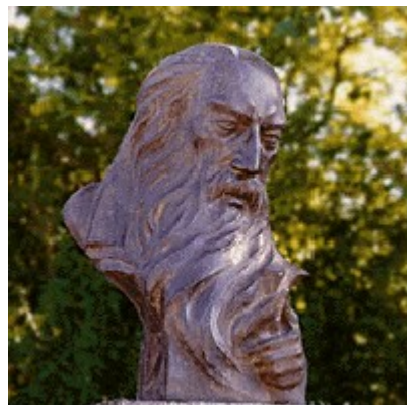
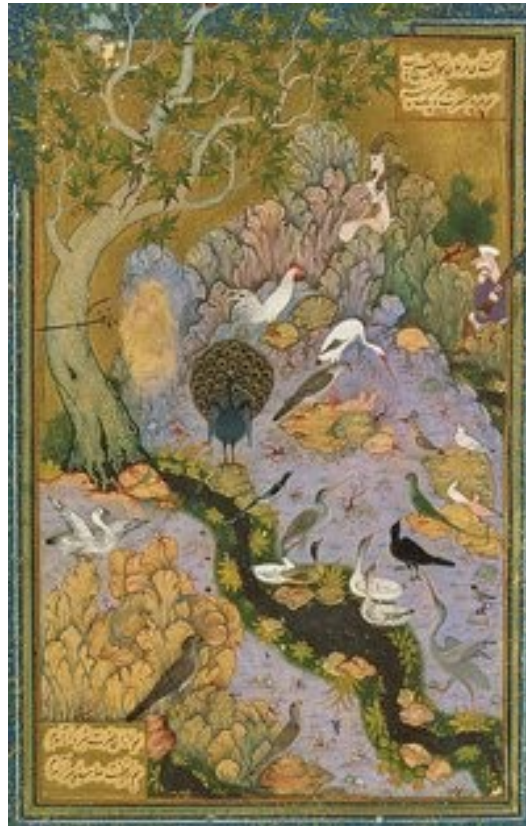


THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS

Farid ud-din Attar

Translated by Afham Darbandi and Dick Davis
London: Penguin, 1984 (~1177)





INTRODUCTION

[A biographical index follows the poem – KA]

The Conference of the Birds (Manteq at-Tair) is the best-known work of Farid ud-Din Attar, a Persian poet who was born at some time during the twelfth century in Neishapour (where Omar Khayyam had also been born), in north-east Iran, and died in the same city early in the thirteenth century. His name, Attar, is a form of the word from which we get the 'attar' of 'attar of roses' and it indicates a perfume seller or druggist. Attar wrote that he composed his poems in his *daru-khané*, a word which in modern Persian means a **chemist's shop or drug-store**, but which has suggestions of a dispensary or even a doctor's surgery; and it is probable that he combined the selling of drugs and perfumes with the practice of medicine.

His date of birth is given by different authorities at various times between 1120 and 1157; modern writers have inclined towards the earlier date. Two manuscript copies of *The Conference of the Birds* give the date of its completion as 1177, and on internal evidence one would judge it to be the work of a writer well past his youth; this also suggests that a birth-date closer to 1120 than 1157 is likely. He is said to have spent much of his childhood being educated at the theological school attached to the shrine of Imam Reza at Mashhad (the largest town in north-eastern Iran and a major centre of pilgrimage), and later to have travelled to Rey (the ancient Raghés, near modern Tehran), Egypt, Damascus, Mecca, Turkistan (southern Russia) and India. Such itineraries are common in the lives of Persian poets of this period, and it was clearly usual for them, like their counterparts in medieval Europe, the troubadours and wandering scholars, to travel from place to place in search of knowledge or patronage or both. Attar's travels seem to have been undertaken more in the pursuit of knowledge than patronage; he boasted that

he had never sought a king's favour or stooped to writing a panegyric (this alone would make him worthy of note among Persian poets). Though *The Conference of the Birds* is about the search for an idea, spiritual king, Attar obviously had a low opinion of most earthly rulers; he usually presents their behaviour as capricious and cruel, and at one point in the poem he specifically says it is best to have nothing to do with them. The knowledge he particularly sought was concerned with the biographies and sayings of Islamic saints; these he collected together in his prose work *Tadhkirat al-Auliya* (*Memorials of the Saints*), which became an important source book for later hagiographers.

After his wanderings he settled in his home town, where he presumably kept his *daru-khané*. There is some evidence that late in his life he was tried for heresy -- reading *The Conference of the Birds* it is not difficult to see why, though the accusation was made against a different poem. The charge was upheld, Attar was banished and his property was looted. Edward G. Browne (*A Literary History of Persia*, 1906; Cambridge, 1928 version, Vol. 2, p.509) points out that this was a not uncommon fate for Persian mystical poets to endure, and that in his last book, *Lisanu'l Ghaib* [lit. "A voice from heaven, a revelation, an oracle; the mystic tongue", compare Frank Herbert's "Lisan al-Gaib", the voice from the outer world, in "Dune" -- KA], Attar

Quote:

compares himself to Nasir-e-Khosrow, who, like himself, "in order that he might not look on the accursed faces" of his persecutors, retired from the world and "hid himself like a ruby in Badakhshan."

The Conference of the Birds contains many anecdotes about sufis who suffered for their beliefs; and if Attar was attacked for his writings, the experience surely cannot have been a surprise to him.

However, he was back in Neishapour at the time of his death, which is variously given as having occurred between 1193 and 1235. One of the dates most favoured among early writers is 1229, the year of the Mongols' sack of Neishapour during their devastating sweep westwards, which took them to Baghdad and beyond. If Attar was born around 1120 he would have been well over a hundred years old at this time, and it seems more likely that his biographers have been seduced by the pathetic picture of the saintly old poet butchered by the barbarian hordes than that he actually did live so long. A date shortly before 1220 is more probably, though even this would mean that he was in his nineties when he died.

A memorial stone was erected over Attar's tomb in the late fifteenth century, and the site is still maintained as a minor shrine. (The tombs of Persian mystical poets have commonly become shrines; Ansari's tomb in Heart was once a magnificently adorned place of pilgrimage -- it still exists in a more or less dilapidated state -- and Rumi's tomb at Konya is to this day maintained in lavish splendour.) Both Attar's tomb and Omar Khayyam's were restored in the 1930s -- Attar's with rather more discretion than Khayyam's; the building that now houses the tomb is surrounded by a small garden.

The Conference of the Birds is a poem about sufism, the doctrine propounded by the mystics of Islam, and it is necessary to know something about this doctrine if the poem is to be fully appreciated. Sufism was an esoteric system, partly because it was continually accused of being heretical, partly because it was held to be incomprehensible and dangerous if expounded to those who had not received the necessary spiritual training. It was handed down within orders of adepts, who were forbidden to reveal the most important tenets of belief (although some occasionally did), from sheikh to pupil (throughout *The Conference of the Birds* the word "sheikh" denotes a spiritual leader, not

a secular chief). Different sufis living at different times have clearly believed different things, and most sufi authors tend to retreat into paradox at crucial moments, either because they feel their beliefs are genuinely inexpressible by other means or because they fear orthodox reprisal.

The doctrine is elusive, but certain tenets emerge as common to most accounts. These, briefly, are: only God truly exists, all other things are an emanation of Him, or are His "shadow"; religion is useful mainly as a way of reaching to a Truth beyond the teachings of particular religions -- however, some faiths are more useful for this than others, and Islam is the most useful; man's distinctions between good and evil have no meaning for God, who knows only Unity; the soul is trapped within the cage of the body but can, by looking inward, recognize its essential affinity with God; the awakened soul, guided by God's grace, can progress along a "Way" which leads to annihilation in God. The doctrine received its most extreme expression in the writings of the Spanish Arab pantheist Ibn Arabi, a contemporary of Attar, who maintained that the being of creation and the Creator are invisible. In *The Conference of the Birds* Attar frequently seems about to propound the same doctrine, only to step back at the last moment and maintain a final distinction between God and His creatures.

Attar's own connection with sufism is not entirely clear. It is not possible, for example, to identify incontrovertibly the sheikh from whom he received instruction, or even to state with certainty which order he belonged to. J. Spencer Trimmingham, in his excellent book *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford, 1971), says that his sheikh was Majd ad-Din al-Baghdadi (died 1219) of the Kubrawiya order; however, E. G. Browne quotes a Persian source to the effect that though Majd ad-Din was Attar's teacher it was medicine that he taught him, not the Way of sufism. There is another persistent tradition (first mentioned by Rumi, whom Attar is said to have dandled on his knee as a child and whose poetry is considered by Persians to be the *ne plus ultra* of mystical literature) that Attar had in fact no teacher and was instructed in the Way by the spirit of Mansur al-Hallaj, the sufi martyr who had been executed in Baghdad in 922 and who appeared to him in a dream.

The two traditions are not wholly exclusive; Attar may have belonged to an order and have had a confirmatory dream in which Hallaj appeared to him. His collection of sayings and anecdotes connected with the lives of sufi saints, *Memorials of the Saints* (many such anecdotes also appear in *The Conference of the Birds*), suggests a bookish, rather scholarly man interested in the lives of those who had gone before him. My own guess -- it is no more than that -- is that the tradition of his instruction by the spirit of Hallaj is a dramatic symbol of his scholarly preoccupation with the lives of dead sufis.

Attar shows a particular interest in the lives of two sufis, al-Hallaj and Bistami (or "Bayazid", as Attar calls him). Both, significantly enough, were representatives of the more extreme, antinomian and, to many of the orthodox, scandalous tendencies of sufism. Hallaj was a Persian who wrote in Arabic (Arabic occupied the position in Islamic Asia and Africa that Latin held in medieval Christian Europe, and many authors used it in preference to their own vernacular languages). He broke with the sufi tradition of secrecy and openly taught mystical doctrines; his most famous pronouncement, made while in a state of religious exaltation, was "I am the Truth" (or even "I am God": the relevant word, *haq*, can mean either "God" or "truth"). He was imprisoned for eight years, then tried and condemned to death; he was flogged, mutilated, hung on a gibbet and then decapitated; his body was burned and the ashes were scattered in the Tigris. Some of his followers fled to Khorasan (north-eastern Iran, where Attar was born), where his ideas were first incorporated into Persian verse by Abou Sa'id Aboul Kheir; they became the staple of Persian mystical literature when they were taken up by Sana'i, and after him by Attar and then Rumi. The statement "I am the Truth" was considered a declaration of the non-existence of the Self which has been re-absorbed into the true reality, i.e. God; his death was seen as a warning of the world's hostility to sufism, which became ever more secretive, paradoxical and esoteric. The poet Hafez goes so far as to imply that Hallaj died

because he had revealed what should be hidden; that is, though to the orthodox his death may have been a punishment for blasphemy, to the sufis it was a punishment for the revelation of a mystery.

Bistami or Bayazid (Bistam, which is about halfway between Rey and Neishapour, was his birthplace) was a famous ascetic associated with the “ecstatic” rather than the “sober” sufi path (the “sober” way was associated with Junaid of Baghdad). Like Hallaj, Bistami is said to have attained a state of annihilation in God, and like Hallaj he proclaimed the fact in utterances that scandalized the orthodox (“Glory to Me! How great is My majesty!” -- he claimed to have had a vision of the throne of God and to have seen himself sitting on it). However, he escaped outright condemnation, perhaps by feigning madness, and died in 874 in Bistam. His tomb was made into a very beautiful shrine by the Mongol Ilkhan Uljeitu in the early fourteenth century; much of this shrine still exists. Attar is one of the chief sources for anecdotes about Bistami’s life. Trimmingham quotes al-Hujwiri, the author of one of the most important medieval texts on sufism, as saying that Bistami’s teaching was

Quote:

characterized by *ghalaba* (rapture, ecstasy) and *sukr* (intoxication); whereas that derived from al-Junaid is based on sobriety (*sahw*).

The two schools were not seen as opposed, and Attar mentions Junaid with respect, but he is clearly more taken up with the Khorasanian tradition; he was, after all, born in Khorasan and probably imbibed its particular emphases early in his education.

Sufism was never simply a doctrine to which one intellectually assented; it was also a discipline for life, and its adepts followed a carefully prescribed “Way”. To quote Trimmingham again,

Quote:

[readers unacquainted with the writings of sufis] could have no better introduction than Attar’s *Manteq at-Tair* (*The Conference of the Birds*) where the seven valleys traversed by the birds of the quest are: **Search, Love, mystic Apprehension, Detachment/Independence, Unity, Bewilderment, and Fulfilment in Annihilation ... The purpose of the discipline ... is to achieve purification. The aspirant has: to purify his *nafs*, i.e. his personality-self, from its inclination to *shahawat*, that is, the thoughts and desires of the natural man, and substitute these with love (*mahabba*); then he must be cast into the flames of passion (*ishq*) to emerge in the state of union (*wusla*) with transmutation of self (*fana*) through the gifts of dazzlement and wonder (*haira*) to everlastingness (*baqa*).**

Attar’s poem then is a description of the stages encountered by the adept of the sufis’ Way.

A poet of the generation before Attar, Sana’i (who died around 1150, when Attar was probably in his twenties) had done more or less just this in his *Hadiqatu’l Haqiqat* (*The Garden of the Truth*) in which sufi doctrine is mixed with a great deal of extraneous matter. The poem is significant as being the first of the three famous long narrative Persian poems written in couplets with expound sufi teachings -- the other two are Attar’s *Manteq al-Tair* and Rumi’s *Masnawi-e-Ma’navi* -- but is by far the least popular of the three and owes its fame to chronological pre-eminence rather than to intrinsic excellence. E. g. Browne, with characteristic forthrightness, called it

Quote:

in my opinion one of the dullest books in Persian, seldom rising to the level of Martin Tupper's *Proverbial Philosophy*, and as far inferior to the *Masnavi* of Jalalu'd Din Rumi as is Robert Montgomery's *Satan* to Milton's *Paradise Lost*.
(op. cit., Vol. 2, p.319)

This is an extreme view, but compared to Attar's work, Sana'i's is undeniably patchy and dull. Attar's great advance on Sana'i's beginning was to present the sufi doctrine in an extended allegorical form which is itself continually interesting and amusing, which has moments of great psychological insight, humour and narrative suspense, and which gives the poem -- over its four and a half thousand lines -- a convincingly unfolded narrative structure. In other words he has transformed belief into poetry, much in the way that Milton or Dante did.

The allegorical framework of the poem is as follows: the birds of the world gather together to seek a king. They are told by the hoopoe that they have a king -- the Simorgh -- but that he lives far away and the journey to him is hazardous. The birds are at first enthusiastic to begin their search, but when they realize how difficult the journey will be they start to make excuses. The nightingale, for example, cannot leave his beloved; the hawk is satisfied with his position at court waiting on earthly kings; the finch is too afraid even to set out, and so on. The hoopoe counters each of their excuses with anecdotes which show how their desires and fears are mistaken. The group flies a little way, formally adopts the hoopoe as its leader, and then decides to ask a series of questions about the Way before proceeding. These questions are also answered by illustrative anecdotes. The last question is about the length of the journey, and in answer the hoopoe describes the seven valleys of the Way. The journey itself is quickly dealt with and the birds arrive at the court of the Simorgh. At first they are turned back; but they are finally admitted and find that the Simorgh they have sought is none other than themselves. The moment depends on a pun -- only thirty (*si*) birds (*morgh*) are left at the end of the Way, and the *si morph* meet the Simorgh, the goal of their quest. Though Attar treats his material in an entirely different way from Sana'i, it is possible that a shorter poem of Sana'i suggested the device of the birds to him. In Sana'i's *Divan* there is a poem in which the different cries of the birds are interpreted as the birds' ways of calling on or praising God. A second source may have been *Kalila and Dimna*. This extraordinary popular work, also called *The Fables of Bidpai*, originated in India and was translated into many languages. The Persian texts of *Kalila and Dimna* which survive are relatively late prose versions, but Rudaki, who lived early in the tenth century and was one of the first poets to write in Persian, made a verse translation of the work, which Attar could have known. Significantly enough, Rudaki used the same couplet form as Attar was later to use for *The Conference of the Birds*; but a direct influence is impossible to prove, because all but a few fragments of Rudaki's poem have been lost. In *Kalila and Dimna* animals talk and act as humans; the fables usually have a moral point to them, and their narratives are allegories of human characteristics and failings. This is precisely the method of Attar's *Conference of the Birds*, and the two works also show a similar kind of folksy humour. Another work which probably influenced Attar when he came to write his poem is the short Arabic treatise *The Bird* by Avicenna. This is the first-person narrative of a bird (clearly representing the human soul) who is freed from a cage by other birds, and then flies off with his new companions on a journey to the "Great King". The group flies over eight high mountain peaks before reaching the king's court; there are a few moments when Attar seems to echo Avicenna's imagery.

[The concept of the Simorgh (the Persian "phoenix") originates in ancient Persian myth, and has perhaps been made most familiar through the Shahnameh, one of the texts I had intended to transcribe, when and if – KA]

The hoopoe in Attar's poem is presented as the birds' guide and leader; he is therefore the equivalent of a sheikh leading a group of religious adepts, or would-be adepts, along their path. His relation to the other birds is also Attar's relation to his audience: he expounds the doctrine they wish to hear and admonishes them to act on it. Attar very frequently gives the impression of merging his personality with that of the hoopoe; this is aided in Persian by the absence of punctuation, in particular quotation marks; a translator has to choose whether the hoopoe or the author is speaking, whereas Attar need not make this decision. Though the stories are ostensibly told by the hoopoe to birds they are in reality told by Attar to men, and the admonitions in them are almost always addressed to humanity, Attar's real audience, rather than to the hoopoe's fictitious avian audience. For example, Persian has a phrase exactly equivalent to the English "Be a man!" (i.e. "Pull yourself together and face danger bravely!"); Attar often uses this phrase because he clearly has his true, human audience uppermost in his mind rather than the birds to whom the stories are supposed to be addressed.

Most of the poem is organized around the hoopoe's answers to different birds' objections to the journey or questions about it. At the beginning the birds are identified by their species (and each species clearly indicates a human type: the nightingale is the lover, the finch is the coward, etc.); and they make excuses, according to their kind, for not going on the journey. Once the journey has begun the birds ask questions about its course, and here the analogy is much more that of a beginner on the spiritual path asking his sheikh about the trials he is likely to encounter. Each section (except for the opening and closing pages) therefore begins with a bird questioning the hoopoe (or arguing with him) and continues with the hoopoe's answer. Each answer usually contains two or three stories which illustrate the particular point the hoopoe is making; the stories are linked together by admonition and commentary.

Many of the stories at first reading seem obscure. This obscurity is certainly, in part at least, intentional; the reader is being asked to look at some problem in an unfamiliar way, and logic is often deliberately flouted so that we are, as it were, teased or goaded -- rather than logically led -- into understanding. The paradoxical koans of Zen Buddhism are an analogous phenomenon. And, nearer home, Bunyan, in the prefatory poem to the second part of his *Pilgrim's Progress*, counters the objection that "his words and stories are so dark/ They know not how, by them, to find his mark" with lines that could well stand at the head of Attar's poem:

Quote:

And to stir the mind
To search after what it fain would find,
Things that seem to be hid in words obscure
Do but the godly mind the more allure
To study what those sayings should contain
That speak to us in such a cloudy strain.

I also know a dark similitude
Will on the fancy more itself intrude,
And will stick faster in the heart and head
Than things from similes not borrowed.

The obscurities are there to "allure" the mind, and the ambiguities of the allegory are the "dark similitude" which "will stick faster in the heart and head". For example, Attar will tell a story about two people, one of whom is clearly God, the other the aspirant sufi, but just as the reader has worked out which is which he will find that he has to change his mind or suspend judgement; the long story with which the poem closes is a good example of this. The reader's attempts to explain the allegory to himself are what make it "stick fast".

But though much of the poem is deliberately in a “cloudy strain” it is certainly not meant to be read in a state of hazy unrelieved incomprehension. Some of what at first sight seems obscure will be clarified if the reader pays attention to the context of each story. (This is why it is not really a good idea to dip into the book at random; it is meant to be read through, at least section by section.) A good example of how the context clarifies meaning occurs when the hoopoe tells the tale of the poor fisherboy befriended by King Mas’oud; when the king casts the boy’s line he is successful, and catches a great quantity of fish, which he gives the boy. The next day he makes the boy the partner of his throne. Out of context, the story, given that the reader knows it comes from a religious allegory, would probably be interpreted as a fable about God’s grace. But if we put the story back into its context, the allegory becomes more interesting. A bird has asked the hoopoe why he (the hoopoe) is spiritually successful whereas all the other birds get nowhere. The hoopoe says it is because Solomon has glanced at him; he goes on to say that this glance is worth far more than prayer. However, this does not mean that one need not pray -- on the contrary, one should pray unceasingly *until* Solomon glances at one. There follows the story of the fisherboy; we now see that the boy’s constant fishing (he comes to fish in the same spot every day) represents the spiritual “fishing” of constant prayer; the king’s visit is the glance of Solomon. The story is about individual effort as well as grace and the fact that *both* are necessary for spiritual progress. If the point of a story seems elusive at first reading, it is usually a good idea to re-read the preceding few lines, or to refer back to the beginning of the section in order to remind oneself what question or objection the hoopoe is answering. Similarly, stories are often linked by a key word; sometimes this link will be a pun which subtly changes the direction of the argument, at other times it seems that, as in a comedian’s patter, a word which comes at the end of one story has simply reminded Attar of another story which depends on the same notion.

It is clear that certain of the beliefs central to sufism engaged Attar’s imagination more than others. Two themes in particular are diffused throughout almost the entire poem -- the necessity for destroying the Self, and the importance of passionate love. Both are mentioned in every conceivable context and not only at the “appropriate” moments within the scheme. The two are connected: the Self is seen as an entity dependent on pride and reputation; there can be no progress until the pilgrim is indifferent to both, and the commonest way of making him indifferent is the experience of overwhelming love. Now the love Attar chooses to celebrate (and the stories that deal with love are easily the most detailed and the longest of the poem) is of a particular kind; it is always love that flies in the face of either social or sexual or religious convention. It may be love between a social superior and inferior (e.g. between a princess and a slave); it is very commonly homosexual love; or, as in the longest story of the poem (about Sheikh Sam’an), it may be love between people of different religions. In each case the love celebrated is seen by the people of the world as scandalous (it may be objected that homosexual love was not seen by medieval Islam as particularly scandalous, but it is forbidden in the Koran (iv. 20), and in *The Conference of the Birds* the anecdote about Shebli in the brothel shows that it was commonly thought of as shameful). The mention of scandal reminds us of the “scandalous”, i.e. blasphemous, aspects of the Khorasanian tradition of sufism to which Attar belonged; the “scandalous” loves which Attar celebrates, their flouting of convention, are the allegorical counterpart of this spiritually “scandalous” abandonment.

Attar’s concern to demonstrate that the sufis’ truth exists outside of human conventions also appears in his predilection for stories in which a poor, despised person (a dervish or beggar) is shown as spiritually superior to a great lord or king; and, in common with other sufi poets, Attar will use words like “fool” or “idiot” to mean “wise man” or “saint”. The most extreme examples of such an attitude occur in the section where he has pilgrims insulting God. Like many religious poets he loves paradox, as when he has a

saint praying that God curse him (because the curse is God's and thus preferable to a blessing from any other source), and this is part of the same habit of mind -- the need to insist that "normal" apprehensions and expectations are questionable, to turn them inside out.

Readers acquainted with medieval European literature will not find Attar's method unfamiliar; parallels such as *The Owl and the Nightingale* and Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* immediately suggest themselves. Indeed, it is remarkable how close Attar's poem frequently is in tone and technique to medieval European classics. Like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, it is a group of stories bound together by the convention of a pilgrimage, and as in Chaucer's work the convention allows the author to present a panorama of contemporary society; both poems can accommodate widely differing tones and subjects, from the scatological to the exalted to the pathetic (and, occasionally, it must be admitted, the bathetic); both authors delight in quick character sketches and brief vignettes of quotidian life. With Dante's *Divine Comedy* Attar's poem shares its basic technique, multi-layered allegory, and a structure that leads us from the secular to the Divine, from a crowded, random world, described with a great poet's relish for language and observation, to the ineffable realm of the Absolute. And in the work of all three authors we can discern a basic catholicity of sympathy, at odds with the stereotypes of inflexible exclusiveness often associated with both medieval Roman Catholicism and medieval Islam.

To western readers Attar's misconceptions about other religions may prove irritating; but his characterization of monasteries as places where orgies go on and good Moslems are led astray is after all no more grotesque than medieval Christian characterizations of what went on in Jewish communities. His obsession with idolatry is part of a general Islamic concern, but in *The Conference of the Birds*, as in a great deal of sufi poetry, the true idol to be destroyed is the Self. Of especial significance is Attar's use of the imagery of fire to indicate religious exaltation; pre-Islamic Iran had been Zoroastrian, and the Zoroastrians worshipped fire; the "fire-worshippers" of Persian mystical poetry are yet another symbol for an antinomian religious fervour scandalous to the orthodox. In the same way Persian poets, including Attar, use the intoxication induced by wine -- forbidden to Moslems -- as a metaphor for the "forbidden" intoxications of mysticism. In the story of the Arab who has all his goods stolen while travelling in Persia, the Arab represents the follower of the formal, outward path of religion; the bandits are the sufis, who follow the inward path of mysticism and spiritual poverty; the wine which makes the Arab drunk and which enables the bandits to strip him of his outward wealth is the sufi doctrine.

Attar's language is, compared with that of many Persian poets, fairly direct and does not present too many difficulties for the translator. Persian lyric poetry is often a tissue of allusion and thus extraordinarily difficult to render into English; but this poem is a narrative, and whatever else is happening the translator has at least the story to convey. Attar is relatively sparing with metaphor, but a word or two about the use of metaphor in Persian verse will perhaps be helpful. Persian metaphors are rarely the visual images that English readers expect to find in poetry. Instead they juxtapose words which have potent associations in a way that deepens and widens the meanings implied by the passage. If the reader attempts to visualize the juxtaposition the result is often ludicrous. Henry Vaughan's poem "My soul, there is a country" has a line, "Sweet Peace sits crowned with smiles", which seems to me untypical of English metaphor (it is absurd to try and see a personified Peace with a crown literally made of smiles -- what could such a crown look like?), but it would not startle a Persian poet. The metaphor works, if it works, by juxtaposing the associations of "Peace", "crowned" and "smiles" to convey a notion of benign authority. This is exactly how most Persian metaphors convey meaning. Thus when Attar compares the Prophet's face to the moon in one line and the sun in the next, he does not want his readers to visualize the result; rather he expects them to combine

the notion of beauty associated with the moon and the notion of solitary splendour associated with the sun.

Most of Attar's metaphors are stock comparisons, and readers will soon realize that his descriptions of beautiful youths and maidens all use the same vocabulary and imagery. This is of course a common device used to unify long narrative poems -- particularly epics -- in many languages. Two other rhetorical devices deserve mention. One is common to a great deal of Persian poetry, the other is more typical of Attar himself. The first is hyperbole; most descriptions of love, sorry, longing etc. in the poem will strike the western reader as, to say the least, very unrestrained. This hyperbolic language is normal in Persian verse, and, as with the metaphors, one should not be too literal-minded in one's response. To say that the moon is jealous of one's beloved's face or that one weeps blood rather than tears is clearly not to offer a literal explanation or description but to indicate the depth of emotion which makes one feel these things to be so. One of Attar's favourite devices is anaphora, the repetition of a particular word or phrase many times within a few lines, or sometimes over a more extended passage, e.g.

Quote:

Love's built on readiness to share love's shame;
Such self-regarding love usurps love's name.

The effect produced is of an obsessive worrying of a concept; though this can sound peculiar in English, we have in general, though not in every case, tried to reproduce the device.

The anecdotes and stories are, as one might expect, easier to render in English than the passages of commentary and religious exhortation. The latter are often highly abstract, and they lack the human interest of the tales; a particular difficulty is that a great deal of the exhortation is written in the imperative mood, which is hard to sustain convincingly for long periods in English; and the negative imperative is especially awkward. However, we have in almost all cases resisted the temptation to omit these passages, and in the few places where we have done so no more than two consecutive lines have been cut; usually only one line is absent.

To translate a long, narrative poem into heroic couplets, a form associated largely with the eighteenth century, may seem to be an undertaking that needs justification. However, it would, I believe, be perverse to translate this poem into any other form. Attar's metre is the common *masnavi* metre of Persian narrative poetry; the rhymes occur within the line, and each line has a new rhyme. Each line has, normally, twenty-two syllables, the rhymes occurring at the eleventh and twenty-second syllables. Almost all lines are end-stopped, i.e. the unit of sense is the same length as the line (there are perhaps twenty lines, out of over four thousand, in *The Conference of the Birds* which are not end-stopped). The proximity of this form to the English heroic couplet is immediately obvious. In general we have translated one Persian line by one couplet, though we have sometimes compressed two lines into one couplet. English heroic couplets are not normally as relentlessly end-stopped as Attar's Persian lines are, and we have tried to effect a compromise between producing a fairly normal English narrative flow and giving some idea of the more rigorously divided movement of the Persian. There is another less technical reason for the decision to reproduce the couplet form. As I have indicated, the subjects of Attar's poem are largely connected with the breaking of convention; in order for this to be effective and interesting the poem must be seen to be rooted in a fairly rigid convention, and the convention of the couplet is a formal paradigm of the conventions of the society Attar is writing about. If the reader considers this a doubtful or spurious point, let him consider the idea of such a poem written in free verse; all sense of tension, of struggle against a prevailing formality, would, I suggest, be dissipated by the openness of

the form.

