

The Philomena of St John of the Cross:

Virgil's Sorrowful Nightingale

or the Sufis' Singer of Ecstasy?

Out of what secret English summer evening
or night on the incalculable Rhine,
lost among all the nights of my long night,
could there have come to my unknowing ear
your song, encrusted with mythology,
nightingale of Virgil and the Persians?

Jorge Luis Borges, "To the Nightingale"

St. John of the Cross' spiritual symbols are among the most mysterious in Renaissance Spain's mystical poetry. The Spanish Arabist Miguel Asín Palacios and myself have traced an impressive number of the Spanish poet's symbols to Sufism. Following in the footsteps of Asín Palacios, in my own case I have been able to trace more than thirty of these mystical symbols to Islamic mysticism. I am happy to add now a new symbol to our ever-increasing list of shared spiritual metaphors: the nightingale.

Because of its almost total lack of Western antecedents, the ornithology of St John of the Cross has always left readers perplexed. We might think of that extraordinarily strange "solitary bird" of the Dichos de luz y amor, a bird with no determined color because it resembles the perfect spirit, "which has no determination in any thing."

In conceiving his mysterious colorless bird, St John, contrary to all expectations, clearly seems to be following the Persian mystics, for the image owes more to the East than to biblical Psalm 101:8, and it is only in the inebriate texts of 'Aṭṭār and Suhrawardī that I have been able to find this passer solitarius of the soul which lacks all color because it is symbolically released from all material bonds.

Despite the "Eastern-ness" of that "solitary bird," however, it looks as though the "sweet nightingale" (dulce Philomena) of the Cántico espiritual, which enchants us with its nocturnal song in the ardent spring of an otherworldly garden, is this time a literary rewriting on the part of St John of the Cross of the Philomena of Greco-Roman tradition. María Rosa Lida has carefully traced the long chain of recreation of Greco-Roman literary motifs on the part of Spanish poets, including the nightingale. But

St John is always surprising: In his hands this “Philomena” becomes, despite its evocative Greek name, a true *rara avis* which is entirely out of key within a Western literary context. For instead of singing a *miserabile carmen* in the style of Virgil’s *Georgics*, St John’s nightingale sings of mystical union, and that particular song was never anticipated by Homer or Catullus or Virgil or any of the long list of Renaissance poets whose poems portray the melodious but sad bird of mythology.

In order to better understand the poetic space in which St John’s nightingale launches its song of ecstasy we should explore in some detail the *Cántico espiritual* or *Spiritual Canticle*. The protagonists of the poem—the bride or soul and the Beloved-then-Spouse (God)—are about to bring their swoons of lovemaking to an end and they tell us, as that moment in the poem arrives, that they will make their nest in “caverns of rock.” In order to make a dwelling high up on a cliff, the two lovers must have undergone a Protean transmutation, must have been symbolically transformed into birds, able to fly like the incorporeal spirit:

Y luego a las subidas
cauernas de la piedra, nos iremos
que estan bien escondidas,
y alli nos entraremos,
y el mosto de granadas gustaremos.

And on to our eyrie then,
in grots of the rock, high, high!
Old rumor placed it far beyond wits of men.
Ah but we’ve traced it
and wine of the red pomegranate—there we’ll taste it!

Obviously, in alluding to the enigmatic “grots [lit. ‘caverns’] of the rock,” St John has borrowed a verse from the *Song of Songs*: “O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of stairs, let me see thy countenance. . . .” (Solomon 2:14). Almost all the commentators on Solomon’s *epithalamion*, including Fray Luis de Leñn, who translated it into Spanish, make clear that this line is referring to openings in cliff sides or rocky mountains—the *Vulgate’s foraminibus petrae*—where doves and pigeons customarily nest.

The *Cántico*, as we know, represents the celebration of an impassioned human love which is simultaneously the symbol of a transcendental, otherworldly love. That is why we should not be overly surprised at the strange behavior of these lovers, who although in some way are very much like the couple in the *Song of Songs*, in this poem metamorphose and change identities—they are dove, deer, corporeal man and woman, and now, two doves—showing us in an oblique but convincing way that they are in the process of becoming One. From almost the first lines of the *Cántico*, St John has been giving us important clues to that effect, and now, at these culminating moments of the poem, those clues multiply dizzily. In the symbolic wedding ceremony of mystical union which the stanzas articulate so passionately, the Beloved, who was once a “wounded deer,” has now been transmuted, like his beloved bride, into a dove. Only by acquiring that winged form can he nest with her in the rocky cliffs, and can they together sip the celebratory libation, which itself is a bit curious: “the must of pomegranates.”

St John’s wine cellars are stocked with a much greater variety than those of Solomon, whom the Spanish poet so closely rewrites. Wine, as not only medieval Bible commentators such as St Bernard and St Bonaventure knew, but also the contemplatives of Islam centuries earlier, represents the state of “drunken” ecstasy. But the “must” of the pomegranate was particularly significant to the medieval Sufis. St John, very much like them, points out how, under the apparent multiplicity of the grains of the fruit, there lies the absolute and unquestionable unity of God, represented by the intoxicating drink:

Because, just as from the many grains of pomegranate a single liquor flows when they are eaten, so from all these marvels. . . of God instilled into the soul there springs a fruition and delight of love, which is the liquor of the Holy Spirit. . . (a) divine liquid. (CB 37:8)

It is precisely this fruit—the pomegranate—that marks the Sufi’s arrival at the fourth stage of the mystical path: as Laleh Bakhtiar tells us, the pomegranate is “the symbol of integration of multiplicity in unity, in the station of Union, conscious of Essence.”

