

“A Pot Full of Ancient Mysteries”: An Australian Version of Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds*

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Abstract

The thirteenth century Sufi text, *The Conference of the Birds*, describes a journey undertaken by a group of birds to find their king. It is an allegorical presentation of the mystical quest. The teachings are extensively illustrated by parables. *An Australian Conference of the Birds*, written in 1995 by Australian poet Anne Fairbairn (1928-), is a tribute to Attar’s poem, using Australian birds within an Australian bush setting. The poem also includes a quest for the King of the Birds. There are some important differences in the spirituality of the two poems. The Australian version places a lesser emphasis on the place of ethical behaviour in the life of the aspirant. There is little concern for the stages of growth in the development of mystical awareness. Successful completion of the quest itself is an individual physical achievement.

Keywords

Anne Fairbairn, *An Australian Conference of the Birds*, Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, Australian spirituality, allegory

Introduction

Farid ud-Din Attar is considered one of the greatest Persian Sufi poets of the twelfth and thirteenth century literary renaissance, second only to Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-73). To this day, his book, *Mantiq-al tayr* (The Conference of the Birds, 1187), is highly valued because of “the skill and passion with which he translates his own yearning into poetic energy,” the complexity of his exposition, his sincerity and devotion to the path, the moving simplicity of his style and the practical nature of the guidance he has provided to generations of seekers (Keshavarz 124). As Walter Benjamin has noted, texts have their own ongoing

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lives. Through translation into other languages and paraphrase in their own, they are retold, recontextualised and reimaged in ways that are shaped by the languages, cultures, literary conventions and the worldviews into which they are later absorbed, despite the apparent stability of being a written piece of literature. In this article, I would like to consider some of the ways in which *The Conference of the Birds* is transformed in a recent poem written in homage to Attar, *An Australian Conference of the Birds*, by poet Anne Fairbairn (1928-).

The Conference of the Birds

Most of what is known about the author of *The Conference of the Birds* is legend. “Farid ud-Din” and “Attar” were both pennames of Abu Hamed Mohammad b. Abi Bakr Ebrahim. The first signified his uniqueness in faith; the second that he was a pharmacist – or a perfume maker. Perhaps he was even considered fragrant himself because of his piety. He spent most of his life at Nishapur, in the northeast region of Iran. Estimates of the year of his birth vary from 1120 to 1157 CE; his death is placed sometime between 1193 and 1235 CE. As the colophon to *The Conference of the Birds* states that the book was finished in 1177 CE, an earlier date of birth may be more appropriate and the later date for his death unlikely. He was probably educated at the theological school attached to the shrine of Imam Reza at Mashad, then travelled to Egypt, Damascus, Mecca, Turkestan and even India. Whether he was an initiated Sufi, and if so, to which order he belonged, remain matters of considerable debate. One version of a story says that:

A dervish was gazing at Attar’s shop, his eyes filled with tears, while letting out a sigh. ‘What are you gazing at? It would have been better for you to continue going your own way,’ said the apothecary. ‘My load does not weigh much,’ he said, ‘I do not have much else but these old clothes, but what are you doing with these bags and barrels filled with valuable medications? I can quickly leave this bazaar whenever I please, but how will you ever pass away?’ Attar replied: ‘The same way you will!’ Whereupon the dervish put his begging bowl on the ground, laid his head upon it, uttered the word ‘God’ and promptly died. Attar immediately closed his shop and began his search for Sufi masters. (From *Nafahat al-uns* by Jami, retold by Este’lami 57)

The greatest Sufi poet of all, Maulana Rumi whom Attar is supposed to have blessed while Rumi was still a small child, suggests that Attar had no teacher and was initiated in a dream by the spirit of the martyred saint Mansur al-Hallaj (858-922 CE). Late in his life, he was tried for heresy and banished for a while, his property looted and his books burned. He wrote at least eight books (and perhaps as many as 40), the most famous being *Mantiq-al tayr* (The Conference of the Birds, 1187). Attar was, perhaps, killed in Nishapur by passing Mongol forces on their way to Baghdad. There is a story to this too:

When the Mongols invaded Nishapur, they took Attar prisoner. Someone came along and offered to buy Attar's release, but Attar advised the Mongol against selling him for silver. The Mongol, perhaps hoping for gold, refused the sale. Soon, another buyer offered gold. Again, Attar advised his captor not to sell. The soldier, driven by greed, refused that sale as well. Finally, along came a man with a donkey who, seeing Attar in chains, offered the soldier a sack of straw in exchange for the elderly poet's life. Attar then urged the soldier to accept the offer, saying: 'Now you have been offered what I am truly worth.' Upon hearing this, the angry soldier picked up his sword and beheaded Attar in one swoosh. (Wolpe 13)