Further, narrative poetry depends on what the American poet Turner Cassity has called “recitative”. We are used to short poems and expect them to function at a maximum of emotional intensity, like the arias of grand opera. One cannot maintain such intensity over hundreds of pages, and it would be wearying if one could. Narrative poetry needs its workaday recitatives between the arias, its simple conveying of the story from point *a* to point *b*. The heroic couplet has been one of the most successful means of effecting such “recitatives” in English. For these reasons -- the similarity of the English form to the Persian (which gives the translator at least the chance of reproducing something of the tone and movement of the original) and the necessity of some fairly strict formal scheme if the poem’s meaning is not to be betrayed -- we have considered that any drawbacks which may come from eighteenth-century associations are more than outweighed by the advantages. Our method of translation does, however, owe something to the eighteenth century; we have followed, more or less, the guide-lines set out in Alexander Fraser Tytler’s admirable *Essay on the Principles of Translation* (first published in 1791), with particular reference to the chapters on verse translation.

No complete translation of the poem has previously been made into English. This translation is of the whole poem with the exception of the invocation and the epilogue. The invocation, a traditional prelude to long narrative poems in Persian, consists of praise of God, of the prophet and of the founders of Islam. Attar cleverly weaves the introduction of his birds into the list of prophets, and it is at this point that the poem proper starts and our translation opens. The epilogue, again a traditional feature of such poems, consists largely of self-praise and is a distinct anticlimax after a poem devoted to the notion of passing beyond the Self.

Previous translations have been made into English by Edward FitzGerald, Masani and C. S. Nott. Of these, FitzGerald’s is the most interesting, though it also takes the most liberties with the text. FitzGerald translates about a fifth of the poem (into heroic couplets); he rearranges the stories, sometimes bowdlerizes them and often translates very freely indeed (as he does in his versions of Khayyam). But, as with the Khayyam poems, he frequently succeeds in capturing much of the tone and feeling of the original. Masani’s translation, of around half the poem, is into adequate prose. Nott’s prose was prepared from Garcin de Tassy’s nineteenth-century French translation; unfortunately the intervention of another language between Nott and the Persian has meant that many of the stories have become blurred in the process. Frequently the point Attar is making is obscured or simply changed; this is especially true in the section where the hoopoe tells anecdotes about sufis who quarrel with God. A fair number of stories are omitted, including the important last story; quite a lot of the commentary is also omitted, and this has rendered the poem’s structure very elusive. Attar’s tone shifts from the exalted to the sarcastic, from the witty to the indignant; Nott’s tone, perhaps because he is translating from an intervening language, is consistently “reverent”, and this makes the poem seem much less lively than in fact it is.

DICK DAVIS

This translation has been made from the edition of Attar’s *Manteq at-Tair* prepared by Dr Sadeq Gouharin (Tehran, 1978), and the notes to his edition have been consulted in the preparation of the Biographical Index which follows the poem. [*Line numbers, given in the original, are omitted here – KA*] Other books to which we are particularly indebted, apart from those cited in the introduction, are *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* and A. J. Arberry’s translation of episodes from Attar’s *Tadh-kirat al-Auliya* (London, 1966). We are grateful to

the British Institute of Persian Studies for generous financial assistance and to those friends who have read the manuscript through, entirely or in part, and made many valuable suggestions.

[This translation, omitting the invocation and epilogue per the introduction, begins at line 616 – KA]

Dear hoopoe, welcome! You will be our guide;
It was on you King Solomon relied
To carry secret messages between
His court and distant Sheba's lovely queen.
He knew your language and you knew his heart --
As his close confidant you learnt the art
Of holding demons captive underground,
And for these valiant exploits you were crowned.
And you are welcome, finch! Rise up and play
Those liquid notes that steal men's hearts away;
Like Moses you have seen the flames burn high
On Sinai's slopes and there you long to fly,
Like him avoid cruel Pharaoh's hand, and seek
Your promised home on Sinai's mountain peak.
There you will understand unspoken words
Too subtle for the ears of mortal birds.
And welcome, parrot, perched in paradise!
Your splendid plumage bears a strange device,
A necklace of bright fire about the throat;
Though heaven's bliss is promised by your coat,
This circle stands for hell; if you can flee
Like Abraham from Nimrod's enmity,
Despise these flames -- uninjured will you tread
Through fire if first you cut off Nimrod's head,
And when the fear of him has died put on
Your gorgeous coat; your collar's strength has gone!
Welcome, dear partridge -- how you strut with pride
Along the slopes of wisdom's mountain-side;
Let laughter ring out where your feet have trod,
Then strike with all your strength the door of God;
Destroy the mountain of the Self, and here,
From ruined rocks a camel will appear;
Beside its new-born noble hooves, a stream
Of honey mingled with white milk will gleam --
Drive on this beast and at your journey's end
Saleh will greet you as a long-lost friend.
Rare falcon, welcome! How long will you be
So fiercely jealous of your liberty?
Your lure is love, and when the jess is tied,
Submit, and be for ever satisfied.
Give up the intellect for love and see
In one brief moment all eternity;
Break nature's frame, be resolute and brave,
Then rest at peace in Unity's black cave.

Rejoice in that close, undisturbed dark air --
The Prophet will be your companion there.*
And welcome, francolin! Since once you heard
And answered God's first all-commanding word,
Since love has spoken in your soul, reject
The Self, that whirlpool where our lives are wrecked;
As Jesus rode his donkey, ride on it;
Your stubborn Self must bear you and submit --
Then burn this Self and purify your soul;
Let Jesus' spotless spirit be your goal.
Destroy this burden, and before your eyes
The Holy Ghost in glory will arise.
Welcome, dear nightingale -- from your sweet throat
Pour out the pain of lovers note by note.
Like David in love's garden gently sigh;
There sing the songs that make men long to die,
O, sing as David did, and with your song
Guide home man's suffering and deluded throng.
The Self is like a mail coat -- melt this steel
To pliant wax with David's holy zeal,
And when its metal melts, like David you
Will melt with love and bid the Self adieu.
And welcome, peacock -- once of paradise,
Who let the venomous, smooth snake entice
Your instincts to its master's evil way,
And suffered exile for that fateful day;
He blackened your untutored heart and made
A tangled darkness of the orchard's shade --
Until you crush this snake, how can you be
A pilgrim worthy of our mystery?
Destroy its ugly charm and Adam then
Will welcome you to paradise again.
Cock pheasant, welcome! With your piercing sight,
Look up and see the heart's source drowned in light;
You are imprisoned in your filthy well,
A dark and noisome, unremitting hell --
Rise from this well as Joseph did and gain
The throne of Egypt's fabulous domain,
Where you and Joseph will together reign.
Dear pigeon, welcome -- with what joy you yearn
To fly away, how sadly you return!
Your heart is wrung with grief, you share the gaol
That Jonah knew, the belly of a whale --
The Self has swallowed you for its delight;
How long will you endure its mindless spite?
Cut off its head, seek out the moon, and fly
Beyond the utmost limits of the sky;
Escape this monster and become the friend
Of Jonah in that ocean without end.
Welcome, sweet turtle-dove, and softly coo
Until the heavens scatter jewels on you --
But what ingratitude you show! Around
Your neck a ring of loyalty is bound,

But while you live you blithely acquiesce
From head to claw in smug ungratefulness;
Abandon such self-love and you will see
The Way that leads us to Reality.
There knowledge is your guide, and Khezr will bring
Clear water drawn from life's eternal spring.
And welcome, hawk! Your flight is high and proud,
But you return with head politely bowed --
In blood and in affliction you must drown,
And I suggest you keep your head bent down!
What are you here? Mere carrion, rotten flesh,
Withheld from Truth by this world's clumsy mesh;
Outsoar both this world and the next, and there,
Released from both, take off the hood you wear --
When you have turned from both worlds you will land
On Zulgharnin's outstretched and welcome hand.
And little goldfinch, welcome! May your fire
Be an external sign of fierce desire.
Whatever happens, burn in those bright flames,
And shut your eyes and soul to earthly claims.
Then, as you burn, whatever pain you feel,
Remember God will recompense your zeal;
When you perceive His hidden secrets, give
Your life to God's affairs and truly live --
At last, made perfect in Reality,
You will be gone, and only God will be.

** A reference to the Companion of the Cave. During a period of danger the Prophet Mohammad and a close companion, Abou Bakr, hid for a while in a cave on Mount Thaur. In mystical poetry this episode became a symbol of withdrawal from the world.*

The birds assemble and the hoopoe tells them of the Simorgh

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."

They argued how to set about their quest.
The hoopoe fluttered forward; on his breast
There shone the symbol of the Spirit's Way
And on his head Truth's crown, a feathered spray.
Discerning, righteous and intelligent,
He spoke: "My purposes are heaven-sent;
I keep God's secrets, mundane and divine,

In proof of which behold the holy sign
Bisillah * etched for ever on my beak.
No one can share the grief with which I seek
Our longed-for Lord, and quickened by my haste
My wits find water in the trackless waste.
I come as Solomon's close friend and claim
The matchless wisdom of that mighty name
(He never asked for those who quit his court,
But when I left him once alone he sought
With anxious vigilance for my return --
Measure my worth by this great king's concern!).
I bore his letters -- back again I flew --
Whatever secrets he divined I knew;
A prophet loved me; God has trusted me;
What other bird has won such dignity?
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 king -- but how can I alone
Endure the journey to His distant throne?
Join me, and when at last we end our quest
Our king will greet you as His 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 king; beyond Kaf's mountain peak
The Simorgh lives, the sovereign whom you seek,
And He is always near to us, though we
Live far from His transcendent majesty.
A hundred thousand veils of dark and light
Withdraw His presence from our mortal sight,
And in both worlds no being shares the throne
That marks the Simorgh's power and His alone --
He reigns in undisturbed omnipotence,
Bathed in the light of His magnificence --
No mind, no intellect can penetrate
The mystery of his unending state:
How many countless hundred thousands pray
For patience and true knowledge of the Way
That leads to Him whom reason cannot claim,
Nor mortal purity describe or name;
There soul and mind bewildered miss the mark
And, faced by Him, like dazzled eyes, are dark --
No sage could understand His perfect grace,
Nor see discern the beauty of His face.
His creatures strive to find a path to Him,
Deluded by each new, deceitful whim,

But fancy cannot work as she would wish;
You cannot weigh the moon like so much fish!
How many search for Him whose heads are sent
Like polo-balls in some great tournament
From side to giddy side -- how many cries,
How many countless groans assail the skies!
Do not imagine that the Way is short;
Vast seas and deserts lie before His court.
Consider carefully before you start;
The journey asks of you a lion's heart.
The road is long, the sea is deep -- one flies
First buffeted by joy and then by sighs;
If you desire this quest, give up your soul
And make our sovereign's court your only goal.
First wash your hands of life if you would say:
'I am a pilgrim of our sovereign's Way';
Renounce your soul for love; He you pursue
Will sacrifice His inmost soul for you.

It was in China, late one moonless night,
The Simorgh first appeared to mortal sight --
He let a feather float down through the air,
And rumours of its fame spread everywhere;
Throughout the world men separately conceived
An image of its shape, and all believed
Their private fantasies uniquely true!
(In China still this feather is on view,
Whence comes the saying you have heard, no doubt,
'Seek knowledge, unto China seek it out.')

If this same feather had not floated down,
The world would not be filled with His renown --
It is a sign of Him, and in each heart
There lies this feather's hidden counterpart.
But since no words suffice, what use are mine
To represent or to describe this sign?
Whoever wishes to explore the Way,
Let him set out -- what more is there to say?"

The hoopoe finished, and at once the birds
Effusively responded to his words.
All praised the splendour of their distant king;
All rose impatient to be on the wing;
Each would renounce the Self and be the friend
Of his companions till the journey's end.
But when they pondered on the journey's length,
They hesitated; their ambitious strength
Dissolved: each bird, according to his kind,
Felt flattered but reluctantly declined.

* *'In the name of God', the opening words of the Koran.*

The nightingale's excuse

The nightingale made his excuses first.
His pleading notes described the lover's thirst,
And through the crowd hushed silence spread as he
Descanted on love's scope and mystery.
"The secrets of all love are known to me,"
He crooned. "Throughout the darkest night my song
Resounds, and to my retinue belong
The sweet notes of the melancholy lute,
The plaintive wailing of the love-sick flute;
When love speaks in the soul my voice replies
In accents plangent as the ocean's sighs.
The man who hears this song spurns reason's rule;
Grey wisdom is content to be love's fool.
My love is for the rose; I bow to her;
From her dear presence I could never stir.
If she should disappear the nightingale
Would lose his reason and his song would fail,
And though my grief is one that no bird knows,
One being understands my heart -- the rose.
I am so drowned in love that I can find
No thought of my existence in my mind.
Her worship is sufficient life for me;
The quest for her is my reality
(And nightingales are not robust or strong;
The path to find the Simorgh is too long).
My love is here; the journey you propose
Cannot beguile me from my life -- the rose.
It is for me she flowers; what greater bliss
Could life provide me -- anywhere -- than this?
Her buds are mine; she blossoms in my sight --
How could I leave her for a single night?"

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe answered him: "Dear nightingale,
This superficial love which makes you quail
Is only for the outward show of things.

Renounce delusion and prepare your wings
For our great quest; sharp thorns defend the rose
And beauty such as hers too quickly goes.

True love will see such empty transience

For what it is -- a fleeting turbulence
That fills your sleepless nights with grief and blame --
Forget the rose's blush and blush for shame!
Each spring she laughs, not *for* you, as you say,
But *at* you -- and has faded in a day.

The story of a dervish and a princess

There was a king whose comely daughter's grace
Was such that any many who glimpsed her face
Declared himself in love. Like starless dusk
Her dark hair hung, soft-scented like fine musk;
The charm of her slow humid eyes awoke
The depths of sleeping love, and when she spoke,
No sugar was as sweet as her lips' sweet;
No rubies with their colour could compete.
A dervish saw her, by the will of Fate.
From his arrested hand the crust he ate
Dropped unregarded, and the princess smiled.
This glance lived in his heart -- the man grew wild
With ardent love, with restless misery;
For seven years he wept continually
And was content to live alone and wait,
Abject, among stray dogs, outside her gate.
At last, affronted by this fool and tired
Of his despair, her serving-men conspired
To murder him. The princess heard their plan,
Which she divulged to him. 'O wretched man,'
She said, 'how could you hope for love between
A dervish and the daughter of a queen?
You cannot live outside my palace door;
Be off with you and haunt these streets no more.
If you are here tomorrow you will die!'
The dervish answered her: 'That day when I
First saw your beauty I despaired of life;
Why should I fear the hired assassin's knife?
A hundred thousand men adore your face;
No power on earth could make me leave this place.
But since your servants mean to murder me,
Explain the meaning of this mystery:
Why did you smile at me that day?' 'Poor fool,
I smiled from pity, almost ridicule --
Your ignorance provoked that smile.' She spoke,
And vanished like a wisp of strengthless smoke."

The parrot's excuse

The pretty parrot was the next to speak,
Clothed all in green, with sugar in her beak,
And round her neck a circle of pure gold.
Even the falcon cannot boast so bold
A loveliness -- earth's variegated green
Is but the image of her feathers' sheen,
And when she talks the fascinating sound
Seems sweet as costly sugar finely ground;

She trilled: "I have been caged by heartless men,
But my desire is to be free again;
If I could reassert my liberty
I'd find the stream of immortality
Guarded by Khezr -- his cloak is green like mine,
And this shared colour is an open sign
I am his equal or equivalent.
Only the stream Khezr watches could content
My thirsting soul -- I have no wish to seek
This Simorgh's throne of which you love to speak."

The hoopoe answers her

The hoopoe said: "You are a cringing slave --
This is not noble, generous or brave,
To think your being has no other end
Than finding water and a loyal friend.
Think well -- what is it that you hope to gain?
Your coat is beautiful, but where's your brain?
Act as a lover and renounce your soul;
With love's defiance seek the lover's goal.

A story about Khezr

Khezr sought companionship with one whose mind
Was set on God alone. The man declined
And said to Khezr: 'We two could not be friends,
For our existences have different ends.
The waters of immortal life are yours,
And you must always live; life is your cause
As death is mine -- you wish to live, whilst I
Impatiently prepare myself to die;
I leave you as quick birds avoid a snare,
To soar up in the free, untrammelled air'."

The peacock's excuse and the hoopoe's answer

Next came the peacock, splendidly arrayed
In many-coloured pomp; this he displayed
As if he were some proud, self-conscious bride
Turning with haughty looks from side to side.
"The Painter of the world created me,"
He shrieked, "but this celestial wealth you see
Should not excite your hearts to jealousy.
I was a dweller once in paradise;
There the insinuating snake's advice
Deceived me -- I became his friend, disgrace

Was swift and I was banished from that place.
My dearest hope is that some blessed day
A guide will come to indicate the way
Back to my paradise. The king you praise
Is too unknown a goal; my inward gaze
Is fixed for ever on that lovely land --
There is the goal which I can understand.
How could I seek the Simorgh out when I
Remember paradise?"

Hoopeo Reply

And in reply

The hoopoe said: "These thoughts have made you stray
Further and further from the proper Way;
You think your monarch's palace of more worth
Than Him who fashioned it and all the earth.
The home we seek is in eternity;
The Truth we seek is like a shoreless sea,
Of which your paradise is but a drop.
This ocean can be yours; why should you stop
Beguiled by dreams of evanescent dew?
The secrets of the sun are yours, but you
Content yourself with motes trapped in its beams.
Turn to what truly lives, reject what seems --
Which matters more, the body or the soul?
Be whole: desire and journey to the Whole.

A story about Adam

A novice asked his master to explain
Why Adam was forbidden to remain
In his first undivided happiness.
The master said: 'When he, whose name we bless,
Awoke in paradise a voice declared:
"The man whose mind and vision are ensnared
By heaven's grace must forfeit that same grace,
For only then can he direct his face
To his true Lord".' The lover's live and soul
Are firmly focused on a single goal;
The saints in paradise teach that the start
Of drawing near is to renounce the heart."

The duck's excuse

The coy duck waddled from her stream and quacked:
"Now none of you can argue with the fact
That both in this world and the next I am
The purest bird that ever flew or swam;
I spread my prayer-mat out, and all the time

I clean myself of every bit of grime
As God commands. There's no doubt in my mind
That purity like mine is hard to find;
Among the birds I'm like an anchorite --
My soul and feathers are a spotless white.
I live in water and I cannot go
To places where no streams or rivers flow;
They wash away a world of discontent --
Why should I leave this perfect element?
Fresh water is my home, my sanctuary;
What use would arid deserts be to me?
I can't leave water -- think what water gives;
It is the source of everything that lives.
Water's the only home I've ever known;
Why should I care about this Simorgh's throne?"

The hoopoe answers her

The hoopoe answered her: "Your life is passed
In vague, aquatic dreams which cannot last --
A sudden wave and they are swept away.
You value water's purity, you say,
But is your life as pure as you declare?
A fool described the nature both worlds share:
'The unseen world and that which we can see
Are like a water-drop which instantly
Is and is not. A water-drop was formed
When time began, and on its surface swarmed
The world's appearances. If they were made
Of all-resisting iron they would fade;
Hard iron is mere water, after all --
Dispersing like a dream, impalpable'."

The partridge's excuse

The pompous partridge was next to speak,
Fresh from his store of pearls. His crimson beak
And ruddy plumage made a splendid show --
A headstrong bird whose small eyes seemed to glow
With angry blood. He clucked: "My one desire
Is jewels; I pick through quarries for their fire.
They kindle in my heart an answering blaze
Which satisfies me -- though my wretched days
Are one long turmoil of anxiety.
Consider how I live, and let me be;
You cannot fight with one who sleeps and feeds
On precious stones, who is convinced he needs
No other goal in life. My heart is tied
By bonds of love to this fair mountain-side.
To yearn for something other than a jewel

Is to desire what dies -- to be a fool.
Nothing is precious like a precious stone.
Besides, the journey to the Simorgh's throne
Is hard. I cannot tear myself away;
My feet refuse as if caught fast in clay.
My life is here; I have no wish to fly;
I must discover precious stones or die."

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: "You have the colours of
Those jewels you so inordinately love,
And yet you seem -- like your excuses -- lame.
Your beak and claws are red as blood or flame
Yet those hard gems from which you cannot part
Have only helped you to a hardened heart;
Without their colours they are nothing more
Than stones -- and to the wise not worth a straw.

King Solomon and his ring

No jewel surpasses that which Solomon
Wore on his finger. It was just a stone,
A mere half-*dang* in weight, but as a seal
Set in his ring it brought the world to heel.
When he perceived the nature of his rule --
Dependent on the credit of a jewel --
He vowed that no one after him should reign
With such authority." (Do not again,
Dear God, I pray, create such puissant kings;
My eyes have seen the blight their glory brings.
But criticizing courts is not my task;
A basket-weaver's work is all I ask,
And I return to Solomon's great seal.)
"Although the power it brought the king was real,
Possession of this gem meant that delay
Dogged his advance along the spirit's Way --
The other prophets entered paradise
Five hundred years before the king. This price
A jewel extracted from great Solomon,
How would it hinder such a dizzy one
As you, dear partridge? Rise above this greed;
The Simorgh is the only jewel you need."

The homa's excuse

The homa* next addressed the company.

Because his shadow heralds majesty,
This wandering portent of the royal state
Is known as Homayun, 'The Fortunate'.
He sang: "O birds of land and ocean, I
Am not as other birds, but soar and fly
On lofty aspiration's lordly wings.
I have subdued the dog desire; great kings
Like Feridoun and Jamshid** owe their place
To my dark shadow's influence. Disgrace
And lowly natures are not my concern.
I throw desire its bone; the dog will turn
And let the soul go free. Who can look down
On one whose shadow brings the royal crown?
The world should bask in my magnificence --
Let Khosroe's glory stand in my defence.
What should this haughty Simorgh mean to me?"

** A mythical bird whose shadow would fall on a future king*

*** Two of the most illustrious of the legendary kings of ancient Persia*

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: "Poor slave to vanity,
Your self-importance is ridiculous;
Why should a shadow merit so much fuss?
You are not now the sign of Khosroe's throne,
More like a stray dog squabbling for a bone.
Though it is true that you confer on men
This majesty, kings must sink down again
And bear the punishments of Judgement Day.

King Mahmud after death

There was a man, advanced along the Way,
Who one night spoke to Mahmud in a dream.
He said: 'Great king, how does existence seem
To one beyond the grave?' Mahmud replied:
'I have no majesty since I have died;
Your greetings pierce my soul. That majesty
Was only ignorance and vanity;
True majesty belongs to God alone --
How could a heap of dust deserve the throne?
Since I have recognized my impotence,
I blush for my imperial pretence.
Call me "unfortunate", not "king". I should
Have been a wanderer who begged for food,
A crossing-sweeper, any lowly thing
That drags its way through life, but not a king.

Now leave me; I have no more to say;
Hell's devils wait for me; I cannot stay.
I wish to God the earth beneath my feet
Had swallowed me before I heard the beat
Of that accursed homa's wings; they cast
Their shade, and may they shrivel in hell's blast! ”

The hawk's excuse

The hawk came forward with his head held high;
His boasts of grand connections filled the sky.
His talk was stuffed with armies, glory, kings.
He bragged: “The ecstasy my sovereign brings
Has turned my gaze from vulgar company.
My eyes are hooded and I cannot see,
But I perch proudly on my sovereign's wrist.
I know court etiquette and can persist
In self-control like holy penitents;
When I approach the king, my deference
Correctly keeps to the established rule.
What is this Simorgh? I should be a fool
If I so much as dreamt of him. A seed
From my great sovereign's hand is all I need;
The eminence I have suffices me.
I cannot travel; I would rather be
Perched on the royal wrist than struggling through
Some arid *wadi* with no end in view.
I am delighted by my life at court,
Waiting on kings or hunting for their sport.”

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: “Dear hawk, you set great store
By superficial graces, and ignore
The all-important fact of purity.
A king with rivals in his dignity
Is no true king; the Simorgh rules alone
And entertains no rivals to his throne.
A king is not one of these common fools
Who snatches at a crown and thinks he rules.
The true king reigns in mild humility,
Unrivalled in his firm fidelity.
An earthly king acts righteously at times,
But also stains the earth with hateful crimes,
And then whoever hovers nearest him
Will suffer most from his destructive whim.
A courtier risks destruction every hour --
Distance yourself from kings and worldly power.

A king is like a raging fire, men say;
The wisest conduct is to keep away.

A king and his slave

There was a monarch once who loved a slave.
The youth's pale beauty haunted him; he gave
This favourite the rarest ornaments,
Watched over him with jealous reverence --
But when the king expressed a wish to shoot,
His loved one shook with fear from head to foot.
An apple balanced on his head would be
The target for the royal archery,
And as the mark was split he blenched with fear.
One day a foolish courtier standing near
Asked why his lovely face was drained and wan,
For was he not their monarch's chosen one?
The slave replied: "If I were hit instead
Of that round apple balanced on my head,
I would be then quite worthless to the king --
Injured or dead, lower than anything
The court can show; but when the arrow hits
The trembling target and the apple splits,
That is his skill. The king is highly skilled
If he succeeds -- if not, the slave is killed'."

The heron's excuse

The heron whimpered next: "My misery
Prefers the empty shoreline of the sea.
There no one hears my desolate, thin cry --
I wait in sorrow there, there mourn and sigh.
My love is for the ocean, but since I --
A bird -- must be excluded from the deep,
I haunt the solitary shore and weep.
My beak is dry -- not one drop can I drink --
But if the level of the sea should sink
By one drop, jealous rage would seize my heart.
This love suffices me; how can I start
A journey like the one that you suggest?
I cannot join you in this arduous quest.
The Simorgh's glory could not comfort me;
My love is fixed entirely on the sea."

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe answered him: "You do not know
The nature of this sea you love: below

Its surface lingers sharks; tempests appear,
Then sudden calms -- its course is never clear,
But turbid, varying, in constant stress;
Its water's taste is salty bitterness.
How many noble ships has it destroyed,
Their crews sucked under in the whirlwind's void:
The diver plunges and in fear of death
Must struggle to conserve his scanty breath;
The failure is cast up, a broken straw.
Who trusts the sea? Lawlessness is her law;
You will be drowned if you cannot decide
To turn away from her inconstant tide.
She seethes with love herself -- that turbulence
Of tumbling waves, that yearning violence,
Are for her Lord, and since she cannot rest,
What peace could you discover in her breast?
She lives for Him -- yet you are satisfied
To hear His invitation and to hide.

A hermit questions the ocean

A hermit asked the ocean: 'Why are you
Clothed in these mourning robes of darkest blue?*'
You seem to boil, and yet I see no fire!
The ocean said: 'My feverish desire
Is for the absent Friend. I am too base
For Him; my dark robes indicate disgrace
And lonely pain. Love makes my billows rage;
Love is the fire which nothing can assuage.
My salt lips thirst for Kausar's** cleansing stream.'
For those pure waters tens of thousands dream
And are prepared to perish; night and day
They search and fall exhausted by the Way."

* *Blue was the colour of mourning in ancient Persia; the epic poet Ferdowsi (10th -11th centuries) mentions it as being worn by the first of the legendary Persian kings, Keyumars, when in mourning for his son Siyamak.*

** *A stream that flows through paradise.*

The owl's excuse

The owl approached with his distracted air,
Hooting: "Abandoned ruins are my lair,
Because, wherever mortals congregate,
Strife flourishes and unforgiving hate;
A tranquil mind is only to be found
Away from men, in wild, deserted ground.
These ruins are my melancholy pleasure,
Not least because they harbour buried treasure.
Love for such treasure has directed me

To desolate, waste sites; in secrecy
I hide my hopes that one fine day my foot
Will stumble over unprotected loot.
Love for the Simorgh is a childish story;
My love is solely for gold's buried glory."

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe answered him: "Besotted fool,
Suppose you get this gold for which you drool --
What could you do but guard it night and day
While life itself -- unnoticed -- slips away?
The love of gold and jewels is blasphemy;
Our faith is wrecked by such idolatry.
To love gold is to be an infidel,
An idol-worshipper who merits hell.
On Judgement Day the miser's secret greed
Stares from his face for everyone to read.

The miser who became a mouse

A miser died, leaving a cache of gold;
And in a dream what should the son behold
But his dead father, shaped now like a mouse
That dashed distractedly about the house,
His mouse-eyes filled with tears. The sleeping son
Spoke in his dream: 'Why, father, must you run
About our home like this?' The poor mouse said:
'Who guards my store of gold now I am dead?
Has any thief found out its hiding-place?'
The son asked next about his mouse-like face
And heard his father say: 'Learn from my state;
Whoever worships gold, this is his fate --
To haunt the hidden cache for evermore,
An anxious mouse that darts across the floor'."

The finch's excuse

The timid finch approached. Her feeble frame
Trembled from head to foot, a nervous flame;
She chirped: "I am less sturdy than a hair
And lack the courage that my betters share;
My feathers are too weak to carry me
The distance to the Simorgh's sanctuary.
How could a sickly creature stand alone
Before the glory of the Simorgh's throne?
The world is full of those who seek His grace,

But I do not deserve to see His face.
And cannot join in this delusive race --
Exhaustion would cut short my foolish days,
Or I should turn to ashes in His gaze.
Joseph was hidden in a well and I
Shall seek my loved one in the wells nearby.”

The hoopoe answers her

The hoopoe said: “You teasing little bird,
This humble ostentation is absurd!
If all of us are destined for the fire,
Then you too must ascend the burning pyre.
Get ready for the road, you can’t fool me --
Sew up your beak, I loathe hypocrisy!
Though Jacob mourned for Joseph’s absent face,
Do you imagine you could take his place?”