Perhaps Mother Ana de Jesús, to whom the *Cántico* spiritual was addressed, knew something about this divine wine of the Unity of God that is pressed from the ruby-colored seeds of the mystical pomegranate. I suspect that the monastic culture within which St John and his readers moved, would have preserved some memory of these mystical similes, even if they no longer explicitly recalled their remote Sufi origins. But they would most certainly have recalled the obligatory symbolic equivalence: as we will see in a moment, the “nightingale” is yet another sign in this curious mode of suggesting to monastic readers the mysteries of mystical union. St John’s first readers would probably know a great deal about these literary equivalences whose decoding entails so much scholarly effort for us.

But let us once again pick up the trail of the nightingale of the *Cántico*. Setting aside for the moment St John’s complex literary contextuality, we should remember that in the first moments of ecstasy suggested by the first verses of the poem, the female beloved is identified with the “crystalline fount”

(christalina fuente) in which she suddenly sees the ineffable eyes of the man she loves most—eyes which, paradoxically, she carries “portrayed” or “drawn” or, as Nims has it, “sketched” within her entrails. The Beloved then appears, symbolically transformed into a thirsty “wounded deer,” like the wounded deer in the *Æneid* (IV: 67) and even the deer of the Psalms (41:2–3), which come to drink in the symbolic cooling waters of his beloved bride-to-be. A few stanzas later, when the symbolic marriage has been achieved, the poem’s speaker, the Bride, a clear alter ego of St John, sips the wines of the Spouse’s “inward storehouse,” and these wines represent the mystical union, as intoxicating liquids always do in the poetry of St John. In this line of the *Cántico* that I am referring to—“and wine of the red pomegranate—there we’ll taste it!”—once the process of theopoiesis has occurred, the couple simultaneously drink the intoxicating liquor of ecstasy, which can be nothing but their own Essence, now re-united. The two are now the holy fermented juice of the vineyard. The unimaginable union of the *unus-ambo*, is represented, then, in the unifying liquor that the two lovers drink and in which they are con-sumed.

The nuptial celebration continues to unfold within the most hidden depths of the rocky caverns, to which the protagonists have now symbolically flown. It is clear that the Bride or “dove” has been freed from all material bonds and is therefore able to cleave the air in an incorporeal flight that binds her eternally to her Ineffable Spiritual Beloved. This mystical marriage ceremony is, furthermore, totally lacking in witnesses or celebrating guests—there are only the two spouses. And it is in precisely this rarefied space of spiritual union—represented by the dizzyingly high nest where the marriage is consummated—that we will soon hear the jubilant—but, from the standpoint of classical culture, incongruent—song of the “sweet nightingale.”

It is important to explore further still other aspects of the particular circumstances in which St John’s *rara avis* launches forth its song. The bride of the *Cántico* now celebrates the details of her otherworldly wedding night, and does so in terms of the profound wisdom that she has made her own during the process of mystical revelation. As we know, although the mystical experience cannot be expressed rationally, it is an eminently cognitive experience. And since the experience implies transcendent knowledge, we know that the *Cántico*’s bride is now in the presence of an otherworldly, inexpressible gift which she symbolizes in the following enraptured verses:

Alli me mostrarias
aquello que mi alma pretendia,
y luego me darias
alli, tu vida mia,
aquello que me diste el otro dia:
El aspirar de el ayre

el canto de la dulce Philomena
el soto y su donayre
en la noche serena
con llama que consume y no da pena.

There finally you'll show me
the very thing my soul was yearning for;
and the same moment, O my dearest life, restore
something you gave the other day: the breathing of the air
the nightingale in her affectionate vein,
woods and the pleasure there
in night's unruffled reign—
these, and the flames embracing without pain.

The singer of these verses employs the sweet language of a newlywed, and the intimacy with which the bride now communicates with the once solemn Spouse is clearly shown when she apostrophizes him in this final moments of the poem as *vida mía*, “my life.” The phrase has the ring of Garcilaso; and the reader surely recalls that unforgettable “*Elisa, vida mía*” with which Garcilaso broke through his literary discourse, otherwise filled with the euphemisms of Virgil and Petrarch: suddenly the bride seemed to be speaking to her beloved outside the conventional discourse of art. In the case of the *Spiritual Canticle*, the break is not so striking, since throughout the poem St John proved himself to be the most affectionate and lovingly expressive poet of the Spanish Renaissance: We have heard the speaker of the verses refer to her partner as *carillo* (“little darling”) and *mis amores* (“my loved one”). But at this moment when the mystical marriage is taking place, the language becomes even more lovestruck and we are left with no doubt that the spiritual marriage has now been consummated.

