

***‘Attâr’s Cantic of the Birds  
Illustrated Through Persian and Eastern Islamic Art***

**In the now classic translation by Dick Davis and Afkham Darbandi**

**Illuminated through 211 Persian, Turkish, Central Asian and Indian  
paintings from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries commented by Michael Barry**

Launch at the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, on December 3rd, 2014



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Excerpt from *The Canticle of the Birds*; the hoopoe's speech to the assembled birds:

For years I travelled over many lands,  
Past oceans, mountains, valleys, desert sands,

And when the Deluge rose I flew around  
The world itself and never glimpsed dry ground;

With Solomon I set out to explore  
The limits of the earth from shore to shore.

I know our sovereign – but I can't alone  
Endure the journey to that distant throne.

Join me, and when at last we end our quest  
You will be welcomed as an honoured guest.

How long will you persist in blasphemy?  
Escape your self-hood's vicious tyranny –

Whoever can evade the Self transcends  
This world and as a lover he ascends.

Set free your soul; impatient of delay,  
Step out along our sovereign's royal Way:

We have a sovereign past Qâf's mountain peak  
The Sîmorgh lives, the Sovereign whom you seek,

And She is always near to us, though we  
Live far from Her transcendent majesty.

*(Birds' gathering)*

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## Bibliographical Data

FULL TITLE: *The Canticle of the Birds* by ‘Attâr *Illustrated through Persian and Eastern Islamic Art*

AUTHOR: Farîd-od-Dîn ‘Attâr

TRANSLATION: Written in Persian at the end of the twelfth century, *The Canticle of the Birds* tells in verse the story of the journey made by all the world’s birds towards the Supreme Being, the Simorgh. Here in the authoritative translation by Dick Davis and Afkham Darbandi.

ILLUSTRATIONS: 211 Persian, Turkish, Afghan and Indo-Pakistani paintings from the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries, preserved in libraries, museums and private collections around the world. The book reproduces in full and with details the complete set of paintings from the royal Herât manuscript of *The Canticle* of AD 1487, now in the Metropolitan Museum, New York.

IMAGE CONSULTANT: Dr Michael Barry teaches Classical Persian literature and the cultures of Iran, Afghanistan, Mogul India and medieval Spain in Princeton University’s Department of Near Eastern Studies; he was consultative chairman of the New York Metropolitan Museum’s Department of Islamic Art for the reorganization of its new galleries.

COMMENTARIES: Each work of art is accompanied by detailed commentary by Michael Barry, enhancing our understanding both of the art reproduced, and of the poem itself.

INTRODUCTORY TEXTS: ‘Taking Flight’, an introduction to *The Canticle of the Birds* by Leili Anvar; ‘Simorgh in Persia’s sky’, an introduction to the iconography by Michael Barry; Note on Dick Davis and Afkham Darbandi’s translation.

ANNEXES: Glossary, chronology and map, short accounts of the painters and schools of painting, picture credits.

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***The Canticle of the Birds,***  
**a meditative poem and an encounter with the Self**

*The best way to approach The Canticle of the Birds is to forget your bearings. Be willing to make the journey. Venture forth into the unknown. Lose yourself. Be burnt. Become nothing. Take flight; let your soul take wing towards uncharted lands. But go with humility . . . humility before a new language whose metaphors are often tinged with tears and blood; humility at the heart of a text in which poetry and mysticism are wreathed together. But what a thrilling adventure!*

(Excerpt from the foreword by Diane de Selliers)

**The story of *The Canticle of the Birds***

*The world's birds gathered for their conference  
And said: 'Our constitution makes no sense.'*

*All nations in the world require a king;  
How is it we alone have no such thing?*

*Only a kingdom can be justly run;  
We need a king and must inquire for one.'*

*(Birds' gathering)*

Ardently yearning to find their monarch, all the world's birds gather in sonorous assembly. Guided by the hoopoe, the messenger of Solomon, the birds take wing towards the Sîmorgh, the Divine Being, who dwells on the heights of mythical Mount Qâf, on the edge of the horizon of the rising Sun. Only the hoopoe knows how long and arduous the journey will be.

