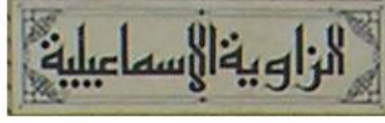


Tariqa Alawiyya Madaniyya Ismailiyya



Tariqa Shaykh Isma'il Al Hedfi Madani - Zawiya in Italia ed Europa
autorizzata dalla Casa Madre di Tozeur

The Symbolism of the Birds in Rumi's Stories in the "Mathnawi"



BismiLlahi-r-Rahmāni-r-Rāhīm.

The purpose of this essay is to show some examples of how the images in stories and poetry can convey religious and spiritual truths by means of their power to synthesise them; how they can depict and illustrate them and how they represent a providential means of making these truths accessible to a wide different range of human natures, offering therefore an indispensable alternative to difficult doctrinal expositions.

"After listening to Rûmî explain a point of doctrine to his disciples, al-Qûnawî asked him, "How are you able to express such difficult and abstruse metaphysics in such simple language?" Rûmî replied, "How are you able to make such simple ideas sound so complicated?" (1).

This anecdote, even though it may suggest at first that story and poetry are more effective in exposing religious truths than theoretical formulations, really points out is the independency that these two ways can have from each other and the fact that they are two modes for the understanding of religious truths according to different type of receptivity from the part of the listeners. As Rûmî says in the *fîhi-mâ-fîhi*: *"if the ways are different, the aim is one"* (2). Certainly, stories and poetry, like those in Rûmî's *Mathnawi*, go straight to the heart of the listener without necessarily requiring from the latter a deep theoretical preparation: *"if mystics use paragons and images it is only in order to make a dedicated person but weak in spirit grasps the truth"* (3). Furthermore, should these stories not be understood in their fullness, they would always communicate something of the spiritual truths they carry and that the authors aim to convey (4). It must be added that these poets are referring to knowledge in the forms of poetry and doctrine coming from the heart, which is totally different from mere rational knowledge. This next anecdote will explain this latter point:

"...the eldest student ask Avicenna, "O great master, how did you find that man Abû Sa'îd?" ...Avicenna replied, "Well, everything I know, he sees."

...one of Abû Sa'îd's close disciples was delegated by the others to inquire about this philosopher [that is, Avicenna]... Abû Sa'îd replied, "Well, it's true. Everything I see, he knows." (5)

Here, the philosopher Avicenna represents one who is endowed with rational knowledge, while Abû Sa'îd (as well as *al-Qûnawî* in the previous anecdote) with direct knowledge, a knowledge coming from the heart.

The act of seeing symbolises direct knowledge, seeing or knowing things as they are. Now, this is the knowledge that Rûmî wants to convey.

The symbolism of seeing as direct knowledge may suggest why there is almost always the impression that story or poetry, is more powerful than doctrinal formulations, even when the latter refers as well to the knowledge of the heart. Rûmî's use of everyday things as a support for denoting invisible and spiritual realities is effective inasmuch as these things are already experienced and can be more directly recalled to our imagination. The concrete things that the *Mathnawî* deals with are things, or some of their aspects, that we have already spontaneously learned through our life's experience. When we are informed of some of their hidden aspects it is a new fresh discovery of these same things the knowledge of which we thought to have completely exhausted. In fact, we took for granted that there was not anything more to learn about them. Hence, the *Mathnawî* makes us aware that we were deluded about things, because of our opinion of our self-sufficiency in rational knowledge. The danger of this self-sufficiency is the risk of gradually limiting all that exists to the sensory world. It is also a kind of petrification of our intellect and our perception of the world, that the Heavens do not concern us anymore. Suddenly, reading the *Mathnawî*, it appears to us that this world is not at all closed up in itself, but that there is a constant influence from spiritual worlds from above. What the *Mathnawî* says is to see what it is behind these apparent forms. Conversely, a doctrinal exposition can, at first impression, be taken as abstract concepts and therefore far from us and only indirectly related to us by the tool of our mind.

Other poets, such as Jâmî, intertwine complex doctrinal formulation with verses, so that the reader, if he cannot manage to grasp the doctrinal points, can always rest on the poetry and from that participate to the doctrinal truths in any case (6). In summary, what it is important is that both poetry and doctrines come from a knowledge of the heart, from a direct knowledge; the authors have witnessed these spiritual truths and, by images or in the form of more complex speech, they convey them to us. In other words, they are teaching us by means of symbols.