We immediately see, furthermore, that the word the poet has repeatedly used throughout the poem to point to the indescribable space of the mystical manifestation is spoken again, this time twice, with particular emphasis—*allí, allí* (“there, there”)—propelling us into the rocky caverns but also to the union's remote “crystalline fount” which somehow simultaneously fuses all the *Cántico*'s spaces, which are the concatenated symbols of a unique but extraordinarily fecund locus of the Divine manifestation. It is impossible to explain what the staggering celestial gift consists of that the spouses receive in this vague symbolic space of theopoiesis that we have been speaking about; it is suggested

but hardly specified by that imprecise but eloquent *aquello*, *aquello*, “that,” “that,” which the poet once more repeats, with emotional desperation. The concept of time is blurred more than ever in this stanza, and with that blurring the poet suggests (once again, for he has done so before in this poem) that we are outside time. And all this despite that “then” (i.e., “immediately”) that begins the verses and that would appear to give us a sense of specific time. As Xabier Pikaza has noted:

[Luego] (“then”) implies a whole prior process culminating now in a definite form of time. Thus, the future perpetuates what the past was, preserving it but now in a fulfilled way, in a plenitude. That is why the bride says “and then you will give me that which you gave me the other day.” The past of love becomes a present that triggers the future: the experience already lived is the source of hope and the guarantee of new experience.

The ambiguous imperfect tense of “pretendía” (“desired, wished, hoped”) contributes to this mysterious confluence of times, for the imperfect tense in Spanish draws out the past action yet is “forced” in some sense to coexist with the future/conditional “you would give” (*darías*). The gift is of such magnitude that there is no way to express it, and our bride, deeply in love, must have recourse, in her stammering inability to formulate the experience, to a symbolic sputtering of noun phrases in no apparent logical sequence. The images thus “strung together” also have no verb: St John seems to be imitating here the “deep” syntax of the Hebrew Song of Songs and of the Mozarabic *kharjas*, for Semitic languages almost always omit the verb “to be.” Thus, the dizzying lines of this intoxicating stanza that reveals to us the supernatural gift of mystical grace are the yearning verbal cascade with which the poem’s protagonist gave her awestruck welcome to her Beloved in the very midst of the poem:

Mi amado las montañas
los valles solitarios nemorosos
las insulas estrañas
los rios sonorosos
el siluo de los ayres amorosos

My love: the mountains’ height,
forest ravines—their faraway recesses,
t o r r e n t s ’ s o n o r o u s weight,
isles no explorer guesses,
. the affectionate air, all whisper and caresses

This, once again, seems to be a case of mystical gibberish, *ma non tanto*, for the enigmatic words do manage to whisper to us something of the unfathomable mystery of the union that has been achieved.

Let us now look more closely for a moment at the supernatural “gifts” the Beloved gave His Bride at the end of the *Cántico*, because among them we have finally found “the song of the sweet nightingale” that we have been looking for. The lines, with their pure verbless evocation of breezes, songs, graces, nights, and flames, would appear to dissolve, evaporate, lift off into nothingness: the dematerializing chord that is struck is immediately evident and equally clearly important, for the poet once again sets us at the border between the corporeal world and a locus outside space and time. The first ineffable gift, “the breathing of the air,” offers no great problem, whatever the spiritual tradition that we view it from. As we all know, “respiration”—the *pneuma* of the Greeks, the *prana* of the Hindus, the *rawā’* of the Hebrews, the *rū’* of the Muslims—is related to the creative breath of Genesis, the *logos*, and the Holy Spirit (“the very osculant of the Triune God”, according to Nicholas Perella) and even to the exchange of breath that occurs in the kiss, through which a couple intermingle their souls in the most diverse Neoplatonic traditions.

But the specifically mystical meaning that St John gives the concept of air here is obvious. In a previous stanza in the *Cántico* — “Come, southern wind, for lovers. Come and stir / the garden with your breath. / Shake fragrance on the air./ My love will feed among the lilies there” — the wind of the word of God is invited to waft through the garden of the soul and spread the fragrance of the flowers of the spiritual gifts that are characteristic of the theopathic state. (Indeed, the Sufis refreshed the perfumed gardens of their ecstatic souls with the same divine breeze that wafts here through the garden of the *Cántico*-singer’s deep psyche) We are walking, then, through a supernatural garden—the garden of the soul in ecstasy—cooled by the vivifying breezes of divine overtones of a transcendent springtime.

We are sure that at this moment of the *Cántico* the season of flowers has come because we immediately hear the jubilant “song of the sweet Philomena,” that is, the nightingale, which St John himself associates with the arrival of “spring, when once the cold, the rains, and the varieties of winter have past” (CB 39:8-9). So at last we are allowed to hear St John’s nightingale, but the springtime melody that we hear is unexpected. The joyful song, as I have hinted above, turns out to be quite enigmatic if what one expects is the nightingale of Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Martial, or even the more modern Garcilaso, Boscán, Camoëns, Heine, and Keats. All these poets, central to the Western literary tradition, associate the nightingale with human grief, not with the overflowing joy of ecstasy. Let us review briefly this broad Western tradition.

The protagonist of the ancient Greek myth which European poets reformulated constantly is the young Athenian woman Philomena, who is raped by her brother-in-law, Tereus, king of Thrace. To prevent Philomena from telling her sister, his wife, Procne, what happened, Tereus cuts out the violated woman’s tongue, and so she can do no more than weep, wordlessly, in her grief. Yet Philomena figures out a way to tell her story: she embroiders the scene of violation on a piece of cloth and shows it to her

sister. Together, the two women plot their revenge: They kill Itylus, the son of Tereus and Procne, cut off his head, cook the child, and serve it to Tereus for dinner. Once the king has eaten the horrendous meal, the two women show him his child's head. When he realizes what he has done, Tereus draws his sword to kill the women, but the women pray to the gods that they be transformed into birds. Procne is metamorphosed into a nightingale, Philomena into a swallow, and Tereus into a sandpiper, or hoopoe. This is the version of the legend in the oldest Greek sources; it is not until the myth reaches the Romans that the inversion of the two sisters occurs, with Philomena becoming the famed nightingale that Europe later adopted as a literary motif consistently associated with grief and weeping.

