

Conference of the Birds

(in prose and verse)



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Translator: Manavaz Alexanderyan
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Manavaz Alexanderyan



(1940/Iran)

Iranian translator and poet

-Ask Me Not Why I'm Silent/Persian-English translation of free verse from Banafsheh Hejazi/170 pages/published in 1997 by Gil Pub/Tehran

-Wave of Desire/Bilingual Persian-English translation of odes from Vida Farhoudi/140 pages/published in 1999, by Vazhe Ara Pub/Tehran

-Rain of Recollection/ Persian-English translation of free verses from Farhad Abedini/142 pages/published in 2000 by Darinoush Pub/Tehran

-The Sound of the New Lyre/Bilingual translation of selected poems from contemporary Iranian poets. The book covers translation of 42 pioneer contemporary poets, 478 pages. Published in winter 2002 by Ketabsarye Tandis Pub/Tehran

-Conference of the Birds/Bilingual verse translation of Fariduddin Attar's

-Translation in verses selected odes from **Rumi**, **Hafiz**, selected quatrains from **Khayam** and **Baba Tahir**, and other poets...

About the book:

Farid ud-Din Attar Neishaburi, the celebrated Iranian poet and mystic, lived during the 12th century A.D. He was born in 1158 or, according to Dolatshah Samarghandi and Ghazi Noorollah Shoushtari, in the year 1134. Hedayat says Attar was born in 1133 A.D. at Kadkan, one of the villages surrounding Neishabur. Dolatshah maintains that he was born in Shadyakh. Neishabur was ruined during the invasion of Tartar hordes in the year 1169 and Shadyakh was built east of Neishabur to replace the original town. After the invasion of the Mongols, this town was ruined and Neishabur was rebuilt in its original place .

We have very little information about the poet's childhood except the fact that his father owned an apothecary at Shadyakh. After his father's death, he resumed his profession and ran a well-organized shop. However, it must be noted that an apothecary is called "Attar" in Persian and Attar chose this as his pen name .

What we are certain is that at the beginning of his career, and for a considerable period of time when he was climbing the stages of mysticism, he maintained the profession of the apothecary. This necessitated some medical knowledge and he treated patients at his shop .

Expert of the Book:

1. DEDICATION

*Attar, our learned scholar and guide,
Writers assemble where you lived and died.
Fired by a Dervish who railed at mortality
You dismissed the cares of life and its vanity;
Then marching in the tempting path of love,
You crossed seven cities and climbed above.
With your birds you soared higher and higher
And boldly flew into the mystics' empire
Where globes in globes in due order roll
And the Maker presides from pole to pole.
What you warble gushes from your heart's core
With a pen which none have employed before.
Much you have taught from virtues that you hold,
Now roaming in mountain, now in the fold.
Plain words which hang in every lip, O sage,
You mould in sweet verse and pour your knowledge.
From you, O bard, lovers learned how to burn
In a journey which there is no return;
In living pages your lovely numbers are read,
And we look where your hallowed remains are laid;
But no monument you need, O divine master,
Your fame flies from your tomb faster and faster!*

THE STRUCTURE OF THE STORY

The hoopoe, representing himself as Solomon's page and courier, gathers the birds and bids them to seek the Simorgh, their heavenly king and warns of the dangers lurking in the expedition. Awed by Simorgh's greatness and superior rank, the birds try to forge an excuse to avoid the dreadful journey.

The nightingale says his love for the rose is enough and that he seeks no greater reward from the Simorgh, but the hoopoe warns him to give up love for temporary things. The parrot is eager to achieve everlasting life but is content to reach the gate of the Maker only. The duck cannot leave the pond and stop bathing in the pleasant water. The partridge is digging the mountain and seems happy to find shining jewels. Hoopoe tells the treasure hunter that pearls are only colorful stones and love of worldly treasure darkens the heart. Homa is proud to crown kings and is shy of Simorgh and the owl loves to dig treasures in the ruin. Hoopoe urges the sparrow to fly bravely to the Prince and shun death. He tells the birds that they represent the shadow of the Simorgh and they will be dissolved in Him if they complete their adventurous journey. "You can see the divine image if you look in your heart," he says. "One truly in love is not afraid to sacrifice his life to join his or her beloved. One must purify his soul and listen with the inner ear to hear divine secrets".

As mentioned before, when the birds hear the dangers of the expedition some of them try to excuse themselves, but others ask guidance about the Way. Twenty-two birds speak to the hoopoe and seek guidance .

The first bird is eager to know why Solomon has chosen him as his favorite and has revealed so many secrets to him. Hoopoe says that with a single glance Solomon liked him and elected him as his page.