Jacob’s dream when Joseph was lost

When Jacob lost his son his eyes grew blind;
Tears flooded for the child he could not find.
His lips repeatedly formed Joseph’s name --
To his despair the angel Gabriel came
And said: ‘Renounce this word; if you persist,
Your own name will be cancelled from the list
Of prophets close to God.’ Since this command
Came from his God, dear Joseph’s name was banned
Henceforth from Jacob’s lips; deep in his soul
He hid the passions he could not control.
But as he slept one night the long-lost child
Appeared before him in a dream, and smiled;
He started up to call him to his side --
And then remembered, struck his breast and sighed
When from his vivid dream the old man woke,
The angel Gabriel came to him, and spoke:
‘Though you did not pronounce your lost son’s name,
You sighed -- the exhalation meant the same
As if you had renounced your vow; a sigh
Reveals the heart as clearly as a cry.’”

The other birds protest and the hoopoe tells them of their relationship with the Simorgh

The other birds in turn received their chance
To show off their loquacious ignorance.
All made excuses – floods of foolish words

Flowed from these babbling, rumour-loving birds.
Forgive me, reader, if I do not say
All these excuses to avoid the Way;
But in an incoherent rush they came,
And all were inappropriate and lame.
How could they gain the Simorgh? Such a goal
Belongs to those who discipline the soul.
The hoopoe counselled them: "The world holds few
As worthy of the Simorgh's throne as you,
But you must empty this first glass; the wine
That follows it is love's devoted sign.
If petty problems keep you back -- or none --
How will you seek the treasures of the sun?
In drops you lose yourselves, yet you must dive
Through untold fathoms and remain alive.
This is no journey for the indolent --
Our quest is Truth itself, not just its scent!"

When they had understood the hoopoe's words,
A clamour of complaint rose from the birds:
"Although we recognize you as our guide,
You must accept -- it cannot be denied --
We are a wretched, flimsy crew at best,
And lack the bare essentials for this quest.
Our feathers and our wings, our bodies' strength
Are quite unequal to the journey's length;
For one of us to reach the Simorgh's throne
Would be miraculous, a thing unknown.
At least say what relationship obtains
Between His might and ours; who can take pains
To search for mysteries when he is blind?
If there were some connection we could find,
We would be more prepared to take our chance.
He seems like Solomon, and we like ants;
How can mere ants climb from their darkened pit
Up to the Simorgh's realm? And is it fit
That beggars try the glory of a king?
How ever could they manage such a thing?"

The hoopoe answered them: "How can love thrive
In hearts impoverished and half alive?
'Beggars', you say -- such niggling poverty
Will not encourage truth or charity.
An man whose eyes love opens risks his soul --
His dancing breaks beyond the mind's control
When long ago the Simorgh first appeared --
His face like sunlight when the clouds have cleared --
He cast unnumbered shadows on the earth,
On each one fixed his eyes, and each gave birth.
Thus we were born; the birds of every land
Are still his shadows -- think, and understand.

If you had known this secret you would see
The link between yourselves and Majesty;
Do not reveal this truth, and God forbend
That you mistake for God Himself God's friend.
If you become that substance I propound,
You are not God, though in God you are drowned;
Those lost in Him are not the Deity --
This problem can be argued endlessly.
You are His shadow, and cannot be moved
By thoughts of life or death once this is proved.
If He had kept His majesty concealed,
No earthly shadow would have been revealed,
And where that shadow was directly cast
The race of birds sprang up before it passed.
Your heart is not a mirror bright and clear
If there the Simorgh's form does not appear;
No one can bear His beauty face to face,
And for this reason, of His perfect grace,
He makes a mirror in our hearts -- look there
To see Him, search your hearts with anxious care.

A king who placed mirrors in his palace

There lived a king; his comeliness was such
The world could not acclaim his charm too much.
The world's wealth seemed a portion of his grace;
It was a miracle to view his face.
If he had rivals, then I know of none;
The earth resounded with this paragon.
When riding through his streets he did not fail
To hide his features with a scarlet veil.
Whoever scanned the veil would lose his head;
Whoever spoke his name was left for dead,
The tongue ripped from his mouth; whoever thrilled
With passion for this king was quickly killed.
A thousand for his love expired each day,
And those who saw his face, in blank dismay
Would rave and grieve and mourn their lives away --
To die for love of that bewitching sight
Was worth a hundred lives without his light.
None could survive his absence patiently,
None could endure this king's proximity --
How strange it was that men could neither brook
The presence nor the absence of his look!
Since few could bear his sight, they were content
To hear the king in sober argument,
But while they listened they endured such pain
As made them long to see their king again.
The king commanded mirrors to be placed
About the palace walls, and when he faced

Their polished surfaces his image shone
With mitigated splendour to the throng.

If you would glimpse the beauty we revere
Look in your heart -- its image will appear.
Make of your heart a looking-glass and see
Reflected there the Friend's nobility;
Your sovereign's glory will illuminate
The palace where he reigns in proper state.
Search for this king within your heart; His soul
Reveals itself in atoms of the Whole.
The multitude of forms that masquerade
Throughout the world spring from the Simorgh's shade.
If you catch sight of His magnificence
It is His shadow that beguiles your glance;
The Simorgh's shadow and Himself are one;
Seek them together, twinned in unison.
But you are lost in vague uncertainty ...
Pass beyond shadows to Reality.
How can you reach the Simorgh's splendid court?
First find its gateway, and the sun, long-sought,
Erupts through clouds; when victory is won,
Your sight knows nothing but the blinding sun.

A story about Alexander the Great

When Alexander, that unconquered lord,
Who subjugated empires with his sword,
Required a lengthy message to be sent
He dressed up as the messenger and went.
'The king gives an order,' he would say,
And none of those who hurried to obey
Once guessed this messenger's identity --
They had no knowledge of such majesty.
And even if he said: 'I am your lord',
The claim was thought preposterous and ignored.
Deluded natures cannot recognize
The royal way that stands before their eyes.

Ayaz's sickness

Ayaz, afflicted with the Evil Eye,
Fell ill. For safety he was forced to lie
Sequestered from the court, in loneliness.
The king (who loved him) heard of his distress
And called a servant. 'Tell Ayaz,' he said,
'What tears of sympathy I daily shed.

Tell him that I endure his suffering,
And hardly comprehend I am the king;
My soul is with him (though my flesh is here)
And guards his bed solicitous with fear;
Ayaz, what could this Evil Eye not do,
If it destroys such loveliness as you!
The king was silent; then again he spoke:
'Go quickly as a fire, return like smoke;
Stop nowhere, but outrun the brilliant flash
That lights the world before the thunder's crash.
Go now; if you so much as pause for breath
My anger will pursue you after death.'
The servant scuttled off, consumed with dread,
And like the wind arrived at Ayaz' bed --
There sat his sovereign, by the patient's head!
Aghast, the servant trembled for his life
And pictured in his mind the blood-smeared knife.
'My king,' he said, 'I swear, I swear indeed,
That I have hurried here with utmost speed --
Although I see you here I cannot see
How in the world you have preceded me;
Believe my innocence, and if I lie
I am a heathen and deserve to die.'
His sovereign answered him: 'You could not know
The hidden ways by which we lovers go;
I cannot bear my life without his face,
And every minute I am in this place.
The passing world outside is unaware
Of mysteries Ayaz and Mahmoud share;
In public I ask after him, although
Behind the veil of secrecy I know
Whatever news my messengers could give;
I hide my secret and in secret live'."

The birds question the hoopoe and he advises them

An ancient secret yielded to the birds
When they understood the hoopoe's words --
Their kinship with the Simorgh was now plain
And all were eager to set off again.
The homily returned them to the Way
And with one voice the birds were heard to say:
"Tell us, dear hoopoe, how we should proceed --
Our weakness quails before this glorious deed."

"A lover," said the hoopoe, now their guide,
"Is one in whom all thoughts of Self have died;
Those who renounce the Self deserve that name;
Righteous or sinful, they are all the same!
Your heart is thwarted by the Self's control;

Destroy its hold on you and reach your goal.
Give up this hindrance, give up mortal sight,
For only then can you approach the light.
If you are told: 'Renounce our Faith', obey!
The Self and Faith must both be tossed away;
Blasphemers call such actions blasphemy --
Tell them that love exceeds mere piety.
Love has no time for blasphemy or faith,
Nor lovers for the Self, that feeble wraith.
They burn all that they own; unmoved they feel
Against their skin the torturer's sharp steel.
Heart's blood and bitter pain belong to love,
And tales of problems no one can remove;
Cupbearer, fill the bowl with blood, not wine --
And if you lack the heart's rich blood take mine.
Love thrives on inextinguishable pain,
Which tears the soul, then knits the threads again.
A mote of love exceeds all bounds; it gives
The vital essence to whatever lives.
But where love thrives, there pain is always found;
Angels alone escape this weary round --
They love without that savage agony
Which is reserved for vexed humanity.
Islam and blasphemy have both been passed
By those who set out on love's path at last;
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 both been slain;
Then the fierce fortitude the Way will ask
Is yours, and you are worthy of our task.
Begin the journey without fear; be calm;
Forget what is and what is not Islam;
Put childish dread aside -- like heroes meet
The hundred problems which you must defeat.

The story of Sheikh San'an

San'an was once the first man of his time.
Whatever praise can be expressed in rhyme
Belonged to him: for fifty years this sheikh
Kept Mecca's holy place, and for his sake
Four hundred pupil's entered learning's way.
He mortified his body night and day,
Knew theory, practice, mysteries of great age,
And fifty times had made the Pilgrimage.
He fasted, prayed, observed all sacred laws --
Astonished saints and clerics thronged his doors.
He split religious hairs in argument;
His breath revived the sick and impotent.

He knew the people's hearts in joy and grief
And was their living symbol of Belief.
Though conscious of his credit in their sight,
A strange dream troubled him, night after night;
Mecca was left behind; he lived in Rome,
The temple where he worshipped was his home,
And to an idol he bowed down his head.
'Alas!' he cried, when awoke in dread,
'Like Joseph I am in a well of need
And have no notion when I shall be freed.
But every man meets problems on the Way,
And I shall conquer if I watch and pray.
If I can shift this rock my path is clear;
If not, then I must wait and suffer here.'
Then suddenly he burst out: 'It would seem
That Rome could show the meaning of this dream;
There I must go!' And off the old man strode;
Four hundred followed him along the road.
They left the Ka'abah * for Rome's boundaries,
A gentle landscape of low hills and trees,
Where, infinitely lovelier than the view,
There sat a girl, a Christian girl who knew
The secrets of her faith's theology.
A fairer child no man could hope to see --
In beauty's mansion she was like a sun
That never set -- indeed the spoils she won
Where headed by the sun himself, whose face
Was pale with jealousy and sour disgrace.
The man about whose heart her ringlets curled
Became a Christian and renounced the world;
The man who saw her lips and knew defeat
Embraced the earth before her bonny feet.'
And as the breeze passed through her musky hair
The men of Rome watched wondering in despair.
Her eyes spoke promises to those in love,
Their fine brows arched coquettishly above --
Those brows sent glancing messages that seemed
To offer everything her lovers dreamed.
The pupils of her eyes grew wide and smiled,
And countless souls were glad to be beguiled;
The face beneath her curls glowed like soft fire;
Her honeyed lips provoked the world's desire;
But those who thought to feast there found her eyes
Held pointed daggers to protect the prize,
And since she kept her counsel no one knew --
Despite the claims of some -- what she would do.
Her mouth was tiny as a needle's eye,
Her breath as quickening as Jesus' sigh;
Her chin was dimpled with a silver well
In which a thousand drowning Josephs fell;
A glistening jewel secured her hair in place,
Which like a veil obscured her lovely face.
The Christian turned, the dark veil was removed,

A fire flashed through the old man's joints -- he loved!
One hair converted hundreds; how could he
Resist that idol's face shown openly?
He did not know himself; in sudden fire
He knelt abjectly as the flames beat higher;
In that sad instant all he had been fled
And passion's smoke obscured his heart and head.
Love sacked his heart; the girl's bewitching hair
Twined round his faith impiety's smooth snare.
The sheikh exchanged religion's wealth for shame,
A hopeless heart submitted to love's fame.
'I have no faith,' he cried. 'The heart I gave
Is useless now; I am the Christian's slave.'
When his disciples saw him weeping there
And understood the truth of the affair
They stared, confounded by his frantic grief,
And strove to call him back to his belief.
Their remonstrations fell on deafened ears;
Advice has no effect when no one hears.
In turn the sheikh's disciples had their say;
Love has no cure, and he could not obey.
(When did a lover listen to advice?
When did a nostrum cool love's flames to ice?)
Till evening came he could not move but gazed
With stupefaction in his face, amazed.

When gloomy twilight spread its darkening shrouds --
Like blasphemy concealed by guilty clouds --
His ardent heart gave out the only light,
And love increased a hundredfold that night.
He put aside the Self and selfish lust;
In grief he smeared his locks with filth and dust
And kept his haunted vigil, watched and wept,
Lay trembling in love's grip and never slept.
'O Lord, when will this darkness end?' he cried,
'Or is it that the heavenly sun has died?
Those night I passed in faith's austerities
Cannot compare with this night's agonies;
But like a candle now my flame burns high
To weep all night and in the daylight die.
Ambush and blood have been my lot this night;
Who knows what torments day will bring to light?
This fevered darkness and my wretched state
Were made when I was made, and are my fate;
The night continues and the hours delay --
Perhaps the world has reached its Judgement Day;
Perhaps the sun's extinguished with my sighs,
Or hides in shame from my beloved's eyes.
This long, dark night is like her flowing hair --
The thought in absence comforts my despair,
But love consumes me through this endless night --
I yield to love, unequal to the fight.

Where is there time enough to tell my grief?
Where is the patience to regain belief?
Where is the luck to waken me, or move
Love's idol to reciprocate my love?
Where is the reason that could rescue me,
Or by some trick prove my auxiliary?
Where is the hand to pour dust on my head,
Or lift me from the dust where I lie dead?
Where is the foot that seeks the longed-for place?
Where is the eye to show me her fair face?
Where is the loved one to relieve my pain?
Where is the guide to help me turn again?
Where is the strength to utter my complaint?
Where is the mind to counsel calm restraint?
The loved one, reason, patience -- all are gone
And I remain to suffer love alone.'

At this the fond disciples gathered round,
Bewildered by his groans' pathetic sound.
'My sheikh,' urged one, 'forget this evil sight;
Rise, cleanse yourself according to our rite.'
'In blood I cleanse myself,' the sheikh replied;
'In blood, a hundred times, my life is dyed.'
Another asked, 'Where is your rosary?'
He said: 'I fling the beads away from me;
The Christian's belt ** is my sole sanctuary!
One urged him to repent; he said, 'I do,
Of all I was, all that belonged thereto.'
One counselled prayer; he said: 'Where is her face
That I may pray toward that blessed place?'
Another cried: 'Enough of this; you must
Seek solitude and in repentant dust
Bow down to God.' 'I will,' replied the sheikh,
'Bow down in dust, but for my idol's sake.'
And one reproached him: 'Have you no regret
For Islam and those rites you would forget?'
He said: 'No man repents past folly more;
Why is it I was not in love before?'
Another said: 'A demon's poisoned dart --
Unknown to you -- has pierced your trusting heart.'
The sheikh said: 'If a demon straight from hell
Deceives me, I rejoice and wish her well.'
One said: 'Our noble sheikh has lost his way;
Passion has led his wandering wits astray.'
'True, I have lost the fame I once held dear,'
Replied their sheikh, 'and fraud as well, and fear.'
One said: 'You break our hearts with this disgrace.'
He laughed: 'The Christian's heart will take their place.'
One said: 'Stay with old friends awhile, and come --
We'll seek the Ka'abah's shade and journey home.'
The sheikh replied: 'A Christian monastery
And not the Ka'abah's shade suffices me.'

One said: 'Return to Mecca and repent!'
He answered: 'Leave me here, I am content.'
One said: 'You travel on hell's road. 'This sigh
Would shrivel seven hells' was his reply.
One said: 'In hope of heaven turn again.'
He said: 'Her face is heaven; I remain.'
One said: 'Before our God confess your shame.'
He replied: 'God Himself has lit this flame.'
One said: 'Stop vacillating now and fight;
Defend the ways our faith proclaims as right.'
He said: 'Prepare your ears for blasphemy;
An infidel does not prate piety.'
Their words could not recall him to belief,
And slowly they grew silent, sunk in grief.
They watched; each felt the heart within him fail,
Fearful of deeds Fate hid beneath her veil.

** A building of grey stone at the centre of the great mosque in Mecca, circumambulated by every pilgrim seven times. It is the geographical centre of Islam.*

*** The zonnar, a belt or cord worn by Eastern Christians and Jews; thus a symbol of heresy.*

At last white day displayed her golden shield;
Black night declined his head, compelled to yield --
The world lay drowned in sparkling light, and dawn
Disclosed the sheikh, still wretched and forlorn,
Disputing with stray dogs the place before
His unattainable beloved's door.
There in the dust he knelt, till constant prayers
Made him resemble one of her dark hairs;
A patient month he waited day and night
To glimpse the radiance of her beauty's light.
At last fatigue and sorrow made him ill --
Her street became his bed and he lay still.
When he perceived he would -- and could -- not move,
She understood the fury of his love,
But she pretended ignorance and said:
'What is it, sheikh? Why is our street your bed?
How can a Moslem sleep where Christians tread?'
He answered her: 'I have no need to speak;
You know why I am wasted, pale and weak.
Restore the heart you stole, or let me see
Some glimmer in your heart of sympathy;
In all your pride find some affection for
The grey-haired, lovesick stranger at your door.
Accept my love or kill me now -- your breath
Revives me or consigns me here to death.
Your face and curls command my life; beware
Of how the breeze displays your vagrant hair;
The sight breeds fever in me, and your deep
Hypnotic eyes induce love's restless sleep.
Love mists my eyes, love burns my heart -- alone,

Impatient and unloved, I weep and groan;
See what a sack of sorrow I have sewn!
I give my soul and all the world to burn,
And endless tears are all I hope to earn.
My eyes beheld your face, my heart despaired;
What I have seen and suffered none have shared.
My heart has turned to blood; how long must I
Subsist on misery? You need not try
To humble wretchedness, or kick the foe
Who in the dust submissively bows low.
It is my fortune to lament and wait --
When, if, love answers me depends on Fate.
My soul is ambushed here, and in your street
Relives each night the anguish of defeat;
Your threshold's dust receives my prayers -- I give
As cheap as dust the soul by which I live.
How long outside your door must I complain?
Relent a moment and relieve my pain.
You are the sun and I a shadow thrown
By you -- how then can I survive alone?
Though pain has worn me to a shadow's edge,
Like sunlight I shall leap your window's ledge;
Let me come in and I shall secretly
Bring seven heavens' happiness with me.
My soul is burnt to ash; my passion's fire
Destroys the world with unappeased desire.
Love binds my feet and I cannot depart;
Love holds the hand pressed hard against my heart.
My fainting soul dissolves in deathly sighs --
How long must you stay hidden from my eyes?'

She laughed: 'You shameless fool, take my advice --
Prepare yourself for death and paradise!
Forget flirtatious games, your breath is cold;
Stop chasing love, remember you are old.
It is a shroud you need, not me! How could
You hope for wealth when you must beg for food?'
He answered her: 'Say what you will, but I
In love's unhappy torments live and die;
To Love, both young and old are one -- his dart
Strikes with unequalled strength in every heart.'
The girl replied: 'There are four things you must
Perform to show that you deserve my trust:
Burn the Koran, drink wine, seal up Faith's eye,
Bow down to images.' And in reply
The sheikh declared: 'Wine I will drink with you;
The rest are things that I could never do.'
She said: 'If you agree to my commands,
To start with, you must wholly wash your hands
Of Islam's faith -- the love which does not care
To bend to love's requests is empty air.'
He yielded then: 'I must and will obey;

I'll do whatever you are pleased to say.
Your slave submits -- lead me with ringlets twined
As chains about my neck; I am resigned!
She smiled: 'Come then and drink,' and he allowed
Her to escort him to a hall (the crowd
Of scholars followed, weeping and afraid)
Where Christians banqueted, and there a maid
Of matchless beauty passed the cup around.
Love humbled our poor sheikh -- without a sound
He gave his heart into the Christian's hands;
His mind had fled, he bowed to her commands,
And from those hands he took the proffered bowl;
He drank, oblivion overwhelmed his soul.
Wine mingled with his love -- her laughter seemed
To challenge him to take the bliss he dreamed.
Passion flared up in him; again he drank,
And slave-like at her feet contented sank --
This sheikh who had the whole Koran by heart
Felt wine spread through him and his faith depart;
Whatever he had known deserted him,
Wine conquered and his intellect grew dim;
Wine sluiced away his conscience; she alone
Lived in his heart, all other thoughts had flown.
Now love grew violent as an angry sea,
He watched drink and moved instinctively --
Half-fuddled with the wine -- to touch her neck.
But she drew back and held his hand in check,
Deriding him: "What do you want, old man?
Old hypocrite of love, who talks but can
Do nothing else? To prove your love declare
That your religion is my rippling hair.
Love's more than childish games, if you agree --
For love -- to imitate my blasphemy
You can embrace me here; if not, you may
Take up your stick and hobble on your way.'
The abject sheikh had sunk to such a state
That he could not resist his wretched fate;
Now ignorant of shame and unafraid,
He heard the Christian's wishes and obeyed --
The old wind sidled through the old man's veins
And like a twisting compass turned his brains;
Old wine, young love, a lover far too old,
Her soft arms welcoming -- could he be cold?
Beside himself with love and drink he cried:
'Command me now; whatever you decide
I will perform. I spurned idolatry
When sober, but your beauty is to me
An idol for whose sake I'll gladly burn
My faith's Koran.' 'Now you begin to learn,
Now you are mine, dear sheikh,' she said. 'Sleep well,
Sweet dreams; our ripening fruit begins to swell.'

News spread among the Christians that this sheikh
Had chosen their religion for love's sake.
They took him to a nearby monastery,
Where he accepted their theology;
He burnt his dervish cloak and set his face
Against the faith and Mecca's holy place --
After so many years of true belief,
A young girl brought this learned sheikh to grief.
He said: 'This dervish has been well betrayed;
The agent was mere passion for a maid.
I must obey her now -- what I have done
Is worse than any crime beneath the sun.'
(How many leave the faith through wine! It is
The mother of such evil vagaries.)
'Whatever you required is done,' he said.
'What more remains? I have bowed down my head
In love's idolatry, I have drunk wine;
May no one pass through wretchedness like mine!
Love ruins one like me, and black disgrace
Now stares a once-loved dervish in the face.
For fifty years I walked an open road
While in my heart high seas of worship flowed;
Love ambushed me and at its sudden stroke
For Christian garments I gave up my cloak;
The Ka'abah has become love's secret sign,
And homeless love interprets the Divine.
Consider what, for your sake, I have done --
Then tell me, when shall we two be as one?
Hope for that moment justifies my pain;
Have all my troubles been endured in vain?'
The girl replied: 'But you are poor, and I
Cannot be cheaply won -- the price is high;
Bring gold, and silver too, you innocent --
Then I might pity your predicament;
But you have neither, therefore go -- and take
A beggar's alms from me; be off, old sheikh!
Be on your travels like the sun -- alone;
Be manly now and patient, do not groan!'
'A fine interpretation of your vow,'
The sheikh replied; 'my love, look at me now --
I have no one but you; your cypress gait,
Your silver form, decide my wretched fate.
Take back your cruel command; each moment you
Confuse me by demanding something new.
I have endured your absence, promptly done
All you have asked -- what profit have I won?
I've passed beyond loss, profit, Islam, crime,
For how much longer must I bide my time?
Is this what we agreed? My friends have gone,
Despising me, and I am here alone.
They follow one way, you another -- I
Stand witless here uncertain where to fly;
I know without you heaven would be hell,

Hell heaven with you; more I cannot tell.
At last his protestations moved her heart,
'You are too poor to play the bridegroom's part,'
She said, 'but be my swineherd for a year
And then we'll stay together, never fear.'
The sheikh did not refuse -- a fractious way
Estranges love; he hurried to obey.
This reverend sheikh kept swine -- but who does not
Keep something swinish in his nature's plot?
Do not imagine only he could fall;
This hidden danger lurks within us all,
Rearing its bestial head when we begin
To tread salvation's path -- if you think sin
Has no place in your nature, you can stay
Content at home; you are excused the Way.
But if you start our journey you will find
That countless swine and idols tease the mind --
Destroy these hindrances to love or you
Must suffer that disgrace the sad sheikh knew.

Despair unmanned his friends; they saw his plight
And turned in helpless horror from the sight --
The dust of grief anointed each bowed head;
But one approached the hapless man and said:
'We leave for Mecca now, O weak-willed sheikh;
Is there some message you would have us take?
Or should we all turn Christians and embrace
This faith men call a blasphemous disgrace?
We get no pleasure from the thought of you
Left here alone -- shall we be Christians too?
Or since we cannot bear your state should we,
Deserting you, incontinently flee;
Forget that you exist and live in prayer
Beside the Ka'abah's stone without a care?'
The sheikh replied: 'What grief has filled my heart!
Go where you please -- but quickly, now, depart;
Only the Christian keeps my soul alive,
And I shall stay with her while I survive.
Though you are wise your wisdom cannot know
The wild frustrations through which lovers go.
If for one moment you could share my pain,
We could be old companions once again.
But now go back, dear friends; if anyone
Asks after me explain what I have done --
Say that my eyes swim blood, that parched I wait
Trapped in the gullet of a monstrous fate.
Say Islam's elder has outsinned the whole
Of heathen blasphemy, that self-control
Slipped from him when he saw the Christian's hair,
That faith was conquered by insane despair.
Should anyone reproach my actions, say
That countless others have pursued this Way,

This endless Way where no one is secure,
Where danger waits and issues are unsure.'
He turned from them; a swineherd sought his swine.
His friends wept vehemently -- their sheikh's decline
Seemed death to them. Sadly they journeyed home,
Resigning their apostate sheikh to Rome.

They skulked in corners, shameful and afraid.
A close companion of the sheikh had stayed
In Mecca while the group had journeyed west --
A man of wisdom, fit for any test,
Who, seeing now the vacant oratory
Where once his friend had worshipped faithfully,
Asked after their lost sheikh. In tears then they
Described what had occurred along the way;
How he had bound his fortunes to her hair,
And blocked the path of faith with love's despair;
How curls usurped belief and how his cloak
Had been consumed in passion's blackening smoke;
How he'd become a swineherd, how the four
Acts contrary to all Islamic law
Had been performed by him, how this great sheikh
Lived like a pagan for his lover's sake.
Amazement seized the friend -- his face grew pale,
He wept and felt the heart within him fail.
'O criminals!' he cried. 'O frailer than
Weak women in your faith -- when does a man
Need faithful friends but in adversity?
You should be there, not prattling here to me.
Is this devoted love? Shame on you all,
Fair-weather friends who run when great men fall.
He put on Christian garments -- so should you;
He took their faith -- what else had you to do?
This was no friendship, to forsake your friend,
To promise your support and at the end
Abandon him -- this was sheer treachery.
Friend follows friend to hell and blasphemy --
When sorrows come a man's true friends are found;
In times of joy ten thousand gather round.
Our sheikh is savaged by some shark -- you race
To separate yourselves from his disgrace.
Love's built on readiness to share love's shame;
Such self-regarding love usurps love's name.'
'Repeatedly we told him all you say,'
They cried. 'We were companions of the Way,
Sworn to a common happiness or grief;
We should exchange the honours of belief
For odium and scorn; we should accept
The Christian cult our sheikh could not reject.
But he insisted that we leave -- our love
Seemed pointless then; he ordered us to move.
At his express command we journeyed here

To tell his story plainly, without fear.'

He answered them: 'However hard the fight,
You should have fought for what was clearly right.
Truth struggled there with error; when you went
You only worsened his predicament.
You have abandoned him; how could you dare
To enter Mecca's uncorrupted air?'
They heard his speech; not one would raise his head.
And then, 'There is no point in shame,' he said.
'What's done is done' we must act justly now,
Bury this sin, seek out the sheikh and bow
Before him once again.' They left their home
And made their way a second time to Rome;
They prayed a hundred thousand prayers -- at times
With hope, at times disheartened by their crimes.
They neither ate nor slept but kept their gaze
Unswerving throughout forty nights and days.
Their wailing lamentations filled the sky,
Moving the green-robed angels ranked on high
To clothe themselves with black, and in the end
The leader of the group, the sheikh's true friend,
His heart consumed by sympathetic grief,
Let loose the well-aimed arrows of belief.
For forty nights he had prayed privately,
Rapt in devotion's holy ecstasy --
At dawn there came a musk-diffusing breeze,
And in his heart he knew all mysteries.
He saw the Prophet, lovely as the moon,
Whose face, Truth's shadow, was the sun at noon,
Whose hair in two black heavy braids was curled --
Each hair, a hundred times, outpriced the world.
As he approached with his unruffled pace,
A smile of haunting beauty lit his face.
The sheikh's friend rose and said, 'God's Messenger,
Vouchsafe your help. Our sheikh has wandered far;
You are our Guide; guide him to Truth again.'
The Prophet answered: 'I have loosed the chain
Which bound your sheikh -- your prayer is answered, go.
Thick clouds of dust have been allowed to blow
Between his sight and Truth -- those clouds have gone;
I did not leave him to endure alone.
I sprinkled on the fortunes of your sheikh
A cleansing dew for intercession's sake --
The dust is laid; sin disappeared before
His new-made vow. A world of sin, be sure,
Shall with contrition's spittle be made pure.
The sea of righteousness drowns in its waves
The sins of those sincere repentance saves.'