In the *Georgics* (IV, 511–515), Virgil offers a variant of the myth and contributes to fixing the motif of the nightingale “as figuration of the unhappy mother” mourning the theft of her still-unfledged offspring, which the hard-hearted laborer (*durus arator*) has stolen from the nest. Perched on a tree branch, she gives free rein to her song—*miserabile carmen*—and floods the woods around with grief. This is the stanza in question:

Qualis populea maerens Philomela sub umbris
amissos queritur fetus quos durus arator
observans nido implumes detraxit: at illa
flet noctem, ramoque sedens miserabile carmen
integrat, et maestis late loca questibus implet.

As in the poplar-shade a nightingale
Mourns her lost young, which some relentless swain,
Spying, from the nest has torn unfledged, but she
Wails the long night, and perched upon a spray
With sad insistence pipes her dolorous strain,
Till all the region with her wrongs o'erflows.

Faithful to this magisterial lesson of the classics is Petrarch's “rosignol che si soave piagne” and Camoëns' Philomena which “chora.” But probably the most beautiful rewriting in Spanish of this motif of the grieving nightingale is from the pen of Garcilaso, who borrows from Virgil's melancholy bird in *Eclogue I*:

Cual suele el ruiseñor con triste canto

quejarse, entre las hojas escondido,
del duro labrador, que cautamente
le despojó su caro y dulce nido
de los tiernos hijuelos, entretanto
que del amado ramo estaba ausente,
y aquel dolor que siente
con diferencia tanta
por la dulce garganta
despide, y a su canto el aire suena,
y la callada noche no refrena
su lamentable oficio y sus querellas,
trayendo de su pena
al cielo por testigo y las estrellas.

As the nightingale, among the branches hidden,
with sad song the wrong done it laments—
the cruel laborer stealthily has stolen
the tender birdlings from the sweet nest
while the nightingale was absent
from its beloved branch—
and that pain it senses,
so wonderfully transformed,
through its sweet throat it sends,
and to its song the air resounds
and the silent night does not restrain
its grieving labor and its plaints
that carry that grief and pain
up, for witness of the stars and heaven. (Trans. A.H.)

But Garcilaso is not alone in his recreation of this classical motif. Boscán had stolen a march on Garcilaso in his *Historia de Leandro y Héro*, whose lines are so very nearly identical to Garcilaso's: "Qual suele el ruyseñor, entre las sobras / de las jomas de olmo o de la haya, / la pérdida llorar de sus hijuelos, / a los quales sin plumas aleando / el duro labrado tom  del nido. / Lloro la triste paxarilla entonces / la noche entera sin descanso alguno, / y desde all  do est  puesta en ru ramo, / renovando su llanto dolorido, / de sus querellas hinche todo el campo."

And yet Boscán and Garcilaso are but the precursors of a symbolic motif that became obligatory in Spanish literature in the following centuries: For Francisco de la Torre, the "Sweet, sweet Philomena singing / deafens the woods with plaints," while G ngora expresses his compassion for the "widowed nightingale" contemplating the violated nest. Lope de Vega returns to an echo of the weeping bird, who now, in the *Arcadia* (IV), is paired with the turtledove: "Lamenta Filomena, / gime la tortolilla enamorada" ("Philomena grieves, / and moans the lovesick turtledove"). There can be no doubt, then: this is a literary bird which, whether as violated virgin or dispossessed mother, is the very embodiment of grief.

What does St John of the Cross have to do with this long and venerable tradition of sadness and mourning, if his symbolic love-nest high up in the rocky caverns is not simply not empty, but in fact the sublime chamber of married love? Is St John mocking Virgil and his imitators by turning their *miserabile carmen* into the joyful song of ecstatic union?

Not even the spiritual rewriting of the nightingale by Spanish contemplatives offers any precedent for St John's apparent abandonment of literary tradition. To cite just one example, Mal n de Chaide, in his *Conversi n de la Magdalena*, echoes both the Virgilian and Garcilasan laments: "and the sweet nightingale of the loving nest / cleaves the air with plaints." Despite Mal n's re-siting of the nightingale in a context of sacredness, Philomena continues to grieve. Mar a Rosa Lida notes this incongruity as she notes that in the poet's second reformulation of the myth, included in the *Conversi n's* paraphrase of Psalm 103 (Part II, 1), he portrays the nightingale's melody as "mournful song." From the high ground where they nest, all the birds praise God "with song unlearned"— except, that is, for the nightingale:

. . . solo la filomena . . .

por su dulce garganta en trist duelo

despide sus querellas,

moviendo a compasion a las estrellas.

save for the nightingale
[who] through her sweet throat in sad mourning
sends forth her plaints
moving the stars to compassion.

Lida notes that “the incongruity of the ‘sad mourning’ in the psalm of joy and wonder at the work of God underscores the firmness with which the simile of the nightingale of the Georgics had been imposed on literary thought.” Where, then, does St John’s stubborn allegory of the Philomena come from?

