open mouth,
We'll stretch a wolf skin.
And to these drums, hot with melody and rhythm,
We will set songs resounding that are peace and justice.

In the interests of space, let me summarize the rest of the cycle. The poem above, with its images of wolves and pot-bellied, roaring mortars, employs multiple allusions to *mujāhid* manhood in the late 1980s and the 1990s civil war. It also suggests that this mode of being could be dismantled and reassembled into something post-violent. This may even remake pre-war pasts: in the next poem, set amidst the Taliban's inexorable late-'90s ascendency throughout the country, Kārwān looks back into the past too. Focusing on nationalistic human worlds, this poem recalls what a collective-national progress-oriented Afghan manhood once looked like, to juxtapose it with its recent alter-ego: Taliban manhood. Taliban subjectivity, he says, manifests a 'golden Leviathan' (*nāhang*)[33] into the seething ocean contained in the water-gourds that are the skulls of

youths, youths 'crushed by the bitter animus' that comes from knowing no life but war. It is the local underside of an all-consuming, self-universalizing mode of ego, one arising fractally at once in empire, in the nation-state, and in individuals' psyches. Of course, even in dreaming alternatives, Kārwān pleads that submitting to such demands upon one's self is understandable. In an arresting phrase, still building on the water-gourd image, he recalls the militarized sentiment of care that recurs repeatedly throughout the cycle: 'We are thirsty for even the harshest forms of love.'

The cycle moves into two more poems that remind readers that there are other lives. First is an ode that has Kārwān praising, and reconciling with, his Spirit-Fairy, the tutelary *Xāperey* whom he earlier drove off when he murdered his own poet-self. And last, finally, comes his response to the forest. Kārwān gratefully acknowledges the forest's offer to extend its own language back to Kārwān to help regenerate his own *ma'nawī* sense. He responds by praising a series of poets who are all nodes in the fragile literary networks that emerged between Kabul and elsewhere in the late Taliban years. In effect Kārwān is reassuring the forest, and us, that he and all his comrades in the Bahīr and beyond are working on building new human virtualities in ways that might be more humane. He ends the cycle with one more material parallel, juxtaposing the violence in human-technological wartime networks, networks that ensnare the landscape, against the indomitable regenerative power of the landscape itself. This poem ends with another ode to the spirit of poetry, this time in her epic face; the collection then moves into a long series of lyrics on the themes established in the cycle.

4. Conclusion: poetic thinking and living

> When you say 'I am' and I say 'I am' then neither you nor I exist
> But if you say 'You are,' and I say 'You are', both you and I exist
> – 'Abdullāh Bakhtānī, veteran historian-poet-activist-'*ālim*, quoting a Pashto proverb (Bakhtānī 2004, 46)

How does Kārwān speak as a theorist-practitioner; what are the politics of this ontological speculation? I think this could be illustrated through a reconstituted ontological history, in linear prose but drawing on Pashto poetic heuristics and the preoccupations I read in Kārwān's work. I then move into implications of this history, including beyond its original setting.

Into the mid-1940s, even leading Pashtun intellectuals in Kabul hailed from face-to-face Islamic education networks in borderland societies that taught rationalist-Neoplatonic traditions in which their highly plural human worlds were situated relationally in a much fuller cosmos. We see this in Kārwān's prefatory account of his father, even beyond broader attestations in the primary literature (for example, Benawā 1961–1968; Bakhtānī 1978; see also Green 2016). So the next decades were all the more traumatic for how quickly modes of human-centric technocratic practice, supported by both the Western and Eastern blocs, fractured social institutions and ecosystems of knowledge. Older networks were redistributed into the disciplines of the modern university and the state. Poetic knowledge was increasingly recast as 'art'; and imagination as only tangentially relevant to materiality. New boundaries emerged between state officials, '*ulamā*', elite and popular poets, and others, from the 1950s. So did urban-rural divides that hadn't existed so strongly before, and technocratic elites gained traction as local economies

were pulled into a nascent national one, tied to Cold War-era development aid (Ahmadi 2008; Green and Arbabzadah 2013; Gregorian 1969). Although the process was far from totalizing (Kārwān's work itself is evidence that it was not), older imaginations lost ground to the human-centric instrumentalities, hierarchies, and abstractions of imperial modernity. These included US-style modernization theory and its quasi-messianic liberalism, but also equally scientist and teleological Soviet modes of developmentalism, and modern statist Islamism. All were incarnated as various antagonistic political factions, sinking roots into Kabul over the 1970s and remaking the material and *ma'nawī* world alike. All resembled each other on the thematic level, more than any of them resembled earlier cosmologies.

