

## Farīd al-dīn al-‘Attār (1145-1221)

Today we are going to read an extract from “Conference of the Birds”, which is one of the most famous epic poems in the Islamic tradition, and one of the best-known expositions of the mystical journey in any language; in the western world it has been turned into ballets and plays, and inspired much art. It was written by Farīd al-dīn al-‘Attār, who was a contemporary of Ibn ‘Arabī and the great Arab mystical poet, Ibn al-Fāriḍ but, unlike them, lived in the far Eastern regions of the Islamic world. As such he wrote in Persian, and was in fact one of the earliest poets to establish Persian as **THE** language of poetry in the middle eras of the 12<sup>th</sup>- 16<sup>th</sup> century.

‘Attār was born in Nishapūr, in Eastern Iran, in around 1145, and he lived most, if not all of his life there, and died in around 1221 when he was an old man of over 70, probably during the Mongol sack of the city. (The dates are subject to debate). The name ‘Attār is a pen-name; it means perfume, and it indicates that he was an apothecary and a doctor, running a business with a shop-front on one of the main streets in Nishapūr, which he had inherited from his father. He makes some references to his work, for instance, that he wrote two of his major poetic works whilst simultaneously treating 500 patients a day. The import of his work as a healer is that he had an independent means of support. Within the Islamic tradition, poetry has mostly been an activity carried out at court and most poets would have had a rich patron to support them, but this was not the case with any of the poets we will read on this course, who were all men of God first and foremost and poets second. Rūmī is particularly famous for stating in several places how much he despises poetry, which he compares to tripe, and how much he prefers silence and what he calls ‘action’, but gives poetry to people only because it what they ask for and will listen to.

We don’t know much about ‘Attār’s spiritual life, and some people, such as the pioneering scholar of his work, Hellmut Ritter,<sup>1</sup> have claimed that he was not even a Sufi in any formal sense. But more recent scholarship tends towards thinking that this cannot possibly be true, as it is felt that the poems could not have been written by someone who had not personally experienced the states they describe. It is now

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<sup>1</sup> Hellmut Ritter, *Das Meer der Seele; Mensch, Welt und Gott in den Geschichten des Farīduddin ‘Attār*. Leiden, 1955. See also his entry in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, II.

thought that he was intimately connected to the spiritual life of Nishapūr, which was associated not only with a number of important early Sufi masters such as Abū Saʿid al-Khayr (d. 1049 ) one of the first poets to write in Persian, al-Sulamī (d. 1022), al-Qushayrī (d.1072) and Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d. c1020). This was home to a thriving community of spiritual seekers in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, to whose experience and aspiration ʿAṭṭār gave voice. One of the few statements he makes about his involvement is in the introduction to his famous prose work *The Memorials of the Saints* where he says; “From early childhood, seemingly without cause, I was drawn to this particular group (i.e. the Sufis), and my heart was tossed in waves of affection for them and their books were a constant source of delight for me”.<sup>2</sup> He has been called ‘The Poet of the Men of God’. The tradition is that he was converted to Sufism when one day a wandering dervish came into his shop and questioned him about his preparedness for the afterlife. The dervish then died suddenly in front of him; he was so disturbed by this that he abandoned his shop and went into retreat for several years at one of the many Sufi lodges in Nishapūr.<sup>3</sup>

He is one of the greatest poets of the Persian tradition, which is saying something, ranked by some commentators with Rūmī and Ḥāfīz for the beauty and power of his language and imagery. *Conference* was written whilst he was still quite young, and so may well have been one of his first poems. There is a tradition that when he was old man he met Rūmī when the latter was a young boy, passing through Nishapūr as his family fled from Balkh in about 1215, and gave him a copy of his *Book of Mysteries* (*Asrār-nāma*), as well as predicting his future eminence. Whether or not this was true, there is no doubt that he was immensely influential on all the Islamic mystical poetry that came after him.

