

24 May 1976

READING 3

THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS (MANTIQU-UT-TAYR) OF FARID-UD-DIN ATTAR

(*Biographical Note:* Born 1120 in a village near Nischapur in North East Persia, Attar was following his father's trade as dispenser of drugs and perfumes when a dervish entered the shop, who, inhaling the sweet scents, sighed and began to weep. Attar, thinking he was begging for alms, told him to move on. 'Yes,' said the dervish, 'there is nothing to prevent me from leaving your door or even this world at any moment since my sole possession is my worn-out robe. But Oh! Attar, I grieve for you.' About what passed between them there are several versions but Attar gave up his business, sought out a Shaykh, succeeded the mystic poet Sansi and became the most voluminous Sufi writer of his age. About him, Jalal-ud-din-Rumi said: 'Attar was the soul itself and Sansi its two eyes. I came after both.')

Here is a much shortened version of the *Mantiq-ut-Tayr*:

Once upon a time, in the dim old days, all the birds of the world assembled in solemn conclave to consider a momentous question... These feathered souls had no king to defend them; theirs was an army without a general: a most precarious position!

At this stage, full of fervour, leapt forward the Hoopoe, renowned in the Muslim scriptures for the part she had played as King Solomon's trusted emissary to the Queen Sheba in token of which she wore the crest of faith on her head and the name of God upon her beak. 'Dear birds,' she cried, 'I have the honour to belong to the celestial army; one who carries the signs I wear may be given the credit for knowing many secrets of the spiritual world... We have indeed a king, and I have an indication of his court, but to go alone in quest of him is beyond my power. If, however, you accompany me, we may hope to reach the threshold of His Majesty. Yes, my friends, the name of our King is Simurg' (the 'Supreme Being', and in Sufi poetry an emblem of plurality in unity) 'and his residence is behind Mount Caucasus. He is close by, but we seem to be far away from him, for the road to his throne is screened by a hundred thousand veils of light and darkness; and though myriads of souls have an ardent passion to see Him, no one is able to find the way. Yet none can afford to do without Him... and if we do not attempt it, this life is not worth living.'

On hearing this account the birds became all impatience to set out... but when they began to realise how long and fearful the way would be, they lost their nerve and each brought forward his typical excuses. The first to fly back was the Nightingale – 'For me' he said, 'the love of the rose is enough.' Then came the Parrot, pleading his inability to undertake the journey because (for his beauty) he had for so long been imprisoned in a cage. The Peacock argued that he was quite unworthy of the Royal Presence because of the part he had played in the expulsion of Adam from Paradise. The Duck could not do without water, nor the Partridge without mountains. The Huma (who is always on the wing), being gifted with the power to confer sovereignty on everyone over whom he flew asked why should he give up such a lofty privilege? Similarly the Falcon could not bear the idea of relinquishing his place of honour on the wrist of kings. The Heron wished only to fish in the lagoons, and the Owl to stay on in the ruins of which he was the

undisputed monarch. Last came the Wagtail with excuses for his physical weakness which would make such a journey impossible.

The Hoopoe brushed aside all these pretexts and kept urging them on with inspired stories (of which we will give just one sample).

After some time on the march they had halted to express their misgivings once more, when a bird came forward with a question to the Hoopoe. 'You are just like ourselves, and we are just like you. Why do we need *you* to keep us going on the path of Truth?' 'This blessing', she replied 'is due only to the fact that I had a glance from Solomon. All my good fortune is the result of that one favourable glance. This story illustrates my own case:

One day Sultan Mahmoud wandered away from his retinue and saw a boy sitting on the bank of a river with a fishing rod. Mahmoud asked him why he looked so pale and thin. 'Sir' said the boy, 'we are seven children; our father is dead, and our bedridden mother has not a cent to buy food. Each day I fish for our evening meal but seldom catch even one.'

The Sultan borrowed the rod, offering to give him half the spoil. Princely fortune now favoured the orphan; that day they had a haul of a hundred fish which were all given to the boy. Next day the Sultan sent for him and said, 'Come now, yesterday we were partners in that fishing enterprise; now I want you to be a partner in my kingdom.' No sooner said than done; Mahmoud made over half his territories to him, and when an old acquaintance asked the lad how he managed to attain so lofty a position: 'All my grief turned to joy' said he 'because a fortunate man passed by me.'

Cheered by this and many other stories, the birds passed at length through six of the seven valleys: the Valley of the Quest, the Valley of Love, the Valley of Knowledge, the Valley of Detachment, the Valley of Unity and the Valley of Stupefaction, where the cause of man's perpetual state of grief has become the source of thanksgiving; infidelity has become faith and faith infidelity. In this place he cries, 'I have lost the key to my own house; has anyone found it anywhere?'

By now only thirty birds (of all the millions who set out) had completed the journey and reached the palace of the Simurg. Weary and worn, without fluff or feathers, in that bewildering realm they saw thousands of stars and luminous suns like specks of dust. 'How can we hope', they wailed, 'to be seen by His Majesty?' After some time, the Honourable Usher of the Royal Court came out of the palace and asked their business. On hearing their reply, he said, 'Whether you exist or not is immaterial to the Sovereign of Eternity; better return whence you came, you handful of paupers.'

At this the pilgrims nearly died of disappointment... but so fervent and genuine was their grief that they were soon admitted to the presence of the Sovereign; but first a register was placed before them in which was recorded every detail of the deeds each one had done or omitted to do. They were thereby annihilated and their bodies were reduced to dust. Yet when at last they looked up again, how great was their surprise!

As the sun rose before them those thirty birds of the earth, saw in the reflection of their own faces, the face of the Celestial Simurg. Perceiving that the Simurg was no other than those self-same thirty birds, they became convinced that they and the Simurg formed, in reality, only one Being. This single Being was the Simurg, and the Simurg this Being. That one was this, and this one was that. Look where they would, in whatever direction, it was only the Simurg that they saw.

The Simurg thereupon gave his reply: ‘The Sun of My Majesty is a mirror; whoever beholds himself in this mirror sees there his soul and body, sees himself entire. Since you, being thirty birds, have come here, you find thirty birds in the mirror... it is well that you have succeeded. Remain bewildered, impatient, astonished... As for Me, I am more than thirty birds! ... Annihilate yourselves joyfully and gloriously, so you will find yourselves again in me!’

Thereupon the birds passed the seventh veil – Annihilation – and lost themselves for ever in the Simurg. Nothing remained; not the travellers, nor the guide, nor the path. Finding the Simurg, they found themselves, and the riddle of ‘I and Thou’ was solved.

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In a note about the above, Dr. Roles wrote:

‘This reading is to emphasise that the journey to the Realization of God (Self-realization) should not be underrated. In the past very few used to succeed. Now everything is different; so those who want to avail themselves of today’s knowledge and experience are invited to do so. Particularly is it important to realise that on the Subtle and Causal levels time and space are very different; what required a lifetime when described in terms of the physical body can take place in a few months by the right use of head and heart, or instantaneously on the Causal Level in the Soul.

‘Of course anyone who prefers to use *only* medieval methods is welcome to do so and lose their fluff and feathers in the process! But it is a pity not to make full use of the wonderful means which are now available to us.’

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