Jorge Luis Borges knew the answer. He was perfectly aware that more than a single tradition has nurtured the literary nightingale whose sweet song has for so long accompanied humanity. The lines of Borges’ ode “To the Nightingale” (in the 1975 volume *La rosa profunda*) illustrate this better than many scholarly essays:

¿En qué noche secreta del Inglaterra
O del constante Rhin incalculable
Perdida entre las noches de mis noches,
A mi ignorante oído habrá llegado
Tu voz cargada de mitologías
Ruisenior de Virgilio y de los persas?

Out of what secret English summer evening
or night on the incalculable Rhine,
lost among all the nights of my long night,
your song, encrusted with mythology,
could there have come to my unknowing ear
nightingale of Virgil and the Persians?

Borges, who knew more about Muslim mystical literature than until recently we had thought, is entirely correct in evoking two nightingales, one Western and one Eastern. Because in fact their symbolic referents are diametrically opposed. We have already looked at the nightingale of Virgil and his European colleagues, but as we will see, many Sufis also used the simile of the nightingale, a bird

venerated by Islam. Ahmad al-Ghazzālī, Ruzbehān Baqlī, ‘Attār, and especially the sublime Jālaluddīn Rūmī all incorporated the motif into their poetry. But unlike the nightingale of the Georgics, the nightingale of these Muslim authors (who generally wrote in Persian, although also in Arabic, Turkish, and Urdu) does not mourn, but rather celebrates mystical union. A line in Borges tells us this clearly: “El agareño / Te sueño arrebatado por el éxtasis” (“The Muslim dreamed you / in the delirium of ecstasy”). The distinguished Islamicist Annemarie Schimmel is clear about this: “[The nightingale of Persian poetry] is the bird of intoxicated love.” Thus, we have at last come across the “dulce Philomena” of St John of the Cross, a nightingale which preserves the externalities of classical mythology but behaves like a Persian bird. I have already mentioned that this is indeed a *rara avis*. Far from the desolate mourning of its European ancestors, St John’s joyous bird celebrates, along with its Islamic counterparts, the intoxication of ecstasy. It seems strange to say, but a Muslim reader would have understood the song of St John’s nightingale better than a Western reader might, and that is the reason for my constant suspicion that Sufi symbols such as this might still have been common literary currency in the monastic setting in which St John produced his poetry-- still today so little understood.

But now we should listen closely to the transcendent cooing of the Sufi nightingale, which sings wordless songs to the ineffable presence of God. It is a song, insists Annemarie Schimmel, which would have been automatically decoded by the readers of Persian mystical poetry: “Anyone who has read Persian poetry, if only in translation, knows of the nightingale who yearns for the rose [a symbol of the Divine Presence]—it is, in mystical language, the soul longing for eternal beauty.” The Persian nightingale sometimes sings its song alone, sometimes addresses the song to the rose, symbol of the unwithering beauty of God. The reason Persian mystical lyrics so insistently associate the nightingale with the rose is actually quite clear, as Schimmel reminds us: *bolbol* (“nightingale”) rhymes with *gol* (“rose”), and the rose is a symbolic reflection of the indescribable beauty of the Creator, whose nectar the enamored nightingale sucks. It is important to recall that in the *Cántico* St John celebrates the mystical rose (roses, in his case) just before the nightingale sings its song: “en tanto que de rosas hacemos una piña”. The tight braid of roses that the lovers weave is, for the poet-commentator, *las extrañas noticias de Dios* (“the mysterious news of God,” CB 24:6). A Sufi would have been able to decode this without any need for exegesis, since the rose is, as I have noted, the flower that represents the Transcendental God. As we have seen, St John chooses to celebrate first the rose and then, at the end of the poem, his “very Islamic” Philomena.

Let us return for a moment to the delightful literary garden of the Persians, in search of the nightingale’s song. Beginning in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and further instructed by the treatises on mystical symbolic birds such as the *Risālat al-ṭayr* (“Treatise on the birds”) by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī (known in the West as Algazel) and the *Manṭiq ut-ṭayr* (“The language of the birds”) by Farīd al-dīn ‘Aṭṭār, both twelfth century, contemplative poets in Iran filled their ecstatic gardens with nightingales and roses. The first to produce one of these ornithological epics was Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥusān

ibn ‘Abdallāh ibn Sīnā (980–1037), known in the West as Avicenna, whose work, the *Risālat al-ṭayr* or “Speech of the Bird,” was originally written in Arabic but translated into Persian and commented on profusely in both languages. These pioneering works gave rise to a poetry of intoxicated birds that served as heralds of ecstasy—a poetry so widespread and so consistent that it led the great expert in Persian mysticism, Henry Corbin, to call the literary phenomenon “le cycle de l’oiseau.” (In fact, the Persians of this time were so passionately given to the use of flowering gardens filled with birds that in order to make their gardens flower and be able to contemplate their singing birds even in the harsh winter, they wove their famous carpets, usually decorated with floral and flying-bird motifs.)

These Persian texts which inaugurate the long line of the simile of the contemplative birds make it very clear that the “language of the birds” is the language of sanctified human spirits—that is, of the mystics. The leit-motif is Qur’anic, finally, for in the Qur’an (XXVII, 16), Solomon sings of having received this ineffable language of God. The Persian poet Najm ad-dīn al-Kūbrā confesses that he, too, has been blessed with this peerless language: “. . . praise of God, which has been given to us by the language of birds.”

