

# The canticle of the birds

Words, images, poetry and mysticism, all come together in this sumptuous new volume of *Mantiq-ut Tayer*, Islam's greatest literary masterpiece



**'ART & SOUL'**

B.N. GOSWAMY

O Attar, with these mysteries' musky scent  
You've filled the wide world and its  
firmament

— the *Mantiq-ut Tayer*

A SUFI once heard a man crying. 'I have lost a key. Has anyone found it anywhere? The door of my house is shut and I am left without a shelter in the street! If the door remains closed, what shall I do? I shall be forever miserable. What shall I do?' 'Who wishes you to be miserable?', asked the Sufi. 'Since you know where the door is, go and stay near it, even though it be closed. If you sit near it for a long time, there is no doubt that someone will open it for you. Your condition is not so bad as mine. My soul is consumed in stupefaction. Of the great enigma that bewilders me, there is no solution. There is neither a door nor a key for me.'

This is just one of the countless allegories — propelling one towards a search for true meanings that are woven into the tale that is regarded as one of 'culture's greatest literary masterpieces': *Farid-ud Din 'Attar's 12th century Mantiq-ut Tayer*, often translated as *A Conference of the Birds* but now published in a sumptuous new volume as *The Cantic of the Birds* by Paris-based publishing house, Diane de Selliers. The title is well chosen, I think, for even though the word 'canticle' is used ordinarily to describe 'one of the non-metrical hymns or chants, chiefly from the Bible, used in church services', the association

thread through the great Persian text too. Outwardly, or in *surat*, as the Sufis might say, the text tells a long and absorbing tale — in 4,500 lines of verse — but inwardly, in *ma'ani*, it embodies a spiritual quest. Few, remarkably few, works would come close to the wisdom that the tale contains, and the poetic intensity with which it is told.

The shell of the story is relatively simple. Once upon a time, 'in the dim old days', the tale opens, all the birds of the world assembled 'in solemn conclave to consider a momentous question'.

Whom should they choose as their leader, the one who is without a parallel in majesty and power? At this stage, the hoopoe (*hud-hud* as she is called in Persia), 'bearing the crown of faith on her head like a crest', renowned for her ancient association with King Solomon, leapt forward to offer a thought. There is none, she said, who deserves to be our king more than the one who lives behind Mt. Caucasus, for his majesty is incomparable. His name is Simurgh, and we need to look for him, for the secrets of all creation are known to him. I cannot, however, go alone in quest of him but, if you accompany me, she said, we may hope to reach the threshold of His Majesty. Some birds hesitated, however, and asked the assembly to consider first their claims to being their sovereign: the nightingale, the parrot, the peacock, among them. But unconvinced by their claims, the birds decided to follow the hoopoe's advice and go in search of the Simurgh. "He is close by", the hoopoe told them, "but we are far from Him". The road to reach him is not easy, however, for there are a "hundred thousand veils of light and darkness that screen his throne". In any case, on our way to him, she said, we will have to cross seven valleys for he does



The Hoopoe addresses the Assembled Birds. From the Imperial manuscript of the *Mantiq-ut Tayer*, Herat 1487. Folio added in 1609 by Habibullah of Meshed. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



The Birds surrounding the Simurgh. From a manuscript of the *Mantiq-ut Tayer*, Herat, ca. 1490-1500. The British Library, London

the telling of the tale, at each step 'Attar — the poet has a singularly apt name, for the word means both a perfumer and an apothecary: distiller of essence, and prescriber of healing

"Come you lost Atoms to your Centre draw", the verses here run: 'And be the Eternal Mirror that you saw! Rays that have wandered into Darkness wide! Return and back into your Sun





cle of the Birds by Paris-based publishing house, Diane de Selliers. The title is well chosen, I think, for even though the word 'canticle' is used ordinarily to describe 'one of the non-metrical hymns or chants, chiefly from the Bible, used in church services', the association it bears essentially is one of sacredness, something that runs like a golden



King Solomon's Hoopoe. Unknown artist; Turkey or Iran, ca. 1800. Topkapi Palace Museum Library, Istanbul

away from Him". The road to reach him is not easy, however, for there are a "hundred thousand veils of light and darkness that screen his throne". In any case, on our way to him, she said, we will have to cross seven valleys for he does live far, far away. And then, in a moving passage of the text, she named the Seven Valleys — the essence of the seven stages, or stations, of self-realisation that Sufi masters speak of — the Valleys, respectively, of quest (talab), love (ishq), knowledge (ma'rifa), independence and detachment (istighna'), unity (tawhid), bewilderment and stupefaction (hairat), and, finally, of poverty and annihilation (fuqr-wafana').