The *Conference of the Birds* describes a quest by a group of birds to find Simorgh, their King, under the leadership of a hoopoe bird (also known as a green peafowl or lapwing). The Simorgh is an Iranian mythopoetic bird that has existed in Persian literature since the time of Zoroaster. He is a representative of the Divine, both within and beyond the created order, and of death and rebirth. The Simorgh is often identified with the phoenix (Baxter-Tabriztchi 440-41). *The Conference of the Birds* describes Simorgh as being born from a feather of "that Great Beauty" over China (Wolpe 46), and having "an indescribable Majesty/ beyond all reason, past comprehension,/... like a myriad suns,/ multiple moons, and more" (Wolpe 324). He is, of course, God, and the search for the Simorgh is the search for the Divine.

Wolpe (2017) divides *The Conference of the Birds* into the following sections:

- (1) The Prologue (lines 1-616), which is separate from the main text and includes: the praise of God; praise of Abu Bakr and Usman, the second and third of the "rightly guided Caliphs"; praise of Ali who, according to the Shi'a, should have been the Prophet's immediate successor; praise of other figures, including Bilal, an Ethiopian freed slave, and Rabi'ah, one of the most important women mystics of Islam.²
- (2) The birds of the world gather (617-81). Besides the Hoopoe, Attar names twelve other types of birds, including the ringdove, the parrot, the partridge, the hawk and the goldfinch.
- (3) The birds confer and make excuses (682-1163). These excuses include the faults of infatuation, religious delusion, frivolous attachments, avarice, pride, ambition, misguided longing, materialism, false humility and a few others.
- (4) The birds prepare for the journey (lines 1164-1601).
- (5) The birds begin the journey (1602-1743). They first elect a leader.

² The prologue is given in full in Darbandi and Davis 2011.

- (6) The birds complain and boast (1744-2232). Their further faults include weakness, sinfulness, ambivalence, ego, pride, greed and grandiosity.
- (7) The birds voice their fears (2233-2484), which are based on the loss of love, death and bad luck.
- (8) The birds ask about the Beloved (2485-3245). The answers relate to positive virtues such as obedience and steadfastness, sacrifice, zeal and perseverance, justice and fidelity, audacity, true happiness, authentic and constant love and devotion; and a few negative qualities, such as egotism and faultfinding.
- (9) The seven valleys (3246-4158), namely the valleys of the quest, love, knowledge, detachment, unity, wonderment, and finally, the valley of poverty and annihilation, which mark stages on the mystic journey. The verses consider in detail the psychological and spiritual experiences that belong to each of these stages in the spiritual journey.
- (10) The journey of the birds (4159-4482). In just twenty lines, the birds arrive at the Simorgh’s door. They are admitted, encounter the Great Simorgh and eventually return from Annihilation. Having found themselves – as the image of God – their own personal attributes are obliterated. Only God exists. Significantly the story that comes next is that of the “blasphemer” Hallaj, who cried out “I am the Truth” as he was being executed.
- (11) The epilogue (4483-4724),³ which deals with Attar himself and the nature of True Knowledge.

A briefer, and extremely paradoxical form of the spiritual journey is graphically presented in Darbandi and Davis’ translation:

Love will direct you to Dame Poverty,
And she will show the way to Blasphemy.
When neither Blasphemy nor Faith remain,
The body and the Self have been slain.
Then the fierce fortitude the Way will ask
Is yours, and you are worthy of our task. (Darbandi and Davis 67-68)

The way begins in love. It leads to material and inner poverty. This in turn leads to “blasphemy” and “faith,” the state of the mystic beyond language and orthodox doctrines, who must overcome physical suffering and the constraints of the ego. It is a state that literal minded persons find hard to comprehend. Al-Hallaj was cruelly executed for declaring “I am the Truth.” Junayd (830-910) fared

³ Line numbers follow Wolpe and may vary slightly for other editions.

somewhat better by establishing the “sober” school of Sufism that relied on logic to defend its practitioners.

