The Conference of the Birds: The Selected Sufi Poetry of Farid ud-Din Attar

Raficq Abdulla
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In medieval Islamic civilization, poetry was widely acknowledged to be the most intimate vessel for conveying Sufism's hidden truths. The spiritual states and stations traversed by adepts along an ascending path to the reality of God's unity largely defies simple descriptions into ordinary prose or everyday language. The subtleties necessary to evocatively describe a spiritual journey that is, by its very essence, ineffable, necessitates a linguistic medium that could at once reveal secrets of inner contemplation and mystical perception while simultaneously concealing such information from the "uninitiated" behind the exoteric understanding of the same work of literature. Persian poetry, with its unique capacity for metaphorical symbolism, puns, and paradoxes, thus emerged by the seventh/thirteenth century as an unparalleled vehicle for expressing the mystical experience.

The most dramatic expression in all of Persian mystical literature of this spiritual journey is the allegorical poem *Mantiq al-Tair* (best translated as "The Speech of the Birds") by Farid al-Din `Attar (d. 627/1229), which recounts the initiatory voyage of a group of birds through seven valleys to the palace of the mythical king-bird Simurgh, symbol of the Divine, enthroned atop the cosmic mountain Qaf.

In addition to the book currently under review, `Attar's masterpiece inspired other renditions into English, including an abbreviated and freely reworked edition by Edward FitzGerald, *The Bird-parliament* (1903); R. P. Masani's prose translation of half the original poem's 4,600 lines, *The Conference of the Birds* (1924); the incomplete prose version by C. S. Nott, *The Conference of the Birds* (1954), which was prepared from Garcin de Tassy's nineteenth-century French translation, *Le Langage des oiseaux*, and, as such, is obscured by an intervening third language; Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis' Penguin Classics edition *The Conference of the Birds* (1984), which represents the poem's first complete English translation (minus the invocation and epilogue), is based on the oldest extant manuscripts, and is skillfully rendered into heroic couplets pleasingly faithful to the letter and spirit of `Attar's allegory; and Peter Avery's determinedly literal translation, *The Speech of the Birds* (1998), whose 560-page opus includes 120 pages of enriching endnotes on `Attar's use of Qur'anic imagery and the hadith mate-

rial that offers students of Sufism an invaluable, albeit unpoetic, resource for the literary expression of Islamic mystical concepts.

Abdulla's contribution to this disparate corpus represents a decidedly new approach to `Attar, one reminiscent of the modern refashionings of Jalal al-Din Rumi. Much like modern poets who have popularized Rumi in the West, Abdulla worked from an English translation, specifically Nott's paraphrase of de Tassy, and thereby avoided the rigor involved in consulting manuscript copies or Sadiq Gauharin's critical Persian edition of *Mantiq al-Tair* (1991). Abdulla addresses this reliance in his introduction (p. 11) and unreservedly directs readers seeking a scholarly treatment to Avery's translation.

To be fair, his endeavor is not a translation but a "new interpretation" that, he hopes, "brings to life the spirit and the meaning of the original work" (p. 10) to a western audience unversed in Persian's or Sufism's technical language. The slender book (93 pages in all), though richly illustrated with miniature paintings from the British Library, contains less than half the original's frame story and interjecting homilies. Consequently, while we find descriptions of the birds and valleys as well as the didactic stories of Sheikh San`an and Shibli, anecdotes on Hallaj's martyrdom and Mahmud's longing for Ayaz are absent. There is no bibliography, and the fourteen explanatory notes on such salient figures as Khidr, Yusuf, Bayazid Bistami, and Sheikh Junaid span no more than three pages.

In light of his reliance on Nott's paraphrase, Abdulla's interpretations might at first glance appear as versified echoes of a prose antecedent. However, his keen sensitivity to mood and irony, doubtlessly honed through his training as a screenwriter, lends a palpable inventiveness to his verses that, paradoxically, stays true to the heart of `Attar's message.

The original *Mantiq al-Tair* was written according to a *mathnawi* narrative meter of rhyming couplets, which used lines of twenty-two syllables with rhymes on the eleventh and twenty-second syllables. Rather than replicating this convention with heroic couplets, Abdulla, somewhat inconsistently, applies an alternating rhyming scheme that occasionally severs thoughts, leaving them pendulously at the line's end. The following example, drawn from the climactic encounter between the thirty birds and the theophanic vision of the Simurgh, illustrates not only this point but, in comparison with my own attempt at a literal translation of the same couplets, shows the near impossibility of faithfully reproducing `Attar's puns and juxtapositions with verses oriented to an English-speaking audience.

Abdulla's interpretation (p. 86):

From their telepathic flow they ask the King to show
Them the nature of being, how the many is the One.
The Simurgh replies: "I'm the mirror wherein my sun
Reflects those who look in, see their body and soul
Completely, so you shall see thirty birds reach their goal."

Literal translation:

Without thinking (*bi tafakkur*) they remained in meditation (*dar tafakkur*).
Since they did not know anything on account
of the spiritual state of non-existence (*hich hal*),
Without speaking (*bi zaban*) they asked a question from that majestic presence.
They wished that this powerful secret (*sirr*) be unveiled (*kashf*);
They wanted we-ness (*ma'i*) and you-ness (*tu'i*) differentiated/unloosened (*hall*).
Without speaking (*bi zaban*) the answer came from that majestic presence:
"Because that sun-like majestic presence is a mirror,
Whoever comes sees himself in it/Him;
Soul and body (*jan u tan*) and hidden and manifest (*jan u tan*) are seen in it/Him.
Since you came to this place as thirty birds (*si murgh* = a pun on Simurgh),
Thirty in this mirror you appeared."

Though Abdulla's interpretation of the *Mantiq al-Tair* contains lacunae and an inattention to the subtle ambiguities of Persian, which might preclude its use in university-level courses on Islam, Sufism, or pre-modern literature of the East, its sheer readability and overall fidelity to the fundamental theme of finding one's true self in the transcendent Self will convey – to a general readership – an appealing hint as to what the vast treasury of Persian mystical poetry has to offer.

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