At this point, even though they set off in large numbers, many of the birds began to lose courage. Their 'souls became restless and many gave up their lives in the very first stage; several died on the way; others drowned in the sea; still others sacrificed their souls on the summit of the mountains; several were roasted by the heat of the sun; a good many died of thirst in the forest; others went mad with hunger..." But a few, only 30 in number, finally reached the spot where the great Simurgh lived and held his court. In

the telling of the tale, at each step 'Attar — the poet has a singularly apt name, for the word means both a perfumer and an apothecary: distiller of essence, and prescriber of healing agents — keeps on weaving in parables and allegories, rich in meaning and elevating in suggestion. But there is sheer brilliance in the climactic passages, for one comes to realise that all along the poet had a telling pun in mind when speaking of the Simurgh: for the word does not only refer to the great mythic Sun-Bird or the Bird of Paradise, that great Chinese/Persian symbol of sovereignty who is seen soaring in the skies with his magnificent plumage, but also is a compound of two words: si and murgh, meaning '30 birds': those that reached their final destination.

Mystical passages follow at this point when the 30 birds finally 'behold' the Simurgh. It is they themselves who are the si+murgh, they realise, for the great bird is nothing more than their own transcendent totality. They see their own reflection as if in a giant mirror-like lake, realise what the journey was about, and then, diving into it, merge with eternity, baqa'a.

"Come you lost Atoms to your Centre draw", the verses here run: "And be the Eternal Mirror that you saw! Rays that have wander'd into Darkness wide/Return and back into your Sun subside."

In all the 800 or so years since 'Attar wrote it, the Mantiq-ut Tayer has been held as an iconic work throughout the Islamic world, approached with humility and cited with the utmost respect. Quite naturally, it was also illustrated, one of the most famous Imperial manuscripts of it having been painted in Herat towards the end of the 15th century. The de Sellier volume that I spoke of above has remarkable riches of painting in it, drawn from diverse sources. It all comes together: word and image, poetry and mysticism, fana'a and baqa'a. A verse by the Urdu poet Seemab Akbarabadi comes to mind: Chhooti nahin mujhey par-e-Jabreel ki hawa

Aisi bulandiyon pey udaa jaa rahaa hoon main. In other words, roughly: 'Even the airy swish from the wings of Gabriel does not touch me./ For such is the height at which am I soaring'.



Detail from the 'Ten Birds'. Page from an Akbari album. By the painter Miskin. MuséeGuimet, Paris

## BROAD BRUSH

A SPECTRUM SELECTION



**<<ART TO SKY:** Ballet dancers rehearse a brand new creation called Art to Sky by Australian choreographer Stephen Baynes at the Sydney Opera House in Sydney. Art to Sky is part of a show called "Chroma" by British choreographer Wayne McGregor and will show at the Sydney Opera House till May 17.



**<<PREHISTORIC ART:** An artist redraws a Lascaux painting in a workshop in Montignac, southern France. French Culture Minister Aurelie Filippetti inaugurated the construction site of "Lascaux 4", a site including a giant replica of the famous cave and a centre dedicated to prehistoric art.

**DECODING CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY:** A woman views traditional Chinese calligraphy during a press preview for Out of Character: Decoding Chinese Calligraphy — Selections from the Collection of Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang at the The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The selection of works and their interpretation in the galleries are intended to speak to beginners and specialists alike, using artworks of the highest quality to introduce key concepts of format, script type, and style.



### CLEAN THE ARTWORKS:

Russian artist Dmitri Vrubel (R) cleans his painting "My God, help me to survive this deadly love" at the East side gallery from tags and scribbles in Berlin. An artist initiative called for support to clean the artworks covering pieces of the Berlin wall.

PHOTOS: AFP

