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Conference of the Birds

Toward the end of the 12th century, Farid ud-Din Attar wrote a long poem about a journey to the divine. The *Mantiq al-Tayr*, variously translated as the “Conference” or “Speech” of the birds, describes how the birds assembled and decided that they needed a king.¹



Figure V.13. The Conference of the Birds. Detail of the cover of a manuscript of the *Mantiq al-Tayr* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Wikimedia Commons).

¹ Atṭar, F. -D. (12th century CE, translated by Davis, D., & Darbandi, A., 1984). *The conference of the birds*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books; Atṭar, F. -D. (12th century CE, translated and annotated by Avery, P. (1998). *The speech of the birds: Concerning migration to the real, the Manṭiqu'ṭ-ṭair*. Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society; an abridged translation by Edward Fitzgerald first published in Wright, W. A. (1889) *Letters and literary remains of Edward Fitzgerald. Volume II* London: MacMillan. (*The Bird Parliament* , pp 431-482), available at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/bp/bp01.htm>

The poem has been illustrated many times.² Figure V.13 represents a detail of the cover from a manuscript started in 1487 and completed in 1609. The birds are listening attentively to the Hoopoe bird, who can be recognized by his crown of feathers just to the right of the center. The birds propose to seek the legendary bird Simorgh. Little is known about Simorgh but there have been signs:

It was in China late one moonless night
The Simorgh first appeared to mortal sight
He let a feather float down through the air.
And rumours of its fame spread everywhere.³

This alludes to the Muslim hadith “Seek knowledge even unto China,” meaning to the ends of the earth. Hadiths are reported sayings of the Prophet. Many, such as this one, are considered apocryphal. However, other more authentic hadiths show a similar support for knowledge: “If anyone travels on a road in search of knowledge, Allah will cause him to travel on one of the roads of Paradise.”⁴ And in the context of the poem, it perhaps alludes to the Eastern sources of its mysticism.

The birds choose the hoopoe bird as their leader. The hoopoe encourages his fearful companions, restrains the reckless, chides the self-satisfied, deflates the pompous, and comforts those possessed by too great a love of the world. He illustrates his exhortations with parables about the search for God.

One bird claims that he lives only to love Simorgh. The hoopoe reproves this presumption. What right has anyone to offer love to God? God comes to us not because of our love but by His grace, as is shown in the story of the Shah and the stoker.

The Shah paid a visit to the stoker who maintained the fires that heated the water in the great baths of the city. The Shah did not reveal who he was. The

² Kamada, Y. (2010). A taste for intricacy: an illustrated manuscript of *Mantiq al-Tayr* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. *Orien*, 45, 129–75; Barry, M. (2006). Illustrating Attar: a pictorial meditation by Master Habiballah of Mashhas in the tradition of Master Bihzad of Heart. In Lewisohn, L., Shackle, C. (2006). *Attar and the Persian Sufi tradition: The art of spiritual flight*. (pp 135-164). London: I. B. Tauris; a modern illustrated version is Sís, P. (2011) *The conference of the birds*. New York: Penguin.

³ *The conference of the birds*. (Davis translation., lines 736-739. p 45)

⁴ Abū, D (10th century CE, translated Hasan, A, 1984). *Sunan Abu Dawud*. Lahore: Sh. M. Ashraf. (Book 25, number 3634) (<http://www.usc.edu/org/cmje/religious-texts/hadith/abudawud/>)

stoker shared bread with his visitor and showed him how the furnaces were fed with fuel. The Shah so enjoyed the company of the stoker that he returned seven times. The two talked of power and of poverty. The Shah then identified himself and offered the stoker whatever he might wish for, even a kingship. The stoker declined, claiming he had all that he might desire. He pointed out that it was only because of the baths that he had met the Shah. His only request was that the Shah occasionally be his guest.