The birds will have to cross seven valleys, first that of the Quest, then those of Love, of Insight into Mystery, of Detachment and Serenity, of Unity, of Awe, and lastly of Poverty and Nothingness, to reach at length the Royal Throne. At first each bird, still prisoner to earthly ties, hesitates to take wing. So the hoopoe tells each bird a parable, a tale within a tale urging each winged creature to cast aside its worldly goods, loves and certainties, to give up its ego in order to undertake the journey. For at the end of the path rises the Sun-like Belovèd Being.

Only thirty birds will reach their goal, but in the Simorgh find only their own reflection. In Persian, *sî morgh* literally means 'thirty birds'. 'Attâr makes use of the homonymy Sîmorgh/*sî morgh* to show that the seven valleys offer an inner progress and that at journey's end the birds find only and can only see themselves. The Supreme Being in unseen splendour eludes their gaze, yet lurks in the innermost depths of each soul.

*'Before we reach our goal,' the hoopoe said,  
'The journey's seven valleys lie ahead;*

*How far this is the world has never learned,  
For no one who has gone there has returned'*

*(The seven valleys)*

## The Sîmorgh

In *The Canticle of the Birds* and in Eastern Islamic mysticism generally, the Sîmorgh is a mythical bird of ineffable beauty, a symbol of the Sun and an allegory of the Divine. The hoopoe describes this Sun-Bird as the only Being worthy of the soul's love and longing. At the end of their journey, the birds find to their amazement that the Sîmorgh remains invisible to the eye and unutterable to the tongue. The Sîmorgh rises beyond perception.

Only by shining forth within each soul and heart does the Sun-Bird become manifest. The world's birds learn that the only way for them to reach the Sîmorgh is to cast themselves into the fire of the Sun-Bird's Presence, and by becoming nothing, to be reunited with the Whole. Through the imagery of the Sîmorgh and the progress of the birds, 'Attâr discloses the underlying teachings of Sufi thought, preaching annihilation of the self in ardent search for the Godhead.

In this edition we have opted to translate the Sîmorgh as female, and the poem's title as a *Canticle*, not a 'Conference'. Leili Anvar explains what lies behind such choices in her introduction: 'The object of the birds' quest is a mythical Bird living on the cosmic Mount Qâf, beyond the seven valleys, and bearing an ancient name referred to in the *Avesta* as *Saêna meregha*. In the Avestan language, *Saêna meregha* is female, as is its equivalent 'Anqâ in Arabic. In Persian, there is no gender, so that we do not know if the Sîmorgh is female or male. That the bird is referred to as a 'monarch' – in Persian *shâh* or *pâdeshâh* – does not necessarily imply a purely male figure. Yet previous Western translators have always taken it for granted that it was a male figure, since the Sîmorgh stands for a symbol of the Divine Being. One notable exception in twentieth-century scholarship, however, is Henry Corbin who constantly shifts between a feminine 'Sîmorgh' and a masculine 'monarch', reflecting the symbolic ambivalence in Sufi perceptions of a Divinity both lovely and majestic, feminine and masculine.'

Dr Barry adds that the Scriptural resonance of 'Attâr's original title, literally 'the language of the birds' whose mystical understanding was vouchsafed by God unto the wise king Solomon, implies, not a 'conference', but the inspired and reasoned speech by which a loving soul sings the praises of its Lord. The Word signifies both Speech and Reason as in the Song of Songs, the *Canticum Canticorum* that is Solomon's, as one medieval Christian writer chose to put it – echoed in turn in the 'Canticle of all the world's creatures' sung by Saint Francis himself, preaching in legend to all the universe's birds, symbolizing all human souls.

## Parables

The tapestry of tales woven through *The Canticle of the Birds* illustrates the teachings of 'Attâr while unveiling the sheer breadth of his culture, drawing inspiration from a dazzling array of motifs from mystical figures quoted in the Koran (like the Prophet Joseph and the Princess of Egypt), to heroes of Near Eastern history (such as Sultan Mahmûd of Ghaznî) and protagonists from Arabic and Persian folk literature (like the mad Majnûn singing in the desert his praises to Lady Leylî).

The widely learned poet embroiders these tales into the warp and woof of his central poem with a thousand symbols, always presenting them within a Sufi frame of reference. By means of such tales he tirelessly extols the values that he holds dear – humility, pity, tenderness and compassion – while exhorting self-renunciation in the quest for the Belovèd Being.