With grateful happiness the friend cried out;

The heavens echoed his triumphant shout.
He told the good news to the group; again
They set out eagerly across the plain.
Weeping they ran to where the swineherd-sheikh,
Now cured of his unnatural mistake,
Had cast aside his Christian clothes, the bell,
The belt, the cap, freed from the strange faith's spell.
He saw how he had forfeited God's grace;
He ripped his clothes in frenzies of distress;
He grovelled in the dust with wretchedness.
Tears flowed like rain; he longed for death; his sighs'
Great heat consumed the curtain of the skies;
Grief dried the blood within him when he saw
How he had lost all knowledge of God's law;
All he had once abandoned now returned
And he escaped the hell in which he'd burned.
He came back to himself, and on his knees
Wept bitterly for past iniquities.
When his disciples saw him weeping there,
Bathed in shame's sweat, they reeled between despair
And joy -- bewildered they drew near and sighed;
From gratitude they gladly would have died.
They said: 'The mist has fled that hid your sun;
Faith has returned and blasphemy is gone;
Truth has defeated Rome's idolatry;
Grace has surged onward like a mighty sea.
The Prophet interceded for your soul'
The world sends up its thanks from pole to pole.
Why should you mourn? You should thank God instead
That out of darkness you've been safely led;
God who can turn the day to darkest night
Can turn black sin to pure repentant light --
He kindles a repentant spark, the flame
Burns all our sins and all sin's burning shame.'

I will be brief: the sheikh was purified
According to the faith; his old self died --
He put the dervish cloak on as before.
The group set out for Mecca's gates once more.

And then the Christian girl whom he had loved
Dreamed in her sleep; a shaft of sunlight moved
Before her eyes, and from the dazzling ray
A voice said: 'Rise, follow your lost sheikh's way;
Accept his faith, beneath his feet be dust;
You tricked him once, be pure to him and just,
And, as he took your path without pretence,
Take his path now in truth and innocence.
Follow his lead; you once led him astray --
Be his companion as he points the Way;
You were a robber preying on the road
Where you should seek to share the traveller's load.

Wake now, emerge from superstition's night.
She woke, and in her heart a steady light
Beat like the sun, and an unwonted pain
Throbbled there, a longing she could not restrain;
Desire flared up in her; she felt her soul
Slip gently from the intellect's control.
As yet she did not know what seed was sown --
She had no friend and found herself alone
In an uncharted world; no tongue can tell
What then she saw -- her pride and triumph fell
Like rain from her; with an unearthly shout
She tore the garments from her back, ran out
And heaped the dust of mourning on her head.
Her frame was weak, the heart within her bled,
But she began the journey to her sheikh,
And like a cloud that seems about to break
And shed its downpour of torrential rain
(The heart's rich blood) she ran across the plain.
But soon the desert's endless vacancy
Bewildered her; wild with uncertainty,
She wept and pressed her face against the sand.
'O God,' she cried, 'extend your saving hand
To one who is an outcast of the earth,
To one who tricked a saint of unmatched worth --
Do not abandon me; my evil crime
Was perpetrated in a thoughtless time;
I did not know what I know now -- accept
The prayers of one who ignorantly slept.'

The sheikh's heart spoke: 'The Christian is no more;
The girl you loved knocks at religion's door --
It is our way she follows now; go back
And be the comforter her sorrows lack.'
Like wind he ran, and his disciples cried:
'Has your repentant vow so quickly died?
Will you slip back, a shameless reprobate?'
But when the sheikh explained the girl's sad state,
Compassion moved their hearts and they agreed
To search for her and serve her every need.
They found her with hair draggled in the dirt,
Prone on the earth as if a corpse, her skirt
Torn from her limbs, barefoot, her face death-pale.
She saw the sheikh and felt her last strength fail;
She fainted at his feet, and as she slept
The sheikh hung over her dear face and wept.

She woke, and seeing tears like rain in spring
Knew he'd kept faith with her through everything.
She knelt before him, took his hands and said
'The shame I brought on your respected head
Burns me with shame; how long must I remain

Behind this veil of ignorance? Make plain
The mysteries of Islam to me here,
And I shall tread its highway without fear.'
The sheikh spelt out the faith to her; the crowd
Of gratified disciples cried aloud,
Weeping to see the lovely child embrace
The search for Truth. Then, as her comely face
Bent to his words, her heart began to feel
An inexpressible and troubling zeal;
Slowly she felt the pall of grief descend,
Knowing herself still absent from the Friend.
'Dear sheikh,' she said, 'I cannot bear such pain;
Absence undoes me and my spirits wane.
I go from this unhappy world; farewell
World's sheikh and mine -- further I cannot tell,
Exhaustion weakens me; O sheikh, forgive ...'
And saying this the dear child ceased to live.
The sun was hidden by a mist -- her flesh
Yielded the sweet soul from its weakening mesh.
She was a drop returned to Truth's great sea;
She left this world, and so, like wind, must we.

Whoever knows love's path is soon aware
That stories such as this are far from rare.
All things are possible, and you may meet
Despair, forgiveness, certainty, deceit.
The Self ignores the secrets of the Way,
The mysteries no mortal speech can say;
Assurance whispers in the heart's dark core,
Not in the muddied Self -- a bitter war
Must rage between these two. Turn now and mourn
That your existence is so deeply torn!"

The birds set off on their journey, pause, then choose a leader.

They heard the tale; the birds were all on fire
To quit the hindrance of the Self; desire
To gain the Simorgh had convulsed each heart;
Love made them clamour for the journey's start.
They set out on the Way, a noble deed!
Hardly had they begun when they agreed
To call a halt: "A leader's what we need,"
They said, "one who can bind and loose, one who
Will guide our self-conceit to what is true;
We need a judge of rare ability
To lead us over danger's spacious sea;
Whatever he commands along the Way,
We must, without recalcitrance, obey,
Until we leave this plain of sin and pride
And gain Kaf's distant peak. There we shall hide,
A mote lost in the sun; the Simorgh's shade

Will cover those who travelled and obeyed.
But which of us is worthy of this trust?
A lottery is suitable and just.
The winning lot must finally decide
Which bird should be our undisputed guide.”
A hush fell, arguments were laid aside,
The lots were chosen, and the hoopoe won,
A lucky verdict that pleased everyone.
He was their leader; they would sacrifice
Their lives if he demanded such a price;
And as they travelled on the Way his word
Would spell authority to every bird.

The birds are frightened by the emptiness of the Way, and the hoopoe tells them a story about Sheikh Bayazid.

The hoopoe, as their chief, was hailed and crowned --
Huge flocks of birds in homage gathered round;
A hundred thousand birds assembled there,
Making a monstrous shadow in the air.
The throng set out -- but, clearing the first dune,
Their leader sent a cry up to the moon
And panic spread among the birds; they feared
The endless desolation which appeared.
They clung together in a huddling crowd,
Drew in their heads and wings and wailed aloud
A melancholy, weak, faint-hearted song --
Their burdens were too great, the way too long!
How featureless the view before their eyes,
An emptiness where they could recognize
No marks of good or ill -- a silence where
The soul knew neither hope nor blank despair.
One said, “The Way is lifeless, empty -- why?”
To which the hoopoe gave this strange reply:
“To glorify the king.

One moonlit night
Sheikh Bayazid, attracted by the sight
Of such refulgent brilliance, clear as day,
Across the sleeping city took his way
And thence into the desert, where he saw
Unnumbered stars adorning heaven's floor.
He walked a little and became aware
That not a sound disturbed the desert air,
That no one moved in that immensity
Save him. His heart grew numb and gradually
Pure terror touched him. ‘O great God,’ he cried,
‘Your dazzling palace beckons far and wide --
Where are the courtiers who should throng this court?’
A voice said: ‘Wanderer, you are distraught;

Be calm. Our glorious King cannot admit
All comers to His court; it is not fit
That every rascal who sleeps out the night
Should be allowed to glimpse its radiant light.
Most are turned back, and few perceive the throne;
Among a hundred thousand there is one'."

The birds ask the hoopoe to resolve their doubts

The trembling birds stared out across the plain;
The road seemed endless as their endless pain.
But in the hoopoe's heart new confidence
Transported him above the firmaments --
The sands could not alarm him nor the high
Harsh sun at noon, the peacock of the sky.
What other bird, throughout the world, could bear
The troubles of the Way and all its care?

The frightened flock drew nearer to its guide.
"You know the perils of the Way," they cried,
"And how we should behave before the king --
You served great Solomon in everything
And flew across his lands -- therefore you know
Exactly where it's safe and right to go;
You've seen the ups and downs of this strange Way.
It is our wish that as our guide you say
How we should act before the king we seek;
And more, as we are ignorant and weak,
That you should solve the problems in our hearts
Before the fearful company departs.
First hear our doubts; the thing we do not doubt
Is that you'll answer them and drive them out --
We know that on this lengthy Way no light
Will come to clear uncertainty's dark night;
But when the heart is free we shall commit
Our hearts and bodies, all we have, to it."

The hoopoe stood to speak, and all the birds
Approached to be encouraged by his words;
A hundred thousand gathered with one mind,
Serried in ranks according to their kind.
The dove and nightingale voiced their complaint;
Such beauty made the company grow faint --
A cry of ecstasy went up; a state
Where neither Self nor void predominate
Fell on the birds. The hoopoe spoke; he drew
The veil from what is ultimately true.
One asked: "How is it that you surpass us in
This search for Truth; what is our crippling sin?"

We search and so do you -- but you receive
Truth's purity while we stand by and grieve."

The hoopoe tells them about the glance of Solomon

The hoopoe answered him: "Great Solomon
Once looked at me -- it is that glance alone
Which gave me what I know; no wealth could bring
The substance I received from wisdom's king.
No one can gain this by the forms of prayer,
For even Satan bowed with pious care;
Though don't imagine that you need not pray;
We curse the fool who tricks you in this way.
Pray always, never for one moment cease,
Pray in despair and when your goods increase,
Consume your life with prayer, till Solomon
Bestows his glance, and ignorance is gone.
When Solomon accepts you, you will know
Far more than my unequal words can show."

The story of King Mas'oud and the fisherboy

He said: "King Mas'oud, riding out one day,
Was parted from his army on the way.
Swift as the wind he galloped till he saw
A little boy sat by the ocean's shore.
The child was fishing -- as he cast his hook,
The king dismounted with a friendly look
And sat by him; but the unhappy child
Was troubled in his heart and hardly smiled.
'You seem the saddest boy I've ever seen,'
The monarch said. 'What can such sorrow mean?'
'Our father's gone; for seven children I
Must cast my line' was his subdued reply.
'Our mother's paralysed and we are poor;
It is for food that I must haunt this shore --
I come to fish here in the dawn's first light
And cannot leave until the fall of night.
The meagre harvest of my toil and pain
Must last us all till I return again.'
The king said: 'Let's be friends, do you agree?'
The poor child nodded and, immediately,
His new friend cast their line into the sea.
That day the boy drew up a hundred fish.
'This wealth is far beyond my wildest wish,'
He said. 'A splendid haul,' the king replied.
'Good Fortune has been busy at your side --
Accept your luck, don't try to comprehend
How this has happened; you'd be lost, my friend.
Your wealth is greater than my own; today

A king has fished for you -- I cannot stay.'
He leapt onto his horse. 'But take your share,'
The boy said earnestly. 'That's only fair.'
'Tomorrow's catch is mine. We won't divide
Today's; you have it all,' the king replied.
'Tomorrow when I fish you are the prey,
A trophy I refuse to give away.'
The next day, walking in his garden's shade,
The king recalled the friend that he had made.
A captain fetched the boy, and this unknown
Was at the king's command set on his throne.
The courtiers murmured at his poverty --
'He is my friend, this fact suffices me;
He is my equal here in everything
The partner of my throne,' declared the king;
To every taunt the boy had one reply:
'My sadness vanished when the king passed by.'

A murderer who went to heaven

A murderer, according to the law,
Was killed. That night the king who'd killed him saw
The same man in a dream; to his surprise
The villain lorded it in paradise --
The king cried: 'You! In this celestial place!
Your life's work was an absolute disgrace;
How did you reach this state?' The man replied:
'A friend to God passed by me as I died;
The earth drank up my blood, but stealthily
That pilgrim on Truth's journey glanced at me,
And all the glorious extravagance
That laps me now came from his searing glance.'

The man on whom that quickening glance alights
Is raised to heaven's unsuspected heights;
Indeed, until this glance discovers you
Your life's a mystery without a clue;
You cannot carve your way to heaven's throne
If you sit locked in vanity alone.
You need a skilful guide; you cannot start
This ocean-voyage with blindness in your heart.
It may be you will meet the very guide
Who glanced at me; be sure he will provide --
Whatever troubles come -- a place to hide.
You cannot guess what dangers you will find,
You need a staff to guide you, like the blind.
Your sight is failing and the road is long;
Trust one who knows the journey and is strong.
Whoever travels in a great lord's shade
Need never hesitate or be afraid;

Whoever undertakes this lord's commands
Finds thorns will change to roses in his hands.

The story of King Mahmoud and the woodcutter

King Mahmoud went out hunting. In the chase
His courtiers flagged, unequal to the pace.
An old man led a donkey whose high load
Of brushwood slipped and fell into the road.
The old man scratched his head; the king came near
And said: 'Do you need help?' 'I do, that's clear,'
The old man said. 'If you could lend a hand,
You won't lose much. I see that you command
Your share of grace -- such men are always good.'
The king got down and helped him with the wood,
His flower-like hands embraced the thorns; and then
He rode back to his waiting lords again.
He said to them: 'An old man will appear,
Riding a piled-high donkey -- lead him here;
Block all the paths and highways to this place;
I want him to confront me face to face.'
The winding roads were blocked up in a ring,
Of which the centre was the waiting king.
The old man mumbled as he rode alone:
'Why won't he go ... this donkey's skin and bone.
Soldiers! ... Good day, my lords!' and still the way
Led pitilessly on; to his dismay
There rose ahead a royal canopy,
And there was no escape that he could see.
He rode, for there was nothing else to do,
And found awaiting him a face he knew.
'I made a king hump wood for me,' he cried;
'God help all sinners now, I'm terrified.'
'What troubles you, my man?' inquired the king.
'Don't play with me, you took in everything.'
The old man said: 'I'm just a wretched fool
Who day and night must scour the plain for fuel;
I sell the thorns I get and buy dry bread --
Give me some scraps, and blessings on your head.'
The king replied: 'Old man, I'll buy your wood --
Come, name a price you think is fair and good.'
'My lord, such wood cannot be cheaply sold;
It's worth, I reckon, ten full bags of gold.'
The courtiers laughed: 'It's worth two barley grains.
Shut up and sell, and thank you for your pains.'
'Two grains, my friends, that's true -- but this rare buyer
Can surely manage something rather higher?
A great one touched these thorns -- his hand brought forth
A hundred flowers; just think what that is worth!
A dinar buys one root -- a little gain
Is only right, I've had my share of pain;

The wood itself is worthless, I agree --
It is that touch which gives it dignity'."

A cowardly bird protests

One of the birds let out a helpless squeak:
"I can't go on this journey, I'm too weak.
Dear guide, I know I can't fly any more;
I've never tried a feat like this before.
This valley's endless; dangers lie ahead;
The first time that we rest I'll drop down dead.
Volcanoes loom before the goal is won --
Admit this journey's not for everyone.
The blood of multitudes has stained the Way;
A hundred thousand creatures, as you say,
Address themselves to this great enterprise --
How many die, a useless sacrifice!
On such a road the best of men are cowed,
Hoods hide the frightened features of the proud --
What chance have timid souls? What chance have I?
If I set out it's certain I shall die!"

The hoopoe admonishes him

The hoopoe said: "Your heart's congealed like ice;
When will you free yourself from cowardice?
Since you have such a short time to live here,
What difference does it make? What should you fear?
The world is filth and sin, and homeless men
Must enter it and homeless leave again.
They die, as worms, in squalid pain; if we
Must perish in this quest, that, certainly,
Is better than a life of filth and grief.
If this great search is vain, if my belief
Is groundless, it is right that I should die.
So many errors throng the world -- then why
Should we not risk this quest? To suffer blame
For love is better than a life of shame.
No one has reached this goal, so why appeal
To those whose blindness claims it is unreal?
I'd rather die deceived by dreams than give
My heart to home and trade and never live.
We've seen and heard so much -- what have we learned?
Not for one moment has the Self been spurned;
Fools gather round and hinder our release:
When will their stale, insistent whining cease?
We have no freedom to achieve our goal
Until from Self and fools we free the soul.
To be admitted past the veil you must
Be dead to all the crowd considers just.
Once past the veil you understand the Way

From which the crowd's glib courtiers blindly stray.
If you have any will, leave women's stories,
And even if this search for hidden glories
Proves blasphemy at last, be sure our quest
Is not mere talk but an exacting test.
The fruit of love's great tree is poverty;
Whoever knows this knows humility.
When love has pitched his tent in someone's breast,
That man despairs of life and knows no rest.
Love's pain will murder him, then blandly ask
A surgeon's fee for managing the task --
The water that he drinks brings pain, his bread
Is turned to blood immediately shed;
Though he is weak, faint, feebler than an ant,
Love forces him to be her combatant;
He cannot take one mouthful unaware
That he is floundering in a sea of care.

Sheikh Noughani at Neishapour

Sheikh Noughani set out for Neishapour,
The way was more than he could well endure
And he fell sick -- he spent a hungry week
Huddled in tattered clothes, alone and weak.
But after seven days had passed he cried:
'Dear God, send bread.' An unseen voice replied:
'Go, sweep the dirt of Neishapour's main square,
And with the grain of gold that you find there
Buy bread and eat.' The sheikh abruptly said:
'If I'd a broom I wouldn't beg for bread,
But I have nothing, as you plainly see;
Give me some bread and stop tormenting me!'
The voice said: 'Calm yourself, you need not weep --
If you want bread take up your broom and sweep.'
The sheikh crawled out and publicized his grief
Till he was lent a broom and sweeper's sieve.
He swept the filthy square as he'd been told,
And in his last sieve's dust-heap found the gold.
He hurried to the baker's, bought his bread --
Thoughts of the broom and sieve then filled his head.
He stopped short in his tracks; the shining grain
Was spent and he was destitute again.
He wandered aimlessly until he found
A ruined hut, and on the stony ground
He flung himself headlong; to his surprise
The broom and sieve appeared before his eyes.
Joy seized the old man -- then he cried: 'O Lord,
Why must I toil so hard for my reward?
You tell me to exhaust myself for bread!'
'Bread needs the sauce of work,' the Lord's voice said;
'Since bread is not enough, I will increase

The sauce that makes it tasty; work in peace!

A simpleton walked naked through the crowd,
And seeing such fine clothes he cried aloud:
'God give me joy like theirs.' A voice replied:
'I give the sun's kind warmth; be satisfied.'
He said: 'My Lord, the sun clothes you, not me!'
The voice said: 'Wait ten days, then you will see
The garment I provide.' Ten days had gone;
A poor man offered to this simpleton
A ragged cloak made up of scraps and shreds.*
'You've spent ten days with patches and old threads
Stitching this cloak,' the madman said; 'I'll bet
You spoiled a treasury of clothes to get
So many bits together -- won't you tell
Your servant where you learned to sew so well?'
The answer came: 'In His great court one must
Be humble as His royal highway's dust;
So many, kindled by His glory, come --
But few will ever reach the longed-for home.'

** i.e. the dervish cloak.*

A story about Rabe'eh

Saint Rabe'eh for seven years had trod
The pilgrimage to Mecca and her God.
Now drawing near the goal she cried: 'At last
I've reached the Ka'abah's stone; my trials are past' --
Just at that moment the aspiring saint
Succumbed to woman's intimate complaint --
She was impure; she turned aside and said:
'For seven years a pilgrim's life I've led,
And as I reach the throng of pilgrims He
Plants this unlooked-for thorn to hinder me;
Dear God, give access to your glorious home,
Or send me back the weary way I've come.'
No lover lived as true as Rabe'eh,
Yet look, she too was hindered on the Way.
When first you enter Wisdom's sea, beware --
A wave of indecision floods you there.
You worship at the Ka'abah's shrine and then
You're weeping in some worthless pagan's den;
If from this whirlpool you can raise your head,
Tranquillity will take the place of dread.
But if you sink into its swirl alone
Your head will seem some mill's enormous stone;
The least distraction will divert your mind
From that tranquillity you hoped to find.

A troubled fool

A saintly fool lived in a squalid place.
One day he saw the Prophet face to face,
Who said to him: 'In your life's work I see
The signs of heaven-sent tranquillity.'
'Tranquillity! When I can't get away
From hungry fleas by night or flies by day!
A tiny gnat got into Nimrod's brain
And by its buzzing sent the man insane;
I seem the Nimrod of this time -- flies, fleas,
Mosquitoes, gnats do with me as they please!'

A bird complains of his sinfulness

Another bird complained: 'Sin stains my soul;
How can the wicked ever reach our goal?
How can a soul unclean as noisome flies
Toward the Simorgh's mountains hope to rise?
When sinners leave the path, what power can bring
Such stragglers to the presence of our king?

And the hoopoe answers him

The answer came: 'You speak from ignorance;
Do not despair of His benevolence.
Seek mercy from Him; throw away your shield,
And by submission gain the longed-for field.
The gate stands open to contrition's way --
If you have sinned, squeeze through it while you may,
And if you travel with an honest heart,
You too will play the victor's glorious part.

Shame forced a vicious sinner to repent.
Once more his strength returned, once more he went
Down his old paths of wickedness and lust;
Leaving the Way, he wallowed in his dust.
But pain welled in his heart, his life became --
A second time -- the source of bitter shame.
Since sin had brought him nothing but despair,
He wanted to repent, but did not dare;
His looks betrayed more agitation than
Ripe corn grains jumping in a heated pan --
His heart was racked by grief and warring fears;
The highway's dust was laid by his sad tears.
But in the dawn he heard a voice: 'The Lord
Was merciful when first you pledged your word.

You broke it and again I gave you time,
Asking no payment for this newer crime;
Poor fool -- would you repent once more? My gate
Stands open always; patiently I wait.'

Gabriel and the unbeliever

One night in paradise good Gabriel heard
The Lord say: 'I am here', and at His word
There came another voice which wept and prayed --
'Who knows whose voice this is?' the angel said.
'It comes from one, of this at least I'm sure,
Who has subdued the Self, whose heart is pure.'
But no one in the heavens knew the man,
And Gabriel swooped toward the earth to scan
The deserts, seas and mountains -- far and wide
He searched, without success, until he cried
For God to lead his steps. 'Seek him in Rome,'
God said. 'A pagan temple is his home.'
There Gabriel went and saw the man in tears --
A worthless idol ruled his hopes and fears.
Astonished, Gabriel turned and said: 'Tell me,
Dear Lord, the meaning of this mystery;
You answer with Your kindness one who prays
Before a senseless idol all his days!
And God replied: 'He does not know our Way;
Mere ignorance has led this man astray --
I understand the cause of his disgrace
And will not coldly turn aside My face;
I shall admit him to My sanctuary
Where kindness will convert his blasphemy'."

The hoopoe paused and raised his voice in prayer,
Then said: "This man for whom God showed such care
Was one like you -- and if you cannot bring
Great virtues to the presence of our king,
Do not alarm yourself; the Lord will bless
The saint's devotion and your nothingness.

A sufi who wanted to buy something for nothing

A voice rang out one morning in Baghdad:
'My honey's sweet, the best that can be had --
The price is cheap; now who will come and buy?'
A sufi passing in the street nearby
Asked: 'Will you sell for nothing?' But he laughed:
'Who gives his goods for nothing? Don't be daft!'
A voice came then: 'My sufi, turn aside --
A few steps higher -- and be satisfied.
For nothing We shall give you everything;

If you want more, that "more" We'll also bring.
Know that Our mercy is a glittering sun;
No particle escapes its brilliance, none --
Did We not send to sin and blasphemy
Our Prophet as a sign of clemency?'

God remonstrates with Moses

God said: 'Gharoun has ten times seven times,
Dear Moses, begged forgiveness for his crimes --
Still you ignore him, though his soul is free
From all the twisting growths of blasphemy;
I have uprooted them and now prepare
A robe of grace in answer to his prayer.
You have destroyed him; wound has followed wound;
You force his head to bow down to the ground --
If you were his creator you would give
Some respite to this suffering fugitive.'
One who shows mercy to the merciless
Brings mercy close to Godlike blessedness;
The ocean of God's grace is infinite --
Our sins are like a tear dissolved in it.
How could His mercy change? -- it can contain
No trace of temporal corruption's stain.
One who accuses sinners takes the part
Of tyranny, and bears a tyrant's heart.

A sinner enters heaven

A sinner died, and, as his coffin passed,
A man who practised every prayer and fast
Turned ostentatiously aside -- how could
He pray for one of whom he knew no good?
He saw the sinner in his dreams that night,
His face transfigured with celestial light.
'How did you enter heaven's gates,' he said,
'A sinner stained with filth from foot to head?'
'God saw your merciless, disdainful pride,
And pitied my poor soul,' the man replied.

What generous love His wisdom here displays!
His part is mercy, ours is endless praise;
His Wisdom's like a crow's wing in the night --
He sends a child out with a taper's light,
And then a wind that quenches this thin flame;
The child will suffer words of scathing blame,
But in that narrow darkness he will find
The thousand ways in which his Lord is kind.
If all were pure of all iniquity,
God could not show His generosity;

The end of Wisdom is for God to show --
Perpetually -- His love to those below.
One drop of God's great Wisdom will be yours,
A sea of mercy with uncharted shores;
My child, the seven heavens, day and night,
For your sake wage their old unwearied fight;
For your sake angels pray -- your love and hate
Reflected back are hell's or heaven's gate.
The angels have bowed down to you and drowned
Your soul in Being, past all plummet's sound --
Do not despise yourself, for there is none
Who could with you sustain comparison;
Do not torment yourself -- your soul is All,
Your body but a fleeting particle.
This All will clarify, and in its light
Each particle will shine, distinctly bright --
As flesh remains an agent of the soul,
Your soul's an agent of the sacred Whole.
But 'part' and 'whole' must disappear at last;
The Way is one, and number is surpassed.
A hundred thousand clouds above you press;
Their rain is pure, unending happiness;
And when the desert blooms with flowers, their scent
And beauty minister to your content;
The prayers of all the angels, all they do,
All their obedience, God bestows on you.

The angels' jealousy of man

Abbasseh said: 'At God's last Judgement Day,
When panic urges men to run away
And at the same time paralyses them,
When sinners stumble, overwhelmed by shame,
When terror seizes on the human race,
And each man seeks to hide his anguished face,
Then God, whom all the earth and heavens adore,
Will His unstinted benedictions pour
On man, the handful of unworthy dust.
The angels will cry out: 'Lord, is this just,
That man, before us all, take precedence?'
And God will say: 'There is no consequence
Of loss or gain in this for you, but man
Has reached the limit of his earthy span --
Hunger must always be supplied with bread;
A mortal nation clamours to be fed'.'

An indecisive bird complains

Another bird declared, "As you can see,
I lack the organs of virility;
Each moment I prefer a different tree --

I'm drunk, devout, the world's, then (briefly) His;
Caught between 'No, it isn't', 'Yes, it is'.
The flesh will send me drinking, then I'll find
The praise of God awakening in my mind;
What should I do between these two extremes,
Imprisoned by conflicting needs and dreams?"

And the hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: "This troubles everyone;
What man is truly single-minded? None!
If all of us could boast a spotless mind,
Why should the prophets mingle with mankind?
If it is love which prompts your fervent prayers,
A hundred kindnesses will calm your cares.
Life is an obstinate young colt -- until
He's broken in by your restraining will;
He knows no peace; but you are indolent,
Stretched out beside the oven, warm, content.
Tears temper hearts; but living's well's a rust
That inch by inch reduces them to dust --
You're just a eunuch pampering his needs;
Your Self's grown gross, a dog that sleeps and feeds.

A story about Shebli

Shebli would disappear at times; no one
In all Baghdad could guess where he had gone --
At last they found him where the town enjoys
The sexual services of men and boys,
Sitting among the catamites; his eye
Was moist and humid, and his lips bone-dry.
One asked: 'What brings you here, to such a place?
Is this where pilgrims come to look for grace?'
He answered: 'In the world's way these you see
Aren't men or women; so it is with me --
For in the way of Faith I'm neither man
Nor woman, but ambiguous courtesan --
Unmanliness reproaches me, then blame
For my virility fills me with shame.'
The man of understanding puts aside,
To travel on this path, all outward pride
(The courage of his choice will honour those
Who taught this pilgrim everything he knows).
If you seem more substantial than a hair,
You've made an idol of yourself -- take care,
Whatever praise or blame may say of you,
You're an idolater in all you do.
As truth's sworn slave, beware of Azar's ways
Who carved the stone to which he offered praise --
Devotion is the crown of all mankind;

Leave Uzza * and such idols far behind.
You seem a sufi to the common folk
But hide a hundred idols with your cloak --
If you're a eunuch underneath, don't dress
In clothes of high heroic manliness!

* *A goddess in pre-Islamic Arabia.*

Two sufis go to court

One day two dressed as wandering sufies came
Before the courts to lodge a legal claim.
The judge took them aside. 'This can't be right,
For sufis to provoke a lawyers' fight,'
He said. 'You wear the robes of resignation,
So what have you to do with litigation?
If you're the men to pay a lawyer's fee,
Off with your sufi clothes immediately!
And if you're sufis as at first I thought,
It's ignorance that brings you to this court.
I'm just a judge, unversed in your affair,
But I'm ashamed to see the clothes you wear;
You should wear women's veils -- that would be less
Dishonest than your present holy dress.'