The second bird says he is feeble and afraid to die in the expedition. Hoopoe rebukes him for fearing death. “Better to perish in the journey than to die a coward in this degraded earth,” he warns. The third bird has committed many sins. Hoopoe urges him to beg divine grace and not give up hope of salvation. The fifth bird says the dog in his soul restrains him. How can he defeat the dog and purify himself? Hoopoe says, “Unless you defeat the dog in your heart you will never succeed because that dog has destroyed thousands like you ”.

The eight birds say he has a very strongly-built palace and is happy in that fort, as nothing can harm him. Why risk a perilous journey? Hoopoe says, “You cannot escape death wherever you are. Death will find you even if you fly to the seventh heaven.” Another bird is very feeble but is determined to go. Hoopoe says one with lofty ambition will succeed even to bring down the sun from heaven. Another bird boasts he has achieved perfection. Why search a better faith in a painful journey? Hoopoe is angry with his boasting and egoism. “You must destroy your pride,” He cries. “If a false light glimmers in you take it as scorpion's string.” He urges the twentieth bird to take pain and ardor to the Prince as a gift.

In between these questions and answers, the author mentions brief stories and anecdotes to clarify his point. “As long as you do not destroy yourself and love of worldly objects you cannot be accepted in the heaven,” Hoopoe exhorts. “He who is entangled with exterior attachments cannot walk in the spiritual path. The dog of desire and the devil who has ensnared the world keeps you from the Way. Satan has imprisoned you and stops you from joining the Master of Creation. The spirit is jailed in the flesh and is emancipated after death only. Helping beggars is better than a thousand prayers and ablutions. Death awaits everybody in the most strongly fortified palace even and fear of death will lead to damnation. Whoever is attached to temporary things shall have no lasting life. Justice means salvation. When you

feel and understand real love the faults of those near you will appear as merits. When you see the ugliness of your own faults you will not find fault with others”.

The birds travel through the valleys of Quest, Love, Knowledge, Detachment, Unity, Wonder and Doom. In the Valley of the Quest they undergo a hundred difficulties and trials and after getting rid of worldly attachments one learns in the Valley of Love that love has nothing to do with reason. In the Valley of Knowledge, they learn that knowledge is temporary but understanding endures. Mending faults and overcoming weakness accelerates their goal. In the Valley of Detachment, they neither desire to possess nor wish to discover. They must be self-sufficient to cross this difficult station. In the Valley of Unity, all creatures spring from a single neck and experience complete unity. In the Valley of Wonder, they lose themselves in the divine essence. Immersed in love, they achieve unity and forget themselves. It is impossible to describe the Valley of Doom. The present and future worlds dissolve in that vast ocean opening to the hereafter. Here on the verge of death, they understand that a single drop becomes part of a vast ocean .

Only thirty birds out of several thousand cross the seven valleys and arrive at the court of the Prince of the Universe with broken feathers and on the brink of death. To their amazement, what they see is an enormous phantom mirror. Made of a thousand molten planets, which reflects their own shapes and purified selves. This is consistent with the Sufi doctrine that in that elevated stage of purification of flesh and perfection of the soul the created and the Creator join and become one. At this stage, the light of divine wisdom and benevolence shines upon those who have undergone the pains and sufferings needed to quit the mortal frame.

Attar's language is very simple and to the point, free of ambiguity, affectation. Borrowed wisdom, pompous expressions or unpopular metaphors. As in Saadi's poetry, his simple words are molded into clear and succinct verse.

INVOCATION

Praise to Almighty God who set his throne upon the waters and created all earthly creatures. He has given power to heaven to dominate and has made the earth obedient to heaven. He raised the firmament above the earth like a tent and created the stars and planets and the nine cupolas of heaven. First He decorated the heaven with stars to shed light at night and then He fastened the mountains firmly to the ground, capped with ice, and made the oceans liquid as a sign of bondage. He made the mountaintops sharp like the blade and the valleys like girdles helping mountains to lift their heads with pride. He placed the earth on the back of the bull, the bull on the fish, and the fish in the air .

Sometimes He causes the flowers to spring from fire and sometimes throws bridges over rivers. He paints the world with the color of the tulip out of vapor. He makes beds of water-lilies and drenches the earth with blood to cause them to yield rubies. The sun and the moon bow to Him and admire Him and their movement around an axis is a sign of their worship. He lighted the day with sunshine and made the night black. He painted the parrot in gold, and crowned the hoopoe, appointing him the leader of the Path. He molded the universe out of a little vapor. In winter He scatters snow, in summer fruits and in autumn gold-yellow leaves. He adorns the jasmine with petals and puts a red bonnet on the head of the tulip. He created the wind, the earth, and fire. He took clay and mixed it with water to make a man and after forty days He breathed spirit into his nostrils and gave him the intelligence to discern, judge, and ponder .