But one must note that of all the birds in the mystical gardens of Islam, the nightingale is foremost. In his *Dīwān-i-kabīr*, Jalāluddīn Rūmī invites the nightingale (bolbol in Persian) to step up to the pulpit of the bough and offer a sermon—exquisitely musicalized, no doubt—on the beauty of God. Here, as Annemarie Schimmel reminds us, the nightingale “is also the ‘head of the musicians,’” and can be associated in turn with the bolbola, “the long-necked bottle which makes a nice sound when wine is poured out of it during cheerful drinking parties in spring.” Closely paralleling Rūmī, Ruzbehān Baqlī says the following: “When the nightingale [of the spirit] becomes intoxicated with the rose, it shall hear the song [of its Beloved] with the heart’s ear in the fountain of pre-eternity.” In his famous *Diwān-i-Shams-i Tabrizī*, Rūmī insists once again on the occult mystical significance of the bolbol’s song: “From now on, the nightingale in the garden will sing our song: He will tell of sugar-dispensing, spirit-increasing Love.” And in the *Diwān-i-Kabīr*, Rūmī celebrates inflowing mystical knowledge, which is infinitely superior to the aridity of rational theology: “the cow does not know how to produce the cry of the nightingale, / the sober intellect does not know the taste of intoxication.” It is clear that the nightingale of St John of the Cross is much closer to this enraptured bolbol of the Persian mystics than to the sad and grieving “Philomena” of classical tradition.

The ancient Greek myth, as we will recall, points to the idea that Philomena is mute because Tereus has cut out her tongue so that she will not be able to tell anyone of the tragic event that has befallen her. That is why the mutilated young woman, once transformed into a bird, sings wordlessly. The Sufis’ nightingale is likewise wordless, but not because a treacherous brother-in-law has cut out its tongue, but because of the wondrous trance that the bird has fallen into. The Persian bird knows that silence is the language of the angels, not the tortured. For centuries, the Persians, and especially Rūmī, had also understood that the nightingale’s song is born out of separation, because in the very instant of Union,

words fail. When the ecstatic bird sings it is because its otherworldly melody celebrates a union that is now past, and that has left it without words to express it. Annemarie Schimmel has, as usual, cogently expressed this idea: “[The] Divine Rose can never be described properly; what the poet can do is to ‘give the explanation of the nightingale who is separated from the rose.’” That is why Rūmī had insisted that the totality of his intoxicated Mathnawī-i ma‘nawī was but the “explanation of the nightingale separated from the Rose.” (St John would appear to have known this, and perhaps that is why his Philomena sings only at the end of the poem, when mystical grace has been granted and it is now time to celebrate it.) God is better spoken of outside language, or suggested, because language, as Rūmī explains in some of his loveliest distichs, is but the veil of God.

The bolbol is, then, a necessarily solitary bird, since it attempts to sing the Ineffable and knows that not everyone will be able to understand its sublime psalm: “Oh you nightingale of that garden, how do you feel in the company of those who do not listen to you?” laments Rūmī in the *Dīwān-i-kabīr*. And he insists upon this point: “Even if you are able to describe the Language of the Birds, how can you discern what they want to say?” It is interesting to note that the Arabic root *balbala*, from which the world bulbul (“nightingale”) is derived, is associated both with anxiety and with the “wordlessness” of babble and mental-confusion-expressed-as-stammering—that is, with the inability to express one’s thoughts clearly, with being at an anguishing “loss for words.” The “whirling” or dancing dervishes, especially, employed the formula of repeated prayer, and it is interesting to remember that a famous Pakistani dervish named Muhammad Nasir `Andalib (1697– 1758) chose that last name for its symbolic value: in Urdu `andalib means, precisely, “nightingale.” The Islamic nightingale sings, then, and does not speak; it is mute, like Virgil’s Philomena, but for different, and undoubtedly more elevated, reasons.

The nightingale that sings out its exalted song in the *Cántico espiritual*, represents for St John both the soul-in-love and the Beloved that is the object of that love: “in this union, the soul joys in and praises God with God himself” (CB 39:6). We can no longer know who is singing, because both partake of the single essence: it should not surprise us, then, that in order to celebrate such an inextricable union, the poet should mold a two-faced bird, simultaneously Eastern and Western.

And yet much more Eastern, in the final analysis. The Sufis knew a great deal about this nightingale which is ultimately identified with the unmistakable Beauty that its song celebrates and praises. Rūmī tells us this with his usual passion, this time in the *Dīwān-i Shamsi-i Tabrīzi*, that “[in] this plane, I am the All-Merciful’s nightingale. / Seek not for my limit and border—I have no limits.” And again: “the nightingale of those whom He grants a mystical rapture has its own rose garden in itself.” Schimmel glosses this in the following way: “The soul-bird eventually experiences that the rose is dwelling in its innermost heart, and that there is no separation. ‘The rose bud is the nightingale’s heart,’ as some poets would express it.” And of course the nightingale of the *Georgics*, which knew nothing of mystical ecstasy, never sang such otherworldly songs.