How will you solve love's secret lore if you --
Not man, not woman -- glide between the two?
If on its path loves forces you to yield,
Then do so gladly, throw away your shield;
Resist and you will die, your soul is dead --
To ward off your defeat bow down your head!

A pauper in love with the king of Egypt

A poor man fell in love with Egypt's king,
Who heard the news and ordered guards to bring
The wretch to him. 'You love the king,' he said;
'Now choose: give up your home here or your head --
You must make up your mind between these two,
Exile or death. Well, which seems best to you?'
For all his love this pauper wasn't brave;
His choice was exile rather than the grave.
He left; the king's command came loud and clear:
'Cut off his head at once and bring it here.'
The porter said: 'But he is innocent;
Why should my lord command this punishment?'
'He did not really love,' the king replied.
'Though he pretended love for me, he lied:
If he were valiant in love he would

Have chosen death here as the highest good.
If one prefers his head to love, then he
Must pay to love the traitor's penalty --
Had he required my head, at his command
There would have been no lord to rule this land;
I would have worn his livery, a king
Would have become his slave in everything --
But he resisted love, and it is right
That he should lose his head in such a fight.
The man who leaves me, though he rave and cry,
Is an impostor and his love's a lie --
I say this as a warning to that crowd
Whose boasts of love for me ring long and loud'."

A bird complains of the Self

One of the birds then said: "My enemy's
That veteran of highway robberies,
My Self; how can I travel on the Way
With such a follower? The dog won't pay
The least attention to a word I say --
The dog I knew is gone and in his place
A slaving wolf stalks by me, pace for pace."

And the hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: "How has this dog betrayed
And brought to dust whatever plans you made!
The Self's squint-eyed and cannot guide you well,
Part dog, part parasite, part infidel.
When you are praised your Self swells up with pride
(Aware that praise is quite unjustified);
There's no hope for the Self -- the dog grows fatter
The more it hears men fawn, deceive and flatter.
What is your childhood but a negligence,
A time of carelessness and ignorance?
What is your youth but madness, strife and danger,
Knowledge that in this world you are a stranger?
What is your age but torpid helplessness,
The flesh and spirit sapped by long distress?
Until this dog, the Self, can be subdued,
Our life is folly, endlessly renewed;
If all of life from birth to death is vain,
Blank nothingness will be our only gain --
Such slaves the Self owns! What a catalogue!
How many rush to worship this foul dog!
The Self is hell -- a furnace belching fire,
An icy pit as Price succeeds Desire,
And though a hundred thousand die of grief,
That this same dog should die is past belief.

A gravedigger

A man who lived by digging graves survived
To ripe old age. A neighbour said: 'You've thrived
For years, digging away in one routine --
Tell us the strangest thing you've ever seen.'
He said: 'All things considered, what's most strange
Is that for seventy years without a change
That dog, my Self, has seen me digging graves,
Yet neither dies, nor alters, nor behaves!'

Abbaseh's description of the Self

One night Abbaseh said: 'The world could be
Thronged with wild infidels and blasphemy,
Or it could be a place of pious works,
Filled with the faithful, keen as zealous Turks.
Instead the prophets came -- that infidel
The Self must choose between the faith and hell
(One seemed too difficult, one terrified --
How could the indecisive soul decide?).
Beneath the Self's reign we are infidels
And nourish blasphemy in all our cells;
Its life is stubborn, strong, intractable --
To kill it seems well-nigh impossible.
It draws its strength from both alternatives;
No wonder it so obstinately lives.
But if the heart can rule, then day and night
This dog will labour for the heart's delight,
And when the heart rides out he sprints away
Eager to flush his noble master's prey.
Whoever chains this dog will find that he
Commands the lion of eternity;
Whoever binds this dog, his sandals' dust
Surpasses all the councils of the just.'

A king questions a sufi

A ragged pilgrim of the sufis' Way
By chance met with a king, and heard him say:
'Who's better, me or you?' The old man said:
'Silence, your words are empty as your head!
Although self-praise is not our normal rule
(The man who loves himself is still a fool).
I'll tell you, since I must, that one like me
Exceeds a thousand like your majesty.
Since you find no delight in faith -- alas,

Your Self has made of you, my lord, an ass
And sat on you, and set its load on you --
You're just its slave in everything you do;
You wear its halter, follow its commands,
A no-one, left completely in its hands.
My study is to reach Truth's inmost shrine --
And I am not my Self's ass, he is mine;
Now since the beast I ride on rides on you,
That I'm your better is quite plainly true.
You love the Self -- it's lit in you a fire
Of nagging lust, insatiable desire,
A blaze that burns your vigour, wastes your heart,
Leaving infirmity in every part --
Consuming all your strength, till deaf and blind
You're old, forgetful, rambling in your mind.

This man, and hundreds like him, constitute
The mighty phalanx of the Absolute;
When such an army charges you will find
You and your puny Self are left behind.
How you delight in this dog's partnership --
But it's the dog, not you, that cracks the whip!
The forces of the king will separate
This dog and you -- why not anticipate
Their order and forestall the pain? If though
You weep that here on earth you cannot know
Enough of this audacious infidel --
Don't worry; you'll be comrades down in hell.

Two foxes

Two foxes met, and tasted such delight
They could not let each other out of sight.
But then a king came hunting on the plain
And parted them. 'Where shall we meet again?'
She yelped. He barked back as he reached their hole:
'At the furrier's, dear -- hung up as a stole!'

A bird complains of pride

Another said: "Whenever I decide
To seek His presence, that arch-devil Pride
Obstructs my path. I can't fight back with force;
Against his specious talk I've no recourse.
How can I find salvation from his lies,
Drink down the wine of meaning and be wise?"

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: "This devil never leaves
Until the Self has gone; if he deceives
You now, his cunning is your own deceit --
Your wishes are the devil, you the cheat!
If you accomplish one desire, a shoal
Of struggling demons rises in your soul;
The world's a furnace and a prison cell,
The devil's province, an unending hell --
Draw back your hand from it if you would win
An unmolested life secure from sin.

The devil complains

A sluggard once approached a fasting saint
And, baffled by despair, made this complaint:
'The devil is a highwayman, a thief,
Who's ruined me and robbed me of belief.'
The saint replied: 'Young man, the devil too
Has made his way here to complain -- of you.
'My province is the world,' I heard him say;
'Tell this new pilgrim of God's holy Way
To keep his hands off what is mine -- if I
Attack him it's because his fingers pry
In my affairs; if he will leave me be,
He's no concern of mine and can go free.'

Malek Dinar

One dear to God addressed Malek Dinar:
'I've lost myself -- but tell me how you are.'
He said: 'I get my bread from God's own hands,
Then carry out the Evil One's commands.'

Your vaunted faith is wordy insolence;
The devil strikes, and you have no defence --
This world's grief clings to you, yet you decide
You're ready for our quest! God damn your pride!
I said 'Give up the world', and now I say
Stand firm to be admitted to the Way;
If you have given Him this earthly show
When will you spread your hands and let it go?
Your sloth has drowned you in a sea of greed;
You don't know why you wait or what you need --
Though earth and heaven weep you seek out sin;
Greed blunts your faith, passion corrupts within.
What is this world, this nest of greed and lust
But leavings of oppression, windswept dust?
Here tyranny intensified its reign,
Here cruelty struck and left an emptied plain.
God calls this world a nothing, but its snare

Has trapped you, and you struggle in despair --
When will you die to such unhappiness
And take the hand that leads you from distress?
Can one who's lost in nothing rightly claim
The attributes of man, much less the name?
The creature who abandons what he sought
For nothing's sake is nought and less than nought.
What is this world's work? -- idle lethargy,
That idleness a long captivity.
What is the world but a consuming pyre,
Where nation follows nation to the fire?
And when its flames turn night to blinding day,
The lion-hearted hero runs away --
To close your eyes and flee is courage here,
Or like some fluttering moth you'll draw too near
And in the blaze be burnt; to worship flame
Is drunken pride, the path to death and shame.
The fire surrounds you, and with every breath
The scorching flames reach out and threaten death;
But they are quenched when we achieve our goal,
And look -- there waits asylum for your soul.

A rich lord and a dervish

At public prayers a great lord cried: 'O God,
Have mercy on me now and spare the rod!'
A crazy dervish heard his prayer and said:
'You dare to call His mercies on your head
When your behaviour seems to say "The earth
Can hardly hold a person of my worth" --
You've raised a palace up against the sky,
Embellished it with gold to daze the eye;
Ten boys and ten young girls await your whim,
What claim have you on mercy or on Him?
Look on your life, on all that you possess --
There isn't room for mercy in this mess!
If Fate gave you my daily round of bread,
Then you could call down mercies on your head.
Shame on you, man! Until you turn aside
From power and wealth and all your stinking pride,
There's nothing to be done -- turn now, and see
How like a hero you can still break free.'

Death-bed repentance

A true believer said: 'There is a crowd
Who when they come to die will cry aloud
And turn to God. But they are fools; they should
Have spent their lives in seeking what is good.
When leaves are falling it's too late to sow;
Repentance on a death-bed is too slow --

The time to turn aside has flown; be sure
Whoever waits till then will die impure'."

A miserly bird

Another bird said: "I love gold alone;
It's life to me, like marrow to a bone --
When I have gold I blossom like a flower;
With restless pride I revel in its power."

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: "Appearances delight
The heart that cannot see Truth's dawning light;
You are as blind by day as in the night --
Your life's a crawling ant's. What essence lies
In surfaces? A void! Direct your eyes
To meaning's core; gold is a stone, and you
Are like a child attracted by its hue.
It is an idol when it holds the soul
Back from its God -- hide it in some dark hole!
And if it is a sovereign remedy
It also has a foul utility
(Men make a ring of it that stops a mule
From being covered). O unhappy fool,
Who's helped by all this gold? And what real pleasure
Can you derive from heaps of glittering treasure?
If you can give a dervish just a grain
You'll nag at him, or wish it back again!
It's true that backed by gold you'll never lack
For friends -- your friendship's brand burns every back!
Each month you count the profits from your trade,
What trade! -- your soul's been sold, the bargain's made.
Life's sweetness passes and you spend your time
Scrabbling for farthings -- isn't this a crime?
You give this All for nothing, while your heart
Is given wholly to the merchant's art;
But underneath your gibbet I shall wait
Until its steps are jerked away by Fate.
How many times you'll hang! Each sliding noose
Will seem a hundred burning flames -- what use
Will your religion, gold, be to you then?
Or when you're drowned, you business acumen?
In that last tumult as you gasp for air
You'll know your doom and shriek in while despair.
Remember the Koran: "You cannot gain
Salvation while the things you love remain."
You must abandon all things that exist;
Even the soul itself must be dismissed --
Renounce its fellowship; it too must go,
Along with all you own and all you know.

If you have made this world a place for sleep,
Your bed's the load that makes the Way so steep --
Burn it! and pass beyond what merely seems;
You can't deceive the Truth with sleepy dreams.
Let fear persuade you, and the fire is lit;
Burn your bed now if you would rise from it.

The novice who had some gold

A novice hid a little store of gold.
His sheikh knew this, although he'd not been told.
There was a journey that they had to make --
The two set out, the young man and his sheikh;
Then night came to the valley where they walked,
And into two the path they followed forked.
The novice trembled for his hidden gold
(Which makes its owners rather less than bold);
'Which way do you advice?' he asked his sheikh.
'There are two paths; which is the best to take?'
The sheikh said: 'Throw out what you cannot hide,
Then either way will do -- as you decide.'
Let gold win someone's heart, and when that's done
Even the Devil, out of fear, will run
(When gold is weighed what arguments ensue:
'One grain too many!' 'No, one grain too few!');
In ways of faith he's like an ass that's lame,
Cast down, preoccupied and full of shame --
A king when cheating people, but a fool
When faith is mentioned -- a bewildered mule.
The man whom shining gold can lead astray
Is captured by the world, he's lost the Way.
Remember Joseph and beware this well;
Tread carefully; it leads to death and hell.

Rabe'eh and the two grains of silver

A sheikh of Basra said to Rabe'eh:
'How much have you endured along love's Way!
And all this strength is from yourself -- tell me
The source of your profound ability,
This inward light which you have neither read
Nor learnt nor copied.' Saint Rabe'eh said:
'Great sheikh, I simply spin coarse cotton thread;
I sell this and am satisfied to get
Two grains of silver -- though I never yet
Held both these grains together in my palm,
But one in each hand. I fear the harm
That follows from the clink of coin on coin,
The sleepless nights when sums of money join.'

The worldly man's embroiled in bloody cares,
Laying a hundred thousand different snares
Until unlawfully he gets his gold,
And promptly dies! Before his body's cold,
The eager heir has claimed his property,
His legal right to strife and misery.
You sell the Simorgh for this gold; its light
Has made your heart a candle in the night!
We seek the Way of perfect Unity,
Where no one counts his own prosperity;
But you are like an ant that's led astray
Too easily from our strict, narrow Way --
The strait path offers no deceitful smiles;
What living creature can endure its trials?

The hermit who listened to a bird

A man divinely blessed filled all his days
For twice two hundred years with sacred praise.
He lived alone where no man ever trod
And, hidden by Truth's veil, conversed with God
(His one companion was the Lord, and He
Makes other friends a useless luxury).
His garden had a tree -- this tree a guest;
For there a lovely bird had built its nest.
Such sweetly trilling songs poured from its throat,
A hundred secrets lurked in every note!
Charmed by this liquid voice the hermit found
Companionship in its beguiling sound.
God called the prophet of that time and said:
'We must reproach this man: "The life you've led
Has day and night been given up to prayer;
For years you burnt with love -- and now you dare
To sell Me for the singing of a bird,
The willing dupe of that fine voice you heard!
I've bought and cared for you -- your negligence
Has cheaply sold me off as recompense:
I pay the price for you, you auction Me,
Is this your meaning for 'fidelity'?
I am the one Companion you should keep,
Not some quick bargain to be marked down 'cheap' ". '

An ostentatious bird

Another bird declared: "My happiness
Comes from the splendid things which I possess:
My palace walls inlaid with gold excite
Astonishment in all who see the sight.
They are a world of joy to me -- how could
I wrench my heart from this surpassing good?
There I am king; all bow to my commands --

Shall I court ruin in the desert sands?
Shall I give up this realm, and live without
My certain glory in a world of doubt?
What rational mind would give up paradise
For wanderings filled with pain and sacrifice?"

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: "Ungrateful wretch! Are you
A dog that you should need a kennel too?
This world's a kennel's filthy murk at best;
Your palace is a kennel with the rest.
If it seems paradise, at your last breath
You'll know it is your dungeon after death.
There'd be no harm in palaces like yours,
Did not the thought of death beat at our doors.

A king who built a splendid palace

A king who loved his own magnificence
Once built a palace and spared no expense.
When this celestial building had been raised,
The gorgeous carpets and its splendour dazed
The crowd that pressed round -- a servant flung
Trays heaped with money to the scrabbling throng.
The king now summoned all his wisest friends
And said: 'What do I lack? Who recommends
Improvements to my court?' 'We must agree,'
They said, 'no man could now or ever see,
In all the earth, a palace built like this.'
An old ascetic spoke. 'One thing's amiss,'
He said; 'there's one particular you lack.
This noble structure has a nasty crack
(Though if it weren't for that it would suffice
To be the heavenly court of paradise).'

The king replied: 'What crack? Where is it? Where?
If you've come for trouble, then take care!'
The man said: 'Lord, it is the truth I tell --
And through that crack will enter Azra'el. *
It may be you can block it, but if not,
Then throne and palace are not worth a jot!
Your palace now seems like some heavenly prize,
But death will make it ugly to your eyes;
Nothing remains for ever and you know --
Although you live here now -- that this is so.
Don't pride yourself on things that cannot last;
Don't gallop your high-stepping horse so fast.
If one like me is left to indicate
Your faults to you, I pity your sad fate.'

* *The angel of death.*

A merchant gives a party

To gratify his busy self-esteem,
A merchant built a mansion like a dream,
And when the preparations were all done,
He regally invited everyone
To an enormous entertainment there,
At which they'd feast and dutifully stare.
But running self-importantly around,
He met a begging fool, who stood his ground
And mocked the merchant's diligence. 'My lord,'
He said, 'I'm desolate (O, rest assured!)
That I can't come and drink your health, but I'm
So busy that I really haven't time --
You will forgive me?' and he gave a grin.
'Of course,' the merchant answered, taken in.

The spider

You've seen an active spider work -- he seems
To spend his life in self-communing dreams;
In fact the web he spins is evidence
That he's endowed with some far-sighted sense.
He drapes a corner with his cunning snare
And waits until a fly's entangled there,
Then dashes out and sucks the meagre blood
Of his bewildered, buzzing, dying food.
He'll dry the carcass then, and live off it
For days, consuming bit by tasty bit --
Until the owner of the house one day
Will reach up casually to knock away
The cunning spider's home -- and with her broom
She clears both fly and spider from the room.

Such is the world, and one who feeds there is
A fly trapped by all that spider's subtleties;
If all the world is yours, it will pass by
As swiftly as the blinking of an eye;
And though you boast of kings and patronage,
You are a child, an actor on a stage.
Don't seek for wealth unless you are a fool;
A herd of cows is all that you can rule!
Whoever lives for banners, drums and glory
Is dead; the dervish understands this story
And calls it windy noise -- winds vainly flap
The banners, hollowly the brave drums tap.
Don't gallop on the horse of vanity;

Don't pride yourself on your nobility.
They skin the leopard for his splendid pelt;
They'll flay you too before your nose has smelt
A whiff of danger. When your life's made plain,
Which will be better, death or chastening pain?
You cannot hold your head up then -- obey!
How long must you persist in childish play?
Either give up your wealth or lay aside
The rash pretensions of your crazy pride.
Your palace and your gardens! They're your gaol,
The dungeon where your ruined soul will wail.
Forsake this dusty pride, know what it's worth;
Give up your restless pacing of the earth.
To see the Way, look with the eyes of thought;
Set out on it and glimpse the heavenly court --
And when you reach that souls' asylum, then
Its glory will blot out the world of men.

The restless fool and the dervish

A fool dashed onward at a reckless pace
Till in the desert he came face to face
With one who wore the ragged dervish cloak,
And asked: 'What is your work?' The dervish spoke:
'Poor shallow wretch, can you not see I faint
With this strict pressure of the world's constraint?'
'Constraint? That can't be right,' the man replied;
'The empty desert stretches far and wide.'
The dervish said, 'If there is no strict Way,
How has it led you to me here today?'

A myriad promises beguile your mind,
But flames of greed are all that you can find.
What are such flames? Tread down the world's desire,
And like a lion shun this raging fire.
Accomplish this, and you will find your heart;
There waits your palace, pure in every part.
Fire blocks the path, the goal is long delayed --
Your heart's a captive and your soul's afraid,
But in the midst of such an enterprise
You will escape this universe of lies.
When worldly pressures cloy, prepare to die --
The world gives neither name nor truth, pass by!
The more you see of it the less you see,
How often must I warn you to break free?

Seeing the world

A mourner following a coffin cried:
'You hardly saw the world, and yet you've died.'

A fool remarked: 'Such noise! You'd think that he
Had seen the world himself repeatedly!'

If you would take the world with you, you must
Descend with all the world unseen to dust;
You rush to savour life, and so life goes
While you ignore the balm for all its woes;
Until the Self is sacrificed your soul
Is lost in filth, divided from its goal.

A perfumed wood was burning, and its scent
Made someone sigh with somnolent content.
One said to him: 'Your sigh means ecstasy;
Think of the wood, whose sigh means misery'."

A bird who cannot leave his beloved

"Great hoopoe," said another bird, "my love
Has loaded me with chains, I cannot move.
This bandit, Love, confronted me and stole
My intellect, my heart, my inmost soul --
The image of her face is like a thief
Who fires the harvest and leaves only grief.
Without her I endure the pangs of hell,
Raving and cursing like an infidel;
How can I travel when my heart must stay
Lapped here in blood? And on that weary Way,
How many empty valleys lie ahead,
How many horrors wait for us? I dread
One moment absent from her lovely face;
How could I seek the Way and leave this place?
My pain exceeds all cure or remedy;
I've passed beyond both faith and blasphemy --
My blasphemy and faith are love for her;
My soul is her abject idolater --
And though companionless I weep and groan,
My friend is sorrow; I am not alone.
My love has brought me countless miseries,
But in her hair lie countless mysteries;
Without her face, blood chokes me, I am drowned,
I'm dust blown aimlessly across the ground.
Believe me, everything I say is true --
This is my state; now tell me what to do."

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: "You are the prisoner of
Appearances, a superficial love;
This love is not divine; it is mere greed

For flesh -- an animal, instinctive need.
To love what is deficient, trapped in time,
Is more than foolishness, it is a crime --
And blasphemous the struggle to evade
That perfect beauty which can never fade.
You would compare a face of blood and bile
To the full moon -- yet what could be more vile
In all the world than that same face when blood
And bile are gone? -- it is no more than mud.
This is the fleshly beauty you adore;
This is its being, this and nothing more.
How long then will you seek for beauty here?
Seek the unseen, and beauty will appear.
When that last veil is lifted neither men
Nor all their glory will be seen again,
The universe will fade -- this mighty show
In all its majesty and pomp will go,
And those who loved appearances will prove
Each other's enemies and forfeit love,
While those who loved the absent, unseen Friend
Will enter that pure love which knows no end.

Shebli and a man whose friend had died

Once Shebli saw a poor wretch weeping. 'Why
These tears?' the sheikh inquired. 'What makes you cry?'
He said: 'O sheikh, I had a friend whose face
Refreshed my soul with its young, candid grace --
But yesterday he died; since then I'm dead,
There's nothing that could dry the tears I shed.'
The sheikh replied: 'And is that all you miss?
Don't grieve, my friend, you're worth much more than this.
Choose now another friend who cannot die --
For His death you will never have to cry.
The friend from who, through death, we must soon part
Brings only sorrow to the baffled heart;
Whoever loves the world's bright surfaces
Endures in love a hundred miseries;
Too soon the surface flees his groping hand,
And sorrow comes which no man can withstand.'

A merchant who sold his favourite slave

There was a merchant once who had slave
As sweet as sugar -- how did he behave?
He sold that girl beyond comparison --
And O, how he regretted what he'd done!
He offered her new master heaps of gold
And would have paid her price a thousandfold;
His heart in flames, his poor head in a whirl,

He begged her owner to resell the girl.
But he was adamant and would not sell;
The merchant paced the street, his mind in hell,
And groaned: 'I cannot bear this searing pain --
But anyone who gives his love for gain,
Who stitches tight the eyes of common-sense
Deserves as much for his improvidence --
To think that on that fatal market-day
I tricked myself and gave the best away.'

Your breaths are jewels, each atom is a guide
To lead you to the Truth, and glorified
From head to foot with his great wealth you stand;
O, if you could entirely understand
Your absence from Him, then you would not wait
Inured by patience to your wretched fate --
God nourished you in love and holy pride,
But ignorance detains you from His side.

A king and his greyhound

A royal hunt swept out across the plain.
The monarch called for someone in his train
To bring a greyhound, and the handler brought
A dark, sleek dog, intelligent, well-taught;
A jewelled gold collar sparkled at its throat,
Its back was covered by a satin coat --
Gold anklets clasped its paws; its leash was made
Of silk threads twisted in a glistening braid.
The king thought him a dog who'd understand,
And took the silk leash in his royal hand;
The dog ran just behind his lord, then found
A piece of bone abandoned on the ground --
He stopped to sniff, and when the king saw why,
A glance of fury flashed out from his eye.
'When you're with me,' he said, 'your sovereign king,
How dare you look at any other thing?'
He snapped the leash and to his handler cried:
'Let this ill-mannered brute roam far and wide.
He's mine no more -- better for him if he
Had swallowed pins than found such liberty!'
The handler stared and tried to remonstrate:
'The dog, my lord, deserves an outcast's fate;
But we should keep the satin and the gold.'
The king said: 'No, do just as you are told;
Drive him, exactly as he is, away --
And when he comes back to himself some day,
He'll see the riches that he bears and know
That he was mine, a king's, but long ago.'

And you, who had a king once as your friend,
And lost Him through your negligence, attend:
Give yourself wholly to the love of Truth;
Drink with this dragon like a reckless youth --
Now is the dragon's time -- the lover must
Submit and see his throat's blood stain the dust;
What terrifies the human soul's so slight --
An ant at most -- in this vast dragon's sight;
His lovers' thirst will not be quenched till they
Drink their own love and take the selfless Way.

The martyrdom of Hallaj

Hallaj was taken to the gallows tree
And cried: 'I am the Truth'; they could not see
The meaning of his words and hacked at him,
Tearing his bleeding carcass limb from limb.
Then as his face grew deathly pale he raised
The bleeding stumps of broken arms and glazed
His moon-like face with glittering blood. He said:
'Since it is blood which paints a man's face red,
I've painted mine that no one here may say
"Hallaj turned pale on that last bloody day" --
If any saw me pale they'd think that I
Felt fear to face my torturers and die --
My fear's of less than one hair's consequence;
Look on my painted face for evidence!
When he must die and sees the gallows near,
The hero's courage leaves no room for fear --
Since all the world is like a little "o",
Why should I fear whatever it may show?
Who knows the seven-headed dragon's lair,
And sleeps and eats through summer's dog-days there,
Sees many games like this -- the gallows seems
The least of all his transitory dreams.' *

That sea of faith, Junaid, in Baghdad once
Discoursed with such persuasive eloquence
It seemed the stars bowed down to hear him speak.
This stalwart guide and comfort of the weak
Delighted in his son, a lovely child
Who as his father lectured was beguiled
And murdered by a gang -- they tossed his head
In that assembly's midst and quickly fled.
Junaid looked steadfastly at this cruel sight
And did not weep but said: 'What seems tonight
So strange was certain from eternity;
What happens happens from necessity'."

* *The last four lines of this passage are Attar's paraphrase of a poem by Hallaj. In this and*

the following anecdote Attar juxtaposes the attitude to death of the “ecstatic” mystic (Hallaj) and that of the “somber” mystic (Junaid).

A bird who fears death

Another bird spoke up: “The Way is long,
And I am neither valiant nor strong.
I’m terrified of death; I know that I --
Before the first stage is complete -- must die;
I tremble at the thought; when death draws near,
I know I’ll shriek and groan in snivelling fear.
Whoever fights death with his sword will meet
Inevitable, absolute defeat;
His sword and hand lie smashed. Alas! What grief
They grasp who grasp the sword as their belief!”

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: “How feebly you complain!
How long will this worn bag of bones remain?
What are you but a few bones? -- and at heart
Each bone is soft and hastens to depart.
Aren’t you aware that life, from birth to death,
Is little more than one precarious breath?
That all who suffer birth must also die,
Their being scattered to the windy sky?
As you are reared to live, so from your birth
You’re also reared to one day leave this earth.
The sky is like some huge, inverted bowl
Which sunset fills with blood from pole to pole --
The sun seems then an executioner,
Beheading thousands with his scimitar.
If you are profligate, if you are pure,
You are but water mixed with dust, no more --
A drop of trembling instability,
And can a drop resist the surging sea?
Though in the world you are a king, you must
In sorrow and despair return to dust.

The phoenix

In India lives a bird that is unique:
The lovely phoenix has a long, hard beak
Pierced with a hundred holes, just like a flute --
It has no mate, its reign is absolute.
Each opening has a different sound; each sound
Means something secret, subtle and profound --
And as these shrill, lamenting notes are heard,
A silence falls on every listening bird;

Even the fish grow still. It was from this
Sad chant a sage learnt music's artifice.
The phoenix' life endures a thousand years
And, long before, he knows when death appears;
When death's sharp pangs assail his tiring heart,
And all signs tell him he must now depart,
He builds a pyre from logs and massy trees
And from its centre sings sad threnodies --
Each plaintive note trills out, from each pierced hole
Comes evidence of his untarnished soul --
Now like a mourner's ululating cries,
Now with an inward care the cadence dies --
And as he sings of death, death's bitter grief
Thrills through him and he trembles like a leaf.
Then drawn to him by his heart-piercing calls
The birds approach, and savage animals --
They watch, and watching grief; each in his mind
Determines he will leave the world behind.
Some weep in sympathy and some grow faint;
Some die to hear his passionate complaint.
So death draws near, and as the phoenix sings
He fans the air with his tremendous wings,
A flame darts out and licks across the pyre --
Now wood and phoenix are a raging fire,
Which slowly sinks from that first livid flash
To soft, collapsing charcoal, then to ash:
The pyre's consumed -- and from the ashy bed
A little phoenix pushes up its head.
What other creature can -- throughout the earth --
After death takes him, to himself give birth?
If you were given all the phoenix' years,
Still you would have to die when death appears.
For years he sings in solitary pain
And must companionless, unmated, reign;
No children cheer his age and at his death
His ash is scattered by the wind's cold breath.
Now understand that none, however sly,
Can slip past death's sharp claws -- we all must die;
None is immortal in the world's vast length;
This wonder shows no creature has the strength
To keep death's ruthless vehemence in check --
But we must soften his imperious neck;
Though many tasks will fall to us, this task
Remains the hardest that the Way will ask.

A mourning son

Before his father's coffin walked a son --
It seemed his tears would never cease to run.
'No day for me is like the day you died;
My wounded soul despairs,' the poor man cried.