*Within the narrative framework scores of anecdotes or tales of varying length unfold, each of which illustrates a spiritual theme, making it more lively and more accessible to the imagination.*

*A careful study of the structure of the poem also reveals that ‘Attâr has created a symphonic composition, in which the melodic themes are repeated at intervals: the stories echo one another, the metaphors are shown in myriad variations.*

(Excerpt from ‘Taking Flight’, an introduction by Leili Anvar)

## **Virtuosity of language**

‘Attâr sublimates his spiritual message through the sheer power of his imagination and lyricism. The beauty of his imagery stirs the fancy, while the music of his words charms and transports the reader. The language unfolds with gracefulness, at times with humour – whenever the poet catches the chance, his verse sparkles with wit and wordplay.

Through narrative mastery and pure, beautiful, refined and colourful language, the poet rivets our attention, always guiding us exactly where he wants to go; ‘Attâr enables the soul to sound unseen truths in depth. Through the wizardry of poetic evocation, this medieval Persian writer expresses unutterable secrets of mysticism in a work of art accessible to all.

## **A spiritual experience both intimate and universal**

In the early 1970s, renowned British director Peter Brook created a stage adaptation of what was then usually titled *The Conference of the Birds* for France’s Avignon Festival in 1979, which then toured around the world. At every performance Brook could sense strong feedback from widely varying audiences: ‘In the African bush, in the suburbs of Paris, among the Chicanos of California, the Indians of Minnesota, and on the street corners of Brooklyn we played *La Conférence des Oiseaux* and were thrilled to discover that ‘Attâr’s text was truly universal, that quite effortlessly it crossed all cultural and social barriers.’

Indeed what ‘Attâr says awakens resonances deep within us. Like the thirty birds, his readers also are led to fly along the ways of Love, in search of the Sîmorgh. Their spiritual flight may be hindered by headwinds – fear, greed, spite, jealousy, selfishness in general – but ‘Attâr conveys how through patience and humility their way to the heavens is slowly cleared. Only by winging through and beyond the illusions of egotism can the journey’s luminous end be sighted, and its longed for end be reached.

The hoopoe guides the birds towards celestial heights commensurate with the innermost depths of the heart, so that their heavenly journey mirrors, in fact, an inner spiritual progress. There is no need to adhere today to any one particular creed to appreciate the universality of *The Canticle of the Birds*: In the text lies something ‘true’ that transcends creeds or, as ‘Attâr puts it, soaring ‘beyond belief and unbelief.’ The spiritual path and its stages may be perceived through the prism of inner experience, the personal and intimate goals within each and all.

Readers of ‘Attâr’s famous poem, one of the greatest classics of the world’s spiritual literature, have been carried away for more than eight centuries by the thrill and pungency of his words and transported by the music of his timeless song.

*My verse has something wonderful within it  
Which is, it gives new meanings every minute,*

*And if you read it often I'm quite sure  
Each time you do so you'll enjoy it more,*

*Since you can only gradually prevail  
Upon this bashful bride to lift her veil.*

*(Epilogue)*



## Meditation through imagery

### **From the Bosphorus to the Ganges: *The Canticle of the Birds* as an everlasting source of inspiration**

Images reproduced throughout this edition present a broad sweep of Eastern Islamic painting from the Bosphorus to the Ganges and from the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries. Created almost exclusively for princes in royal workshops in what are today's Iran and Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and India, these paintings illustrate the many mystical motifs pervading 'Attâr's poetry.

They also reflect the major schools of manuscript illumination which flourished in the lands of medieval Eastern Islam. Readers will discover the manifold Byzantine and Chinese influences that wondrously blended into the classical style of the so-called 'Persian miniature', which crystallized in Iran under Mongol rule uniting the Asian continent from Anatolia to Korea at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. As Islamic dynasties resumed their sway in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, styles in imperial Istanbul and Esfahân, Herât and Delhi evolved and grew while mirroring with increasing subtlety the elaborate Sufi symbolism of mystical poems like *The Canticle of the Birds*, whose coded allegorical motifs were pondered in depth by painters like Behzâd, Soltân-Mohammad or Mansûr.

### **Treasures revealed**

More than two hundred paintings were chosen from among the finest manuscripts of medieval Western, Central and Southern Asia. Research was undertaken in public and private collections of Islamic art not only in Europe and North America, but also in the Near and Middle East. This edition for instance reveals relatively inaccessible treasures from museums in Tehran, Istanbul, Cairo, as well Kabul, where a rare painting, in all likelihood destroyed during the bombing of that city in 1992-1996, has fortunately been immortalized through the lens of photographer Roland Michaud.