But another important point that makes us understand why it is more likely to think that story and poetry, are more powerful in conveying religious truths than abstract doctrines is that, on one hand, the use of concrete objects are naturally symbols themselves because they coincide with God's creation, while on the other, inasmuch as symbols, the stories in the *Mathnawî* are as real as the things we experience in the world. Indeed, the latter are images that embody spiritual realities. This because this work comes from knowledge of the heart, and not just from mere fantasy. Indeed, the author himself states: "*my stories are*

not simply jokes, they contain a teaching and their purpose is to guide people and to make them understand what I mean in them" (7). And God says in the Qur'an: "*We did not create heaven and earth and everything in between them as a game*" (8). It has been said that this koranic verse means that God does not create forms that are unreal or futile, like the ones in the shadow plays (9). Hence, on one hand, this world is not unreal in every respect, as some philosophers could say, and, on the other, it is false to state that nothing can be known apart from this world, as some materialists could say (10). This same remark can be analogically transposed to spiritual poetry, which is not mere fantasy, because it is an expression of invisible reality in the forms of images, and that these spiritual stories are not just meant for the sake of the reader's amusement, but are signs which point to invisible realities. And in the same way the things in this world are real only because behind them there is the Real, so the spiritual poetry is not just a shadow play because behind them there are spiritual truths (11).

There is another analogy between creation and the representation in the human imagination, namely, story. In a certain way, human beings create things in themselves through imagination, whether these things exist in the outward world or not. The faculty of imagination is a modality of the human constitution, and things at that degree really can be said to exist in the same way as we say that sensory and corporeal things in the world exist. Hence, for the faculty of imagination it is possible to represent what senses and the rational faculty judge impossible. This is why symbols in poetry and stories, in the form of images, can be accepted when addressing themselves to the faculty of imagination. On the contrary, the faculty of reason finds it difficult or impossible to accept these images. Again, anybody, at any intellectual level is able to accept imaginal symbolism, with the help of faith (12). Logically, reason and imagination do not constitute a dialectic. On the contrary, they are complementary to each other. While images can be grasped immediately even if what is behind them is not yet fully comprehended in rational terms, reason without imagination cannot grasp symbols in the form of images (13).

The Quranic words "*Allah is not ashamed to propose a gnat or something more elevated as parable*" and "*God proposes parables to people*" (14) highlight the importance of the meanings which are found in parables. The same can be said about the parables and stories written by human hands under spiritual inspiration and the fact that they convey spiritual and religious truths. The Emir 'Abd Al-Qâdir Al-djazâ'irî, referring to the above Qur'anic verses, explains the deep relation between spiritual stories and God's acts (15).

Because of their analogy with hidden realities, parables have the power to lead human beings, by means of their imaginative faculty, to the knowledge of these realities. Those who believe these parables as true and have faith will receive, by God's will, the knowledge that they point to. It is worth noticing that at a certain point of his commentary, the Emir does not feel important to keep a clear distinction between parables and the events that occur in the world which are experienced by human life. This means that they are practically the same inasmuch as that they are both shadows, reflections of the attributes of God. They are both symbols, and the Emir suggests seeing only symbols in

things of the world in order to be aware of God's presence. Hence, God speaks to us both through parables and through His acts and creation. This reminds us that God creates things through His Logos, that is, His Word or Speech. Through it, he never ceases to speak to us. In summary, human beings can learn through stories in the same way as they can learn through life, as long as they are aware that it is God who is speaking to them. Parables and created things perceived in this world by human beings are both like rungs that allow human beings to climb towards God. Conversely, stories and the sensory things in the world can both become veils that prevent us from seeing them as indications or signs that lead to God. In the same way as these stories can be taken as "*simply jokes*", human beings can perceive the sensory world only as an outward shell without being aware of the pearls which are contained in it. If human beings are able to see of things, which are rungs enabling to climb to pure intellectual or spiritual ideas, only their sensory aspect, then they will not be able to go beyond this sensory world. The implication is that human beings, acting in this way, will consider creation merely as a "*simple joke*", while God in the Qur'an says clearly that this world has not been created for amusement (16). On the contrary, the world has been created so that human beings can know God. Indeed, the knowledge of God is the ultimate reason human beings have been created because through knowledge one can worship Him (17). In fact, one cannot worship something if he does not know anything of it.

