

Book Review

Farid ud-din Attar,
The Conference of the Birds,
Translated by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis,
Penguin Books, UK

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The ***Mantiq-ut-tayr*** is a famous allegory in Persian verse written by the scholar-poet, Farid ud-din Attar. It has long been familiar in poetic circles in Persia and the subcontinent. Basically, it describes a ‘pilgrim’s progress’ of the birds who wish to seek out their King. Of course, an allegory stands for something beyond itself. So the birds are actually symbols for men who seek their Lord and Creator. The allegorical use of animal symbols representing men is as old as the ancient Greeks. Aristophanes, in his plays, ***The Frogs*** and ***The Wasps*** describes men in the guise of insects and reptiles. Chaucer [d. 1400] wrote ***The Parliament of Fowls*** in which he uses birds to symbolize men – and his poem may have been inspired by a knowledge of Attar’s poem.

The first-ever English version of the ***Mantiq-ut-tayr*** was made by Edward FitzGerald in 1856 and this remained unpublished in his life. It was a summarized translation and his poetic and evocative skills are manifest; these were to emerge more strongly in his version of the ***Rubaiyat*** of Omar Khayyam. A French translation was made by the famous scholar, Garcin de Tassy, and printed from Paris in 1863. He used a selection of MSS. Present in the Bibliotheque Nationale. After this, Ghulam Muhammad Abid Shaikh issued his version in 1911 and Rustom P. Masani’s version came forth in 1924 from Mangalore {OUP}. C.S. Nott, in 1954, translated the French of Garcin de Tassy and issued the prose version from London. In 1984, Afkham Darbandi, an Iranian woman working in the UK, translated the ***Mantiq-ut-tayr*** into English and this was put into English verse by Dick Davis. The text used was that edited by Sadegh Gouhan [Tehran, 1968]. In

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2014, a prose version was issued in Pakistan by M. Saleem Butt – the quality of the translation leaving much to be desired. He claims to make use of the text of Garcin de Tassy –of which he obtained a copy. What his credentials are in Persian, we are not informed. The *Mantiq-ut-tayr* has been printed many times in the subcontinent. The well-known Oriental publisher, Naval Kishore of Lucknow, issued the Persian text in 1933 in lithograph. The text has also been printed in 1943 from Ispahan by the scholar, Muhammad Ali Faroghi. Details of the MS. Used are not given. However, the division of the separate sections are given by Naval Kishore and Faroghi though Faroghi omits the names of the First Three Pious Caliphs. The poem to Abu Bakr begins thus:

*Khwaja-i-awwal kih awwal yar-i-ust
Thani at-nayn iz huma fi'l ghar-i-ust.*

Translation: The first master – the first friend [of the Holy Prophet]
The second of the two- when the two were in the cave!

The version under review, by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis, has an informative introduction that ably outlines the Sufi tradition in Islam. There is no Sufism outside Islam. The translation goes directly to the start of the poem and omits the customary introduction – praise of Allah, the Holy Prophet and the First Four Caliphs. There is no reason given as to why a verse translation was favoured over a prose translation although this involves much sacrifice of meaning and involvement of prosodic strictures and poetic devices. The translation has 4455 ll. and is reasonably complete and competent. Whatever may be said of the various translations made over the years, there is no doubt that the original spark of genius that ignited the poem came from Attar – scholar-mystic extraordinary. Rumi pays tribute to him thus:

*Attar ruh buwad wa Sanai do chashm-e- u
Ma az pa-i Attar wa Sana'I amadeym*

Translation:
Attar was the spirit and Sana'I his two eyes-
We came after Attar and Sana'i.

It is a most illustrious succession of master-mystics reflecting the glory of Islam.

In view of the decline of Persian in Pakistan nowadays, I appeal both for its revival and for translation from the Persian classics.