The highlight among the works of art featured in the book is undoubtedly the royal manuscript of *The Canticle of the Birds* from 1487, now preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It comprises eight masterworks by some of the greatest masters of the 'Persian miniature' like Mîrak Naqqâsh, Behzâd and Habîbollâh of Mashhad. Besides reproducing the whole set of these paintings, we have magnified striking details that may be deemed works of art in their own right, magnificently demonstrating the delicacy of Eastern Islamic figurative illumination.

### **The issue of figurative depiction in Islam**

The royal manuscript of *The Canticle of the Birds* was commissioned as a work of religious devotion by Herât's sultan Hoseyn Mîrzâ Beyqarâ in AD 1487, it was illustrated with figurative images at the behest of the monarch's own ministers and spiritual advisers. These included the renowned Turkish-language poet Navâ'î, and the even more eminent and widely respected theologian and Persian-language poet Jâmî, a prelate invested with highest clerical dignity in the realm and acknowledged as a spiritual authority as far away as Istanbul.

The question of figurative representation in the Muslim world is open to interpretation. The Koran only explicitly condemns idolatry. Commentators of the ninth and tenth centuries AD, however, increasingly relied on traditions and hadiths – ‘sayings’ attributed to the Prophet – in order to discourage pictorial representation.

Stylization and lack of shadowing nevertheless set apart most Eastern Islamic paintings from illusionistic three-dimensional attempts to depict reality, and artists were able to work around prevailing disquiet over showing the Prophet, and members of his family, by sometimes representing their faces as veiled, or masked: so as not to shock orthodoxy.

### **Illustrating *The Canticle of the Birds***

Works of art reproduced in our edition include a number painted specifically to illustrate *The Canticle of the Birds*. Artists like Mîrak, Behzâd and Habîbollâh of Mashhad thus interpret several of the poem’s short parables and stories with a wealth of visual symbols that become, in turn, commentaries for the eye. Their works thereby become new allegories, adding further layers of perceived meaning to the text, as they suggest through symbolic imagery even further depth to the sheer poetic density of ‘Attâr’s thought. Like *The Canticle* itself, such illustrations allow readings at many different levels: literal, aesthetic, allegorical.

The iconography of this edition is therefore further enriched with many works linked to ‘Attâr’s *Canticle of the Birds* through direct or unmistakable indirect allusion, and always a common pervading Sufi symbolism.

There are, for instance, pages from the ‘Emperors’ Album’, created for the great Mughals Jahangir and Shahjahan. This album comprises miniatures created by the greatest artists of the Mughal court. They depict birds, and de facto become a sort of pictorial meditation on ‘Attâr’s poem, where the Sîmorgh seems to be invoked to protect the empire of the Great Mughals.

Both the royal commissioners of such manuscripts, and the painters who illustrated them on royal command, were invariably deeply read and thoroughly versed in the great Persian classics – like the *Canticle of the Birds* – once studied with veneration from Istanbul to Delhi. Thus many illuminations initially composed to illustrate literary works other than ‘Attâr’s also throw light on *The Canticle of the Birds*. By resorting to the trick of double illustration, Persian and Indian painters indeed often gloss upon the specific story they adorn, by introducing visual allusions to other poetic versions of the same subject matter. For example, ‘Attâr’s Sîmorgh may be seen roaming the heavens of painted pages illustrating tales by the poets Nezâmî, or Amîr Khosrow.

*But to leaf at leisure through the pages of this book with reproduced paintings by Behzâd and the greatest artists of the Persianate world, opening, one after another, magic windows on the deciphered symbolism of one of the culture’s greatest literary masterpieces, is to enjoy today a luxury once allowed only to princes in the ancient Persian lands.*

(Excerpt from ‘Sîmorgh in Persia’s sky’, an introduction by Michael Barry)

## An authoritative translation

### Dick Davis, Professor Emeritus of Persian at Ohio State University

Dick Davis is Professor Emeritus of Persian at Ohio State University, where he was chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures from 2002 to 2012. He is the recipient of numerous academic and literary awards, and has written scholarly works on both English and Persian literature, as well as several volumes of his own poetry.