One of the characteristics to convey spiritual truths in the stories in the *Mathnawi* is the way in which the author makes the boundary between "reality" and story thinner and thinner, so that the reader is brought, almost without being aware, from one 'world' to the other and vice versa. In this way, the author put bridges between them, making possible to shift from stories to implicit or explicit Koranic allusions and parables or to everyday experiences.

Another important finding that makes us understand how "reality" and the images of traditional poetry are much closer than we could at first impression think can be found in Ibn al-'Arabî doctrine. In brief, he says that there is no essential difference, in respect of reality, between this corporeal world and the microcosmical *imaginal* world (18), such as the one of dreams or the one created by imagination; both are composed of images and need to be interpreted. Hence, both of them are composed of forms which convey meanings, hidden truths. As we have said before, God speaks to us through these forms, and by means of the interpretation of these forms, we can understand God's word (19). Hence, there are no a real borders between images in stories and everyday life experiences. Not only that, many characters in the stories already seem to be taken from the same stuff of which dreams are made, to use a Shakespearian expression from *The Tempest*. It is only because we do not wonder anymore that we overlook them.

For instance, in the story of the greengrocer and the parrot (20), the parrot is already something that should create wonder in us, for the fact of being able to articulate human words, which is said to be a specific human feature (21). Rûmî simply adds to the parrot the capacity of human thought. He then reverses the entire way of seeing things: it is the

parrot that sees a *faqīr* (22) as one of his peers, because the way he is dressed looks like, in the view of the parrot, one of its peers (23). Hence, these stories have the same stuff as dreams, because ideas can take forms and shapes different from what we would expect in the sensible world.

This introduces us to the use of typology, where human beings can be metaphorically likened, according to their aptitudes and predispositions, to different animals. This, again, finds its foundation in religious doctrines. Indeed, animals express certain attributes of God whereas true humanity possesses them in an integrated and balanced manner. Hence, if on one hand attributes in animals can be taken as symbols to express certain human or divine attributes, on the other, they can also express limitation, such as the parrot which only sees the outward form of a human being, and therefore considers him as equal to it. The doctrinal content of this story brings us back to what was mentioned before: by judging things only from the outward aspects, one is prevented from seeing their hidden realities. Hence, the parrot sees only a peer of his. In the same way, human beings judging things in that way see only created things, that is, seeing outward forms without being aware of spiritual realities, and so nothing can be perceived beyond its formal modality. This, firstly because they have already deprived themselves from seeing the uncreated, the Spirit in them. Furthermore, this story, like others, has manifold meanings. For instance, it also means the attitude that certain human beings can have towards saints or Prophets. Just because the latter have an external form similar to any other human being, they believe that all that comes from them can be explained away in psychological and in individual human terms. This is one of the meanings of an aphorism in the Gospel, when Jesus says that Prophets are not recognised as such in their own lands.

To return to the parrot tale, after this short story the author gives a few practical example and spurs the reader to see him/herself similar examples in his/her daily life: "*Consider hundreds of thousands of such likenesses and observe...*" (24). The fact of not stopping at forms, but going beyond them to seek their true meanings, is a main theme in the *Mathnawi*. Besides, it is what stories require from the reader.

We will see that the author uses many other species of birds in his stories, all of them being able to convey to us some religious or spiritual knowledge through the display of their qualities or special ways of acting. Through stories, we are able to understand something of their speech. Their speech tells us something that comes from the invisible realm. Birds are naturally symbols inasmuch as they link what is earthly with that which is heavenly, they have wings as angels have, and they can detach themselves in some way from earth because of their ability to fly. From another stance, they are not completely of earth because they fly in the air, and they are not completely of air because they are made of earth and cannot live permanently in the air. Such is the soul: nor pure spirit, nor pure earth. Paradoxically, while the parrot seems to convey more to us because of its ability to unveil secret things by speaking in an articulated human fashion, it seems that the other birds can tell us even more because their singing is more mysterious and incomprehensible to us. And the fact that their singing sounds incomprehensible in

respect of the articulated human speech of the parrot, might suggest that their grade is higher and more aloof, and that they do not mix with anything in respect of the human kind. They are able to sing in different varieties of sounds, each one saying something different and incomprehensible to us. Therefore, they keep secret what they are saying to each other even though they can sing aloud. The symbolism here is that their communication is eminently super rational, while that of the parrot is much more human. In a certain way, what seems marvellous to us - the fact that the parrot can reproduce human words - is replaced by the fact that all the other birds escape from our understanding. In maintaining their secret, God shows how mystery is always present in the world but cannot be grasped by the majority of human beings.