But St John orientalizes even more forcefully his sweet nightingale/ Philomena. The line that follows its wordless song is very strange to Western ears: *el soto y su donayre*, literally, “the woodland and its grace.”, but could also be translated as “the graceful dance of the woods”. Applying this particular form of “grace” to a woodland or forest is unheard-of in Spanish: The word “*donaire*” is applied to people who are graceful, who move gracefully. The woodland would seem to sway, then, gracefully, no doubt because of the breezes that waft through this blessed garden (with its trees) in which we hear the singing of the nightingale. The woodland would, then, seem to acquire its “grace” in echoing that song, which precedes its mysterious movement. The European lyric tradition is of no help in understanding these images, so apparently unconnected and delirious. Islamic literary intertextuality, however, does allow us to see that St John’s similes are more concatenated than they at first appear. I yield once more to Annemarie Schimmel, who comments on the verses in which Rm alludes to the spring breezes that cool the garden of his soul. The nightingale sings and its wordless music makes the woodland dance with joy, for it has been invited to join in the cosmic dance in praise of God:

Creation is seen as a great cosmic dance in which nature, dreaming in non-existence, heard the Divine call and ran into existence in an ecstatic dance. . . . The trees, flowers, gardens which have come dancing into being continue their dance in this world, touched by the spring breeze, and listening to the melodies of the nightingale:

The twigs started dancing like repentants (who have just entered the mystical path), the leaves clap their hands like minstrels, led by the plane-tree. The nightingale comes back from its journey and calls all inhabitants of the garden to join her in *samā’* to celebrate spring. The common people perhaps do not see this dance which begins as soon as the spring breeze of love touches the trees and flowers. . . . [The] leaves, dressed in green like houris, happily dance on the tomb of January. . . . Only dried-up twigs are not moved by this breeze and this lovely sound, comparable to the dry hearts of scholars and philosophers.

Schimmel might just as well be describing the verse of the *Cántico* that we are interested in here—*el soto y su donayre*—since at another place she insists that “the trees likewise dance in the spring breeze.” Nor is this surprising, since Schimmel told me years ago that she was not at all surprised at the “mysteries” in St John that had so frightened Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo and Dámaso Alonso, because she always read St John “as though he were a Sufi.” No reader of Rūmī will find it incongruent that the breeze-blown woodland should dance to the music of the spring melody of the nightingale. Let us look once again at the verses of Jalaloddīn Rūmī’s *Mathnawī*:

Oh wind, make the branches dance in remembrance of the day you wafted over Union.

Behold these trees, all of them joyful like a gathering of the felicitous!

.....

Come into the infinite garden of the heart and behold it many sweet fruits!

See its dancing green boughs, behold the gentleness of thornless roses.

There can be no doubt that spring has come to the beatific garden of the Sufi poets. We already know that the restorative winds of spring also blew suddenly into St John's garden in the *Cántico espiritual*, because he explains to us that his nightingale could begin its song just when the winter had passed. In the prose commentaries to the *Cántico*, St John formulates a whole mystical and theological theory about the meaning of this sudden spiritual spring:

. . . And just as the song of the philomel, which is the nightingale, is heard in the spring, when once the cold and rain and varieties of winter have passed, and it makes melody to the ear and recreation to the spirit, so in this present communication and transformation of love which she now has, so the Bride in this life, aided as she is and free of all temporal disturbances and varieties, and naked and cleansed of imperfections, penalties, and fogs, of both senses and spirit, feels a new springtime in freedom and breadth and happiness of spirit. (CB 8)

We can surely no longer be surprised that St John coincides almost exactly with the mystics of Islam with respect to the mystical theory behind this resurgence of spring in the flowering garden to which the nightingale comes, to celebrate its transformation in God. Winters on the steppes of Anatolia can be long and cold, and everyone greets the advent of spring with joy—yet no one more joyfully than Mawlānā Rūmī, for whom, as for St John, the cycle of the seasons has deep spiritual significance. Winter is the time to practice spiritual patience, like the trees, which jealously hold their sap until it can once again circulate, until the sun caresses their branches and dresses them in green, like the souls of the blessed in paradise. Winter, as Annemarie Schimmel tells us, is the time when the contemplative draws into himself in order to store up spiritual strength and free himself from all inappropriate earthly ties. The secret spiritual treasures which God grants His servants in solitude will only be manifested at the right time: in the springtime of their souls, which is a kind of symbolic resurrection. During the cold winters of purgation, drought, and spiritual drawing-inward, the nightingale has disappeared from the icy garden. When the symbolic ice melts, the bonds that imprisoned the bird, both material and spiritual, melt away as well, and that is why Rūmī can exclaim in his *Fīhi mā fīhi*: “In complete annihilation I said: ‘O King of kings, / all images have melted in this fire!’” (The Sufis, like St John, were very exacting with respect to the highest mystical life, and they held these spiritual bonds to the world of images in contempt as well, since no image of God is possible.) It is, then, after the cleansing or purgation of the spirit, when one has been freed of all perturbation and imperfect bonds, that the singing bird can return triumphantly to sing its ecstatic song in the flowery garden—a song to which, as we have seen, the entire garden dances, in otherworldly joy.