The quest provides the main focus of the book. However, far greater attention is given by Attar to the emotions of the birds and their moral qualities than to any action on their part. The poem can be conceptualised as operating on two levels. There are the dialogues between the hoopoe and the other birds. Each bird has its own virtues and vices and needs to learn how to strengthen its character in order to be prepared for the journey. And secondly, what the above summary does not indicate, each set of moral instructions forms a frame for an extensive series of more or less related parables. The tales describe a wide range of figures, including famous and unknown Sufis, caliphs, prophets and other persons in the Abrahamic religions, historical persons, fictional characters and more (Tavakoli). They tell, for example, of a sheikh who goes to live in a wine tavern, a merchant in love with his maidservant, the Almighty reprimanding Moses, a hungry dervish reprimanding God, Rabi’a’s exclusion from the Ka’abah in Mecca because she is menstruating, an old woman seeking happiness by bidding for an attractive young slave she can never afford; there is no order or apparent end to the succession of tales. The parables are vivid and highly entertaining. As Sholeh Wolpe says: “*The Conference of the Birds* is delightfully packed with lively banter, pathos, clever hyperbole, cheeky humor, poetic imagination, and surprise.... It is told with warmth in an accessible style” (23). These parables are not simply intended to instruct; “they are also meant to be enjoyed” (Wolpe 23).

When the quest is over, the birds are admitted to the king’s court and meet the Great Simorgh:

They were startled.
They were amazed
and still more astonished
as they advanced.
They saw how they themselves
Were the Great Simorgh,
All along, Simorgh was in fact,
Si, thirty, *morgh*, birds... (Wolpe 331)

There were thirty birds and in Persian “Simorgh” means exactly that, thirty birds. The shocking truth is that “Simorgh was them, and they were Simorgh” (Wolpe 331). God is the only true reality; everything else is a reflection of Him. The birds do not become Him, they are formed by Him from the beginning.

An Australian Conference of the Birds

As Anne Fairbairn herself tells it in her Introduction to *Feathers and the Horizon: A Selection of Modern Poetry from Across the Arab World*, she made an impulsive

stopover in Damascus on her way to London in 1980, “during a particularly stressful period in [her] life” (Fairbairn and Ghazi al-Gosaibi 13). At a dinner party, she was profoundly moved to hear Dr Hussam al-Khatibe, a university teacher of Arabic Studies, recite poems by the Syrian poet Adonis, the Palestinian poet Fadwa Tuqan and the classical Yemeni poet Muhammad Mahmoud al-Zubairi. As a consequence, she committed herself to building “a bridge of poems between Australia and the Arab world” (13), returning in 1982 with books from the Australia Council’s Literature Board to help Dr Hussam develop a special issue of his literary magazine *Al-Adab Al-Ajnabiyya*.

In 1986, she visited Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in connection with another project, namely, compiling a volume of Arabic poetry with parallel text in English. As she explains in her Introduction to *Feathers and the Horizon* “A Selection of Modern Poetry from Across the Arab World” (1989), Dr Ghazi al-Gosaibi, a poet and Saudi Arabian ambassador to Bahrain, provided her with literal English “cribs” of the poems he had selected for the anthology, and she initially translated them with the further assistance of four Arabic speakers in Sydney. Becoming frustrated at her lack of success in producing genuine poetry on the basis of literal word by word translations, she eventually turned to “trans-creation” – recreating the poems by feeling free “to make the creative changes necessary to capture, as far as possible, ‘the essence and charm of the original’” (16).⁴ The most difficult decision she had to make was to “maintain the feeling of discipline” by “foreshortening” the meaning to keep the metre.

Fairbairn has subsequently made at least twenty visits to Middle Eastern countries to speak on Australian poetry. For her work on *Feathers and the Horizon*, she received the Gibran International Award of the Australian-Arab Heritage League in 1988. She was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the same year for her “service to Australian literature as a poet and to international relations, particularly between Australia and the Middle East, through translations of poetry and cultural exchanges” (Commonwealth of Australia Gazette, No S 242, 8 June 1988).

