

Attar: Conference of the Birds

Mantiq al-tayr (the Language/Speech/Logic of the Birds)¹

Q.27:16-17:

And Solomon was David's heir. He said: "O ye people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and on us has been bestowed (a little) of all things: this is indeed Grace manifest (from Allah.)" And before Solomon were marshalled his hosts – of Jinns and men and birds, and they were all kept in order and ranks.

A.

The world's birds gathered for their conference
and said: 'Our constitution makes no sense.

All nations in the world require a king;
how is it we alone have no such thing?

Only a kingdom can be justly run;
we need a king and must inquire for one'...

(hoopoe) I know our king – but how can I alone
endure the journey to His distant throne?

Join me, and when at last we end our quest
our king will greet you as His honoured guest.

Escape your selfhood's vicious tyranny –
whoever can evade the self transcends
this world and as a lover he ascends.

Set free your soul; impatient of delay,
step out along our sovereign's royal Way.

We have a king; beyond Qaf's mountain peak
the Simurgh lives, the sovereign whom you seek,
and He is always near to us, though we
live far from His transcendent majesty...

Do not imagine that the Way is short;
vast seas and deserts lie before His court.

Consider carefully before you start;
the journey asks of you a lion's heart...

If you desire this quest, give up your soul
and make our sovereign's court your only goal...

Renounce your soul for love; He you pursue
will sacrifice His inmost soul for you.

(pp. 32-34)

¹ All extracts from translation by Dick Davies and Afkham Darbandi (Penguin Classics, 1984)

B.

... How can love thrive
in hearts impoverished and half-alive?
'Beggars' you say – such niggling poverty
will not encourage truth or charity.
A man whose eyes love opens risks his soul –
his dancing breaks beyond the mind's control.
When long ago the Simurgh first appeared –
his face like sunlight when the clouds have cleared –
he cast unnumbered shadows on the earth,
on each one fixed his eyes, and each gave birth.
Thus we were born; the birds of every land
are still his shadows – think and understand.
If you had known this secret you would see
the link between yourselves and Majesty.
Do not reveal this truth, and God forbend
that you mistake for God Himself God's friend.
If you become that substance I propound,
you are not God, though in God you are drowned...
If He had kept His majesty concealed,
no earthly shadow would have been revealed.
And where that shadow was directly cast
the race of birds sprang up before it passed.
Your heart is not a mirror bright and clear
if there the Simurgh's form does not appear;
no-one can bear His Beauty face to face,
and for this reason, of His perfect grace,
He makes a mirror in our hearts – look there
to see Him, search your hearts with anxious care.

(pp. 52–53)

C.

A lover, said the hoopoe, now their guide,
is one in whom all thoughts of self have died;
those who renounce the self deserve that name;
righteous or sinful, they are all the same!
Your heart is thwarted by the self's control;
destroy its hold on you and reach your goal.

(p. 56)

D. The Valleys

(2. Love)

Love's valley is the next, and here desire
will plunge the pilgrim into seas of fire
until his very being is enflamed
and those whom fire rejects turn back ashamed.

The lover is a man who flares and burns,
whose face is fevered, who in frenzy yearns,
who knows no prudence, who will gladly send
a hundred worlds toward their blazing end,
who knows of neither faith nor blasphemy,
who has no time for faith or certainty,
to whom both good and evil are the same,
and who is neither, but a living flame.

But you! Lukewarm in all you say or do,
backsliding, weak – o no, this is not you!
True lovers give up everything they own
to steal one moment with the Friend alone...

(p. 172)

(6. Bewilderment)

Next comes the valley of bewilderment,
a place of pain and gnawing discontent –
each second you will sigh, and every breath
will be a sword to make you long for death;
blinded by grief, you will not recognise
the days and nights that pass before your eyes.
Blood drips from every hair and writes "Alas!"
beside the highway where the pilgrims pass;
in ice you fry, in fire you freeze – the Way
is lost, with indecisive steps you stray –
the Unity you knew has gone; your soul
is scattered and knows nothing of the Whole.
If someone asks: 'what is your present state?
is drunkenness or sober sense your fate,
and do you flourish now or fade away?'
the pilgrim will confess: 'I cannot say;
I have no certain knowledge any more;