We should add here that this woodland that dances, in a sort of mystical trance, to the music of the breezes and the nightingale's springtime song, is a nocturnal wood. It cannot be otherwise, since the nightingale by definition sings at night. St John of the Cross knows this, and in the next line he speaks of the *noche serena*, "serene night." But an initiate in the reading of Sufi mystical literature would see instantly that the "serene night" is yet another mystical commonplace, since the space of night is a milepost on the path to Transcendence. In his theological tracts, St John coins the technical term "the dark night of the soul," which would in turn seem to be indebted to Islamic mysticism. Both Miguel Asín and I have written a great deal on this possible Islamic filiation, to which further examples have been quite easy to add for me. The spiritual night of this stanza is, however, "serene," not dark, undoubtedly because we are at a moment of ecstatic joy in which the beginnings of the mystical way, associated with periods of asceticism, have fallen behind. Nor does St John appear to be alluding here to the moment of psychic exhaustion, an overwhelming but immensely fecund moment, brought on by an excess of spiritual activity, which Evelyn Underhill associates—*toutes proportions gardées*—with emotional depression. Here it would appear that darkness annihilates our senses and our reason to give rise to a deeper experience of supernatural light—which is in fact celebrated, as a consequence, in the last line of the stanza: *con llama que consume y no da pena* ("with flame that consumes yet gives no pain").

This transformative flame is, as in all mystical traditions and as I have had occasion to explore elsewhere, also recognizable within the Sufi literary discourse. Probably the mere mention of "night" and "flame" would alert Mother Ana de Jesús to the fact that her poet was employing metaphoric shorthand for mystical ecstasy. Not for nothing did St John dedicate two later poems to the subject of the "Night" and the "Flame." Both poems and both symbols would seem to be part of the peerless gift—that unspeakable "that" or "something" (*aquello*) which the Beloved gave his bride at the timeless moment the bride calls "the other day." The Sufis also knew about those mystical conflagrations associated with the nightingale's song. Fazl ĩ, for example, feels the nightingale of his soul take fire in the flame of the mystical Rose: "Oh you who lights [sic] the candles of the rose / and casts fire into the harvest of the nightingale."

Nor did the simile of the flame that consumes not just the nightingale but also the cool night garden itself, filled with music, escape the Muslim mystics. St John closes the verbal torrent of his drunken stanza with this strange image of the "flame that consumes but gives no pain," while Ibn 'Arabī begins the most famous lines of the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* ("Interpreter of desires") with it: "Oh wonder! A garden amidst fires!" Here is the complete stanza:

Oh marvel! A garden amidst fires!

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks.

And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Ka'ba and the tables of the
Torah and the book of the Koran.

I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that
is my religion and my faith.

To a Sufi, the idea is clear: the qalb, or heart of the mystic, represented as it has been so times by the image of a divine garden, is now engulfed in flames because it is in a state of perpetual transformation (the Arabic word for "to be transformed," taqallub, is one of the variants of the three-letter root q-l-b, which is also the root for qalb, "heart"). The fire turns everything it touches into fire, and therefore this garden-heart is able to allow itself to "burn," that is, to be changed through participation in all the manifestations of God simultaneously and without remaining in any one state, for it burns in all. In *Dichos de luz y amor*, St John glosses this in his own way: "What God desires is to make us gods through participation [in Him], while He is so by nature. Like fire turns all things to fire" (Dicho 106). The soul that arrives at this sublime mystical state finds itself, as Michael Sells says, "in the station of no station." The contemplative has achieved a mystical dwelling-place or station so high that he need not seek any other, however beneficial it might be: all are greeted with joy. Once again, as in the central stanzas of union in the *Cántico*, the hypnotic succession of images that makes up this stanza would seem to indicate that they never end: they seem to melt before our eyes, like the images that Rūmī sees melt in his *Fīhi mā fihi*, that wintry ice melting in the heat of the soul's springtime. So finally we burn, melt, are consumed without being consumed, in all the images in this atemporal and aspatial locus amoenus of the soul transformed in God. Or constantly being transformed in God, rather: it is hard to tell what verb tense to use when time has been erased.

Given all that we have seen, then, it would be no exaggeration to say that the song of the nightingale in St John of the Cross bears a greater resemblance to the exalted melody of the Persians' bolbol than to the sorrowful weeping of the philomel in Virgil's *Georgics*. This is rather odd because St John was a scholarly theologian who graduated from the illustrious and traditional University of Salamanca. The Sufi context, apparently so historically distant from the classical context within which the poet was writing, turns out to be particularly fertile when we attempt to decode the most important secrets of the *Cántico's* *rara avis*. But probably Mother Ana de Jesús, to whom the poem is dedicated, a mystic like St John, was untouched, culturally speaking, by the dense Virgilian tradition and was able without any great difficulty to decode St John's philomel as the spiritual nightingale of ecstasy. I do not discount the possibility, once again, that similes of Oriental origin such as this one were lexicalized and popularized by the late sixteenth century, and, therefore, could have been well known in the monastic context in which St John's verses were written and read. It is possible that our cultural tradition, so overwhelmingly classical, has made access to certain crucial symbols in St John difficult. His first

readers, in turn, may have understood his poetry in spiritual terms of remote Sufi origin without great scholarly effort on their part.

Curiously, despite its long classical and aristocratic pedigree, the mysterious Philomena of St John of the Cross is a bird that sings with all the ecstatic joy of its Eastern counterparts. Perhaps under its Greek name a Sufi bolbol is hiding. Is then St John's symbolic bird a nightingale akin to Virgil or akin to the Persians? In some ways it would appear that it is akin to both at the same time. But definitely more akin to the Islamic tradition than to Greek mythology.

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