Rejuvenation and Paradisiacal Youth

The preacher Ibn al-Sammāk told Hārūn al-Rashīd that he would be destined for Paradise or hell-fire. Al-Rashīd wept, soaking his beard with tears. His vizier said: does anyone doubt that the Commander of the Faithful would be destined for Paradise, God willing?

1 Rejuvenation

Firdawsī (d. 411/1020) says, “Youth may hope for old age, but white hair never gets black again.” This may be so in reality, but in popular literature as well as in several traditions ascribed to the Prophet, there were cases to the contrary. The familiar binary opposition black hair/white hair is at work here. In the following accounts, rejuvenation meant regaining the original color of one’s youth—i.e., black—without getting any younger. Real rejuvenation is deemed possible only in Paradise by divine power: the old become young and white hair turns black. Eternal youth is perhaps the greatest divine bounty reserved for the blessed in Paradise.

We have already witnessed much lamentation over lost youth and wishes expressed for its return. In literary sources and popular literature in particular, the idea was taken up and imbued with life by the imagination of the storyteller. One of the ajāʾib (marvels) told by the Andalusian traveler Abū Ḥāmid al-Gharnāṭī (d. 565/1169–70) takes place on an island in the China Sea. He and his companions see a big dome but, as they approach it, they find it is in fact a roc’s egg. They break it with axes and find a young bird. They carry part of its meat with them when they leave the island, and some of them cook another part in a pot, stirring it with the same kind of wood used for cooking. The white beards of the old men who eat the cooked meat turn black, and for the rest of their lives their beards retain their black color. The change of color is due to the

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1 al-Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, vol. 8, p. 357.
2 Quoted by Rosenthal, Sweeter than Hope, p. 61, n. 288.
wood, which is taken from the tree of youthfulness (shajarat al-shabāb).³ The return of the black color to their beards is taken to mean the return of youth. It apparently does not imply immortality but rather a long life in that most desirable state, youthful health and vigor.

In his famous Riḥla, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 770/1368–9 or 779/1377) mentions a tree whose leaves have a rejuvenating power. He says:

I have never seen anyone who has seen its (fallen) leaves. They also give this tree the name of ‘the walker’, because if you look at it from the upper

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