According to Ritter, a very large number of works are attributed to ʿAṭṭār – around 24 – but it is now thought that many of these are actually not by him. The 12 works that seem pretty certainly authentic are nevertheless extremely impressive in terms of quantity, let alone quality. He is best known for his long epic poems, of which the most famous by far, is the *Conference of the Birds* (*Manṭiq al-ṭayr*). Other works include *The Book of Affliction* (*Muṣībat-nāma*) which is another epic poem describing

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<sup>2</sup> See Lewisohn and Shackleton ʿAṭṭār and the Persian Sufi Tradition, p. xviii

<sup>3</sup> See Avery and Alizadeh *Fifty Poems of Attar*, re-press, Melbourne, 2007.

a Sufi's journey of self knowledge through all the states and stages of the cosmos; and *The Book of God (Ilāhī-nāma)*, about a king who tried to inspire his sons with non-worldly aims. There is also a prose work *The Memorial of the Saints (Takhkirāt al-awliyā')*, which is an account of all the major Sufi masters from Jafar al-Sadiq to Hallāj, which is highly recommended and available in several good translations.<sup>4</sup> There is also a large *diwān* of *ghazals*, or mystical love poems, of which there is a selection translated very nicely by Kenneth Avery and Ali Alizadeh.<sup>5</sup>

These are not only beautiful, but also intellectually sophisticated poems. Nishapūr in this period was a great centre of culture, and 'Aṭṭār was clearly an educated man who was familiar with all aspects of Islamic intellectual life, and within his work in general – although not so much in *Conference* – there are lots of references to Qur'ān and *hadīth*, and to ideas drawn from philosophy and *kalām*. But above all, they reflect the development of Sufism which by this time had developed a highly sophisticated methodology and in particular, a great practical understanding of the states and difficulties encountered by those who aspired to union with the Divine. In addition, although it had not yet received the decisive input of Ibn 'Arabī (who was a contemporary of 'Aṭṭār, but his work did not really reach Iran as a major influence until the generations after his death), there was an underlying metaphysic and cosmology.

This was also the time when Sufi institutions were really becoming established within the Islamic world and becoming integrated both intellectually and socially. In places like Nishapūr which had a long history of great Sufi masters and thus a long teaching tradition, formal institutions – *khanqaqs* – for the training of disciples had come into existence. This is very relevant to our reading today, as one of the ways in which a *murīd* – or seeker – would be initiated into the Sufi path was by poetry, which was considered to be an easy way for people to take in the basic principles. It is pretty clear, I think, that *Conference* was written as such a teaching manual, combining as it does information about the path and its pitfalls with Sufi stories designed to inspire or caution the *murīd*.

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<sup>4</sup> I particularly like the version by A J Arberry: *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, Routledge, 1966.

<sup>5</sup> Avery and Alizadeh *Fifty Poems of Attar...*

The symbol of the bird to represent the spirit, and the possibility of flight to the Divine, has a long long history in Islamic culture. As with all Islamic poets, ‘Attar did not invent his story from scratch, but took an existing form and adapted it to his own ends. The earliest possible source was a work by the philosopher, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) (d. 1035), called the *R. al-Tayr* or *Treatise of the Bird*, which portrays the rational soul as a bird which is caught in the net of this world, and must free itself to fly to the Pure Intellect. This it does by making an epic journey over eight mountain peaks. This work was translated into Persian by Suhrawardī, in which form it may well have been known by ‘Attar. In addition, there were imitative works by both Muhammad and Ahmad al-Ghazālī; Muhammad al-Ghazālī (d.1111) introduces the idea of a gathering of birds who desire to find a king to rule over them and make a journey to find him. But in this tale, their leader is the phoenix and the eventual meeting does not have the same mystical denouement that ‘Attar introduces. An immediate source was probably Sanai’s long *qasīda Rosary of the Birds* which develops the Qur’ānic verse 27:16

“And Solomon was David’s heir/ He said: “Oh ye people/ We have been taught the speech of the birds”.

Thus Sanai shows how each bird praises God in its own particular way; the sound made by the dove, for instance, which is “ku ku” means in Persian “where” and so is taken to mean that the seeking of the beloved; where is He? Where is He? The sound made by the stork “lak lak” is interpreted as “*al mulk lak, al-amr lak*” (Everything belongs to Him, the order belongs to Him). etc. ‘Attar picks up this idea and develops it in a different way, making each bird represent a specific spiritual quality and exploring in what ways these are helpful on the spiritual path, and in what ways they can be hindrances or obstacles. Similarly, he picks up the idea of the journey from Ibn Sīnā, but adapts it in a completely innovative way to expound the Sufi vision – as opposed to the philosophical vision – of the path to perfection and realisation.