Her familiarity with Arabic and Persian literature prepared her to write *An Australian Conference of the Birds*. Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds* consists of 4300 to 4600 rhyming couplets, each line of ten or eleven syllables; the Australian text consists of a mere 3000 words with only an occasional rhyme. It was published in 1995 and is “dedicated to the memory of Farid ud-Din Attar.” It is not a translation, or transcreation, of Attar’s poem but transfers that book’s basic structure and outlook to the Southern continent. In an article on translations of Attar’s work in the West, Ailar Moghaddam Jahangiri and Amin Karimnia have described *An Australian Conference of the Birds* as a “(recasting) of Attar’s

⁴ As Fairbairn explains, the phrase quoted is from a letter written by Boris Pasternak to the widow of Titian Tabidze in 1957.

masterpiece in a contemporary Australian context,” so as to “grant it some more understandable backdrop” (59). The quest for Simorgh remains as a central theme but Fairbairn completely omits the parables that Attar uses. This leads Jahangiri and Karimnia to comment that the absence of the subsidiary anecdotes “causes Fairbairn’s poetry – on the one hand – to get fully shipshaped into the English language to be only based on the Pantheistic motif, and – on the other – to not have the tendency to get so close as Attar’s to the justified expression of Mysticism” (Jahangiri and Karimnia 60). They describe Fairbairn’s use of rhythmical language as making the poem “more familiarly similar to everyday spoken English” (Jahangiri and Karimnia 60).

An Australian Conference of the Birds begins with an opening invocation to the hoopoe bird. There are at least three previous models for the translation of Attar’s *Conference of the Birds*. The first, selective, English translation was made by Edward Fitzgerald in 1857 (see Shackle 170-175), and Fairbairn has expressed a liking for it (“An Appreciation of and Current Concern for Sufis”). There is also a prose translation by C.S. Nott (1914), based on a previous French translation. The third translation, by Dick Davis and Afkham Darbandi (1984), returns to heroic couplets, “a form associated largely with the eighteenth century” but, in their opinion, entirely suitable for this kind of work (Davis and Afkham 23). However, Mrs Fairbairn followed none of these predecessors. She wrote in the natural speaking style that she had developed in her own poetry, with an occasional rhyme at unpredictable intervals. Her version begins:

Through-shadow-drifting veils of time and distance,
Attar’s Hoopoe, Messenger of the Way,
called to her Southern counterpart one day
to arrange a Conference of Australian birds... (1)⁵

The Spinifex Pigeon responds to her counterpart’s call in an English that suggests an underlying Arabic voice, some of which the general reader will understand, some not:

‘O Hoopoe Bird, you call me down the years,
you who have passed across an abyss of fears
by a bridge much finer than a human hair,
beset by terror. As you say, only
those birds who peck away their souls to know
the highest love, can find Tariqat.
Help us, O Hoopoe, for on your beak is etched
The blessed word Bismillah for all to see...’ (1-2)

⁵ References to pages in *An Australian Conference of the Birds* will be included in the main text of this article.

The language contains certain mysteries. There is no explanation within the poem for “*tariqat*” (mystical teachings and spiritual practices), “*bismillab*” (In the Name of God) or why the word should be on the bird’s beak. The bridge, “much finer than a human hair,” in common Muslim belief, passes over hell and is also characterised as being sharper than a sword and hotter than fire. All must pass over the bridge: only the virtuous can escape falling off it. The mysteries are at other times carefully modulated. The story of the bird’s service to King Solomon in bringing him the Queen of Sheba, clearly presented in the next verse, is less obscure, as is the Hoopoe’s “quest/ seeking Simorgh, the Bird King, long ago” (2). Solomon and the Queen of Sheba are familiar to many Australian readers, even if the role of the bird is not (this is told in the Qur’an, Surah al-Naml, verses 25-44). And the narrative role of the quest is universal.

The Spinifex Pigeon orders the Wagtail to summon the birds (3). A total of about forty different types are mentioned in the book, although they are less consistently presented than Attar’s creatures – a few lines and it is time for the next creature. The first to come are the Crimson Rosella (3), Peregrine Falcon, Butterfly Quail, Nightingale (4), Lyre Bird, Noisy Miner (5), Swamp Pheasant, Turtle Dove, Satin Bower Bird, Crow (6), White Cockatoo and Emu (7). Significantly, the birds have almost all been described in Part III of Fairbairn’s earlier book, *Shadows of Our Dreaming* (1983), set around her first husband’s property, Gragin, in northern New South Wales.

As the birds arrive, they are immediately scolded by the Pigeon for their various moral shortcomings, thus condensing Attar’s “Gathering of the Birds” and their “Excuses” into one didactic whole. But the “host of birds” are still welcome, “whatever your faults” (6). Other birds keep coming – the Cassowary, Jabiru, Brolga (9), Black Swan (11), Bell-Birds and the Silver Gull (12). The address pauses with the stirring words: “together we’ll seek salvation” (12), and a further reference is made to “The Hoopoe Bird and her noble flock who flew/ to find the Simorgh and to know the truth” (12).