A passing sufi said: 'And such a day
Has never come your wretched father's way!
The son knows sorrow, but do not compare
Such grief with all his father has to bear.
You come into the world a helpless child
And spend your life by foolishness beguiled --
How your heart longs for sovereignty! -- alas,
Like wind through outstretched fingers you will pass.

A vice-roy at the point of death

A vice-roy lingered close to death. One said:
'You are in sight of secrets all men dread --
What do you feel?' 'There's nothing I can say,'
The man replied, 'except that every day
I lived was wasted on what's trivial,
And now I shall be dust -- and that is all.'
To seek death is death's only cure -- the leaf
Grows hectic and must fall; our life is brief.
Know we are born to die; the soul moves on;
The heart is pledged and hastens to be gone.
King Solomon, whose seal subdued all lands,
Is dust compounded with the desert sands,
And tyrants whose decrees spelt bloody doom
Decay to nothing in the narrow tomb;
How many sleep beneath the ground! And sleep
Like theirs is bitter, turbulent and deep.
Look hard at death -- in our long pilgrimage
The grave itself is but the first grim stage;
How your sweet life would change if you could guess
The taste of death's unequalled bitterness.

Jesus and the stream

Once Jesus reached a clear stream's shaded bank --
He scooped up water in his palms and drank;
How sweet that water was! as if it were
Some rose-sweet sherbet or an elixir.
One with him filled a jug, and on they went.
When Jesus drank, to his astonishment,
The jug seemed filled with bitterness. 'How strange,'
He said, 'that water can so quickly change --
They were the same; what can this difference mean?
What tasted sweet is brackish and unclean!'
The jug spoke: 'Lord, once I too had a soul
And was a man -- but I have been a bowl,
A cruse, a pitcher of crude earthenware,
Remade a thousand times; and all forms share
The bitterness of death -- which would remain
Though I were baked a thousand times again;
No water could be sweet which I contain.'

O careless of your fate! From this jug learn,
And from your inattentive folly turn;
O pilgrim, you have lost yourself -- before
Death takes you seek the hidden Way once more!
If while you live and breathe you fail to see
The nature of your own reality,
How can you search when dead? The man who lives
And does not strive is lost; his mother gives
Him life but he cannot become a man --
He strays, a self-deluded charlatan.
How many veils obstruct the sufi's quest,
How long his search till truth is manifest!

The death of Socrates

When Socrates lay close to death, a youth --
Who was his student in the search for truth --
Said: 'Master, when we've washed the man we knew
And brought your shroud, where should we bury you?'
He said: 'If you can find me when I've died,
Then bury me wherever you decide --
I never found myself; I cannot see
How when I'm dead you could discover me.
Throughout my life not one small particle
Had any knowledge of itself at all! "

A bird complains of his bad luck

Another bird said: "Hoopoe, it's no good.
Things never happen as I'd hoped they would;
I've spent my time in misery since birth,
The most unlucky wretch in all the earth --
My heart knows so much torment that it seems
Each atom of my body raves and screams;
My life has trodden out a hopeless way;
God damn me if I've had one happy day!
These sorrows lock me in myself -- how can
I undertake this journey which you plan?
If I were happy I would gladly start;
What stops me is this sorrow in my heart.
What can I do? Look, I appeal to you --
I've told you everything, what can I do?"

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: "How arrogant you are
To think your wretched self so singular!
The disappointments of this world will die
In less time than the blinking of an eye,

And as the earth must pass, pass by the earth --
Don't even glance at it, know what it's worth;
What empty foolishness it is to care
For what must one day be dispersed to air.

The man who refused to drink

There was a man advanced along the Way
Who always, to his puzzled friends' dismay,
Refused to drink sweet sherbet. 'Why is this?'
One asked: 'What could explain this prejudice?'
He said: 'I see a man who stands on guard
And notes who drinks -- his eyes are cold and hard,
And if I drank, the sweetest sherbet would,
I know, act like a poison in my blood.
While he stands here the contents of the bowl
Are liquid fire to sear the drinker's soul.'
Whatever lasts a moment's only worth
One barley grain -- though it were all the earth;
How can I trust what has no rooted power
And holds existence for a transient hour?
If you achieve your every wish, why boast
Of glory insubstantial as a ghost?
If disappointments darken all your days,
You need not grieve, for nothing worldly stays --
It is your passion for magnificence
That prompts your tears, not fancied indigence.
What is your grief compared with all the pain
God's martyrs suffered on Kerbelah's plain? *
In His clear sight the hardships you endure
Show like a treasure, glittering and pure --
Each breath you breathe His kindness reaches you,
And untold love envelops all you do --
But you forget His grace, and negligence
Makes friendship look like meaningless pretence.

** It was at Kerbelah that Husain, the son of Ali and grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, was killed. Husain refused to swear allegiance to the Caliph Yazid; he and his followers were surrounded at Kerbelah, and a swift decisive battle resulted in victory for Yazid's troops. It is Husain's death which is remembered with such fervour by Shi'a Moslems through the mourning month of Moharram. Before the battle Husain's water-supply was cut off, and he and his followers suffered greatly from thirst. During Moharram, and particularly on the anniversary of Husain's death, many Moslems will refuse to drink in commemoration of this thirst. It is this memory which is behind the otherwise rather obscure anecdote about the sufi who refused to touch sherbet, which precedes the mention of Kerbelah.*

The king who gave his slave an apple

A good kind-hearted monarch one day gave

A rosy apple to his favourite slave,
Who seemed to eat the fruit with such delight
The laughing king said: 'Here, give me a bite!
The slave returned him half, but when the king
Bit into it it seemed a paltry thing,
Unripe and tart. Frowning he said: 'And how
Is what appeared so sweet so bitter now?'
The slave replied: 'My lord, you've given me
Such proofs of constant generosity,
I could not find it in my grateful heart
To grumble just because one apple's tart --
I must accept whatever you bestow;
No harm can come to me from you, I know.'
If you meet tribulations here be sure
That wealth will come from all you must endure;
The paths of God are intricate and strange --
What can you do? Accept what will not change!
The wise know every mouthful on this Way
Tastes bitter with their blood. Until that day
When as His guests they break their bread, they must
Consume in suffering each broken crust.

One asked a sufi how he spent his time.
He said: 'I'm thirsty, filthy, smeared with grime,
Burnt in this stove men call the world, but I
Shall keep my courage up until I die.'
If in this world you seek for happiness
You are asleep, your search is meaningless --
If you seek happiness you would do well
To think of that thin bridge arched over hell. *
The world's apparent joy cannot compare
With what we seek -- it isn't worth a hair;
Here the Self rages like an unquenched fire,
And nothing satisfies the heart's desire --
Encompass all the earth, you will not find
One happy heart or one contented mind.

** Sirat: a hair-thin bridge over the pit of hell. The good will be able to cross it; the wicked will slip and plunge into the pit (cf. the 'brig o' dread' in the "Lyke Wake Dirge").*

A woman who wished to pray for happiness

An old, sad woman talked to Mahna's sheikh:
'Teach me to pray for joy, for pity's sake --
I've suffered so much that I cannot bear
To think of future grief -- give me some prayer
To murmur every day.' The sheikh replied:
'How many years I wandered far and wide
Until I found the fortress that you seek --
It is the knee, bend it, accept, be meek;

I found no other way -- this remedy,
And only this, will cure your misery.'

One sat before Junaid. 'You are God's prey,'
He said, 'yet you are free in every way --
Tell me, when does a man know happiness?
When does his heart rejoice? I cannot guess.'
Junaid replied: 'That hour he finds the heart.'
Unless we reach our king we must depart --
With all our courage wasted -- into night.
We atoms are amazed, and lack the light
Of the immortal sun; what circumstance,
What suffering, could cleanse our ignorance?
An atom looked at from which way you will
Remains unalterably an atom still;
And one who has an atom's nature shows
That stubborn fact, no matter how he grows.
If he were lost within the blazing sun
He'd stay an atom till his life were done,
And, good or bad, no matter how he strains,
A tiny atom is what he remains.
O atom, weaving like a drunk until
You reach the sun -- unsettled, never still --
My patience knows that one day you will see,
Beside the sun, your insufficiency.

The bat who wanted to see the sun

One night a bat said: 'How is it that I
Have never seen the sun; I wonder why?
I long to lose myself in its pure light;
Instead my wretched life is one long night --
But though I travel with my eyes shut fast
I know I'll reach that promised blaze at last.'
A seer had overheard and said: 'What pride!
A thousand years might bring you to its side;
You are bewildered, lost -- you could as soon
Attain the sun as could an ant the moon.'
The unpersuaded bat said: 'Never mind,
I'll fly about and see what I can find.'
For years he flew in dismal ignorance,
Till he collapsed in an exhausted trance
And murmured as he tried in vain to fly:
'Where is the sun? Perhaps I've passed it by?'
The seer was there and said: 'You've managed one
Short step, and yet you think you've passed the sun;
You live in dreams!' Shame crushed the bat; he felt
The last thin remnants of his courage melt.
Humble and wretched, he sought out the Way --
'He understands,' he said, 'I will obey'."

A bird accepts the hoopoe's leadership

Another bird said: "Hoopoe, you're our guide.
How would it be if I let you decide?
I'm ignorant of right and wrong -- I'll wait
For any orders that you stipulate.
Whatever you command I'll gladly do,
Delighted to submit myself to you."

"Bravo!" the hoopoe cried. "By far the best
Decision is the one that you suggest;
Whoever will be guided finds relief
From Fate's adversity, from inward grief;
One hour of guidance benefits you more
Than all your mortal life, however pure.
Those who will not submit like dogs stray,
Beset by misery, and lose their way --
How much a dog endures! and all in vain;
Without a guide his pain is simply pain.
But one who suffers and is guided gives
His merit to the world; he truly lives.
Take refuge in the orders of your guide,
And like a slave subdue your restive pride.

The king who stopped at the prison gates

A king returned once to his capital.
His subjects had prepared a festival,
And each to show his homage to the crown
Had helped to decorate the glittering town.
The prisoners had no wealth but iron givings,
Chains, severed heads, racked limbs and ruined lives --
With such horrific ornaments they made
A sight to greet their monarch's cavalcade.
The king rode through the town and saw the way
His subjects solemnized the happy day,
But nothing stopped the progress of his train
Till he approached the prison and drew rein.
There he dismounted and had each man told
That he was free and would be paid in gold.
A courtier asked the king: 'What does this mean?
To think of all the pageantry you've seen --
Brocade and satin shining everywhere,
Musk and sweet ambergris to scent the air,
Jewels scattered by the handful on the ground --
And not so much as once did you look round;
Yet here you stop -- before the prison gate!
Are severed heads a way to celebrate?
What is there here to give you such delight?
Torn limbs and carcasses? A grisly sight!

And why did you dismount? Should you sit down
With all the thieves and murderers in town?
The king replied: 'The others make a noise
Like rowdy children playing with new toys;
Each takes his part in some festivity,
Careful to please himself as much as me --
They do their duty and are quite content,
But here in prison more than duty's meant.
My word is law here, and they've plainly shown
This spectacle was made for me alone.
I see obedience here; need I explain
Why it is here I'm happy to draw rein?
The others celebrate in pompous pride,
Conceited, giddy and self-satisfied,
But these poor captives sacrifice their will
And bow to my commands through good and ill --
They have no business but to spend each breath
In expectation of the noose and death,
Yet they submit -- and to my grateful eyes
Their prison is a flower-strewn paradise.'
Wisdom accepts authority and waits;
The king paused only at the prison gates.

A sufi who surpassed Bayazid and Tarmazi

A master of the Way once said: 'Last night
I saw a strange, unprecedented sight --
I dreamt that Bayazid and Tarmazi
Were walking, and they both gave way to me --
I was their guide! I sought to understand
How two such sheikhs were under my command,
And then remembered that one distant dawn
A sigh was from my very entrails torn;
That sigh had cleared the Way -- a massive gate
Swung open, and I entered the debate
Of sheikhs and dervishes. All questioned me
But Bayazid, who was content to see
That I was there; he uttered no request
But said: "I heard the sigh that tore your breast,
And knew I must accept you as you are,
Not seek for this or that particular --
Embrace the soul and disregard the pain,
Or weigh up what is loss and what is gain;
Your wish is my command, for who am I
To question those commands or to reply?
Your faithful slave cannot demure or tire;
I will perform whatever you desire."
This shows why Bayazid and Tarmazi,
Though they are great, gave precedence to me.'
When once a slave accepts his Lord's control
And hears Him whisper in his inmost soul

He does not boast, no outward signs are shown,
But when life's crises come -- then he is known.

The death of Sheikh Kherghan

When Sheikh Kherghan lay near to death he cried:
'If men could split my heart and see inside,
They'd tell the world my misery and pain,
A wise man's secret doctrine would be plain:
Forsake idolatry; if you do this
You are His slave, and cannot go amiss;
All else is pride. If you are neither slave
Nor God you're substance less, however brave --
I call you "No-one"; turn now, no-one, seek
Devotion's path, be humble, lowly, meek.
But when you bow the head in slavery,
Be resolute, bow down with dignity:
The king who sees a cringing, stupid slave
Who has no notion how he should behave
Expels him from his court, and Mecca's shrine
Is closed to louts and fools. If you combine
True servitude with dignity your Lord
Will not deny you your desired reward.'

The slave who was given a splendid robe

A slave was given, from his sovereign's hand,
A splendid robe -- and feeling very grand
He put it on to wander through the town.
By chance, as he paraded up and down,
Some mud splashed in his face, and with his sleeve
He quickly wiped it off: who should perceive
His action but a sneaking sycophant --
The king was told and hanged the miscreant.
From this unhappy story you can see
How kings treat those who have no dignity."

A bird questions the hoopoe about purity

Another bird spoke next: "Dear hoopoe, say
What purity consists of on this Way,
It seems a settled heart's forbidden me --
All that I gain I lose immediately.
It's either scattered to the winds or turns
To scorpions in my hands; my being yearns
For this great quest, I'm bound to nothing here --
I smashed all worldly chains and knew no fear;

With purity of heart, who knows, I might
Behold His face with my unaided sight.”

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: “Our Way does not belong
To anyone, but to the pure and strong --
To those who let go every interest
And give themselves entirely to our quest;
All your possessions are not worth a hair.
(Don't mend what's torn, what's sewn together tear!)
Consign them to the fire, and when its flash
Has burnt them, rake together all the ash
And sit on it -- then you will know their worth.
But you will curse the day that gave you birth
If you ignore my words. Until your heart
Is free of ownership you cannot start --
Since we must leave this prison and its pains,
Detach yourself from all that it contains;
Will what you own bribe death? Will death delay?
If you would enter on the pilgrim's Way,
Tie up your grasping hands: all you endure
Is valueless if you set out impure.

A sheikh of Turkistan once said: ‘Above
All other things there are just two I love.
My swiftly trotting piebald horse is one --
The second is none other than my son --
If death should take my son I'd sacrifice
My horse in thanks -- I know these two entice,
As idols would, my spirit from the Way.’
Don't brag of purity until the day
You flare as candles do whose substance turns
To nothing as the flame leaps up and burns;
Whoever boasts a pure, unsullied name
Will find his actions contradict his claim,
When purity gives way to greed, the power
Of retribution strikes within the hour.

Sheikh Kherghani and the aubergine

One day Sheikh Kherghani's devout routine
Was spoilt by cravings for an aubergine.
His mother was unsure what should be done
But hesitantly gave him half a one --
The moment that he bit its flesh a crew
Of ruffians seized his son and ran him through.
That night, outside the sheikh's front door they laid
His boy's head hacked off by a cutlass blade.
The sheikh cried out: ‘How often I'd foreseen

Disaster if I tasted aubergine!
The man who has been chosen by this Guide
Must follow Him and never swerve aside --
His service is more terrible than war,
Than shame that cringes to a conqueror.
It is not knowledge keeps a man secure --
With all his understanding, fate is sure;
Each moment we receive a different guest,
And each that comes presents another test,
Although a hundred sorrows wring your soul,
The future will not bow to your control.
But one who breaks illusion's hold will find
Misfortune will not always cloud his mind.
A hundred thousand of His lovers sigh
To sacrifice themselves for him and die;
How many waste their idle lives until
They bleed and groan, subservient to His will.

A voice speaks to Zulnoon

Zulnoon said: 'I was in the desert once.
Trusting in God, I'd brought no sustenance --
I came on forty men ahead of me,
Dressed all in rags, a closed community.
My heart was moved. "O God," I cried, "take heed,
What wretched lives you make your pilgrims lead!"
"We know their life and death," a voice replied;
"We kill these pilgrims first; when they have died
We compensate them for the blood we shed."
I asked, "When will this killing stop?" He said:
"When my exchequer has no love * to give,
While I can pay for death they shall not live,
I drink my servant's blood and he is hurled
In frenzied turbulence about the world --
Then when he is destroyed and cannot find
His head, his feet, his passions or his mind,
I clothe him in the splendour he has won
And grace enfolds him, radiant as the sun:
Though I will have his face bedaubed by blood,
A starved ascetic smeared with dust and mud,
A denizen of shadows and the night --
Yet I will rise before him robed in light,
And when that sun, My countenance, is here
What can these shadows do but disappear?"'
Shadows are swallowed by the sun, and he
Who's lost in God is from himself set free;
Don't chatter about loss -- be lost! Repent,
And give up vain, self-centred argument;
If one can lose the Self, in all the earth
No other being can approach his worth.

I know of no one in the world profound
As Pharaoh's sorcerers: the wealth they found
Was faith's true Way, which is to sift apart
The grosser Self from the aspiring heart.
The world's known nothing of them since that day
They took this first short step along the Way --
And in the world no wisdom could provide
A surer path than this, a better guide!"

** The metaphor is based on the notion of blood-money. A murder could be compensated, if the victim's relatives agreed, by payment of a sum of money; God destroys the dervishes, then pays for this 'crime' with His love; He will continue to do this until He has no more love to give, i.e. for ever.*

A bird who burns with aspiration

"O hoopoe," cried another of the birds,
"What lofty ardour blazes from your words!
Although I seem despondent, weak and lame,
I burn with aspiration's noble flame --
And though I'm not obedient I feel
My soul devoured by an insatiate zeal."

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: "This strange, magnetic force
That holds God's ancient lovers to their course
Still shows the Truth: if you will but aspire
You will attain to all that you desire.
Before an atom of such need the sun
Seems dim and murky by comparison --
It is life's strength, the wings by which we fly
Beyond the further reaches of the sky.

The old woman who wanted to buy Joseph

When Joseph was for sale, the market-place
Teemed with Egyptians wild to see his face;
So many gathered there from dawn to dusk
The asking price was five whole tubs of musk.
An ancient crone pushed forward -- in her hand
She held a few threads twisted strand by strand;
She brandished them and yelled with all her might:
'Hey, you, the seller of the Canaanite!
I'm mad with longing for this lovely child --
I've spun these threads for him, he drives me wild!
Don't argue now, I haven't got all day!
The merchant laughed and said: 'Come on, old girl,

It's not for you to purchase such a pearl --
His value's reckoned up in gold and jewels;
He can't be sold for threads to ancient fools!
'O, I knew that before,' the old crone said;
'I knew you wouldn't sell him for my thread --
But it's enough that everyone will say
"She bid for Joseph on that splendid day".'
The heart that does not strive can never gain
The endless kingdom's gates and lives in vain;
It was pure aspiration made a king
Set fire to all he owned -- to everything --
And when his goods had vanished without trace
A thousand kingdoms sprang up in their place.
When noble aspiration seized his mind,
He left the world's corrupted wealth behind --
Can one who craves the sun be satisfied
With petty ignorance? Is this his guide?

The poverty of Abraham Adam

I know of one who whined unceasingly,
Complaining of his abject poverty,
Till Abraham Adham said: 'Do you weep
Because you bought your poverty too cheap?'
The man replied: 'What's that supposed to mean?
To purchase poverty would be obscene.'
He said: 'I gave a kingdom up for mine,
But for the earthly realm which I resign
I still receive, each moment that I live,
A hundred worlds: my realm was fugitive --
I said farewell to it, to all the earth,
And put my trust in goods of proven worth.
I know what value is; I praise His name --
And you know neither, to your lasting shame.'
Those who aspire renounce both heart and soul,
Content through years to suffer for their goal;
The bird of aspiration seeks His throne,
Outsoaring faith and all the world, alone:
But if you lack this zeal, be off with you --
You're quite unfit for all we have to do.

Sheikh Ghouri and Prince Sanjar

When Sheikh Ghouri, an adept of the Way,
Took refuge under a bridge one day
Together with a group of crazy fools,
Sanjar rode by, resplendent in his jewels,
And said: 'Who's huddled over there?' 'O king,'
The sheikh replied, 'we haven't got a thing,
But we've decided on a choice for you --

Be good to us, and bid the world adieu,
Or be our enemy, and you will find
It is your faith that you must leave behind.
If you will join us for a moment here,
Your pride and gorgeous pomp will disappear --
Look at our friendship and our enmity
And make your mind up; which is it to be?'
Sanjar replied: 'I'm not the man for you.
It's not your kind my hate and love pursue;
You're not my enemy, you're not my friend;
My heart's directed to a different end.
In front of you I've neither pride nor shame
And have no business with your praise or blame.'
The bird of aspiration spreads its wings
And quickly soars beyond terrestrial things --
Beyond the lower world's complacent guess
Of what is temperance, what drunkenness.

The feathers of the soul

One night a fool of God wept bitterly
And said: 'The world, as far as I can see,
Is like a box, and we are locked inside,
Lost in the darkness of our sin and pride;
When death removes the lid we fly away --
If we have feathers -- to eternal day,
But those who have no feathers must stay here,
Tormented in this box by pain and fear.'
Give wings to aspiration; love the mind;
And if at death you'd leave this box behind,
Grow wings and feathers for the soul; if not,
Burn all your hopes, for you will die and rot."

A bird questions the hoopoe about justice and loyalty

Another bird said: "What are loyalty
And justice, put beside such majesty?
God gave me boundless loyalty and I've
Not been unjust to any man alive --
What is the ghostly rank of those who own
Such qualities, before our sovereign's throne?"

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said "Salvation's Lord is just,
And justice raises man above the dust;
To live with justice in your heart exceeds
A lifetime's earnest prayer and pious deeds;

And tales of lavish generosity
Are less than one just act done secretly
(Though justice given in a public place
Suggests deceit beneath the smiling face).
The just man does not argue for his rights;
It is for others that he stands and fights.

Ahmad Hanbal and the beggar

Ahmad Hanbal, a man renowned and wise,
Whose knowledge no one dared to criticize,
Would when he felt his mind inadequate
Consult a barefoot beggar at his gate.
If anyone discovered him they'd say:
'But you're our wisest man in every way;
When one of us is called upon to speak
You scarcely hear our words -- yet here you seek
A barefoot beggar out; what can it mean?'
Ahman Hanbal replied: 'As you have seen,
My commentaries have carried off the prize;
In matters of *hadith** and law I'm wise --
I know more worldly things than him, it's true,
But he knows God -- much more than I can do.'
Look at this action well before you claim
A justice that does not deserve the name.

** Actions or (more particularly) sayings of the Prophet Mohammad. The scholar's task is to sort out which are genuine.*

An Indian king

As Mahmud's army moved through India,
They chanced to take an old king prisoner
Who learnt the Moslem faith at Mahoud's court
And counted this world and the next as nought.
Alone, a hermit in a ragged tent,
He lived for prayer, an eager penitent,
His face bathed day and night in scalding tears --
At last the news of this reached Mahmud's ears.
He summoned him and said: 'I'll give to you
A hundred kingdoms and their revenue;
It's not for you to weep, you are a king;
I promise to return you everything!'
To this the Indian king replied: 'My lord,
It's not my kingdom conquered by your sword
That makes me weep, but thoughts of Judgement Day;
For at the resurrection God will say
"O faithless wretch, you had no thoughts of Me
Till you were crushed by Mahmud's cavalry --

It took an army's might to change your mind
And till you stood defenceless you were blind --
Does this make you My friend or enemy?
How long did I treat you with loyalty
And in return endure your thankless hate?
Is this the friendship that you advocate?"
If God says this, what answer can I give
To contradict the damning narrative?
Young man, if you could understand my fears
You'd know the reason for an old man's tears.'
Learn from these faithful words, and if your heart
Holds faith like this, prepare now to depart;
But if your heart is faithless, give up now,
Forget our struggle and renounce your vow;
The faithless have no place on any page
Within the volume of our pilgrimage.

The faithless Moslem and the faithful infidel

A Moslem fought an infidel one day
And as they fought requested time to pray.
He prayed and fought again -- the infidel
Then asked for time to say his prayers as well;
He went aside to find a cleaner place
And there before his idol bowed his face.
The Moslem, when he saw him kneel and bow,
Said: Victory is mine if I strike now."
But as he raised his sword for that last stroke,
A warning voice from highest heaven spoke:
'O vicious wretch -- from head to foot deceit --
What promises are these, you faithless cheat?
His blade was sheathed when you asked him for time;
For you to strike him now would be a crime --
Have you not read in Our Koran the verse
"Fulfil your promises"? And will you curse
The word you gave? The infidel was true;
He kept his promises, and so should you.
You offer evil in return for good --
With others act as to yourself you would!
The infidel kept faith with you, and where
Is your fidelity, for all your prayer?
You are a Moslem, but false piety
Is less than this poor pagan's loyalty.'
The Moslem heard this speech and went apart;
Sweat poured from him, remorse accused his heart.
The pagan saw him as if spell-bound stand,
Tears in his eyes, his sword still in his hand,
And asked: 'Why do you weep?' The man replied:
'My shame is not a matter I can hide' --
He told him of the voice that he had heard
Reproaching him when he would break his word,
And ending said: 'My tears anticipate

The fury of your vengeance and your hate.'
But when the infidel had heard this tale,
His eyes were filled with tears, his face turned pale --
'God censures you for your disloyalty
And guards the life of His sworn enemy --
Can I continue to be faithless now?
I'll burn my gods, to Allah I will bow,
Expound His law! Too long my heart has lain
In darkness bound by superstition's chain.'
What infidelity you give for love!
But I shall wait until the heavens above
Confront you with the actions you have done
And number them before you, one by one.

Joseph and his brothers

Ten starving brothers left their home to stand
In Joseph's presence, in a foreign land,
And begged for some benevolent relief
To ease the torments of their wretched grief.
Now Joseph's face was veiled; he took a bowl
And struck it hard -- a sound as if a soul
Cried out in misery was heard. He said:
'Do you know what this means?' Each shook his head.
'Lord, no one in the world, search far and wide,
Could give this noise a meaning,' they replied.
Then Joseph said: 'It speaks to you; it says
You had a brother once, in former days,
More precious than this bowl -- he bore the name
Of Joseph; and it says that, to your shame,
His goodness overshadowed all of you.'
Once more he struck the bowl. 'It says you threw
This Joseph in a well, then stained his cloak
With wolf's blood; and it says the smeared rags broke
Poor Jacob's heart.' He touched the bowl again:
'It says you brought your father needless pain
And sold the lovely Joseph. Is this true?
May God bestow remorse to chasten you!
These brothers who had come to beg for bread
Stood speechless, faint with apprehensive dread:
When they gave Joseph for the merchant's gold,
It was themselves, and all the world, they sold --
And when they threw their brother in that well,
They threw themselves in the abyss of hell.
Whoever hears these words and cannot find
How they apply to him is truly blind.
There is no need to scrutinize my tale,
It is your own; when thoughtlessly you fail
To render loyalty its proper due,
How can the light of friendship shine for you?
But, till you're woken, sleep -- too soon you'll see
Your shameful crimes, your infidelity,

And when you stand a prisoner in that place
They'll count them one by one before your face;
There, when the bowl is struck, you too will find
That fear dissolves your reason and your mind.
You're like a lame ant struggling for its soul,
Aimlessly sliding, caught inside this bowl --
Blood fills it, but a voice beyond its rim
Still calls to you -- rise now, and fly to Him."

A bird questions the hoopoe about audacity

Another bird said: "Is audacity
Allowable before such majesty?
One needs audacity to conquer fear --
But is it right in His exalted sphere?"

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: "Those who are worthy reach
A subtle understanding none can teach;
They guard the secrets of our glorious king
And therefore are not kept from anything --
But how could one who knows such secrets be
Convicted of the least audacity?
Since he is filled with reverence to the brim,
A breath of boldness is permitted him.
(The ignorant, it's true, can never share
The secrets of our king. If one should dare
To ape the ways of the initiate,
What does he do but blindly imitate?
He's like some soldier who kicks up a din
And spoils the ranks with his indiscipline.)
But think of some new pilgrim, some young boy
Whose boldness comes from mere excess of joy;
He has no certain knowledge of the Way
And what seems rudeness is but loving play --
He's like a madman -- love's audacity
Will have him walking on the restless sea.
Such ways are laudable; we should admire
This love that turns him to a blazing fire;
One can't expect discretion from a flame,
And madmen are beyond reproach or blame --
When madness chooses you to be its prey
We'll hear what crazy things you have to say.

The dervish who envied a king's slaves

Once Khorasan enjoyed great affluence
Beneath a prince of proved benevolence --

His slaves were lovely as the moon at dusk,
Straight-limbed and silver, scented with soft musk,
And in their ears shone pearls whose milky light
Reflected daytime in the darkest night.
Gold ornaments half hid and half revealed
Their silver limbs; each held a golden shield.
Bright gems adorned their belts; a white horse bore
Each slave as if he were a conqueror.
Whoever saw this shining army gave
His heart to them, the slaves' contented slave.
A barefoot, hungry dervish once, by chance,
Caught sight of this unique magnificence,
And wondering asked: 'What houris might these be?'
The crowd exclaimed: 'The splendid troop you see
Are slaves belonging to our noble lord.'
The dervish writhed as if in pain, then roared:
'Great God, look down from your exalted sphere --
Learn how to treat your slaves from this man here!
If you are mad like him, if you possess
Such leaves of Truth, forget all bashfulness,
Be bold! But if these leaves are not your style,
Control yourself, and wipe away your smile.
Boldness like this does not deserve our blame;
Such men are moths, ambitious for the flame --
They only see their goal and cannot say
What's good or bad along the pilgrims' Way.