In spite of the fact that the author in these stories continuously addresses the reader to the religious Koranic messages, whether in an explicit or implicit manner, can easily go unnoticed, it has been said that the *Mathnawi* is a Qur'an in the Persian language (25). For instance, the fact of not being able to understand the speech of birds and that of considering this as a quite natural and normal situation is in reality a sign of the fall of humanity. Indeed, Adam was given the knowledge of the names of everything, "*the mystery of "He thought the names"*" (26), that is the knowledge of both the forms and the inner meaning of things. Hence, the stories here revert to the original and normal order of things when human beings were able to understand the speech of every other being, that is, know their inner realities. Hence, the story becomes a reminder of our condition of being cut off from true humanity, but at the same time, the beauties of these stories show how this condition, with the grace of God, can be re-established. Again, the paradox is that, while we could at first think of these stories as just fairy tales, and therefore something unreal, they actually show how reality should be.

The fact of the variety of the birds and nature in these stories also makes us understand that, in a more natural environment, fables and stories take shape not only in imagination, but also in the sensory world. Hence, the sense of the fables is more easily felt as true than when human beings live in a modern urbanised and unnatural environment. Then, the disappearance of nature with the disappearance of the sense of the supernatural in everyday things around us is not just a mere coincidence. This is another example of how the boundary between "real" and "unreal" would not be apparently so separated, and how the "real" (this world) would not be so impermeable to the influences of hidden worlds if a cosmic balance were maintained.

We have seen that the author transforms the character of the speaking parrot, which is an example of something that is almost extraordinary - the fact that an animal can articulate human speech -, into something even more extraordinary - the fact that it can think as a human being. Even more extraordinary is the fact of a human being that can understand the speech of the animals in the story of "*The Man who asked Moses to teach him the language of Beasts and Birds*" (27), which we are going to explain in the next paragraph.

The capacity of understanding the speech of the birds refers indirectly to the Koranic story of Salomon to whom God gave this power and who was worthy of it. It is a charismatic

gift, a special and subtle knowledge that, if in the hand of a person unworthy of it, not only comes to nothing but also can be extremely dangerous. It is an allusion for those who follow divinatory sciences deluding themselves in thinking that they can get around their destiny and, at large, anyone who seeks through pseudo-spirituality to gain power over things. Hence, there is also an allusion to the invocation of the Prophet when he prays to God to be protected by a science that is useless. This knowledge is not the one that the author spurs his reader to search for, it is not the meaning of things, it is not going beyond forms. Not only that, the man, in selling his animals before their deaths to other people, and therefore making his loss theirs, gets from that a small worldly profit but increases his loss for the hereafter, because of his cheating. Hence, even though he is ahead in knowing things and acts according to this knowledge, he is preparing his own destiny without being aware: the worldly gains by means of cheating do not profit at the time of one's death, but have a weight on the hereafter. Hence the main difference between knowing the inner reality of things and any kind of pseudo-knowledge of things is that that only the first can give the gnostic the knowledge whether a thing can bring him a lasting good or whether it must be avoided. Moreover, although this man, by overhearing the speech of the animals, will know in advance the day of his own death, it will not give him the power to postpone it. This is another allusion that refers to the prophetic saying where it is stated that the moment of death is a decree that cannot be either anticipated or postponed (28).

We said early on that in these parables animals can reflect different attributes, both divine and human. In the same way, they can embody different aspect of the soul, as in the case of the *"Parable of the four birds"* (29). That the soul can be symbolised by different characters at the same time, reflects the fact that the soul has manifold aspects. There is an analogy with the four elements that constitutes the element of the body and that subsequently imprisons the spirit: *"the one who follows the way, as long as he remains conditioned by this corporeal structure, cannot know God"* (30).

In Rûmî's parable, these birds represent the four principal bad qualities in the human soul, and those from which all the others derive. The author, in saying that these birds make their own nests of the human soul informs us of the fact that the latter can be the locus of bad qualities partly because of our passiveness in letting them do so. The four birds are the duck, the cock, the crow and the peacock, respectively designating greed, lust, desire for long life and eminence, that is, the fact of looking for pride in the eyes of the others.

These four bad character traits can be divided into two groups. The first group designating the fundamental bad qualities of the animal soul, which has become as a second nature in the human being, while the second group designating the latter in respect of the world.