Following the pause, the narrative picks up again. The pigeon continues to address these birds as they arrive – Ringneck Parrots, Willie-Willcocks, Mulga Parrots, Bullocks, Smutties (13), Kookaburra, Currawong, Butcher Bird (14), Wonga Pigeon, Tawny Frogmouth, Pink Galah, Honeyeater, Musk Lorrekeet, Pelican (15) and the Musk Duck (16). Then there is the promise of a positive move forward in the narrative. The birds are again called upon to find “the highest Wisdom... the Simorgh” (16) and told “So now our task begins, we shall fly...” (17). They are encouraged with verses from Jami (1414-92) and Rumi, before being given the briefest of listings of the names of the Seven Valleys, with the comment: “We must be resolute/ to achieve purification from our Nafs” (20), but there is no explanation of that term either. (The *nafs* are the inner human drives; some are bad, some are good.) In *The Conference of the Birds* the subsequent

journey takes only 18 couplets; the *Australian Conference of the Birds* uses only one line: “Here in the bush we shall proceed in silence” (22).

The narrative shifts at that point but not in the way that one might have expected. The birds decide to “present gifts to the Simorgh” (20) and send the Wedge-Tailed Eagle off to find “a wisp of wool” (20), symbolic (although this too is not stated) of the Sufis who were possibly called Sufis because they wore coarse woollen garments (*suf*). The Eagle “soon returns,” bringing “a wisp of softest lamb’s wool in his beak/ He dropped it gently on the floating sun/ while circles radiated towards the birds/ drawing their spirits into the Sacred One” (21).

The birds still go nowhere outwardly. They stand beside the billabong, where they have been from the beginning, until the Spinifex Pigeon calls on them to open their eyes (23). The inward search has ended and they can each see the Simorgh in their own reflections in the water (23). The hoopoe has already quoted Jami:

Essences are each a separate glass,
Through which the sun of being’s light is passed.
Each tinted fragment sparkles in the sun,
A thousand colours, yet the light is One. (18)

Now, following a verse from Sohrawardi (1155-91), the implication of the secret teaching is revealed: “you are the Simorgh and the Simorgh, you” (23). The line is to be found in Attar’s text but in this context the consequence is an enhanced feeling of bodily vigour (“feel the new life flowing/ from the celestial ever-living Light” [22]). The further reward for cleansing the soul is that one is to be “joyously free” (12). In the *Australian Conference of the Birds*, salvation implies delight in the recognition that God lives and moves within you, not that one is His servant.

The birds fly away (24); their part in the story is done. The wisp of wool is carried across Australia by the Crested Hawk (24), the Sea Eagle and the Seagull (25) until it reaches Persia, where it is then carried by the Golden Eagle (26) to Nayshapur (28). The Hoopoe receives the wool – carried “from Australia/ to honour our Sufi poet, symbolically” (28), and places it on Attar’s tomb (29). In the Epilogue, the wool is swept away by “a savage wind” and taken “up to spinning supernal Light upon Light” (30, also 17, referencing the Qur’anic verse “Light upon light, God guides to His light whom He will” (Surah al-Nur, verse 35)).

This final part of the poem might be read at one level as referring to Anne Fairbairn herself and her relationship to the Arabic world through gifts of Australian literature. During her many visits to Arabic-speaking countries, she took large bundles of Australian poetry books with her. “It was purely a cultural visit,” she explained to the *Canberra Times* after her visit in 1982-83. “I carried our

creative spirit to them to pay homage to their awakening” – the “awakening” being defined by her as “the renewed interest in creativity by the Arabs and the resurgence of affection for their culture’s poets, painters and writers” (Nicholls 23).

There is a lively colloquial flow to the *Australian Conference of the Birds*. It introduces a wide range of Australian creatures, quickly characterises them, and provides brief comments on their strengths and failings. The awe filled search for Simorgh is sufficiently prominent to create an apparently integrated text and the birds are finally successful. The story is set in the Australian bushland, by a billabong, with frequent references to droughts, bushfires and floods (and even Uluru, 24). There are also references to kangaroos and koala bears. The final gift to Attar stirs a pride in the Australian woollen industry that reminds one of the patriotism of the 1950s. (“Australia rides on the sheep’s back,” it used to be said.) The Australian birds both acknowledge the imperial centre, now focused around “the cerulean dome” of the master’s tomb, and relate to it as convivial colonials should, by being good mates (or cousins) and sending gifts that can also be considered “tribute” (29).