Then in the 1980s, amidst a militarization of these factions and their competing visions, all these new borders were destabilized again in wartime just as the Afghan-Pakistan border was. Upheavals in state institutions again brought new recompilations of networks and epistemes. People were recategorized from above: one was now loyal to 'Communism' and the state, or to 'Islam' and cross-border *tanzīms*, or militant hierarchies; and each *tanzīm* developed its own distinct media apparatus and patronage networks (see Fuchs 2016). Informants in every neighbourhood, scorched-earth warfare in the countryside: life felt impossibly difficult if one stayed. Yet most of the three million people who fled to Pakistan were forced to engage these same *tanzīms* for survival. In alliance with Pakistani Islamist parties, *tanzīms* organized camps and provided people with subsistence rations in exchange for membership and loyalty (see Marwat 2008 for an overview). And as global and regional powers turned toward a neoliberal-era outsourcing of violence and humanitarianism alike, both at home and abroad, refugees' bodily presence justified a torrent of US, Saudi, and other allies' cash and weapons to the *tanzīms*, who claimed to fight with piety and virtue on the refugees' behalf.

Amidst these geopolitical shifts, great-power interests built new forms of militarized power-knowledge. New governmentalities and disciplinary pedagogy in the state and the *tanzīms*; new configurations of gender and ethnic ideologies; new decentralized yet hierarchic modes of militia mobilization; a universalized, managerial Islamist morality; and a burgeoning war market: all emerged in fusion, in the form of *mujāhid* networks. And these were just the political-institutional expressions of the wider subjectivities and intersubjective, metaphysical entities that emerged amid the upheavals. As Kārwān puts it, a 'City of Love', at once physical and spiritual, that was built on reciprocal recognition of other beings' different modes of existence, manifested itself in the eyes of youths early in the war when they were only just beginning to contend with the globalized 'political economy of war and peace in Afghanistan' (Rubin 2000). To return to Marks's phrasing introduced at the beginning of this essay, that City was an 'extra-subjective reality that binds individuals ethically to others and to history', emergent here as a collective interbeing, one inseparable from an ethics and affect of reciprocity. It was governed by a reciprocal imagination-entity, the 'Fairy-Spirit' of poetry, that was birthed amid reflective attention to the *ma'nās* generated by the constitutive interfaces of the individual self-worlds of all things – that domain, at once 'outside' and immanent, which Alexandre Nodari (2015) calls the 'texteriority' of biosemiosis. But as emotions of care, attachment, and love became deeply entangled in the violence of the emergent wartime political economy, they were textured by categorization, hierarchization, and instrumentalization of the world in multiple scales and contexts, and resurfaced as paternalistic domination.

Even for rural populations, or so I read in Kārwān's work, 'human' was increasingly separated from and above 'nature', which was reconfigured at the same time as 'resources'. Man > woman. Commander > fighter > refugee. Transcendent state, or military, or market > reciprocal relationships. And, material politics was positioned as separate from and above 'mere' or 'childish' (unserious) imagination. The very possibility of a collective self was denied on the conscious-explicit level, even as violent new collective selves took shape.

But: underneath and between all this, quieter recompositions of rural and urban life also emerged, operating in everyday realms of knowledge. This fostered new thinking about self and world, emerging in inventive efforts at empathy and reciprocity in attempts to deal with violence differently. Kārwān's work is a reflexive meta-example. However innovative his thinking may be in either Islamicate philosophy or in anthropological theory, it is above all related to new lived experience in coping with violence, with poetic and material thinking from his youth serving as key resources in understanding this new life. On one hand is the political, economic, social, and psychological upheavals of life during wartime. Refugee camps, where Kārwān wrote these poems, instrumentalized refugees. But in the process, they also brought into dialog people from all backgrounds, with formerly incommensurable experiences. From the standpoint of one making a life in a camp, rather than that of someone organizing camps, the situation demanded new reflection on what it means to live together, and to understand the life experience of others that one now shared space with and depended on.

Second, humans were hardly the only ones traumatized. Nonhuman beings were mobilized, like Kārwān's camels or like the country's trees that were increasingly cut to fuel human life in the wartime economy. Others ended up like the gazelle's poisoned meadow. This devastation's scope was particularly noticeable to people like Kārwān who remembered knowing nonhuman systems in much more personable, much less violent ways. Most of Afghanistan's already-fragile forest cover was destroyed in the war. Mountainsides crumbled from the resultant soil erosion. Horticulture now meant knowing landmines and munitions and toxins as intimately as plants and water. How would human devastation be analytically separable from all this? Nonhuman worlds too must be accounted for, in any narration of the war worth telling. So Kārwān's cosmos is one in which a *mujāhidīn* party's grief-stricken eyes joined with a spring, a poplar, and a turtle-dove, to transmit together the image of a city of love and lamentation: one composed of refugees of all species from a landscape, a meaning-scape, now lost; and struggling to live in a new world now.