A madman seeks shelter

A naked madman, gnawed by hunger, went
Along the road -- his shivering frame was bent
Beneath the icy sleet; no house stood there
To offer shelter from the wintry air.
He saw a ruined hut and with a dash
Stood underneath its roof; a sudden crash
Rang out -- a tile had fallen on his head,
And how the gaping gash it cut there bled!
He looked up at the sky and yelled: 'Enough!
Why can't you clobber me with better stuff?'

The poor man, the rich man and the ass

A poor man living in a drainage-ditch
Once borrowed from his neighbour (who was rich)
A valued ass, and rode it to the mill.
He slept there, and the ass made off at will --
A wolf devoured the beast; with indignation
The owner made a claim for compensation.
The poor man and his neighbour went to court,
Submitting an exhaustive, full report --
'Now who should pay?' they asked. The judge replied:

'Whoever * lets this wolf hunt far and wide,
Whoever put him here to roam about,
Should compensate you both without a doubt --
O God, who is the debtor, who can say?
It's certain that no mortal ought to pay.'
As Egypt's noble maidens swooned to see
Dear Joseph's radiant face, so ecstasy
Is mirrored in the sufi's maddened heart --
Then he has lost himself and moves apart
From all that we perceive -- the world grows dim
As all the world resolves to follow him.

i.e. God.

A famine in Egypt

In Egypt once a baleful famine spread --
The people perished as they begged for bread.
Death filled the roads; the living gnawed the dead.
A crazy dervish saw their wretched plight
And cried: 'O God, look down from Your great height --
If there's no food for them, make fewer men!'
A man who speaks like this asks pardon when
He comes back to himself -- if he's to blame
He knows the ways to cancel all his shame.

A dervish deceived by a hailstorm

A dervish suffered bruises and sore bones
From children who continually threw stones.
He found a ruined hut and in he stole,
Not noticing its roof contained a hole.
A hailstorm started -- through the leaky shed
The hail came bouncing on the old man's head.
The hail was stones for all that he could tell --
He lost his temper and began to yell.
Convinced that they were throwing stones once more,
He screamed out filthy names, fumed, stamped and swore --
Then thought: 'This dark's so thick it's possible
It's not the children this time after all.'
A door blew open and revealed the hail;
He saw his error and began to wail:
'The darkness tricked me, God -- and on my head
Be all the foolish, filthy names I said.'
If crazy dervishes behave like this
It's not for you to take their words amiss;
If they seem drunk to you, control your scorn --
Their lives are painful, savage and forlorn;
They must endure a lifetime's hopelessness
And every moment brings some new distress --
Don't meddle with their conduct; don't reprove

Those given up to madness and to love.
You would excuse them -- nothing is more sure --
If you could share the darkness they endure.

AlVasati passes the Jewish cemetery

AlVasati, cast down by grief one day,
Proceeded on his troubled, weary way
Until he saw the Jewish cemetery
And said: 'These souls are pardoned and go free;
But this is not a truth that can be taught,'
His words were heard and he was haled to court,
Where angry judges asked him what he meant --
AlVasati replied: 'Your government
Accuses them; their pardon's heaven-sent'."

A bird claims that he lives only for the Simorgh

Another bird spoke up: 'I live for love,
For Him and for the glorious world above --
For Him I've cut myself from everything;
My life's one song of love to our great king.
I've seen the world's inhabitants, and know
I could not worship any here below;
My ardent love's for Him alone; how few
Can manage to adore Him as I do!
But though I've struggled on with all my soul,
It seems I haven't quite achieved our goal.
The time has come -- my Self will disappear;
I'll drink the wine of meekness and draw near;
His beauty will illuminate my heart;
His neck will know my touch; we shall not part."

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: "The Simorgh isn't won
By boasts of who you are and what you've done --
Don't brag of love; He's not deceived by lies,
And no one pulls the wool across his eyes.
His call is like some lightly wafted breeze
Lifting the veil from hidden mysteries --
Then He will draw you to Himself, alone;
Your place will be with Him, beside His throne
(Though if mere pride of place prompts your desire,
Your love prepares you for eternal fire).

Bayazid after death

When Bayazid had left the world behind,
He came that night before the dreaming mind
Of one of his disciples, who in fear
Asked how he'd fared with Monkar and Nakir.*
He said: "When those two angels questioned me
About the Lord, I told them I could see
No profit in our talk -- if I should say
'He is my God', my answer would betray
A proud, ambitious heart; they should return
To god and ask him what they wished to learn --
God says who is His slave; the slave is dumb,
Waiting for Him to say: 'Good servant, come!'
If grace is give you from God above,
Then you are wholly worthy of His love;
And if He kindles joy in you, the fire
Will burst out and its flames beat ever higher --
It is His works that act, not yours, you fool;
When will these dunces understand His rule!

** Two angels who question the dead on their faith.*

A dervish in love with God

A dervish wept to feel the violence of
The inextinguishable fires of love.
His spirit melted, and his soul became
A seething mass of incandescent flame;
He wept as he proceeded on his way,
And through his scalding tears was heard to say:
'For how much longer must I weep? Desire
Has burnt my life in its consuming fire.'
'What's all this boasting for?' a voice replied,
'Can you approach Him with such senseless pride?'
'And when did I approach Him?' asked the saint;
'No, He approaches me; that's my complaint --
How could a wretched thing like me pretend
To have the worth to claim Him as my friend?
Look -- I do nothing; He performs all deeds
And He endures the pain when my heart bleeds.'
When He draws near and grants you audience
Should you hang back in tongue-tied diffidence?
When will your cautious heart consent to go
Beyond the homely boundaries you know?
O slave, if He should show His love to you,
Love which His deeds perpetually renew,
You will be nothing, you will disappear --
Leave all to Him who acts, and have no fear.
If there is any 'you', if any wraith
Of Self persists, you've strayed outside our faith.

Shah Mahmoud and the stoker at the public baths

Shah Mahmoud, full of sorrow, went one night
To one who keeps the baths' huge fires alight;
The man made room among the ash and grime
(Feeding the furnace-mouth from time to time),
Then brought the king some stale, unwholesome bread.
'When he knows who I am,' Shah Mahmoud said,
'He'll beg to be allowed to keep his head!'
When, finally, the king prepared to go,
The poor man said: 'I haven't much to show --
You've seen my home and food (I brought the best;
You were a rather unexpected guest),
But if in future you feel sorrow's pain
I hope you'll come and be my guest again.
If you weren't king you could be happy, sire;
I'm happy shovelling wood on this great fire --
So I'm not less than you or more, you see ...
I'm nothing next to you, your majesty.'
The king was so impressed that he returned,
What more could I desire from you than you?
May my perverse heart die if it should crave
Another fate than to remain your slave!
What's sovereignty to me? All I request
Is that from time to time you'll be my guest.'
The bath attendant's love should teach you yours;
Learn from him all the loving heart endures --
And if this love has stirred in you, then cling
With passion to the garments of your king;
He too is moved; hold fast and do not stop --
He is a sea; He asks of you one drop.

Two water-sellers

A man who lived by selling water found
He'd very little left; he looked around
And saw another water-seller there --
'Have you got any water you could spare?'
He asked. 'No, fool, I certainly have not,'
The other snapped: 'make do with what you've got!'
'O, give me some,' the man began to plead;
'I'm sick of what I have; it's yours I need.'
When Adam's heart grew tired of all he knew,
He yearned for wheat; a substance strange and new --
He gave up all he owned for one small grain,
And naked suffered love's relentless pain;
He disappeared in love's intensity --
The old and new were gone and so was he;
He was annihilated, lost, made naught --
Nothingness swallowed all his hands had sought.

To turn from what we are, to yearn and die
Is not for us to choose or to deny.”

A bird you claims to be satisfied with his spiritual state

Another bird squawked: “There can be no doubt
I’ve made myself unworldly and devout.
To reach this wise perfection which you see
I’ve lived a life of cruel austerity,
And as I’ve gained the sum of wisdom here,
I really couldn’t move, I hope that’s clear.
What fool would leave his treasury to roam
In deserts and dry mountains far from home?”

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: “Hell’s pride has filled your soul;
Lost in self-love, you dread our distant goal.
Your arrogance deceives you, and you stray
Further and further from the spirit’s Way.
Your Self has trapped your soul and made it blind;
The devil’s throne is your complacent mind.
The light that guides you is a fantasy,
Your love a self-induced absurdity --
All your austerities are just a cheat,
And all you say is nothing but deceit.
Don’t trust the light which shows you where you go;
Your own Self sheds this dim, misleading glow --
It has no sword, but such an enemy
Will threaten any man’s security.
If it’s your Self’s light which the road reveals,
It’s like the scorpion’s sting which parsley heals;
Don’t be deceived by this false glow, but run
And be an atom since you’re not the sun
(Don’t grieve because the Way is dark as night,
Or strive to emulate the sun’s pure light);
Whilst you are locked within yourself your cares
Are worthless as your worthless cries and prayers.
If you would soar beyond the circling sky,
First free yourself from thoughts of “me” and “I”;
If any thought of selfhood stains your mind
An empty void is all the Self will find,
If any taste of selfhood stays with you
Then you are damned whatever you may do.
If selfhood beckons you for but one breath
A rain of arrows will decide your death.
While you exist endure the spirit’s pain;
A hundred times bow down, then bow again --
But if you cling to selfhood and its crimes,
Your neck will feel Fate’s yoke a hundred times.

How Sheikh Abou Bakr's self-satisfaction was reproved

Sheikh Abou Bakr of Neishapour one day
Led his disciples through a weary way.
His donkey carried him, aloof, apart --
And then the beast let out a monstrous fart!
The sheikh began to tear his clothes and cry
Till one of his disciples asked him why.
The sheikh said: 'When I looked I saw a sea
Of my disciples sworn to follow me;
They filled the roads and in my mind there slid
The thought: 'By God, I equal Bayazid!
So many praise me, can I doubt this sign
That heaven's boundless glories will be mine?'
Then as I triumphed in my inmost heart,
My donkey answered me -- and with a fart;
My pompous, self-deceiving soul awoke,
And this is why I weep and tear my cloak.'
How far away the truth remains while you
Are lost in praise for all you say and do --
Destroy your arrogance, and feed the fire
With that vain Self you foolishly admire.
You change your face each moment, but deep down
You are a Pharaoh and you wear his crown,
Whilst one small atom of this 'you' survives
Hypocrisy enjoys a hundred lives.
If you put all your trust in 'I' and 'me'
You've chosen both worlds as your enemy --
But if you kill the Self, the darkest night
Will be illuminated with your light.
If you would flee from evil and its pain
Swear never to repeat this 'I' again!

The devil's secret

God said to Moses once: 'Go out and find
The secret truth that haunts the devil's mind.'
When Moses met the devil that same day
He asked for his advice and heard him say:
'Remember this, repeat it constantly,
Don't speak of 'me', or you will be like me.'
If life still holds you by a single hair,
The end of all your toil will be despair;
No matter how you prosper, there will rise
Before your face a hundred smirking 'I's.

A saint once said: 'The novice ought to see
A door that opens on obscurity --
Then seas of love will inundate his mind,
And he will leave our earthly life behind;

If he sees anything but darkness there,
He is deceived and worships empty air.'
Though others see them, you have not the art
To recognize the passions in your heart.
There is a den in you where dragons thrive;
Your folly keeps the prowling beasts alive --
By day and night you watch them sleep and eat
And cosset them, and toss them blood-soaked meat.
From dust and blood your earthly being grew --
Is it not strange that both should be taboo?
That blood, which flows within your every vein,
Is an impurity, an unclean stain?
What you most love defiles, and deep within
The chambers of your heart hide guilt and sin;
If you have seen this filth, why do you sit
Smiling as if you'd never heard of it?

The sheikh and the dog

A dog brushed up against a sheikh, who made
No move to draw his skirts in or evade
The filthy stray -- a puzzled passer-by
Who'd noticed his behaviour asked him why.
He said: 'The dog is filthy, as you see,
But what is outside him is inside me --
What's clear on him is hidden in my heart;
Why should such close companions stay apart?'
If inward filth is slight or if it's great,
The outcome is the same disgusting state --
If straws impede you, or a mountain-top,
Where is the difference if you have to stop?

The anchorite who loved his beard

In Moses' time there lived an anchorite
Who prayed incessantly by day and night,
And yet derived no pleasure from his quest;
No sun had risen in his troubled breast.
He had a beard, of which he took great care,
Loving to comb it hair by silky hair.
It happened that this pious man one day
Caught sight of Moses walking far away --
He ran to him and cried: 'Mount Sinai's lord,
Ask God why he denies me my reward.'
When next on Sinai's slopes good Moses trod,
He put this poor man's question to his God,
Who answered: 'Tell this would-be saint that he
Pays more attention to his beard than Me.'
When Moses told the man of God's reply,
He tore his beard out with a piteous cry --
Then Gabriel appeared to them and said:

'Concern for that grey beard still fills his head;
He loved it then, and now he pulls it out,
His wretched love is even more devout.'
Whatever stage you've reached, to spend one breath
Unmindful of your God is worse than death --
And what of you, still wrapped up in your beard,
For whom grief's ocean has not yet appeared?
Forget this beard and you will understand
How you can swim across and gain dry land --
But keep it as you enter that profound
Ungoverned sea, and with it you'll be drowned.

A drowning fool

A fool with an enormous beard once fell
Into a violent sea's tumultuous swell.
As he was struggling he heard someone shout:
'That bag tied on your collar -- throw it out!'
'It's not a bag, it's my huge beard!' he cried.
'Well, that's just marvellous,' the man replied,
'A splendid growth; but now the harvest's come.'
Your goatish beards have made you quarrelsome,
Self-willed and vain, the devil's followers,
Strutting like Pharaoh and his ministers.
But beard this Pharaoh, as did Moses once,
And set out on the Way with confidence --
The pilgrim has no time to preen and comb;
Long suffering will attend his journey home.
If bleaching's his profession he'll complain
There is sun -- if crops, there is no rain.

A sufi washing his clothes

Once, as a sufi washed his clothes, a cloud
Filled all the heavens like a darkening shroud --
But though the world seemed plunged in deepest night,
The sufi's clothes shone clean and strangely bright.
He'd been about to find a grocer's stall
To buy some soap -- 'I don't need soap at all,'
He told himself, and then he said aloud:
'I'll buy some raisins, thanks to you, O cloud --
You do far more than grocer's powders could,
I've washed my hands of earthly soap for good!'

A bird asks for help and advice

Another bird spoke next: "Dear hoopoe, say
What will sustain my heart along the Way --

To travel as I should I need your aid;
If you can help me I'll be less afraid --
To make me start this quest, then persevere,
I must be told how I can conquer fear.
I spurn the crowd's advice; I'm quite alone
And haven't any wisdom of my own."

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: "Trust Him, and while you live,
Avoid whoever seems too talkative.
With Him you will rejoice -- when He is there
The saddest soul is freed from every care;
There is no sorrow He cannot console --
On Him depends the sky's revolving bowl.
Let His joy teach you yours, as planets move
Within the orbit of sustaining love;
What is His equal? Say that nothing is,
Then happiness is yours, and you are His.

A dervish in ecstasy

A frenzied dervish, mad with love for God,
Sought out bare hills where none had ever trod.
Wild leopards kept this madman company --
His heart was plunged in restless ecstasy;
He lived within this state for twenty days,
Dancing and singing in exultant praise:
'There's no division; we two are alone --
The world is happiness and grief has flown.'
Die to yourself -- no longer stay apart,
But give to Him who asks for it your heart;
The man whose happiness derives from Him
Escapes existence, and the world grows dim;
Rejoice for ever in the Friend, rejoice
Till you are nothing, but a prating voice.

'For seventy years my happy heart has led
A life of constant bliss,' a sufi said.
'My God has been so good to me that I
Am bound to Him until the day I die.'
You seek for faults to censure and suppress
And have no time for inward happiness --
How can you know God's secret majesty
If you look out for sin incessantly?
To share His hidden glory you must learn
That others' errors are not your concern --
When someone else's failings are defined
What hairs you split -- but to your own you're blind!

Grace comes to those, no matter how they've strayed,
Who know their own sin's strength, and are afraid.

A drunkard accuses a drunkard

A sot became extremely drunk -- his legs
And head sank listless, weighed by wine's thick dregs.
A sober neighbour put him in a sack
And took him homewards hoisted on his back.
Another drunk went stumbling by the first,
Who woke and stuck his head outside and cursed.
'Hey, you, you lousy dipsomaniac,'
He yelled as he was borne off in the sack,
'If you'd had fewer drinks, just two or three,
You would be walking now as well as me,'
He saw the other's state but not his own,
And in this blindness he is not alone;
You cannot love, and this is why you seek
To find men vicious, or depraved, or weak --
If you could search for love and persevere
The sins of other men would disappear.

The lover who saw a blemish in his beloved's eye

A lion-hearted hero met defeat --
Five years he loved, and slavery was sweet.
The girl for whom he was content to sigh
Had one small blemish lurking in her eye,
And though, as often as she would permit,
He gazed at her he never noticed it.
(How could a man possessed by frenzy see
This unimportant, faint deformity?)
Then imperceptibly love ceased to reign;
A balm was found to ease his aching pain --
The girl and all her blandishments
Became a matter of indifference;
And now the blemish in her eye was clear --
He asked her: 'When did that white speck appear?'
She answered: 'As your love began to die,
This speck was brought to being in my eye.'
How long will others' faults distract your mind?
Your own accuse you, but your heart is blind.
Your sins are heavy, and while they are there,
Another's guilt is none of your affair.

The drunk and the constable

A man whose job it was to keep the peace
Beat up a drunk, who fought for his release

And cried: "It's you who's tipp'd too much wine;
Your rowdiness is ten times worse than mine --
Who's causing this disturbance, you or me?
But yours is drunkenness that men can't see;
Leave me alone! Let justice do its worst --
Enforce the law and beat yourself up first! "

A bird wonders what gift he should ask for from the Simorgh

Another bird said: "Leader of my soul,
What shall I ask for if I reach our goal?
His light will fill the world, but I'm not sure
What special gift I should be looking for --
I'll ask Him for whatever you suggest."

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: "Poor fool, make one request;
Seek only Him -- of all things He is best;
If you're aware of Him, in all the earth
What could you wish for of a greater worth?
Whoever joins Him in that secret place
Is step by step admitted to His grace --
No bribe can turn aside the penitent
Who knows the fragrance of His threshold's scent.

The death of Bou Ali Roudbar

When Bou Ali Roudbar drew near to death,
He said: 'Impatience hastens my last breath.
I see the gates of heaven part and rise;
A throne of glory shines before my eyes --
Angelic voices fill the glistening dome;
Like nightingales they call my ardour home.
"Rejoice!" they sing, "no man has ever known
This radiant splendour which is yours alone."
Though I believe in this refulgent state,
It's not for this my soul and spirit wait;
They murmur to me: "What is this to you?
Was it for this you bid the world adieu?"
I cannot share the cravings of that tribe
Who sneak and bow and snatch each petty bribe --
Infuse my soul with Your sustaining love,
And I know neither hell nor heaven above;
I know but You; no faith or blasphemy
Could make me swerve from my fidelity;
I love but You; to You I must resign
My thirsting soul and take Your soul for mine --
Both worlds for me are You; You are my creed;

I recognise no other hope or need --
A hair's breadth lies between us now -- remove
This last impediment to perfect love,
And if my wayward soul attempts to stir
Our mingled whispers will admonish her.'

God said to David: 'Tell my servants prayer
Should be creation's all-consuming care;
Though hell were not his fear nor heaven his goal,
The Lord should wholly occupy man's soul.
But if the sun did not light up the day,
They would not think of Me, nor ever pray --
Their prayers know nothing of love's selfless pain;
Not love inspires them but mere lust for gain.
True prayer seeks God alone; its motives start
Deep in the centre of a contrite heart.
Tell them to turn from all that is not Me;
To worship none but God continuously;
To heap together all the world can show;
To break it piece by piece and blow by blow;
To burn these fragments in one vivid flash,
And scatter on the winds the swirling ash --
When they have done this they will understand
The ash they grasped for with each greedy hand.'
If it is paradise for which you pray
You can be sure that you have lost your way.

A story of Mahmoud and Ayaz

Shah Mahmoud called Ayaz to him and gave
His crown and throne to this bewitching slave,
Then said: 'You are the sovereign of these lands;
I place my mighty army in your hands --
I wish for you unrivalled majesty,
That you enslave the very sky and sea.'
But when the soldiers heard of this, their eyes
Grew black with envy they could not disguise.
'What emperor in all the world,' they say,
'Has heaped such honours on a servile head?'
Though even as they murmured Ayaz wept
That what the king decreed he must accept;
The courtiers said to him: 'You are insane
To change from slave to king and then complain!'
But Ayaz answered them: 'O, rather say
My king desires me to be far away,
To lead the army and be occupied
In almost any place but by his side.
What he commands I'll do, but in my heart
We shall not -- for one instant -- live apart;
And what have I to do with majesty?'

To see my king is realm enough for me.'
If you would be a pilgrim of the Truth,
Learn how to worship from this lovely youth.
Day follows night -- you argue and protest
And cannot pass the first stage of our quest;
Each night you chatter as the hours pass by
And send Orion down the dawning sky,
And still you linger -- though another day
Has broken, you're no further on your way.
From highest heaven they came to welcome you,
And you made lame excuses and withdrew!
Alas! You're not the man for this; your thoughts
See hell's despair and heaven's wondrous courts --
Forget these two, and glory's radiant light
Will stage by stage emerge from darkest night;
The pilgrim does not long for paradise --
Keep back your heart; He only will suffice.

Rabe'eh's prayer

This was the common hymn of Rabe'eh:
'O God, who knows all secrets,' she would pray,
'May fortune favour all my enemies,
And may my friends taste heaven's ecstasies;
It is not this world or the next I crave
But, for one moment, to be called Your slave --
With passion I embrace this poverty;
Such endless blessings flow from you to me
If I desire this world or shrink from hell,
I am no better than an infidel.'
A man has everything who knows his Lord --
The world and all its seven seas afford.
All that the universe has ever shown
Can find its match but God, who is alone;
And only He, wherever you may seek,
Is absolute, abiding, and unique.

God counselled David: 'There is nothing here
Of good or bad, unseen or far or near,
Which does not have some cunning complement;
For only I have no equivalent.
I am alone; make me your single goal --
My presence is sufficient for your soul;
I am your God, your one necessity --
With every breath you breathe remember Me;
Make God your one desire, for only I
Shall live eternally and never die.'
And you -- obsessed with what the world contains,
Subjected day and night to envy's pains --
Turn now and put our journey to the test;
In this world and the next make Him your quest;

To choose what is not God is to prefer
To be some worthless idol's worshipper,
And if this idol is your soul, your creed
Is nothing more than irreligious greed.

Shah Mahmud at Somnat

When Mahmud's army had attacked Somnat
They found an idol there that men called "Lat".*
Its worshippers flung treasure on the ground
And as a ransom gave the glittering mound;
But Mahmud would not cede to their desire
And burnt the idol in a raging fire.
A courtier said: 'Now if it had been sold
We'd have what's better than an idol -- gold!
Shah Mahmud said: 'I feared God's Judgement Day;
I was afraid that I should hear Him say
"Here two -- Azar and Mahmud -- stand, behold!
One carved his idols, one had idols sold!"'
And as the idol burned, bright jewels fell out --
So Mahmud was enriched but stayed devout;
He said: 'This idol Lat has her reward,
And here is mine, provided by the Lord.'
Destroy the idols in your heart, or you
Will one day be a broken idol too --
First burn the Self, and as its fate is sealed
The gems this idol hides will be revealed.
Your soul has heard the Lord's commanding call;
Accept, and at His threshold humbly fall.
Your soul and God have formed a covenant;
Do not turn back from that first firm assent --
Will you object to what you once averred,
Swear true allegiance and then break your word?
Your soul needs only Him -- through good and ill
Keep faith, and what you promised Him fulfil.

** Lat was the name of an Arabian pre-Islamic goddess. Mahmud attacked and conquered Somnat in north-west India in 1026 and destroyed the Hindu temple there; Attar has either confused the Arabian and Indian deities, or used the name 'Lat' generically, or has been seduced by the fortuitous rhyme.*

Another story of Shah Mahmud in India

Mahmud began his Indian campaign
And saw before him, drawn up on the plain,
The massive army of his enemy --
In fear he prayed to God for victory
And said: 'If I should win this doubtful day,
The dervishes will bear the spoils away.'

They fought, and Mahmoud's conquest was complete --
His captives piled their treasures at his feet.
The king declared 'I will fulfil my vow;
The dervishes shall have this booty now.'
But all his courtiers cried: 'Can gold and jewels
Be given to that crowd of cringing fools?
Reward the soldiers who have won this war,
Or have it piled up in the royal store.'
What should he do? Shah Mahmoud was unsure.
Just then his eye caught sight of Boul Hoosein,
A pious fool whom many thought insane;
He said: 'Whatever that man says, I'll do --
No kings or armies influence his view.'
They called the madman over to the king,
Who welcomed him and told him everything.
The madman said: 'O king, these anxious plans
Are not worth more than two small barley grains --
If all your dealings with the Lord cease here,
Forget the vow you made and never fear;
But if you think you might need Him again
Then keep your promise to the final grain.
God gave the victory to you; now where
In this agreement is your lordship's share?'
So Mahmoud gave the gold where it was owed,
And took his way along the royal road."

A bird asks what gifts he should take the Simorgh

Another bird said: "You have seen our king --
What gifts would it be right for me to bring?
I'll gladly get whatever you advise;
What would be welcome to our sovereign's eyes?
A king deserves a quite distinctive gift;
Only a miser would be ruled by thrift!"

The hoopoe answers him

"Be ruled by me," the hoopoe said. "Take care
To offer something which is lacking there --
Where is the point in dragging all that way
A costly present common there as day?
There mystery resides and confidence,
Pure knowledge and the soul's obedience --
But take the torment of a heart alone,
The soul's distress, for these are there unknown,
And let the anguish you endure arise
Borne upward to the king in bitter sighs;
If one sigh rises from the inmost soul,
That man is saved, and has attained our goal."

Zuleikha has Joseph whipped

Zuleikha used her great authority
To have poor Joseph kept in custody --
She gave her callous orders to the guard:
'Give that man fifty lashes, good and hard!
Deal with this Joseph's body so that I
From far away can hear him groan and sigh.'
But when the guard saw Joseph's face he felt
The cold indifference of his calling melt.
There was a leather coat left on the ground,
And with his whip he made this skin resound --
As every blow descended on the coat,
A scream of pain went up from Joseph's throat.
But when Zuleikha heard his voice she cried:
'You are too soft; whip harder, break his pride!'
The guard said: 'What, dear Joseph, can I do?
Zuleikha only has to look at you
And see no weals or bruises on your back,
And I'll be torn to pieces on the rack --
So bare your shoulders to the lash; some sign
Must mar your skin if I'm to rescue mine.'
When Joseph stripped in readiness, a sound
Of mourning spread from heaven to the ground;
The guard's right arm was raised, and its descent
Produced a cry that split the firmament --
Zuleikha said: 'Now Joseph cannot bluff;
This sigh is from his inmost soul -- enough!
This sigh was real and from his essence came --
His former groans were nothing but a game.'

The mourners at a funeral

A hundred mourners at a funeral grieved;
One truly sighed -- the man who was bereaved.
They were a ring, but only one of them
Was set within that circle as a gem --
Till you have truly mourned beside the grave,
You cannot take your place among the brave.
Love drives the wandering pilgrim on his quest;
And where by day or night will he find rest?

The devout slave

A negro had a slave devout and wise
Who at an early hour would wake and rise,
Then pray until the sun came peeping through.
His master said: 'Wake me up early too,
And we can pray together till the dawn.'

The slave said: 'Just before a baby's born,
Who tells the mother "Now your time draws near"?
She knows it does -- her pain has made it clear;
If you have felt this pain you are awake --
No other man can feel it for your sake.
If someone has to rouse you every day,
Then someone else instead of you should pray.'
The man without this pain is not a man;
May grief destroy the bragging charlatan!
But one who is entangled in its spell
Forgets all thoughts of heaven or of hell.

A vision of heaven and hell

Sheikh Bou Ali Tousi's long pilgrimage
(He was the wisest *savant* of his age)
Conducted him so far that I know none
Who could draw near to what this man has done.
He said: 'The wretches damned in hell will cry
To those in paradise: "O, testify
To us the nature of your happiness;
Describe the sacred joys which you possess!"
And they will say: "Ineffable delight
Shines in the radiance of His face; its light
Draws near us, and this vast celestial frame --
The eightfold heaven -- darkens, bowed by shame."
And then the tortured souls in hell will say:
"From joys of paradise you turn away;
Such lowly happiness is not for you --
All that you say is true, we know how true!
In hell's accursèd provinces we reign
Clothed head to foot in fire's devouring pain;
But when we glimpse that radiant face and know
That we must live for ever here below,
Cut off through all eternity from grace --
Such longing seizes us for that far face,
Such unappeasable and wild regret,
That in our anguished torment we forget
The pit of hell and all its raging fire;
For what are flames but comfortless desire?"'
The man who feels such longing takes no part
In public prayers; he prays within his heart.
Regret and sighs should be your portion here;
In sighs rejoice, in longing persevere --
And if beneath the sky's oppressive dome
Wounds scar you, you draw nearer to your home;
Don't flinch from pain or search here for its cure.
Uncauterised your wounds must bleed; endure!

