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Reading *The Conference of the Birds*

James Winston Morris

Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's *Conference of the Birds* is not just a literary masterpiece: its wider popular influence throughout the Eastern Islamic world, both directly and through centuries of retelling of its stories by subsequent writers in Persian, Turkish, Urdu, and other vernacular languages, can only be compared, for example, to the place of Milton, Bunyan, or even the King James Bible in pre-twentieth-century Anglo-Saxon culture. 'Aṭṭār's primary aim, in this and all his other writings was to bring the spiritual teachings and insights of the Qur'ān and ḥadīth (the sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad), as they had been understood by earlier generations of saints and Sufis, vividly alive for the majority of his compatriots unfamiliar with the learned Arabic forms of those traditions. As with the other monuments of Persian mystical literature, such as the poetry of Ḥāfiz or Rūmī, the very success of 'Aṭṭār's effort makes it almost impossible for the modern translator to do equal

justice to (a) the universality of the author's ideas and intentions; (b) the poetic qualities and general readability of the original; and (c) the complex web of historical allusions, including scriptural themes and symbols, common Islamic practices and assumptions, specifically Sufi terminology and activities, and local social customs and attitudes, that is almost always presupposed. (In fact, virtually every story is meant to paraphrase or illuminate specific Qur'anic themes or canonical sayings attributed to Muḥammad, and 'Aṭṭār's treatment often presupposes many earlier literary or practical Sufi applications of those scriptural sources.) So it is a measure of the remarkable success of Darbandi and Davis' recent translation on the first two scores—and of the true universality of 'Aṭṭār's artistry—that the uninitiated student can still read through *The Conference of the Birds* with both enjoyment and edification, without referring to explanatory notes or any further Islamic background.

The central—indeed the unique—subject of 'Aṭṭār's poem is the intimate relation of God and the human soul, a relation that he describes most often in terms of the mystery or "secret" of divine Love. The actual Arabic words of his title, *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr* ("the language of the birds"), refer in the Qur'ān (27:17) to Solomon's God-given ability to understand that secret as it is revealed in the inner states of all beings. Starting from the same Qur'anic chapter, 'Aṭṭār takes Solomon (and the many other monarchs in his poem) to represent God, the hoopoe (and various messengers or ministers) to represent the prophets and other spiritual guides and intermediaries, and the birds to typify all the manifold human spiritual states and attitudes. For the love that concerns him throughout this work is not simply a particular human emotion, or even the deeper goal of man's striving, but rather the ultimate Ground of all existence: the birds'/soul's pilgrimage itself turns out to be the unending self-discovery of that creative Love. Thus the entire poem is in fact an extended commentary on the famous divine saying "I (God) was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known, so I created the world that I might be known"—and on another, even more celebrated

ḥadīth restating that reality from the human point of view: "he who knows his soul/self, knows his Lord."

The poem as a whole moves from the outward statement to the full inner realization of that Love, to the true, ever-recurrent revelation. It begins with a dense summary of the underlying metaphysical doctrine and its Islamic symbols; proceeds through the more familiar manifestations of that reality in the universal human experiences of "separation," of absence, longing, suffering, and incompleteness; and gradually ascends through that awareness to the highest spiritual states of union and rapture. 'Aṭṭār's long Introduction, woven together from key scriptural passages, echoes the Qur'ānic insistence on God's paradoxical transcendence and immanence, and on Adam's theomorphic reality (and responsibility) as the divine vice-regent, the unique "talisman" through which that mystery becomes known. Its omission in this translation certainly does increase the dramatic power of his narrative for modern readers unfamiliar with (or even initially allergic to) his religious presuppositions, inasmuch as it creates heightened suspense about the goal of the birds' pilgrimage and the nature of the divine "Simorgh" that is largely missing in the original. But the dramatic weight in the original poem is more evenly distributed over the individual episodes and the spiritual lessons potentially contained in each story, which each reader must rediscover for himself.

For the stage of 'Aṭṭār's drama is not the outer world of history or of nature (as in many of Rūmī's ecstatic lyrics), but the human Heart—echoing the celebrated ḥadīth identifying the heart of the man of faith as "the throne of the Merciful" which "encompasses" God, or mirrors Him. His birds are not "out there"; they are not just so many social or psychological types, but rather a sort of catalogue of all possible spiritual states, mirroring each individual's own outlook and condition. The reader objectifies them at his own risk. That is even more true of the figures (messengers, ministers, the hoopoe, etc.) he uses to symbolize the spiritual mediation of the prophets, angels, saints, and other guides: his constant shifting

of those symbols eventually forces the reader to see that their reality can likewise only be truly perceived in light of their divine Source—again as mirrored in his own soul and personal experience. The drama ‘Aṭṭār celebrates is always within: his central protagonists are not so visibly God and man—although ultimately that is always the case—but rather the inner tension within each person between his uncreated Spirit (*rūḥ*), the vehicle of divine Grace, and the endless illusions perpetrated by the carnal soul, the egocentric “self commanding evil” (*nafs-i ammāra*, or “the Self” in this translation).