He is probably best known for his translations from medieval Persian: these include ‘Attâr’s *Canticle of the Birds* (with Afkham Darbandi); *Borrowed Ware: Medieval Persian Epigrams*; Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*; Gorgani’s *Vis and Ramin*; and, most recently, *Faces of Love: Hafez and the Poets of Shiraz*. He has also translated one contemporary work, Iraj Pezeshkzad’s comic novel, *My Uncle Napoleon*. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and has been called, by the *Times Literary Supplement*, “our finest translator from Persian”.

#### Selection of recent awards

- \* *Encyclopaedia Iranica* Prize for “Services to Persian Poetry” March 2001;
- \* AIIS Translation Prize, for *The Canticle of the Birds* (shared with Afkham Darbandi), May 2001;
- \* National Endowment for the Humanities Award, to translate Vol.III of stories from the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi, 2002;
- \* Distinguished Scholar Award, Ohio State University, 2002;
- \* *The Shahnameh: the Persian Book of Kings* chosen as one of “Ten Best Books of 2006”, *The Washington Post*;
- \* AIIS Translation prize for *Vis and Ramin*, 2012.

#### Selection of last publications

- \* *Fathers and Sons: Stories from the Shahnameh of Ferdowsi*, Volume II, pp.310, Mage Books, Washington, 2000;
- \* *Panthea’s Children: Hellenistic Novels and Medieval Persian Romances*, Bibliotheca Persica, 2002;
- \* *Sunset of Empire: Stories from the Shahnameh of Ferdowsi*, Volume III, pp.550, Mage Books, Washington, 2004;
- \* *The Shahnameh: the Persian Book of Kings*, Viking, 2006. Penguin Classics, 2007;
- \* *Rostam: Tales of Love and War from Persia’s Book of Kings*, Mage, 2007; Penguin Classics, 2009;
- \* *Vis and Ramin*, a translation of Fakhraddin Gorgani’s *Vis o Ramin*. Mage, 2008; Penguin Classics, 2009.
- \* *At Home and Far From Home: Poems on Iran and Persian Culture*, Mage Publishers, 2009.
- \* *Faces of Love: Hafez and the Poets of Shiraz* (translations of poems by three 14<sup>th</sup> century poets – Hafez, Jahan Malek Khatun and Obayd-e Zakani). Mage Publishers, 2012. Penguin Classics, 2013.

### Revised translation for this edition

The translation by Dick Davis and Afkham Darbandi, published by Penguin Classics in 1984, was the first complete verse translation in English of ‘Attâr’s work. His passionate and scholarly translation limpidly renders the poet’s thought, as well as the beauty and musicality of his language.

For this edition, Dick Davis has translated the prologue and epilogue, and has also reworked several passages in the light of Leili Anvar’s new linguistic and poetic insights for the French edition.

*Possibly no other English translation— now fortunately complete with the fervent preludes and heartfelt perorations from the Persian original – so purely echoes the music, ringing crystalline imagery and sheer emotion of Farîd-od-Dîn ‘Attâr’s medieval Sufi epic of mystical initiation. Darbandi and Davis’s verses work magic by marvellously reproducing the poet’s original form – individual rhymed couplets or beits forming a whole called a masnavî or “collection of couplets” – to the traditional beat of English iambic pentameters.*

(Excerpt from the foreword by Diane de Selliers)

## 211 Persian and other Eastern Islamic miniatures with commentaries illuminate the reading of the text

### An iconography rich in symbolism

Besides their beauty, the symbolic value of the paintings informed the choice of images, so that each of the 211 works reproduced chimes with the poem and highlights its spiritual meaning.

Research was conducted in public and private collections of Islamic art not only in Turkey, Western Europe and North America, but also in the Middle East and South Asia including less accessible collections of treasures, seldom reproduced, from museums in Cairo and Kabul as well as the Golestan Library and the National Museum of Iran.

### Commentaries on the works of art and on the poem

Facing each illustration, a commentary explains the text and work of art accompanying it. Such cross-reading leads to a better understanding both of the illustration and of 'Attâr's thought, revealing to the reader the many mystical symbols to be found in the paintings.

These commentaries also constitute a fitting introduction to an iconography profoundly steeped in allegory. Written by Michael Barry, a specialist in Persian and Afghan culture and in Islamic art, they provide the reader with invaluable elements for understanding Eastern Islamic painting and its wealth of symbols.

Lëilë Anvar further enriches these commentaries with remarks specific to 'Attâr's poem, adding more keys to understanding *The Canticle*.