I doubt my doubt, doubt itself is unsure;
I love, but who is it for whom I sigh?
Not Moslem, yet not heathen; who am I?
My heart is empty, yet with love is full;
my own love is to me incredible.' (p. 196)

(7. story from the Valley of Nothingness)

Moths gathered in a fluttering throng one night
to learn the truth about the candle's light,
and they decided one of them should go
to gather news of the elusive glow.
One flew till in the distance he discerned
a palace window where a candle burned –
and went no nearer; back again he flew
to tell the others what he thought he knew.
The mentor of the moths dismissed his claim,
remarking: 'He knows nothing of the flame.'
A moth more eager than the one before
set out and passed beyond the palace door.
He hovered in the aura of the fire,
a trembling blur of timorous desire,
then headed back to say how far he'd been,
and how much he had undergone and seen.
The mentor said: 'You do not bear the signs
of one who's fathomed how the candle shines.'
Another moth flew out – his dizzy flight
turned to an ardent wooing of the light;
he dipped and soared, and in his frenzied trance
both Self and fire were mingled by his dance –
the flame engulfed his wing-tips, body, head;
his being glowed a fierce translucent red;
and when the mentor saw that sudden blaze,
the moth's form lost within the glowing rays,
he said: 'He knows, he knows the truth we seek,
that hidden truth of which we cannot speak.' (p. 206)

E. Stories:

When Bayazid had left the world behind,
he came that night before the dreaming mind
of one of his disciples, who in fear
asked how he'd fared with Munkar and Nakir².
He said: "when these two angels questioned me
about the Lord, I told them I could see
no profit in our talk – if I should say
'He is my God', my answer would betray
a proud, ambitious heart; they should return
to God and ask Him what they wishes to learn –
God says who is His slave; the slave is dumb,
waiting for Him to say: 'Good servant, come!'"
If grace is given to you from God above,
then you are wholly worthy of His love;
and if He kindles fire in you, the fire
will burst out and its flames beat ever higher –
It is His works that act, no yours, you fool;
when will these dunces understand His rule! (p. 145)

A sufi once, with nothing on his mind,
was – without warning– struck at from behind.
He turned and murmured, choking back the tears:
'the man you hit's been dead for thrity years;
he's left this world!' The man who'd struck him said:
'You talk a lot for someone who is dead!
But talk's not action – while you boast, you stray
further and further from the secret Way,
and while a hair of you remains, your heart
and Truth are still a hundred worlds apart.'...
Withdraw into yourself, and one by one
give up the things you own – when this is done
be still in selflessness and pass beyond
all thoughts of good and evil; break this bond,
and as it shatters you are worthy of
oblivion, the nothingness of Love. (p. 207)

² Two angels who question the dead on their faith.

A royal hunt swept out across the plain.
The monarch called for someone in his train
to bring a greyhound, and the handler brought
a dark, sleek dog, intelligent, well-taught;
a jewelled gold collar sparkled at its throat,
its back was covered by a satin coat –
gold anklets clasped its paws; its leash was made
of silk threads twisted in a glistening braid.
The king thought him a dog who'd understand,
and took the silk leash in his royal hand;
the dog ran just behind his lord, then found
a piece of bone abandoned on the ground –
he stooped to sniff, and when the king saw why
a glance of fury flashed out from his eye.
'When you're with me', he said, 'your sovereign king,
how dare you look at any other thing?'
He snapped the leash and to his handler cried:
'Let this ill-mannered brute roam far and wide.
He's mine no more – better for him if he
had swallowed pins than found such liberty!'
The handler stared and tried to remonstrate:
'The dog, my lord, deserves an outcast's fate;
but we should keep the satin and the gold.'
The king said: 'No, do just as you are told;
drive him, exactly as he is away –
and when he comes back to himself some day,
he'll see the riches that he bears and know
that he was mine, a king's, but long ago.'

(p. 113)

A man whose job it was to keep the peace
beat up a drunk, who fought for his release
and cried: "It's you who's tiddled too much wine;
your rowdiness is ten times worse than mine –
who's causing this disturbance, you or me?
But yours is drunkenness that men can't see;
leave me alone! let justice do its worst –
enforce the law and beat yourself up first!"

(p. 156)