The greed symbolised by the duck and the lust by the cock are the two qualities of the animal soul which keep the spirit imprisoned. According to Ibn al'Arabî (31), it is the soul and not the body that has the desire to eat immoderately, the latter eating only what it is necessary. As for the lust, especially understood for excess of sexual desire, it is fortified by the excess of eating. It is perhaps for this reason that the duck is the first of the birds listed.

These two qualities can be said to be inherent to the animal soul, which acts according to its nature and cannot act otherwise. Only the intelligence (*'aql*) can control, restrain and dominate it. Hence, when Rûmî is telling us to kill these birds he does not mean to destroy something that cannot actually be destroyed. He is simply alluding to a transformation of the modality of the soul. Indeed he adds to: *"revive them again in another sort, so that afterwards no harm will be done by them"* (32). Likewise the Emir explains that walking towards God *"symbolises the permutation of the animal attributes with the ones of the Divinity... as for the effacement of these [animal] attributes, meaning their total extinguishment, the soul would be in itself immediately destroyed as well [which is impossible]"* (33). Hence, basically, there is not fundamental difference between a highly doctrinal exposition and a more direct way of expressing things through story and poetry. Indeed, verse 520 synthesises what we have said about the four birds: *"The sin of Adam arose from the belly and sexual intercourse, and that of Iblîs from pride and power"* (34). We can see that the vices ascribed to Adam are exactly the two bad qualities of the animal soul according to Ibn al-'Arabî. Moreover, this defines the main qualities of the four elements as divided into two groups: earth and water, of which it can be said that, as a second nature in the corrupted human beings, they have taken a character of heaviness (35) – and therefore assuming a centripetal or "gravitational" tendency –, and air and fire, which are the preponderant elements in the Jinns. And this is the reason they are characterised by pride and are able to have much power over the worlds of forms and in the imaginal world (36).

We have said that the second group of bad qualities, represented by the crow and the peacock, is in respect of the world. Indeed, while the former group, as we have seen, are more in relation to the excess of animal appetite compared to body's real need, this second group appears more dangerous, because, while the first group reflects the greed and lust of the animal soul, and therefore it shares the instinct of the animal nature, the second group reflects the pretention to be a god besides the only God. We will see that a few verses in the *Mathnawî* give us a clear indication of this.

The desire for a long life, symbolised by the crow, basically means love for the world, because death in these terms is that which separates us from this world. A prophetic saying says that the love for the world is the root of all sins. The author here is saying that true life is in the presence of the Living, while attachment to this world without His presence is like being dead. This introduces us to the topic of the two different types of food by which human beings live, namely spiritual food and material food. This is the reason why the author uses the crow for designating worldly desire, because it does not disdain the nourishment of corpses, that is things that are deprived of spirit, things that we naturally judge by our senses and by our reason as dead things. Therefore, by the use of this image the reader can perceive the clear warning that every worldly thing, when seen as something totally detached from the spirit, which is its principle and what gives it life, is a dead thing, a corpse. Conversely, in this image, there is an implicit incitement to search for spiritual food of life, as it is made explicit further in the text (37). This again can be found an equivalent exposition in the *Mawāqif*, where the author explains the koranic

verse X, 31 (38). Finally, the indication of the evil root of the wish for a longer life because of an attachment to the world, which paradoxically implies the act of eating dead things instead of the search for the *water of Life*, through which the divine presence can be found, is the fact that the first who expressed this wish to God was Iblis himself when he asked God: "*Grant me a respite till the day of Retribution*", in order to tempt human beings instead of seeking repentance in God (39).

It is worth bearing in mind that images, like symbols, may have different meaning according to the different perspectives they may be taken from. The crow in Al-Muqaddasi's *The Book of the Revelation of the Secrets of the Birds and Flowers* admonishes us with his caw that life is short and attaching to it is an illusion (40). He reminds us of our death and of the vanity of worldly things.

The last bird is the peacock, which embodies the pride of vainglory. Hence, if the duck and the cock symbolise the two fundamental egocentric and centripetal tendencies of the animal soul in human beings, the peacock represents the centrifugal tendency, a force that is directed towards the multiplicity of the world, which is composed of indefinite parts. It is sufficient to remember the words of the Gospel: "*he that gathereth not with me scattereth*" (41). Ar-Rūmī wants to convey the idea that while the greed for sexual desire and food is just two things, the greed to possess things, which are numberless, is much worse because of the fact that the objects of desire multiply themselves indefinitely. Hence, it brings about a dispersion of the soul. What is more, to possess things one needs power. Hence, what is at the base of this greed is the search for power. This brings us to the subject of the difference between divine traits and human traits. Now, power definitely is a divine trait while spiritual poverty is a human one. Hence, the author says that desire for power amounts to being rebellious against one's ontological condition, which is the meaning of the adjective "devilish" (42). Rūmī, as we have seen earlier, defines these characters in the verse "*The sin of Adam arose from the belly and sexual intercourse, and that of Iblis from pride and power*".