My hope is this, that now and then
My king will visit me in this dark den –
The dust he treads on is a crown to me.
His presence here will be my monarchy.⁵

Acquiescence is better than insistence. Love of God is to be with Him whenever possible. Yet the story has many other levels of meaning. Attaining union with the divinity might require too great a loss of self. Though ultimately we may dissolve in God as a drop of water in the sea, perhaps now we might just content ourselves with his occasional epiphanies.

After much discussion, the birds depart and fly toward Mount Kaf where Simorgh dwells. On the way they cross seven valleys. These represent the stages on the path to the divine: seeking, love, insight, detachment, unity, bewilderment and nothingness. Only thirty birds survive the journey and reach the abode of Simorgh. A herald greets them and tells them to turn back before witnessing the fearful splendor of Simorgh

The blaze of majesty
Reduces souls to unreality
And if your souls are burned then all the pain
That you have suffered will have been in vain.⁶

The birds insist they fear not annihilation. They are like moths who seek the flame. The herald unlocks the door. When they finally see the Simorgh, they are amazed to see themselves. The moment of recognition is a poetic pun since *si murgh* also means “thirty birds.”

There in the Simorgh’s radiant face they saw
Themselves, the Simorgh of the world – with awe
They gazed, and dared at last to comprehend
They were the Simorgh and the journey’s end.⁷

⁵ *The conference of the birds*. (Davis translation, lines 2866-69, p. 160).

⁶ *The conference of the birds*. (Davis translation, lines 4189-92, p. 232).

A famous hadith quoted by Ibn Arabi is: “He who knows himself knows his Lord.”⁸ Many Islamic scholars consider this hadith inauthentic, but for the Sufis it is true by revelation (*kashf*). The hadith harkens to the Judeo-Christian idea that God created man in his own image, to Socrates’ “Know Yourself” and to the Upanishad’s concept that the individual and the absolute should become one.

What does it mean that when we finally see God we see ourselves? Although we can interpret this in terms of the unity of consciousness, it may also reflect the way we see the world. We create our own interpretation of the truth:

Notions of a ‘personal’ or ‘constructed’ truth ... must be understood as rooted, not in the constitution of the truth, but rather in the capacity of the envisioning seeker. In other words, while the ocean is boundless the individual jugs will only be filled according to their own size and shape.

In simple terms the Simurgh is the jug that is the ocean.⁹

Attar was well aware of the Sufi way. However, he never attained the final stage of nothingness, the complete dissolution of the individual. If so, he would not have been able to describe the way in poetry.¹⁰ Attar remained at the stage of *hayrat* (bewilderment, perplexity). In the epilogue to the poem, he describes his dilemma:

If I were on His way now, would I be
Drowned as I am in all this poetry?¹¹

He likens his feelings to that of Ishmael, who in the Islamic tradition was the son whom Abraham was to sacrifice to God.¹² Ishmael was aware that God had desired his sacrifice, yet he continued to live.

⁷ *The conference of the birds*. (Davis translation, lines 4234-7, p. 234).

⁸ Kakaie, G. (2007). Know yourself, according to Qur'an and Sunnah: Ibn Arabi's View. *Philosophical-Theological Research*, 33, 6-22. Available at http://sid.ir/En/VEWSSID/J_pdf/105220073301.pdf

⁹ Keshavarz, F. (2006) Flight of the birds: the poetic animating the spiritual in Attar's *Mantiq al-tayr*. In Lewisohn, L., Shackle, C. (2006). *Attar and the Persian Sufi tradition: The art of spiritual flight*. (pp 112-134). London: I. B. Tauris

¹⁰ Stone, L (2006) Blessed perplexity: the topos of *hayrat* in Attar's *Mantiq al-tayr*. In Lewisohn, L., Shackle, C. (2006). *Attar and the Persian Sufi tradition* (pp 95-111).

¹¹ *The conference of the birds*. (Davis translation, lines 4583-4584, p. 253 and lines 4609-4610, p. 254).

¹² *The conference of the birds*. (Davis translation, lines 4632-4633, p. 256).