There is only He and none else. People are aware of their ignorance. The soul is hidden in the body and God is hidden in the soul. Everyone sees himself in Him and

He is manifest in everything. No one knows the extent of His attributes; being eternal and above all, He deceives even the wisest people .

He sent prophets and saints to describe His divine blessings and spread His words on earth .

Friends and enemies bow their heads before his Throne. Moreover, He is watching all of us. He made all the planets and stars, His throne and the universe are only a talisman. Both the visible and the invisible worlds are a manifestation of God's immense power. After this do you think it is easy to acquire enough knowledge about spiritual things? What shall I say further since there is nothing more to say? One must live a hundred lives to know himself, but you must know God by his attributes and not by himself. For it is God, and not human wisdom, that opens the way, and God is beyond human knowledge.

*Praise be to Almighty God who created the world,
Bred life and made earth obedient in his hold.
He raised the firmament like a speckled tent,
Yet suspended it stand by His commandment.
In six days by him, seven globes were given,
And by two words He laid down nine vaults in heaven.
To the mountain, He gave a belt and a sharp edge
And made the ocean liquid as a sign of bondage ;
The sun and the moon worship the earth by rotation
And by that movement they express their admiration;
First He nailed the earth firm by the mountain
And washed the earth's face with the ocean,
Then He put the earth on the bull's back to bear;
The bull He put on the fish, the fish on the air.*

*In haughty Nimrod's nose, He put a puny fly
To make him suffer four centuries and to die.
Wisely He made the spider to spin a net
And saved the Prince of the World from death.
He made the ant's waist thin like a thread
And bade him sit with King Solomon and debate.
See what He did with Adam at the onset;
How many years Adam mourned in regret?
Think of Noah then who preached a hundred years,
And how his sermons fell on unbelieving ears.
Behold Solomon, the king who was rich and wise,
Satan robbed his realm, banned from Paradise.*

THE BEGINNING - THE BIRDS ASSEMBLE

The hoopoe, Solomon's messenger, and chosen bird, gathers the birds to speak about the invincible Simorgh who resides high in the heaven. By turns, He exhorts the wagtail, the parrot, the falcon, the quail, the nightingale, the peacock, the pheasant, the dove, the pigeon, the goldfinch and the hawk to seek the Simorgh (meaning God or the Absolute One) by overcoming their weakness and their worldly desires:

*Hail to you, O hoopoe, our nimble guide,
A messenger that at every bower fly and glide,
Bid by King Solomon to far Sheba you were gone
)Solomon to whom the language of birds was known;(*
*You preserved Solomon's secret in your head
And converted the Queen of Sheba to his faith.
Hold the Satan tightly in the jail, hold,*

And be a confidante of Solomon in his fold, (1)
When temper is fettered in the jail you
Will sit on his magic carpet with his crew. (2)

Hail O wagtail, you who resemble Moses,
Arise, tune the lute, and sing melodious;
For mankind was made by music and motion
And music tuned the globes in the creation ;(3)
Like Moses you saw the fire but from distance,
When by sparrow guided to Mount Tour you did advance (4)

And you, O painted parrot, who on Tuba perch with fire (5)
You wear a saint's garb with the necklace of fire;
The arch of the fire is for the hellish race,
The badge you wear is for saints and the blameless.
He who likes Abraham escaped Nimrod's fire
Shall sit in the fire fearless and with desire; (6)
Kill Moses; kill him in the burning furnace;
Dive like Abraham in the fire and rise blameless.
When like him you forget Nimrod's deadly fear
The badge of the burning fire you shall wear. (7)

O painted partridge nimbly you prance,
And cheerful ascend the mount of cognizance;
Laugh in the dangerous path, stage by stage,
And cheerfully explore the mountain of knowledge.

Hail to you swift falcon, who see well your path,
Till when you must indulge in anger and wrath?

*Tie the scroll of eternal love on your foot
And never unbound the letter, keep it for good!
Your mother-born wisdom to your heart you bend;
Then one you will see the start and the end. (8)*

*And you fair quail; from you, God asked his identity,
Men's answer of "yes" is your throne of eternity; (9)
When your soul hears God's question in grace,
Shut the mouth of yourself if it cries "yes"!*

*O sweet nightingale, in lovers' bower sings,
Like David sing the lover's pain and suffering,
Like David meaningful you sing and prate!
So hundreds shall follow your pleasing breath .
Hail golden peacock, the eight portals of heaven,
You burnt from the wound of the seven-headed dragon;
The discourse of the charming snake tainted your brainbanished from the Garden of
Eden; (10)
He betrayed the tree to Adam forbidden
And darkened your heart from the bliss of heaven.
If you manage to escape this ugly viper's snare*

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