‘Aṭṭār’s drama—like its archetype in the Qur’ānic account of Adam’s creation and temptation—is a story of loss and rediscovery. As in the Qur’ān (or the Bible), that story is recounted and meant to be reenacted from two complementary—and practically inseparable—perspectives: man’s own efforts (of worship, ethical purification, and spiritual awareness and realization), and God’s grace, compassion, and guidance. And here one crucial caution is in order, at least for modern readers, concerning ‘Aṭṭār’s *rhetoric*, a warning that should not have been necessary for his original audience. His poetic language in this and other works involves a rhetoric of extremes, of hyperbole, violence, and almost Kierkegaardian paradox or contradiction designed to awaken each reader’s personal awareness of God’s grace and living presence, beyond the routine social observance of “religious” forms which was probably the norm in his own society (and the even wider tendency to separate and reify “God”). Clearly, such renewed spiritual awareness was only intended as a first step toward the types of appropriate effort and activity that are alluded to throughout the spiritual progression depicted in the later parts of the poem. But *The Conference of the Birds* itself was not written as a practical spiritual guidebook, and its frequently “antinomian” tales and “superhuman” counsels were not meant to be taken literally, certainly not as practical advice for all comers.

. . .

The structure of 'Aṭṭār's poem resembles a spiraling ascension around a central core. That core, with which he begins and ends, and to which he constantly returns, is the ineffable "mystery" or "secret" of God's presence within man—a mystery which cannot really be told (despite all the scriptural symbols and the poet's own recurrent attempts), but only lived and directly realized—as 'Aṭṭār stresses in his own concluding remarks (p. 229). The stories and symbols referring to this reality typically involve the paired figures of a ruler (prophet, etc.) and his subject (son, slave, etc.), and often a more enigmatic connecting figure representing the Spirit, or the various manifestations or "emissaries" of God's Grace: if the identification of one of these persons as "God" and the other as the "soul" is often obvious in the earlier passages, by the end of the birds' journey 'Aṭṭār has made it almost impossible to say which is which.

The gradual approach to that inner secret—which is of course only subjectively a voyage, since 'Aṭṭār constantly reminds his reader that our momentary feelings of God's "absence" are like a child's stubbornly closing his eyes to the sun's light—focuses on all the temptations and manifestations of the carnal Self (*nafs*), and on the activities and spiritual virtues needed to overcome that opponent. Both those aspects of the Way of perfection are depicted and analyzed at increasingly subtle and profound spiritual stages, beginning with obvious ethical and social allegories, but moving inward until in the final section their portrayal is often inseparable from the central spiritual realization itself. That dramatic structure can be outlined as follows, with 'Aṭṭār's puzzling reminders of the divine Mystery in the left-hand paragraphs and the more accessible stages of spiritual progression in the numbered ones.

Scriptural Introduction (omitted here): The omnipresence (and paradoxical "invisibility") of God, and man's spirit/soul as the secret key to that mystery.

I. Dramatic introduction (pp. 29–35): The “Simorgh’s feather” of God’s Love in each heart, and the need to overcome the carnal “Self” (*nafs*)—through God’s Grace—in order to rediscover Him.

II. The Birds’ Excuses (pp. 35–51): The shortsightedness of our ordinary loves and attachments, the suffering and fears that flow from them, and the first step toward enlightenment: disciplining the Self.

The Mystery of God and man (pp. 52–56): Men as the Simorgh’s “shadows” (and veils); God’s mirror in the Heart; the secret gateway of repentance and forgiveness.

III. Shaykh Sam‘an (pp. 57–75): The transforming direct experience of God’s Love as the indispensable starting point on the Path; true surrender to His will—beyond outward piety and religious learning—as the corresponding attitude and goal.

The Mystery of Grace and prayer (pp. 76–82): Tales of providential transformation (the hoopoe’s “lot”; Bayazid’s “luck”; Solomon’s glance . . .), and mankind’s one duty: “Pray always.” The saving intercession of the prophets and saints, and three key stories on the central mystery of religious practice and divine compassion (the king and the fisherboy; the king and the old woodgatherer; the murderer redeemed by the glance of a true saint).