Susan McKernan has described *Shadows of Our Dreaming*, somewhat unkindly, as “the scrapbook of an artistically inclined daughter of the squattocracy” (1983). It is certainly true that the *Australian Conference of the Birds* relies on a continual succession of quick cameos and rapid changes of focus. There is much to look at and admire in this small, well designed chapbook. Besides the treatment of each creature in short segments of three to ten lines, there are drawings of various birds, verses from the Qur’an, quotations from the Sufi poets Jami, Rumi and Sohrawardi, as well as Sa’di (1208-91) and Hafiz (1350-90), a mention of the twentieth-century Turkish poet Ebrat-e Na’ini, and of “the Bard” for those who recognise the few words coming from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, and references to the Australian poets Charles Harpur (1813-68), A.D. Hope (1907-2000) and Judith Wright (1915-2000). It is ultimately a positive vision of the benign power of human life and nature that is one widely accepted image of Australia. (For an opposite and less glorious vision to that of the rural landowning elite, accessible through Henry Lawson, see Millikan, 1981 and Brady, 1981).

When we compare *An Australian Conference of the Birds* with Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds*, there are also some striking contrasts. The comparative brevity of the Australian text comes at a high cost, which relates particularly to the religious dimensions of the poem. Despite Fairbairn’s attempt to provide an Islamic and Arabic veneer to her poem, the two cultures, contemporary Anglo-Australian and medieval Iranian, conceptualise the individual, society and God in vastly different ways.

The first shift in perspective occurs with regard to the importance of the parables. In Attar, the multitude of stories serve to emphasise the need for a life-long ethical responsibility towards the self and others. By omitting them,

Fairbairn reduces the moral dimension of the spiritual quest to being part of the inner path of self-purification that precedes illumination and perfection (7, 12, 20).

Secondly, in *The Conference of the Birds*, about a thousand lines (almost 70 pages in Sholeh Wolpe's translation) are devoted to explaining the place of each of the seven valleys in the spiritual life. Fairbairn lists the names of the valleys but does not explain them. Details of the stages of personal and communal growth are potentially irrelevant if enlightenment is an immediate process that requires no physical work: "Eyes closed, the birds stood beside the water,/ crossing the dreaded valleys in their minds..." (22).

Finally, in Attar's poem, the riddle of the nature of Simorgh is unlocked when the hoopoe explains that "si" means "thirty," and "murgh," "birds"; the thirty birds were looking for the divine through themselves. Fairbairn, perhaps wisely, does not follow this suspicious etymology. Instead, the Australian birds discover their "soul and body's unique reality" by meditatively gazing into the water of the billabong and seeing their own faces reflected there.

"To live is to feel,/ to feel is to suffer," the hoopoe says, but "through our pain we find/ the peace of Paradise" (17, 4). It is a secular and physical enlightenment, an individual achievement, a Paradise outside the structures of organised religion. Each of us can meditate in our own way: "Each bird with wings outspread in living air,/ knows its own private mode of prayer" (29), we are told at what is almost the end of the book (Qur'an, Surah al-Nur, verse 41; the more common reading is "God notes the prayers and praises of all His creatures"). The "Fall" and its associated misery is overcome through the struggle for transcendence (5), and the lyre-bird dances for the new Adam (5) in the restored Eden of Australia.

Conclusion

This article has sought to compare the medieval *Conference of the Birds* with an Australian poem that is dedicated to the memory of its author, Farid ud-Din. It suggests that the *Australian Conference of the Birds* provides its readers with a lively, wide-ranging approach to the Australian landscape, human existence and varied birdlife. The poem uses a simplified framework of an apparently Muslim spiritual search for self-knowledge, which contains words in Arabic, unexplained concepts and the framework of Attar's original story. In so doing, however, the text omits the major qualities of Muslim spirituality, which emphasise moral strength, personal and social integration, and a long and arduous commitment to regular religious practices. The pilgrim, in this approach, is a reflection of God but can never be the same as Him. The *Australian Conference of the Birds*, on the other hand, offers its readers a form of "salvation" (12, 22) that is individual, immediate, physical, joyful and pantheistic. In one of his parables, Attar quotes the words of the mystic Junayd, "Tonight I have placed a large pot before you and filled it with

words elucidating ancient mysteries” (Wolpe 170). The pot is a large pot and there is much to share.

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