### Michael Barry, an authority on Afghanistan and on Persian and Islamic art

An undisputed expert in 'Persian miniatures', Michael Barry directed this publication's rich selection of images. Michael Barry holds higher degrees from the universities of Princeton, Cambridge, McGill and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en sciences sociales in Paris, and teaches Classical Persian literature and the cultures of Afghanistan, Mogul India and Medieval Spain at Princeton University's Department of Near Eastern Studies.

He further served in 2005-2008 as consultative Chairman of the New York Metropolitan Museum's Department of Islamic Art for the reorganization of its new galleries, as well as often consulting and lecturing internationally for the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. Writing both in English and French, he holds eight prizes for literary and educational work from the United States, France and Iran, including:

\* The Académie Française's medal for the History of Art in 1997 for the French version of his *Colour and Symbolism in Islamic Architecture* (Imprimerie Nationale, Paris 1994; Thames and Hudson, London 1995);

\* Iran's Prize for Book of the Year on Persian Civilization for his French-language translation and study of Nezâmî, *Le Pavillon des sept princesses* (Paris 2000);

\* France's *Prix Femina – Essai* for his French-language biography of the Afghan commander *Massoud*, Editions Audibert, Paris 2002.

His most recent publications include:

- \* *Kabul's Long Shadows*, LISD, Princeton University 2011;
- \* *Le royaume de l'insolence : l'Afghanistan, 1504-2011*, Flammarion, Paris 2011 (first published 1984) ;
- \* *Les sept cités de l'amour de Farîd-od-Dîn 'Attâr* (with Jalal Alavînia), Albin Michel, Paris 2013 ;
- \* 'Jews, Islamic Mysticism, and the Devil', in *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations*, ed. by A. Meddeb and B. Stora, Princeton University Press and Albin Michel, Paris 2013.

Michael Barry wrote the introduction on Persian and Eastern Islamic painting and the role of the figurative artist in medieval Islamic civilization, with stress on the motif of the Sîmorgh or Divine Sunbird in the cultures of Iran and surrounding lands.

In the appendices to the book, Michael Barry further provides an invaluable glossary of terms and names mentioned by 'Attâr, a detailed timeline of Iran and surrounding lands, and an in-depth study of the various schools of painting in the Islamic East, tracing their development and mutual influences from the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries

### **Leili Anvar, translator and specialist in mystical literature**

Dr Leili Anvar attended the École normale supérieure in Paris and is now senior lecturer in Persian language and literature at the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (INALCO) [National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations], Paris.

A translator and specialist in Persian mystical literature and women's writing, her research interests include love literature and spiritual development as well as the significance today of the voice of women in Iran and Afghanistan.

She has published a number of books in France on various Persian mystical poets:

- *Rûmi*, 2004, Éditions Entrelacs;
- *Orient. Mille ans de poésie et de peinture*, 2004, Éditions Diane de Selliers;
- *Malek Jân Ne'matî*, « *La vie n'est pas courte mais le temps est compté* », 2007, Éditions Diane de Selliers.  
Book translated into Persian (Nashr-e Panj, 2009), Italian (Empiria, 2010), German (Ibera Verlag, 2011), and English (Arpeggio Press, 2012). Turkish translation in preparation.
- *Trésors dévoilés*, 2008, Éditions du Seuil.

In October 2012, after four years' immersion in 'Attâr's text and the subtleties of Sufi thought, Leili Anvar brought to French-speaking readers the first ever translation – as poetry – into French verse of Farîd-od-dîn 'Attâr's *Canticle of the Birds*, as *Le Cantique des oiseaux*.

Leili Anvar further co-hosts with Frédéric Lenoir the radio programme 'Les Racines du Ciel' for France Culture and writes a regular column for *Le Monde des religions* (under the heading 'Lettres spirituelles').

And not least, Leili Anvar is a woman of the theatre; she stages unforgettable concert readings, and for Morocco's International Festival of Sacred Music in Fez in July 2012 wrote the libretto for the oratorio *Leylâ et Majnûn, l'amour mystique*.

## Fascinating introductory essays

In ‘Taking Flight’, a general introduction to *The Canticle of the Birds*, Leili Anvar initiates us into the mysteries of ‘Attâr’s Sufi poetry, preparing us to read the poem in the depth as she sheds light on its inner meanings while inviting us to share its lyrical charm.