IV. The birds’ fears, and the proper response (pp. 83–124): ‘Aṭṭār begins to explore deeper signs of attachment to the Self and the corresponding spiritual virtues (as distinguished from the more conventional ethical and social ones): repentance, renunciation, praise, devotion, and surrender to God.

The Mystery of loving submission (pp. 125–128): true obedience and submission—to God, and to one’s spiritual master—as the condition for receiving divine guidance. It is no accident that this point, where the conscious awareness of the Way and the personal commitment to follow it come into play, is also where

‘Aṭṭār necessarily begins to leave some readers behind. From now on the birds’ questions (and their master’s replies) refer less and less to outward, familiar attitudes and experiences, and increasingly deal with deeper spiritual temptations and discoveries.

V. The basic virtues of the Way (pp. 128–166): purity of intention, spiritual aspiration, and justice and loyalty (perseverance); the recurrent pitfalls of pride and self-satisfaction. This section (on “true dignity and servitude” in the spiritual path) deals entirely with what Islamic mystics called *adab*: the spiritually appropriate behavior and attitude of the disciple toward both God and his master, something which cannot be defined by outward, formal rules.

Recapitulation—the Seven Valleys of the Way (pp. 166–213):

Here, as ‘Aṭṭār artfully summarizes the wisdom of generations of earlier Sufis, each “station” is in itself a window on the goal. The particular stages mentioned here (of spiritual Quest, Love, Insight, Detachment, Union, Bewilderment, and Poverty) should not be taken as a rigid or standard schema, either with regard to their order or their number. ‘Aṭṭār’s Sufi predecessors (and later imitators) used the same terms to refer to other spiritual stations, or ranked them differently, often adding dozens of other stages, depending on their own context and intentions. But what is typical here—and perhaps even autobiographical—is not so much the specific order of these stages as it is ‘Aṭṭār’s persistent emphasis on the revelatory, purifying value of suffering, and on the necessary painful emptying of one’s self (spiritual “nothingness”) in order for God’s will to be done.

Journey’s End (pp. 214–229): The decisive point here is not the “thirty birds’” silent contemplation of the Simorgh’s image in their soul, since that mystery has already been mentioned dozens of times. Rather it is what happens afterward (220 ff.), when “their Selves had been restored”: the further, endless journey *within* God symbolized here in Hallāj’s exemplary martyrdom and the last, bewildering story of temptation, redemptive suffer-

ing, and self-sacrifice. Quite intentionally, that tale is a koan, an insoluble allegory whose only "interpretation" is transformation.

We began by emphasizing the explicitly popular and universal intentions of 'Aṭṭār's poem. The "divine comedy" of his birds, especially as they set out on their journey, mixes the romantic, the tragic, and the ridiculous aspects of everyday life in ways often more reminiscent of Woody Allen than of Dante—although, like Dante, it also points insistently to the ultimate context, the potentially transforming reality underlying those same experiences. What 'Aṭṭār asks of his reader to begin with, though, is not any particular religious belief or piety (his favorite targets!), but simply a willingness to look. More and more deeply. His poem, like Dante's, is a marvelous portrayal of his own, now far-away world, but his subject is the deeper world that never changes. It succeeds to the extent that it can create a mirror for each reader's own life, here and now.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

References throughout this article are to the recent translation by A. Darbandi and D. Davis, *The Conference of the Birds* (London: Penguin Classics, 1984). An earlier English prose version by C. S. Nott, based on the nineteenth-century French translation by G. DeTassy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), is quite readable, but generally less accurate and complete, although it does briefly summarize (pp. 3-7) the opening 615 lines omitted in the newer translation. The translation by A. J. Arberry of 'Aṭṭār's *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Auliya'* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, reprint 1976) contains an illuminating account of his motives for writing in Persian, and is also a fascinating introduction to earlier Sufi tradition.

Readers curious to know more about unexplained characters, symbols, and technical terminology will usually find at least a preliminary explanation somewhere in Annemarie Schimmel's *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975). (The presence of so many of 'Aṭṭār's themes and characters throughout Schimmel's survey is another indicator of the massive influence of his writing on later Eastern

Islamic spirituality, both learned and popular.) A more detailed historical study of 'Attār's specifically Islamic background can be found in Helmut Ritter's classic study, *Das Meer der Seele: Gott, Welt- und Mensch in den Geschichten Farīduddīn 'Attārs* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1955).

The length of this article did not allow a discussion of the peculiar features of 'Attār's own rhetorical style in relation to the Persian language and literary norms of his time. However, one can begin to appreciate something of the distinctiveness of his language and style simply by comparing *The Conference of the Birds* with any of the many English translations from Rūmī or Khayyām, for example.