

Classic Poetry Series

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- poems -

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Conference of the Birds

'Attar began The Conference of the Birds (Mantiq al-tair) with an invocation praising the holy Creator in which he suggested that one must live a hundred lives to know oneself; but you must know God by the deity, not by yourself, for God opens the way, not human wisdom. 'Attar believed that God is beyond all human knowledge. The soul will manifest itself when the body is laid aside. One cannot gain spiritual knowledge without dying to all things. When the birds assemble, they wonder why they have no king. The Hoopoe presents herself as a messenger from the invisible world with knowledge of God and the secrets of creation. She recommends Simurgh as their true king, saying that one of his feathers fell on China.

The Nightingale says that the love of the Rose satisfies him, and the journey is beyond his strength; but the Hoopoe warns against being a slave of passing love that interferes with seeking self-perfection. The Parrot longs for immortality, and the Hoopoe encourages the Peacock to choose the whole. The Duck is too content with water to seek the Simurgh. The Hoopoe advises the Partridge that gems are just colored stones and that love of them hardens the heart; she should seek the real jewel of sound quality. The Humay is distracted by ambition, and the Owl loves only the treasure he has found. The Hoopoe reprimands the Sparrow for taking pride in humility and recommends struggling bravely with oneself. She states that the different birds are just shadows of the Simurgh. If they succeed, they will not be God; but they will be immersed in God. If they look in their hearts, they will see the divine image. All appearances are just the shadow of the Simurgh. Those loving truly do not think about their own lives and sacrifice their desires. Those grounded in love renounce faith and religion as well as unbelief. One must hear with the ear of the mind and the heart.

A total of 22 birds speak to the Hoopoe or ask questions about the journey. Short anecdotes are told to illustrate the Hoopoe's points. The Hoopoe says that it is better to lose your life than to languish miserably. The Hoopoe says,

So long as we do not die to ourselves,
and so long as we identify with someone or something,
we shall never be free.
The spiritual way is not for those wrapped up in exterior life.⁵

You will enjoy happiness if you succeed in withdrawing from attachment to the world. Whoever is merciful even to the merciless is favored by the compassionate. It is better to agree to differ than to quarrel. The Hoopoe warns the sixth bird against the dog of desire that runs ahead. Each vain desire becomes a demon, and yielding to each one begets a hundred others. The world is a prison under the devil, and one should have no truck with its master. The Hoopoe also says that if you let no one benefit from your gold, you will not profit either; but by the smallest gift to the poor you both benefit. She says,

Good fortune will come to you only as you give.
If you cannot renounce life completely,
you can at least free yourself
from the love of riches and honors.⁶

A pupil becomes afraid in facing a choice between two roads, but a shaikh advises getting rid of fear so that either road will be good. The Hoopoe tells the eighth bird that only if death ceases to exercise power over creatures would it be wise to remain content in a golden palace. The ninth bird is told that sensual love is a game inspired

by passing beauty that is fleeting. The Hoopoe asks what is uglier than a body made of flesh and bones. It is better to seek the hidden beauty of the invisible world. An anecdote about Jesus yields the following lesson:

Strive to discover the mystery before life is taken from you.
If while living you fail to find yourself, to know yourself,
how will you be able to understand
the secret of your existence when you die?7

The Hoopoe advises the eleventh bird that giving yourself over to pride or self-pity will disturb you. Since the world passes, pass it by, for whoever becomes identified with transient things has no part in the lasting things. The suffering endured is made glorious and is a treasure for the seer, for blessings will come if you make efforts on the path. The fifteenth bird is told that justice is salvation, and the just are saved from errors. Being just is better than a life of worship. Justice exercised in secret is even better than liberality; but justice professed openly may lead to hypocrisy. A story of two drunks teaches that we see faults because we do not love. When we understand real love, the faults of those near us appear as good qualities. When you see the ugliness of your own faults, you will not bother so much with the faults of others.

The journey of the birds takes them through the seven valleys of the quest, love, understanding, independence and detachment, unity, astonishment, and finally poverty and nothingness. In the valley of the quest one undergoes a hundred difficulties and trials. After one has been tested and become free, one learns in the valley of love that love has nothing to do with reason. The valley of understanding teaches that knowledge is temporary, but understanding endures. Overcoming faults and weaknesses brings the seeker closer to the goal. In the valley of independence and detachment one has no desire to possess nor any wish to discover. To cross this difficult valley one must be roused from apathy to renounce inner and outer attachments so that one can become self-sufficient. In the valley of unity the Hoopoe announces that although you may see many beings, in reality there is only one, which is complete in its unity. As long as you are separate, good and evil will arise; but when you lose yourself in the divine essence, they will be transcended by love. When unity is achieved, one forgets all and forgets oneself in the valley of astonishment and bewilderment.