There are several senses attached to the image of the peacock, all of them inspired by its splendid plumage and their contrast with its ugly feet.

There is also a mythological narration that related that the peacock led Iblis, who was hidden in the mouth of the serpent, to Adam and Eve when they were still in Eden. For this reason the peacock too was banned from the terrestrial paradise and its feet were turned ugly (43). The risk that the peacock could not see Paradise again is because of the heavy burden of its beauty, and the consequence of leading it to search for attracting people's praises, which is actually a trial (44). The fact that we do not really possess beautiful qualities and attributes is well symbolised by this birds, as the feather is the reason for its beauty and not itself. By the fact that feathers can be detached and dropped, we can understand that qualities do not strictly belong to us but they are simply borrowed. Hence, the bad quality symbolised by this bird is hypocrisy, showing what we are really not and claiming what does not really belong to us. And hypocrisy is related to the appearance of the feather, while the delusion to possess something that we actually do not possess can bring us to arrogance (45).

When this myth says that the peacock was convinced by Iblis to lead him to Adam and Eve, it conveys also the spiritual truth that when we act badly it is because we are passive and subjected to lower passions due to the fact of obfuscation of the rational soul and hence the hindrance to act freely according to the intellect which is our angel. According to another perspective, the peacock is the animal soul itself, which is vanity and pretention. The image of the peacock that was hidden in the mouth of the serpent, and that it led Iblis, depicts the doctrinal point which explains that Iblis itself was misguided by his own animal soul. Indeed, according to a spiritual logic, if we take the assumption that someone misguided Iblis, then the consequence is that there must have been another in turn who misguided it, and so on *ad infinitum*. Hence, the first being whom Iblis misguided was himself (46).

Another effect of God's curse on the peacock is a double punishment: while its feet are a sign of its act of following Iblis' suggestions and the consequence of its banishment from paradise, the plumage itself is a remembrance of paradise (47). This increases its suffering because of a sense of hopelessness, the fact of having lost something invaluable and the sensation that it cannot be reached any longer. Now, according to the 'arabic lexicon, Iblis means "desperation". Also, despairing of God's mercifulness is one of the greatest sins in Islam. Al-Muqaddasi in commenting on this condition says that there cannot be greater pain than emptiness (48).

However, images, as we have said, are not like a closed system. For instance, the fifth book of *Mathnawi* gives a completely different image of the peacock (49). Opposite to the crow's attachment to the ephemeral life and the world, the peacock strips off its feathers because it sees in them the cause of all its vanity and vainglory, and therefore a hindrance to the attainment of real life. There is a plurality of symbolic meanings in these verses, which seems to contradict each other. But the contradiction is only apparent, because an image is like an object that can be seen from different angles. Rûmî wants to expound, on one hand, through the story of the wise man criticising the peacock's behaviour, that one should be thankful and use in the best way God's gift, the talents, instead of showing ungratefulness. On the other hand, he is saying that this image of feathers symbolising talents and special gifts can be a trial for the one who searches for the true life, because there is a risk that they can hold him/her back from it. Indeed, we must be patient both in trials as well as in gifts. But one can simply see in this story of the peacock's behaviour an example of how one can rectify one's intentions by stripping off pride rather than the talents themselves. Another meaning of this story can be the clear difference between the different natures of ascetism and contemplation in Islam. Finally, the feathers represent all that which makes the animal soul become stronger, and ultimately, they represent the animal soul and all the qualities attached to it.