[...] *In the same way that the lover in Persian poetry is forever separated from the beloved, in ‘Attâr’s work, the soul has been separated from the divine Belovèd and thrust into the world, a land of exile. Thus each soul longs for the time when it was in union with the Divine; it yearns to go back to its Origin. That is why from the outset, the birds seek the Supreme Being, who is praised in the very first lines of the prologue as the Creator of this world and the next. Suffering is the lot of the soul in this world, suffering that is amplified by the necessity of annihilating the self in the process of Perfection. To have the image of the Belovèd reflected in the mirror of the soul, one must be emptied from the ego, and tear oneself away from everything that is not Him. And that cannot come about without suffering. Quite the reverse: for ‘Attâr, more so perhaps than for any other mystical poet, suffering is the keystone of the spiritual struggle and the very substance of love. For him love is impossible to requite other than through the total annihilation of the self.*

(Excerpt from ‘Taking flight’, an introduction by Leili Anvar)

Michael Barry, in his introduction to the iconography, ‘Sîmorgh in Persia’s sky’, examines the spiritual motif of Iran’s Divine Sunbird, explores the lively interplay of artistic influences between Byzantium, Persia, China and India and discusses the knotty religious issue of figurative depiction in Islam. Lastly, he shows how artists between the Bosphorus and the Ganges meditated the message of *The Canticle of the Birds* to paint some of the finest pages produced by the tradition of Eastern Islamic manuscript illumination.

*After fourteenth-century Persian rebirth at Tabrîz, eastern Iranian Herât thus turned into the improbable centre for a century-long ‘Tîmûrid Renaissance’ between 1405 and 1507, under the cultured descendants of mankind’s most vicious mass murderers until modern times broke records. Contemporaries to the Florentine Medici, the Tîmûrid princes of Herât and their cousins in Samarkand, Shîrâz and later Kabul sponsored every form of scientific, literary or artistic endeavour, many themselves became talented astronomers or calligraphers of monumental inscriptions, deeply versed in Sufism [...].*

(Excerpt from ‘Sîmorgh in Persia’s sky’, an introduction by Michael Barry)

## Attâr, Sufi poet and spiritual guide

### The life and legend of ‘Attâr

Very little is known about the poet, Farîd od-dîn ‘Attâr. He was already a legend in his own lifetime, myth commingled with known facts well before he died. Probably born in about 1146 at Neishâbûr, in the province of Khorasan, in north-east of Iran, ‘Attâr – whose name literally means the ‘perfumer’ or ‘pharmacist’ – practised as an apothecary. Legend has it that one day when sitting in his shop, he made an acquaintance that altered his life. A dervish mendicant to whom he had just refused alms dropped suddenly dead outside his stall, to make him realise that worldly goods were not true riches and that death could strike at any moment . . . This startling event determined ‘Attâr’s conversion to Sufism. He is said to have ultimately given up his trade in the bazaar to devote himself to a mystical life of meditation and asceticism.

It is very likely that he died in about 1221, when the armies of Genghis Khan invaded Persia. A mausoleum was erected in ‘Attâr’s honour at Neishâbûr, in the fifteenth century, at the instigation of Navâ’î, the Timurid minister who wrote a famous Turkish adaptation of *The Canticle of the Birds*. This sanctuary is a place of pilgrimage to this day.

‘Attâr penned numerous works which rank among the finest in Persian literature, shot through with the ideas of Sufism and the essence of his own spiritual experience. As one of the pioneers of mystical poetry in Persian (Rûmî in the next generation revered him as one of his masters), ‘Attâr opened the way to a genre in which the poetic and the spiritual became inextricably intertwined. His tales are journeys of mystical initiation to which he becomes the reader’s guide, distilling his thought in splendid verse which Dick Davis’ translation conveys in English:

*And if its words remove the veil, and show  
Even one man the Way that he must go*

*So that he’s comforted by what he’s read,  
Then may he pray for me when I am dead.*

*(Epilogue)*

### Sufi spirituality

‘Attâr followed the way of Sufism, the esoteric or mystical trend in Islam which invites human beings to draw nearer to God through an inner dialogue and a renunciation of the narrow self with its selfishness and low desires. In his spiritual quest, the Sufi aspires towards ultimate union and fusion of his or her soul with the Godhead, preparing to do so through a life of self-denying rigour, asceticism and meditation. ‘Attâr in his poetry shares this spiritual experience, deploying all the possibilities of his poetry to teach, in order to guide his readers into embracing this same mystical approach as his own. He urges detachment from the limits of the earthbound self to enable the soul to soar and mingle with the Divine Belovèd.