The basic story of conference is that at the beginning, all the birds of the world gather together to discuss the fact that they have no king to rule over them. They are informed by the hoopoe bird, whose particular virtue is that he was chosen by King Solomon (as related in the Qur’ān) as go-between in his love affair with the Bilqīs – the Queen of Sheba – that there is a great King called the Simurgh in a distant land.

He suggests that the birds set out on a journey to his court, to request him to become their ruler. The first section of the book is then devoted to a series of excuses that specific birds present as to why they don't need to undertake this journey as they can find completion in easier ways. These are answered one by one by the hoopoe. The form of the book is explicitly didactic – i.e. intended as a teaching text – and the questions and answers are interspersed with stories from the Sufi tradition about the matter being discussed. The allegory of course is with the limited self, or the *nafs* in Sufi terminology, and the objections that it raises when the possibility of undertaking the spiritual path is suggested. For instance, the nightingale is the first bird to present his excuses, claiming that he already has a dear beloved in the rose, with which he is totally satisfied. The hoopoe's reply, is that the rose is an ephemeral thing, saying:

... sharp thorns defend the rose  
And beauty such as hers too quickly goes.  
True love will see such empty transience  
For what it is – a fleeting turbulence  
That fills your sleepless nights with grief and blame...

Eventually they set off, but almost immediately they find that they need a leader, and elect the hoopoe, who subsequently leads the way. Then there is another section in which the birds complain that they are incapable of undertaking the journey, and present a further set of excuses, which once again, the hoopoe replies to. Then he goes on to describe seven valleys through which they have to pass before they reach the Simurgh's land:

The Valley of Quest

The Valley of Love

The Valley of Insight into Mystery

The Valley of Detachment

The Valley of Unity

## The Valley of Bewilderment

### The Valley of Poverty and Nothingness

Only when all this has been related do the birds actually set out, and in the poem the journey itself lasts about a page, which immediately precedes the section we are going to read today. We pick up the story at the dénouement, when just a very few of the birds – 30 out of the many thousands which set out – arrive at their destination.

It is all great fun, and has to read in quite a light-hearted way, I have discovered, else it can all seem a bit heavy – the fact that most of the birds perish along the way, many of them in rather awful ways, can seem a bit pessimistic about our own prospects on the spiritual journey unless you realise that there is a spirit to be entered into. The Sufism on which ‘Attar is drawing in *Conference* is closer to a folk tradition than the rather metaphysical expositions that we will find in writers like ‘Irqāqī or Shabistārī, and many of the stories have a correspondingly earthy character. It is very much in the spirit of early Sufism which developed a very deep and comprehensive, insightful, knowledge of what is called ‘states’ *hāl*, which are, pragmatically, ways of discussing our interior experience – at immensely subtle and delicate levels – and perfecting character, by say, cultivation of virtues or what is called within Sufism, *al-akhlāq al-ilāhiyya* or character traits of the divine. Nowadays we would regard these as spanning both psychological and spiritual experience. It was a very practical knowledge for people on a spiritual path.

A word on the translation we are going to use. There are a number of others, but we have used this one by Dick Davies and Afkham Darbandi because of its poetic quality, which most of the others do not have, whilst remaining pretty true to the meaning. Davies is a very good and established translated and scholar, Professor Emeritus at the University of Ohio in USA, taught for many years at Stanford. Unlike Alan Williams, whose work we read a little of last week and next week will read more, he has made the choice to keep to the rhyme and rhymn of the *mathnawi* style, and there is no doubt a price paid in terms of accuracy and maybe depth. But to get

the essential meaning, it is a much easier to read than, say, Peter Avery's *The Speech of the Birds*<sup>6</sup>, which would have been the alternative.

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Avery *The Speech of the Birds*, Islamic Text Society, 1998.