Finally, verse 498 of the 5th book gives the advice to look at the peacock's feet, as they are seen as ugly (50). This, in a certain way substitutes the tearing off of the feathers. In La Fontaine's Fables (51) we can see that the peacock's feet are in a certain fashion substituted

by its poor capacity for singing, and we can also draw the conclusion that both its feet and its singing symbolise the peacock's striking defaults in respect of its plumage. La Fontaine's fable tells us that the peacock, although being aware of its beautiful plumage, complains about its ugly singing. The moral lesson that the story wants to convey is that everyone has his/her own qualities and that we must be content with what God has given to us rather than complaining about our deficiencies or, even worse, becoming jealous of the other's good qualities. Although Fontaine's fable is beautiful and it conveys a great moral truth and shows a great wisdom, there is something missing compared with Sufi poetry; let us say there is something missing in insight. There is something static that does not open up to the metaphysic. It seems more an allegory rather than a symbolism. In a certain way, we tend to see moral qualities as abstract ideas, accidents in respect to a human individual. Perhaps, this could be the reason why morals can become separated from religion. And even when they are incorporated in religion, it can be missed to be seen as derived and dependent on metaphysical truths. On the contrary, in Sufi poetry human qualities are never detached from cosmic qualities, while individuality is not seen as 'concrete' and static as we are used to because it is a form that is subject to change by the effect of the qualities of the cosmic and divine attributes.

Coming back to La Fontaine's peacock, it is interesting to notice its envy for the nightingale's sweet singing. Curiously enough, in Al-Mutaddasi's *"Revelation of the secrets of the birds"* the beautifulness of the nightingale's singing has a certain analogy with that of the peacock's feathers (52). The analogy may be explained by the spiritual saying that a good deed for common people can be a bad deed for saints, or anyway for those whose religiosity requires a more profound relation to spirituality. Indeed, the one who is criticising the nightingale is the falcon. Here, the falcon's silence is better than the nightingale's singing. One of the reasons is that the nightingale causes people's attention to be drawn in the same way as the peacock's plumage inevitably does. It is its singing that causes it to be captured and be put into a cage, an image which symbolises the spirit imprisoned by the animal soul. And in the same way that the peacock should refrain from displaying its feathers, the nightingale should refrain from singing. This image conveys the idea of the effort that is required to revert the centrifugal tendency of the soul, which is the opposite image of the peacock described earlier concerning the scattering of the powers of the soul into the multiplicity of the world. Also, scattering the power of the soul amounts to scattering oneself into the world and its multiplicity. Hence, the excess of singing from the part of the nightingale is seen by the falcon as a dispersion of energy into worldly affairs and disequilibrium. This excess is not only unnecessary but also detrimental to the conversion of one's attention to the essential or to the spiritual. The covering of the falcon's eyes with a hood, before it is let fly, expresses the same idea.

The image of the falcon basically symbolises the spirit in the human soul that has fallen into separation from its Origin and that now is eager to return to It. Hence, it evokes the Biblical and Koranic myth of the fall of humanity, and the possibility of redemption. There is also a Koranic verse that expresses this fall of humanity from a higher condition to a lower one: *"We created man in the finest mould. Then We reduced him to the lowest of the*

low" (53). However, even though this fall can be logically understood in cyclical terms, and therefore implies a certain relation to time, it nonetheless can indicate respectively the nature of the spirit and that of the soul, or the condition of the spirit free from the obfuscation of the soul and the one which is subjected to it.

The fact that God has given humanity a special honour is symbolised in the story by the King letting the falcon rest on his arm. In order to let the falcon hunt and to show his trust in it, the King allows it to fly freely. There is a clear allusion to free will. And it is because of the illusion of an absolute free will that the falcon decides not to fly back to the King. But his wish for experiencing individual freedom will shortly bring it to be prisoner of an old woman who will clip its wings and its feet (54). The old woman is a symbol of the world, in its negative aspect of separating the pure soul from God, or a symbol of the animal soul that prevents the spirit from shining. The story also relates that the King went in search of the falcon. While the nobility of the King denotes God's attributes of transcendence, the fact that the King even goes into the tent of the old woman to search for his falcon and that He finds it covered by smoke and dust, shows the immanence of His mercy and grace and their intervention in the salvation of the human soul, and an allusion to His sending His Messengers to the different communities of the human beings. The mistreatment received from the part of the old woman and, in another story, from the owls (55) makes the falcon remember the King's kindness and regret its decision to leave Him. The mistreatment represents the suffering of which the world is the source, inasmuch as evilness comes from the world and from one's own soul.

BIBLIOGRAPHY.

Al-Jazā'ir, Al-'Amīr Abd-Al-Qādir, *Al-Mawāqifu-r-Rūhiyyat wa-l-Fuyūdātu-s-Subbūhiyyat*. (Beirut – Lebanon: Dār-al-Kutub-l-'ilmiyyat, 2003)

Al-Muqaddisi, *The Book of the Revelation of the Secrets of the Birds and Flowers*. Translated by Hoare, Irene & Galy Darya, 1980. Octagon Press Ltd., Wiltshire, Great Britain.