The Hoopoe declares that the last valley of deprivation and death is almost impossible to describe. In the immensity of the divine ocean the pattern of the present world and the future world dissolves. As you realize that the individual self does not really exist, the drop becomes part of the great ocean forever in peace. The analogy of moths seeking the flame is used. Out of thousands of birds only thirty reach the end of the journey. When the light of lights is manifested and they are in peace, they become aware that the Simurgh is them. They begin a new life in the Simurgh and contemplate the inner world. Simurgh, it turns out, means thirty birds; but if forty or fifty had arrived, it would be the same. By annihilating themselves gloriously in the Simurgh they find themselves in joy, learn the secrets, and receive immortality. So long as you do not realize your nothingness and do not renounce your self-pride, vanity, and self-love, you will not reach the heights of immortality. 'Attar concluded the epilog with the admonition that if you wish to find the ocean of your soul, then die to all your old life and then keep silent.

Farid al-Din Attar

Illahi Nama (Book of God)

In the Book of God (Ilahi-nama) 'Attar framed his mystical teachings in various stories that a caliph tells his six sons, who are kings themselves and seek worldly pleasures and power.

The first son is captivated by a virgin princess, and his father tells him the adventures of a beautiful and virtuous woman who attracts several men but miraculously survives their abuse and then forgives them. They acknowledge that carnal desire is necessary to propagate the race but also recognize that passionate love can lead to spiritual love, which can annihilate the soul in the beloved.

Other stories indicate the importance of respecting the lives of other creatures such as ants or dogs. One only thinks oneself better than a dog because of one's dog-like nature.

The second son tells his father that his heart craves magic; but his father warns him against the work of the Devil. A monk tells a shaikh that he has chosen the job of locking up a savage dog inside himself, and he advises the shaikh to lock up anger lest he be changed into a dog. The father suggests that this son ask for something more worthy and tells an anecdote in which Jesus teaches a man the greatest name of God. The man uses it to make bones come alive into a lion, which devours him, leaving his bones. Jesus then says that when a person asks for something unworthy, God does not grant it. Birds and beasts flee from people, because people eat them. God tells Moses to watch his heart when he is alone, to be kind and watch his tongue when he is with people, the road in front when he is walking, and his gullet when he is dining. A saint tells a shaikh that love is never denied to humans, for only the lover knows the true value of the beloved. Another saint warns that unless you pray for protection from negativity (the Devil), you shall not enter the court of God.

The third son of the caliph asks for a cup that could display the whole world. 'Attar concluded a story by saying that Sufism is to rest in patience and forsake all desire for the world, and trust in God means bridling one's tongue and wishing for better things for others than for oneself. This son asks why his father seems to disparage the love of honor and the love of wealth which all seem to possess. The caliph replies that in the crazy prison of the world one can achieve greatness only by devotion. Since one speaks to God through the heart and soul, it is difficult to speak with God of worldly things. The third son asks if he can be allowed to seek power in moderation; but the father still warns that this will place screens between him and God. Each screen created by seeking power will create more screens. One must see both the good and the bad inside and outside oneself to understand how they are connected together. Saints who reach their goal see nothingness in all things, making sugar seem like poison and a rose like thorns. Ayaz advises the conquering sultan Mahmud to leave his self behind since he is better being entirely We. In the last story for his third son, the father says that thousands of arts, mysteries, definitions, commands, prohibitions, orders, and injunctions are founded on the intellect. What cup could be more revealing than this?

The fourth son seeks the water of life, and his father warns him against desire. A wise man considers Alexander the Great the slave of his slave, because the Greek conqueror has submitted to greed and desire, which this wise man controls. If the son cannot have the water of life, he asks for the knowledge that will illuminate his heart. In one story 'Attar concluded that if you are not faithful in love, you are in love only with yourself. The fifth son asks for the ring of Solomon that enables one to communicate with birds and other animals. The Way is summarized as seeing the true road, traveling light, and doing no harm. The father tells this son that he has chosen an earthly kingdom, because he has not heard of the kingdom of the next world. He advises this

king that since his sovereignty will not endure not to load the whole world on his shoulders. Why take on the burden of all creation? The caliph suggests that his son practice contentment, which is an eternal kingdom that overshadows even the Sun. When Joseph was thrown into a pit, the angel Gabriel counseled him that it is better to notice a single blemish in yourself than to see a hundred lights of the Unseen.

The sixth son desires to practice alchemy, but his father perceives that he is caught in the snare of greed. Gold is held more tightly by a miser than the rock grips the ore. The son observes that excessive poverty often leads to losing faith, and so he asks God for both the philosopher's stone and for gold; but his father replies that one cannot promote both faith and the world at the same time. In the epilog the poet commented that since he receives his daily bread from the Unseen, he does not have to be the slave of wretched men, and 'Attar concluded this work with the satisfaction that he has perfumed the name of God with his poetry.

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