All this is rooted in an active search for new modes of coexistence, amidst war violence that caused psycho-social partitionings to proliferate. Like the proverb opening this section, Kārwān's vision counters dualist oppositions directly. For him, dualism encouraged blindness to the far-reaching consequences of one's actions, in a situation where beings were still interlinked in mutual constitution even as the immediacy of these connections was becoming obscured in violence. This also foreclosed possibilities for alternative relationships. And in passages like the one in which Kārwān murders his poet-self, such severings are a premonition of worse still. The world that emerges from a mass severing of subject from other, one we glimpse throughout this cycle, is what happens when hierarchized subject-object binaries proliferate on the systems-level. Both in great-power imperial assemblages and in the Taliban one, these patterns

emerge as a nāhang-Leviathan that threatens to universalize itself as the only subject: subordinating, instrumentalizing, reformatting all else to replicate the patterns of the system in a violent everyday microcosm.

In that context, a cosmology like Kārwān's, in which all beings are worlds, discrete but inter-existing and inter-becoming? This is pushback against a global phenomenon: it is not only ontological description, but a politics of ontology; and it is here that potential parallels or conversations with, say, posthuman social science would break down. Kārwān attends to the role of nonhuman actants; he analyzes complex systems, whether states, markets, militaries, or forests; but he deliberately maintains focus on the processual ethics of the inter-being encounters that compose these systems. That politics also unfolds in practice, in building the Bahīr as a non-hierarchic institutional conversation between plural standpoints, and in Kārwān's mode of discussing sophisticated perspectivist ethics in images most people would understand, in very colloquial Pashto. When Kārwān conjures less violent pasts and futures in poetry, he hopes to effect *ma'nawī* change across systems, along with participants in the Bahīr and other such sites of activity. His main question: how to encourage a new shared existence for these refugees, of all species, who were born in a land that no longer exists? How to take part in building a new city of love?

His answer, poetic thinking-living, may not exactly fit metropolitan imaginations of what is consequential, 'serious', or 'real' activism. Even coming from a sympathetic anti-war position, one might ask what practical scope activism like this has in addressing modern conflict. But if one does ask that, one should remember that this work derives precisely from decades of experience in living with globalized violence. As Kārwān puts it at one point, poetic thinking helped him and his companions 'survive the Leviathan's belly' intact. Along with his role in organizing associations, it was an ethical basis for collective survival, recognizing the unity of *ma'nawī* and material life. In her work on anti-war aesthetics, Rosalyn Deutsche (2010) argues that contemporary metropolitan anti-war activism often seeks immediate material results 'impatiently' and privileges 'practical' analyses.[34] For his part, we saw Kārwān tell how his seduction by 'practical', 'serious/consequential' (*drund*) human-material politics is what drew him into violence rather than the reverse. That, in turn, led him to rethink matters and to respond by building a bahīr that, before all else, should empower its participants to sharpen their already-existing collective *takhayyul* tools to question the metaphysical bases of modern violence: all that which underpins both great-power intervention and Islamist counter-modernity. It is here that we can see the potential of a scholarly focus on *takhayyul*, the project of this issue: it invites readers of academic journals to rethink what imagination is, how it is linked to action, and thus how their own imaginative activity can build solidarity with, rather than write over, existing yet fragile modes of politics across the world.[35]

Afghanistan has received an enormous amount of objectifying power-knowledge-violence: military operations; liberal and Islamist programmes of statebuilding, cultural patronage and 'peacebuilding'; IGO/NGO development cycles; much more besides. If this input were less overwhelming, Kārwān's sort of activism and the tentative solidarities it builds might not exist in this seemingly diffuse form. But this too is adapted knowledge-practice. As I described in the introduction, *ma'nawī* networking has long been a technology of survival and activism in Afghanistan; and Kārwān's experiential knowledge updates

this sedimented history to present conditions. Kārwān and other participants in the Bahīr, like many people everywhere, can and do imagine antihierarchic forests full of unique but inseparable lives, in place of Leviathan-worlds. This is not inconsequential, even if at present, many more people, much more globally powerful ones, imagine more hierarchic things into which they are willing and able to invest (in all senses) so much. This strengthens those systems' multidimensional reality immensely. But what would happen if no one, not Kārwān nor you nor I, continued imagining other ways of being anymore?