The man who wanted a prayer-mat

Once someone asked the Prophet to provide
A prayer-mat, and the best of men replied:
'The desert's arid sands are burning now.
Pray there; against the hot dust press your brow
And feel it sear your flesh; the wounded skin
Will be an emblem of the wound within.'
If no scar marks your heart, the countenance
Of love will pass you by without a glance;
But heart's wounds show that on the battlefield
Your friends have found a man who will not yield."

A bird asks how long the journey is, and the hoopoe describes the seven valleys of the Way

Another bird said: "Hoopoe, you can find
The way from here, but we are almost blind --
The way seems full of terrors and despair.
Dear hoopoe, how much further till we're there?"

"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 --
Impatient bird, who would retrace this trail?
There is no messenger to tell the tale,
And they are lost to our concerns below --
How can men tell you what they do not know?
The first stage is the Valley of the Quest;
Then Love's wide valley is our second test;
The third is Insight into Mystery,
The fourth Detachment and Serenity --
The fifth is Unity; the sixth is Awe,
A deep Bewilderment unknown before,
The seventh Poverty and Nothingness --
And there you are suspended, motionless,
Till you are drawn -- the impulse is not yours --
A drop absorbed in seas that have no shores.

The Valley of the Quest

When you begin the Valley of the Quest
Misfortunes will deprive you of all rest,
Each moment some new trouble terrifies,
And parrots there are panic-stricken flies.
There years must vanish while you strive and grieve;
There is the heart of all you will achieve --
Renounce the world, your power and all you own,
And in your heart's blood journey on alone.
When once your hands are empty, then your heart

Must purify itself and move apart
From everything that is -- when this is done,
The Lord's light blazes brighter than the sun,
Your heart is bathed in splendour and the quest
Expands a thousandfold within your breast.
Though fire flares up across his path, and though
A hundred monsters peer out from its glow,
The pilgrim driven on by his desire
Will like a moth rush gladly on the fire.
When love inspires his heart he begs for wine,
One drop to be vouchsafed him as a sign --
And when he drinks this drop both worlds are gone;
Dry-lipped he founders in oblivion.
His zeal to know faith's mysteries will make
Him fight with dragons for salvation's sake --
Though blasphemy and curses crowd the gate,
Until it opens he will calmly wait,
And then where is this faith? this blasphemy?
Both vanish into strengthless vacancy.

Eblis* and God's curse

God breathed the pure soul into Adam's dust,
And as He did so said the angels must,
In sight of Adam, bow down to the ground
(God did not wish this secret to be found).
All bowed, and not one saw what God had done,
Except Eblis, who bowed himself to none.
He said: 'Who notices if I don't bow?
I don't care if they cut my head off now;
I know this Adam's more than dust -- I'll see
Why God has ordered all this secrecy.'
He hid himself and kept watch like a spy.
God said: 'Come out -- I see you peer and pry;
You know my treasure's home and you must die.
The kings who hide a treasure execute
Their secret's witnesses to keep them mute --
You saw the place, and shall the fact be spread
Through all the world? Prepare to lose your head!'
Eblis replied: "Lord, pity me; I crave
For mercy, Lord; have mercy on your slave."
God answered him: "Well, I will mitigate
The rigour and the justice of your fate;
But round your neck will shine a ring to show
Your treachery to all the world below --
For fraudulence and guile you will be known
Until the world ends and the last trump's blown.'
Eblis replied: 'And what is that to me?
I saw the treasure and I now go free!
To curse belongs to You and to forgive,
All creatures of the world and how they live;
Curse on! This poison's part of Your great scheme

And life is more than just an opium-dream.
All creatures seek throughout the universe
What will be mine for ever now -- Your curse!
Search for Him endlessly by day and night,
Till victory rewards your stubborn fight;
And if He seems elusive He is there --
Your search is incomplete; do not despair.

* *The devil.*

The death of Shebli

As Shebli's death approached his eyes grew dim;
Wild torments of impatience troubled him --
But strangest was that round his waist he tied
A heathen's belt,* and weeping sat beside
Heaped ash, with which he smeared his hair and head.
'Why wait for death like this?' a stranger said,
And Shebli cried: 'What will become of me?
I melt, I burn with fevered jealousy,
And though I have renounced the universe
I covet what Ebli procured -- God's curse.'
So Shebli mourned, uncaring if his Lord
Gave other mortals this or that reward;
Bright jewels and stones are equal from His hand,
And if His gems are all that you demand,
Ours is a Way you cannot understand --
Think of the stones and jewels he gives as one;
They are not yours to hope for or to shun.
The stone your angry lover flings may hurt,
But others' jewels compared with it are dirt.
Each moment of this quest a man must feel
His soul is spilt, and unremitting zeal
Should force him onward at whatever cost --
The man who pauses on our path is lost.

* *The zonnar.*

Majnoun searches for Leili

Once someone saw Majnoun, oppressed with pain,
Sifting the dusty highway grain by grain,
And asked, 'What are you searching for, my friend?'
He cried: 'My search for Leili has no end.'
The man protested: 'Leili is a girl,
And dust will not conceal this precious pearl!'
Majnoun replied: 'I search in every place;
Who knows where I may glimpse her lovely face?'
Yusef of Hamadan, a learned seer,

Once said: 'Above, below, in every sphere,
Each atom is a Jacob fervently
Searching for Joseph through eternity.'
By pain and grief the pilgrim is perplexed
But struggles on through this world and the next --
And if the goal seems endlessly concealed,
Do not give up your quest; refuse to yield.
What patience must be theirs who undertake
The pilgrim's journey for salvation's sake!
Now, like a baby curled inside the womb,
Wait patiently within your narrow room;
Ignore the world -- blood is your element;
Blood is the unborn child's sole nourishment.*
What is the world but wretchedness and fear?
Endure, be steadfast till your time draws near.

** The comparison depends on a pun; to 'feed on blood' is to 'suffer'.*

Sheikh Mahna and the peasant

In deep despair Sheikh Mahna made his way
Across the empty desert wastes one day.
A peasant with a cow came into sight,
And from his body played a lambent light --
He hailed the man and started to narrate
The hopeless turmoil of his wretched state.
The old man heard, then said: 'O Bou Sa'id,
Imagine someone piled up millet seed
From here to highest heaven's unknown climes,
And then repeated this a hundred times;
And now imagine that a bird appears
And pecks one grain up every thousand years,
Then flies around the earth's circumference
A hundred times -- from heaven's eminence
In all those years no sign would come to show
Sheikh Bou Sa'id the Truth he longs to know.'
Such is the patient that our pilgrims need,
And many start our quest, but few succeed;
Through pain and blood their journey lies -- blood hides
The precious musk the hunted deer provides;
And he who does not seek is like a wall,
Dead, blank and bland, no living man at all;
He is, God pardon me, a walking skin,
A picture with no life or soul within.
If you discover in your quest a jewel,
Do not, like some delighted doting fool,
Gloat over it -- search on, you're not its slave;
It is not treasures by the way you crave.
To make an idol of the gems you find
Is to be drunk, to cloud the searching mind --

At this first glass your soul should not submit;
Seek out the wine-press of the infinite.

Shah Mahmoud and the sweeper

Shah Mahmoud rode without a guard one night.
A man who swept the streets came into sight,
Sifting through dust-heaps pile by filthy pile.
The king drew rein and with a gracious smile
Flung down his bracelet on the nearest heap;
Then like the wind he left the searching sweep.
Some later night the king returned and saw
The man engaged exactly as before.
He said: 'I threw a bracelet on the ground;
You could redeem the world with what you found!
You could be like a king, a lord of men,
And yet I find you sifting dust again!'
The sweep replied: 'The treasure that you gave
Made me a hidden, greater treasure's slave --
I have perceived the door to wealth and I
Shall sift through dust-heaps till the day I die.'
Search for the Way! The door stands open, but
Your eyes that should perceive the door are shut!
Once someone cried to God: 'Lord, let me see
The door between us opened unto me!'
And Rabe'eh said: 'Fool to chatter so --
When has the door been closed, I'd like to know?'

The Valley of Love

Love's valley is the next, and here desire
Will plunge the pilgrim into seas of fire,
Until his very being is enflamed
And those whom fire rejects turn back ashamed.
The lover is a man who flares and burns,
Whose face is fevered, who in frenzy yearns,
Who knows no prudence, who will gladly send
A hundred worlds toward their blazing end,
Who knows of neither faith nor blasphemy,
Who has no time for doubt or certainty,
To whom both good and evil are the same,
And who is neither, but a living flame.
But you! Lukewarm in all you say or do,
Backsliding, weak -- O, no, this is not you!
True lovers give up everything they own
To steal one moment with the Friend alone --
They make no vague, procrastinating vow,
But risk their livelihood and risk it now.
Until their hearts are burnt, how can they flee
From their desire's incessant misery?
They are the falcon when it flies distressed

In circles, searching for its absent nest --
They are the fish cast up upon the land
That seeks the sea and shudders on the sand.
Love here is fire; its thick smoke clouds the head --
When love has come the intellect has fled;
It cannot tutor love, and all its care
Supplies no remedy for love's despair.
If you could seek the unseen you would find
Love's home, which is not reason or the mind,
And love's intoxication tumbles down
The world's designs for glory and renown --
If you could penetrate their passing show
And see the world's wild atoms, you would know
That reason's eyes will never glimpse one spark
Of shining love to mitigate the dark.
Love leads whoever starts along our Way;
The noblest bow to love and must obey --
But you, unwilling both to love and tread
The pilgrim's path, you might as well be dead!
The lover chafes, impatient to depart,
And longs to sacrifice his life and heart.

A lord who loved a beer-seller

Love led a lord through paths of misery.
He left his splendid house and family
And acted like a drunkard to be near
The boy he loved, who lived by selling beer --
He sold his house and slaves and all he had
To get the means to buy beer from this lad.
When everything was gone and he grew poor
His love grew stronger, more and then yet more --
Though food was given him by passers-by,
His endless hunger made him long to die
(Each morsel that he had would disappear,
Not to be eaten but exchanged for beer,
And he was happy to endure the pain,
Knowing that soon he could buy beer again).
When someone asked: 'What is this love?' he cried:
'It is to sell the world and all its pride --
A hundred times -- to buy one drop of beer.'
Such acts denote true love, and it is clear
That those who cannot match this devotee
Have no acquaintance with love's misery.

Majnoun's love for Leili

When Leili's tribe refused Majnoun, he found
They would not let him near their camping-ground.
Distracted with love, he met a shepherd there
And asked him for a sheepskin he could wear,

And then, beneath the skin, began to creep
On hands and knees as if he were a sheep.
'Now lead your flock,' he cried, 'past Leili's tent;
It may be I shall catch her lovely scent
And hidden by this matted fleece receive
From untold misery one hour's reprieve.'
And so Majnoun, disguised beneath the skin,
Drew near his love unnoticed by her kin --
Joy welled in him and in its wild excess
The frenzied lover lost all consciousness;
Love's fire had dried the fluids of his brain --
He fainted and lay stretched out on the plain;
The shepherd bore him to a shaded place
And splashed cold water on his burning face.
Later, Majnoun was talking with some friends
When one said: 'What a tattered fleece defends
Your body from the cold; but trust in me
I'll bring you all you need immediately.'
Majnoun replied: 'No garment's worth of
Dear Leili, but I wear this skin for love --
I know how fortune favours me, and I
Burn rue to turn away the Evil eye.'
The fleece for him was silk and rare brocade;
With what else should a lover be arrayed?
I too have known love scent the passing air --
What other finer garment could I wear?
If you would scour yourself of each defect,
Let passion wean you from the intellect --
To leave such toys and sacrifice the soul
Is still the first small step towards our goal.
Begin, if you can set aside all shame --
To risk your life is not some childish game.

The beggar who fell in love with Ayaz

A better fell in love once with Ayaz --
The news soon spread through markets and bazaars,
And when he rode about the gaping town
There was the beggar running up and down;
Or if Ayaz once halted in the square,
His eyes would meet the beggar's hungry stare.
But someone gossiped to Mahmoud, who went
To try and apprehend the miscreant --
Ayaz rode out; Mahmoud was horrified
To see the beggar running at his side,
And from his hiding-place the monarch saw
The beggar's face, wasted like yellow straw,
His back bent like a polo-mallet's curve --
From side to side he watched him duck and swerve,
As if he had no self-control at all
But moved when hit just like a polo-ball.
He summoned him, then said: 'And so you thought

A beggar could be equal to the court?
The man replied: 'In matters of desire,
A beggar is his monarch's equal, sire --
You cannot sunder love from pauper's rags;
They're like a rich man and his money bags --
And poverty in love resembles salt:
It gives love taste; you can't call that a fault!
You have the world and love your sovereignty --
You should leave passion to the likes of me!
Your love is with you; you need never know
The pains of absence love should undergo.
O, you are proud to have him, but love's trial
Would come if you should lose him for a while.'
The king said: 'You are ignorant, that's all --
Staring as if he were a polo-ball!'
'It's me who is the ball,' the man replied;
'Look -- both of us are struck from side to side;
Each shares the other's pain, each feels the force
Of Ayaz when he rides by on his horse --
We're both bewildered by his mallet's blows,
And where we're going neither of us knows.
But if we share the same predicament
And seem in grief to be equivalent,
Yet still the ball does more than I can do
And sometimes gets to kiss his horse's shoe.
Though both are hurt, mine is the grimmer part --
Its skin is scarred, my scars are in my heart.
Ayaz pursues the ball he hits -- but I
In unregarded agony must sigh;
The ball will sometimes land at Ayaz' feet,
But when shall Ayaz and a beggar meet?
The ball will know the scent of victory
But all such joys have been denied to me!
The king cried: 'You may boast that you are poor,
But where's your witness? How can I be sure?'
'I don't belong here, sire,' the beggar said,
'But I'm not poor and you have been misled;
You want a witness -- if I sacrifice
My living soul for love, will that suffice?
O Mahmoud, love like yours is meaningless;
Die if you want to boast of your distress!
Then, in the silence after he replied,
He sank at his beloved's feet and died --
And when he saw the lifeless body there
The world was darkened by Mahmoud's despair.
Prepare to risk your being while you live,
And know the glory sacrifice will give --
If you are summoned by that distant call,
Pursue the fading sound until you fall;
And as you fall the news you longed to find
Will break at last on your bewildered mind.

The Arab in Persia

Through Persia once an Arab took his way,
Where foreign customs filled him with dismay --
He met a group of dervishes, who had
Renounced the world and seemed to him quite mad
(But don't be fooled -- if they seem filthy thieves
They are far purer than the world believes,
And though in drunkenness they seem to sink
The ecstasy they know is not from drink).
The Arab saw these men; without a sound
He fainted and lay stretched out on the ground --
They quickly splashed his face to bring him round
And then cried: 'Enter, no-one, enter here!'
And in he went, though torn by doubt and fear.
They made him drunk, he lost himself, and soon
His mind had foundered in a vacant swoon;
His gold, his jewels, his very livelihood
Were stolen there and disappeared for good --
A dervish gave him more to drink, and then
They pushed him naked out of doors again.
Dry-lipped and poor the man was forced to roam,
A naked beggar, till he reached his home,
And there the Arabs said: 'But what's gone wrong?
Where is your wealth, where have you been so long?
Your gold and silver's gone, what can you do?
This Persian expedition's ruined you!
Did thieves attack you? You don't say a word --
You seem so different; tell us what occurred.'
He said: 'I went as usual -- full of pride --
Then saw a dervish by the highway's side.
But then what happened next I can't be sure;
My gold and silver went and now I'm poor!'
They said: 'Describe this man who blocked your way.'
He said: 'I have, there's nothing more to say.'
His mind was still elsewhere and all he heard
Seemed idle chatter, empty and absurd.
Enter the Way or seek some other goal,
But do so to the utmost of your soul;
Risk all, and as a naked Beggar roam
If you would hear that 'Enter' call you home.

The journey of the birds takes them through the seven valleys of the quest, love, understanding, independence and detachment, unity, astonishment, and finally poverty and nothingness. In the valley of the quest one undergoes a hundred difficulties and trials. After one has been tested and become free, one learns in the valley of love that love has nothing to do with reason. The valley of understanding teaches that knowledge is temporary, but understanding endures. Overcoming faults and weaknesses brings the seeker closer to the goal. In the valley of independence and detachment one has no desire to possess nor any wish to discover. To cross this difficult valley one must be

roused from apathy to renounce inner and outer attachments so that one can become self-sufficient. In the valley of unity the Hoopoe announces that although you may see many beings, in reality there is only one, which is complete in its unity. As long as you are separate, good and evil will arise; but when you lose yourself in the divine essence, they will be transcended by love. When unity is achieved, one forgets all and forgets oneself in the valley of astonishment and bewilderment.

The Hoopoe declares that the last valley of deprivation and death is almost impossible to describe. In the immensity of the divine ocean the pattern of the present world and the future world dissolves. As you realize that the individual self does not really exist, the drop becomes part of the great ocean forever in peace. The analogy of moths seeking the flame is used. Out of thousands of birds only thirty reach the end of the journey. When the light of lights is manifested and they are in peace, they become aware that the Simurgh is them. They begin a new life in the Simurgh and contemplate the inner world. Simurgh, it turns out, means thirty birds; but if forty or fifty had arrived, it would be the same. By annihilating themselves gloriously in the Simurgh they find themselves in joy, learn the secrets, and receive immortality. So long as you do not realize your nothingness and do not renounce your self-pride, vanity, and self-love, you will not reach the heights of immortality. 'Attar concluded the epilog with the admonition that if you wish to find the ocean of your soul, then die to all your old life and then keep silent.

Who is Simourg?

The Simurgh is an immortal bird that nests in the branches of the Tree of Knowledge; Burton compares it with the eagle which, according to the Younger Edda, has knowledge of many things and makes its nest in the branches of the World Tree, Yggdrasill. Both Southey's *Thalaba* (1801) and Flaubert's *Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1877) speak of the Simorg Anka; Flaubert reduces the bird's status to that of an attendant to the Queen of Sheba, and describes it as having orange-colored feathers like metallic scales, a small silver-colored head with a human face, four wings, a vulture's talons, and a long, long peacock's tail. In the original sources the Simurgh is a far more important being. Firdausi in the *Book of Kings*, which compiles and sets to verse ancient Iranian legends, makes the bird the foster father of Zal, father of the poem's hero; Farid al-Din Attar, in the thirteenth century, makes it a symbol of the godhead. This takes place in the *Mantiq al-Tayr* (*Parliament of Birds*). The plot of this allegory made up of some 4,000 couplets, is striking. The distant king of birds, the Simurgh, drops one of his splendid feathers somewhere in the middle of China; on learning of this, the other birds, tired of their present anarchy, decide to seek him. They know that the king's name means "thirty birds" they know that his castle lies in the Kaf, the mountain or range of mountains that ring the earth. At the outset, some of the birds lose heart: the nightingale pleads his love for the rose; the parrot pleads his beauty, for which he lives caged; the partridge cannot do without his home in the hills, nor the heron without his marsh, nor the owl without his ruins. But finally, certain of them set out on the perilous venture; they cross seven valleys or seas, the next to last bearing the name *Bewilderment*, the last the name *Annihilation*. Many of the pilgrims desert; the journey takes its toll among the rest. Thirty, made pure by their sufferings, reach the great peak of the Simurgh. At last they behold him; they realize that they are the Simurgh, and that the Simurgh is each of them and all of them.

Edward FitzGerald translated portions of the poem under the playful title *The Bird-parliament*; A bird's-eye view of Farid-Uddin Attar's *Bird parliament*. The cosmographer al-Qaswini, in his *Wonders of Creation*, states that the Simorg Anka lives for seventeen

hundred years and that, upon the coming of age of its son, the father burns himself on a funeral pyre. "This," observes Lane, "reminds us of the phoenix."

Notes and history: The introduction of a Phoenix into modern astronomy was, in a measure, by adoption rather than by invention. But, whether Bayer knew it or not, his title is an appropriate one, for with various early nations - at all events, in China, Egypt, India, and Persia, - this bird has been "an astronomical symbol of cyclic period" some versions of the well-known fable making its life coincident with the Great Year of the ancients beginning at noon of the day when the sun entered among the stars of Aries; and, in Egypt, with the Sothic Period when the sun and Sirius rose together on the 20th of July. Thompson further writes of this: "A new Phoenix-period is said to have commenced AD 139, in the reign of Antoninus Pius; and a recrudescence of astronomical symbolism associated therewith is manifested on the coins of that Emperor". Coincidentally, Ptolemy adopted as the epoch of his catalogue the year AD 138, the first of Antoninus. [SLM p.335].

With the Egyptians, who knew this bird as Bennu and showed it on their coins, it was an emblem of immortality; indeed it generally has been such in pagan as well as in Christian times. In China the constellation was Ho Neaou, the Firebird. [SLM p.335].

From the accounts given by Herodotus and Plutarch, the phoenix would seem to have been a mythical bird of matchless splendor and extraordinary longevity which came from Ethiopia and, having been cremated upon a funeral pyre, had the power to be reborn from its own ashes. When the time of its death drew near, it built a nest of aromatic twigs in which it burned from the heat of its own body. This clearly displays the aspects of its symbolism - the cycle of regeneration, resurrection and immortality. This is why, throughout the Middle Ages, the phoenix was made the symbol of Christ's resurrection and sometimes that of his divine nature, as the pelican was of his human nature.

In Ancient Egypt the phoenix was a symbol of the solar cycle and was associated with the town of Heliopolis. There is always the possibility that this 'City of the Sun' was not originally Egyptian, but belonged to that primeval Land of the Sun', Homer's 'Syria'. Arabs believed that the only place upon which the phoenix could settle was Mount Kaf, the pole and centre of the world. Be that as it may, the Ancient Egyptian phoenix, or bennu, was associated with the daily cycle of the Sun and with the annual flooding of the Nile, hence its relationship with regeneration and life.

Since, in Ancient Egypt, the bird concerned was the purple heron, this suggests the alchemists' 'red art'. Taoists called the phoenix the 'cinnabar bird' (tan-niao), cinnabar being red sulfur of mercury. Furthermore, the phoenix corresponds, emblematically, to south, Summer. Fire and the color red. Similarly, its symbolism is akin to the Sun, life and immortality. It was the emblem of Nu-Kua, who invented the cheng, a musical instrument which copied the shape and imitated the supernatural song of the phoenix.

In China, the male bird was a symbol of happiness and the female an emblem of the empress, in contrast with the Imperial Dragon. Male and female phoenixes were together emblems of happy marriage. Yet again, not only did Suo Che's and Lon Yu's phoenixes display married bliss, but guided married couples to the Paradise of the Immortals. It was a phoenix which guided Pien-ho to the Ch'u dynasty jade, jade being a symbol of immortality, and it was the Fong-hoang, a manifestation of pure yang, which made its appearance during prosperous reigns.

Al-Jili made the phoenix the symbol of what exists only in name, meaning 'what exists beyond the grasp of the intellect or of thought'. Thus, since the idea of the phoenix can only be apprehended through the name which it bears, so God cannot be apprehended except through his Names and Virtues (CORA, DEVA, DURV, GUES, JILH, KALL, SOU N).

This splendid and fabulous bird rose at dawn from the waters of the Nile like the Sun, and legend states that it burnt itself to ashes and went out like the Sun in the darkness of the night, only to be reborn from those ashes. The phoenix conjures up an image of creative and destructive fire, from which the world began and in which it will end.

It was a symbol of the resurrection which awaited dead people after their souls had been weighed, provided that they correctly followed the ritual of sacrifice and the judges of the dead had accepted as truthful their denial of sin. The dead person became a phoenix. The phoenix often bore a star to display its celestial nature and the nature of life in the Otherworld. Phoenix' is Greek for the bird called the 'bennu'. It is depicted at the prow of many of the sacred boats which launched 'into the vast gulf of light . . . a symbol of the universal soul of Osiris, endlessly self-creating so long as time and eternity shall last' (CRAM p.78). [p.752 "The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols", 1969, Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant" translated by John Buchanan-Brown, Penguin books].

The Phoenix: According to tradition only one Phoenix at a time could live in our world. Its true home was Paradise, a land of unimaginable beauty lying beyond the distant horizon towards the rising sun. Nothing dies in Paradise, and here was the crux of the bird's dilemma. After a thousand years had passed, the Phoenix had become oppressed by the burden of its age; the time had come for it to die. To do so, the Phoenix had to wing its way into the mortal world, flying westwards across the jungles of Burma, and the torrid plains of India until it reached the scented spice groves of Arabia. Here it collected a bunch of aromatic herbs before setting course for the coast of Phoenicia in Syria. In the topmost branches of a palm tree, the Phoenix constructed a nest out of the herbs and awaited the coming of the new dawn which would herald its death.

As the sun soared above the horizon, the Phoenix faced east, opened its bill and sang such a bewitching song that even the sun god himself paused for a moment in his chariot. After listening to the sweet tones, he whipped his horses into motion and a spark from their hooves descended onto the Phoenix's nest and caused it to blaze. Thus the Phoenix's thousand-year life ended in conflagration.

But in the ashes of the funeral pyre a tiny worm stirred. Within three days the creature grew into a brand-new Phoenix, which then spread its wings and flew east to the gates of Paradise in the company of a retinue of birds. The symbolism is not too difficult to understand. The Phoenix represents the sun itself, which dies at the end of each day, but is reborn the following dawn. Christianity took the bird over, and the authors of bestiaries equated it with Christ, who was put to death but rose again. (John Sparks, *The Discovery of Animal Behavior* 1982).

The Phoenix symbolism: Clement, one the ante-Nicaean Fathers, describes in the first century after Christ the peculiar nature and habits of the phoenix, in this way: "There is a

certain bird which is called a Phoenix. This is the only one of its kind and lives five hundred years. And when the time of its dissolution draws near that it must die, it builds itself a nest of frankincense, myrrh, and other spices, into which, when the time is fulfilled, it enters and dies. But as the flesh decays a certain kind of worm is produced, which, being nourished by the juices of the dead bird, brings forth feathers. Then, when it has acquired strength, it takes up that nest in which are the bones of its parent, and bearing these it passes from the land of Arabia into Egypt, to the city called Heliopolis. And, in open day, flying in the sight of all men, it places them on the altar of the sun, and having done this, hastens back to its former abode. The priests then inspect the registers of the dates, and find that it has returned exactly as the five hundredth year was completed." Although admitting that he had not seen the phoenix bird (there being only one alive at a time), Herodotus amplifies a bit the description given by Clement: "They tell a story of what this bird does, which does not seem to me to be credible: that he comes all the way from Arabia, and brings the parent bird, all plastered with myrrh, to the temple of the sun, and there buries the body. In order to bring him, they say, he first forms a ball of myrrh as big as he finds that he can carry; then he hollows out the ball, and puts his parent inside; after which he covers over the opening with fresh myrrh, and the ball is then of exactly the same weight as at first; so he brings it to Egypt, plastered over as I have said, and deposits it in the temple of the sun. Such is the story they tell of the doings of this bird." Both Herodotus and Pliny noted the general resemblance in shape between the phoenix and the eagle, it is reasonably certain that the modern Masonic eagle was originally a Phoenix. The body of the Phoenix is described as having been covered with glossy purple feathers, while its long tail feathers were alternately blue and red. Its head was light in color and about its neck was a circlet of golden plumage. At the back of the head the phoenix had a peculiar tuft of feathers, a fact quite evident, although it has been overlooked by most writers and symbolists.

The phoenix was regarded as sacred to the sun, and the length of its life (500 to 1000 years) was taken as a standard for measuring the motion of the heavenly bodies and also the cycles of time used in the Mysteries to designate the periods of existence. The diet of the bird was unknown. Some writers declare that it subsisted upon the atmosphere; others that it ate at rare intervals but never in the presence of man. Modern Masons should realize the special Masonic significance of the phoenix, for the bird is described as using sprigs of acacia in the manufacture of its nest.

The phoenix (which is the mythological Persian roc) is also the name of a Southern constellation, and therefore it has both an astronomical and an astrological significance. To the ancient mystics the phoenix was a most appropriate symbol of the immortality of the human soul, for just as the phoenix was reborn out of its own dead self seven times seven, so again and again the spiritual nature of man rises triumphant from his dead physical body.

Mediaeval Hermetists regarded the phoenix as a symbol of the accomplishment of alchemical transmutation, a process equivalent to human regeneration. The name phoenix was also given to one of the secret alchemical formulae. The familiar pelican of the Rose Croix degree, feeding its young from its own breast, is in reality a phoenix, a fact that can be confirmed by an examination of the head of the bird. The ungainly lower part of the pelican's beak is entirely missing, the head of the phoenix being far more like that of an eagle than of a pelican. In the Mysteries it was customary to refer to initiates as phoenices or men who had been born again, for just as physical birth gives man consciousness in the physical world, so the neophyte, after nine degrees in the womb of the Mysteries, was born into a consciousness of the spiritual world. This is the mystery of initiation to which Christ referred when he said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God". The phoenix is a fitting symbol of this spiritual birth.

Philosophers say that the phoenix is the symbol of the transmutation and regeneration of the creative energy commonly called the accomplishment of the Great Work. The double-

headed phoenix is the prototype of an androgynous man, for according to the secret teachings there will come a time when the human body will have two spinal cords, by means of which vibratory equilibrium will be maintained in the body. (The Secret Teachings Of All Ages 1928 by Manly P Hall).