Many Sufis lived ordinary lives by day – like ‘Attâr the shopkeeper – and meditated on the divine mysteries in gatherings in the evening. Others renounced all worldly wealth to become dervishes or wandering holy mendicants, leading a life of austerity and poverty. All cultivated humility and



sought to mortify their pride in order to strive better towards Mystical Union. The opposite of the so-called way of soberness observed by Sufis like ‘Attâr who plied a practical trade by day was the way of intoxication of the dervishes, marked by exuberance of behaviour in search for an ecstatic meeting with the Godhead. In his poem, ‘Attâr in fact interweaves both strands, insisting as he does on the exemplary model of the ‘lovesick’ dervishes as great sages of the Sufi tradition. The poem’s ‘seven valleys’ are allegories of the spiritual stages that the soul must cross along the way to perfection in order to transcend the gulf between madness and reason, good and evil, belief and unbelief, being and not-being. In the light of the Truth, revealed at last, all differences, dogmas and illusions are resolved. Only Love remains.

### ‘Attâr’s legacy

The influence of ‘Attâr and his *Canticle of the Birds* on poets of the Islamic East – in Persian and also in Turkish and Urdu - has been both immense and decisive and has lasted to this day. While ‘Attâr’s equally famous contemporary Nezâmî mastered the art of story-telling, ‘Attâr played a determining role in the destiny of Persian poetry by combining the imagery of his civilization’s so-called secular poetry with the deepest concepts of Islamic mysticism or gnosis.

The great Rûmî (1207–1273), according to legend, met ‘Attâr when still a child in 1219, and the older master gave the boy a manuscript of his own poetry. Ever after, Rûmî in Turkey acknowledged his spiritual and literary debt to ‘Attâr, recommending to his disciples a daily reading of ‘Attâr’s works and telling them: “‘Attâr has roamed the seven cities of Love, we have only turned a corner!”

‘Attâr’s images deployed in *The Canticle of the Birds* - the Sîmorgh, the hoopoe, the seven valleys across which the birds must fly, the tale of the love of the sheikh San’ân for a Christian princess, became archetypes of Persian and also Turkish and Urdu poetry.

Adaptations of *The Canticle of the Birds* abound not only in European languages, but in the tongues of the East. The minister and poet Nava’î of Herat composed a Turkish version of the poem at the end of the fifteenth century that enabled readers to savour ‘Attâr’s work from Istanbul to Central Asia.

Eastern Islamic painters too have contemplated ‘Attâr’s poetry. Allegorical motifs from *The Canticle* reappear in manuscript illuminations by the most talented court painters in Tabrîz and Herât, Istanbul and Esfahân, Bokhârâ and Lahore, Agra, Delhi, and Bîjâpûr in the far Indian South. Masters like Behzâd and Sheykhzâdeh in Tîmûrid Herât, Soltân-Mohammad and Habîbollâh in Safavid Iran, Basâvan and Meskîn in Mogul India pondered ‘Attâr’s mystical symbols and conveyed them with highly individual sensitivity throughout their art.

## Invaluable annexes

### **A glossary of names and terms**

At the end of the book, a glossary compiled by Michael Barry records and defines notions, terms and principal characters occurring in the poem and the commentaries. This invaluable tool will help the reader's understanding of the text, setting names and terms in historical, religious or literary context.

### **A timeline and map**

A detailed timeline and helpful map, also prepared by Michael Barry, provide the framework in time and place of the author and successive illustrators of *The Canticle of the Birds*, beginning with the Ancient Iranian background and tracing the rise and fall of the relevant Islamic dynasties, until the eighteenth-century decline of traditional Eastern Islamic civilization.

### **Schools of painting and major painters in Persia and the Islamic East**

Written by Michael Barry, this useful study and careful analysis will guide readers through the main Persian and Eastern Islamic schools of painting through the centuries, identifying the major painters represented in this book, and taking into account those political and religious upheavals and events and currents of influence which had decisive impact on the flowering of the arts, thereby yielding a fresh understanding of the magnificent manuscript pictures which illustrate *The Canticle*.