Notes

1. An important chapter of the Qur'ān.
2. On readings of older philosophy in this direction, see Bloch (2019); Marks (2018).
3. van Lit (2017) among others cautions that present academic understandings of 'the Imaginal' in earlier Islamic philosophy may be overly, and inaccurately, influenced by the modern readings of Henri Corbin in particular. I think this caution is important, although here, I think the theory derived from Kārwān's own work justifies a comparison to the idea regardless of its origins, and I use 'the imaginal' as academic shorthand rather than implying any direct genealogical link with the Corbinian concept.
4. On Neoplatonized-Aristotelian visions of ma'nā in classical poetic theory see Key (2018). For theories of ma'nā in modern Pashto, including activist sociopolitical ramifications, see Bakhtānī (1954).
5. Catherine Ambler, building on work by Shahzad Bashir and others, notes that an early modern 'material turn' was a wider trend in Persianate religious-literary genres, from 1400 to 1700, of 'attunement of religious systems to the mediation between the material and the unseen, and a general movement toward 'particular investment in the material … sphere' (Ambler 2022, 15).
6. Zabūr: the Psalms.
7. Maḥshar: the staging ground for Judgement Day.
8. Kōh-i Tūr: where God spoke to Moses through the burning bush.
9. Bilāl: Ethiopian devotee whose powerful voice called the early Muslim community to prayer.
10. Tarannum: melodic recitation.
11. *Jalāl:* God's majesty
12. *Jamāl*: God's graceful beauty
13. *Khayāl*: the faculty of mental image-production; concrete (as opposed to conceptual/abstract) imagination
14. *Nāra*: a two-line poem or refrain that sets a rhythm for dancing
15. *Ilhām*: Divine inspiration
16. *Jholī*: the pouch formed when you pull up the lap-fabric of your qamīṣ (tunic) and use it to carry items, or ask for items in supplication.
17. Dānish himself provided me this commentary, which helped me understand the cycle, in personal conversation (Peshawar, April 2008).
18. *Gurgura*; *kirkaṇ*: berries from wild thorn-trees
19. *Takbīr*: 'Allāhu Akbar!'
20. *Ataṇ*: a ceremonial circular dance, deployed for celebration, sorrow, or inflaming righteous anger
21. Ṭappas: a two-line genre, often impromptu; it also accompanies *ataṇs*
22. My rendering of Pashto 'nāhang' ('whale', 'shark', 'sea-monster') as 'Leviathan' throughout this essay is a backtranslation, not my own imposition. Kārwān almost certainly borrows this image from Majrūḥ specifically, while Majrūḥ uses it to discuss transcendent sovereignty in passages with other extended calques that unmistakeably reference Hobbes.
23. Sweetening one's mouth: a common expression referring to celebratory consumption of sweets to mark an auspicious occasion.

24. *Naẕar*: people possessing inordinate sensitivity to the Unseen, and strong emotions, can fracture rock with a stare among other powers.
25. Dawood Azami (personal conversation) supplied this connection for me.
26. *Kayfiyyat:* transcendent state
27. *Ḥaqīqat*: Metaphysical reality; God as the Ultimate Reality
28. As Afghan forces retreated at the Battle of Maiwand (1886) against the British, a young woman Malalai legendarily reinvigorated them with the *ṭappa* 'If you don't become a martyr at Maiwand, my love / God must be sparing you for dishonor'
29. Leaving aside the aggressiveness connoted through the image, this references how scorpion stingers are smoked as intoxicants.
30. Referencing the legend 'Shīrīn-Farhād': love-mad sculptor Farhād carves a realer-than-real (ma'nawī) image of his beloved Shīrīn into the mountain, and hews a passage through the mountains to reach her physically.
31. *Ḍhol*: a large two-sided drum that accompanies celebratory or annunciatory music.
32. Interjections of appreciation/excitement.
33. See fn. 21 above
34. I thank Sami Raza for bringing this work to my attention.
35. Indeed, this has shaped my own practice in other projects with colleagues including Muhammad Salman Khan and Daanish Mustafa. Not content with studying poetry in Swat and 'extracting' academic value from it, we decided the ethical thing to do would be to channel theory distilled from poetic thinking back into the poetic space itself. This emerged in hybrid poetic events conducted with a variety of local organizations across Pakistan, funded by the British Academy and the USIP. The events themselves, the thinking emergent in them, and the relationships they create were their own goal, although we do expect to publish on this in the immediate future.

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