Chittick, William, C. 1989. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge, Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*. State University of New York Press, USA.

Chittick, William, 1991. *Rûmî and the Maḥawwiyah*. Chapter 5 of *Islamic Spirituality, Manifestations*. Edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. SCM Presse LTD. United States of America.

Chittick, William, 1992. *Faith and Practise in Islam, Three Thirteenth Century Sufi Texts*. State University of New York Press. United States of America.

Chittick, William, C, 1994, *Imaginal Worlds, ibn al-'arabî and the Problem of Religious Diversity*. State University of New York Press, USA.

Chittick, William, 2001. *Good and Evil*.

<http://www.sufism.org/society/articles/GoodAndEvil.htm>

Chodkiewicz, Michel, 1993. *An Ocean Without Shore, Ibn 'Arabî, The Book, an the Law*. State University of New York Press. United States of America.

De Vitray-Meyeroitch, Eva, 1996. *Il libro delle Profondità Interiori, fihî-mâ-fihî*. Luni Editrice. Trento.

Doi, A. Rahman I. 1981, *Introduction to the Hadith, Traditions of Prophet Muhammad*. Arewa Boks. Hong Kong.

Farîdu'd-Dîn 'Attâr, *The Speech of the Birds*. Translated by Avery, Peter, 1998. The Islamic Text Society. Suffolk. Great Britain.

Gilis, Charles-André, *Aperçus sur la Doctrine Akbarienne des Jinns* (Beyrouth-Liban: Dar Albouraq, 2005)

Ibn al-'Arabî's, *what the student needs*. Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society, 1986, Volume V. United Kingdom.

La Fontaine, *Fables*. (Edition: 1970). Signorelli. Milano

Murata, Sachiko, 2000. *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light*. Translated text of Jâmî's *lawâ'ih* and Liu Chih's *Displaying the concealment of the Real Realm*. State University of New York Press. United States of America.

Nicholson, Reynold, A., 1990. (Translation of) *The Mathnawî*, by Jalálu'ddi Rúmín Gibb Memorial Trust. Wiltshire. Great Britain.

Renard, John, 1994. *All the King's Falcons, Rûmî on Prophets and Revelation*. State University of New York Press. United States of America.

NOTES

(1) Hamîm Sayyid Jalâl al-Dîn Âshtiyânî, quoted by Chittick, 1991, page 114.

(2) De Vitray-Meyeroitch, 1996, page 15.

(3) De Vitray-Meyeroitch, 1996, page 15.

(4) Chittick, 1991, page 114-7.

(5) Chittick, 1992, page 18.

(6) Murata, 2000, page 122

(7) De Vitray-Meyeroitch, 1996, page 15.

(8) Qur'an (21:16)

(9) 'Abd Al-Qâdir Al-djazâ'irî, *ma'wfiq* 98.

(10) Ibid.

- (11) Ibid.
- (12) ‘Abd Al-Qâdir al-djazâ’irî, *mawfiq* 292
- (13) We have to bear in mind that it must be imagination from traditional symbolism and illuminated by faith.
- (14) Qur’an, 2,26; 14,25.
- (15) ‘Abd Al-Qâdir al-djazâ’irî, *mawfiq* 248.
- (16) God also says of those who remember Him and meditate on the creation of the heavens and the earth: “Our Lord, you have not created this in vain (*batilan*)!” (Qur’an III, 191). *Batil* means *useless, unreal, without meaning, futile, false*.
- (17) Qur’an, 17, 23.
- (18) A rendering into English by Chittick of an Arabic and technical word of Ibn Arabi's teachings.
- (19) Chittick, 1994.
- (20) *The Mathnawî*, page 17-21, Volume I.
- (21) In a certain respect this is truth, but ultimately every created thing possesses the capacity of speech, though in different modes. What makes the human being distinct from all the other creature is, according to the teaching of the *Ibn ‘Arabî*, the divine form or image of God in it.
- (22) A spiritual poor towards God.
- (23) *The Mathnawî*, page 261, Volume I.
- (24) *The Mathnawî*, page 18, Volume I.
- (25) Annemarie Schimmel, quoting Jami, in Renard's foreword, 1994, page X.
- (26) Qur'an 2:31 and *The Mathnawî*, verse 1238, page 69, Volume I.
- (27) *The Mathnawî*, page, 183-91, Volume II.
- (28) *Al-Nawawi's Forty Traditions*, hadith number 4. Quoted by Doi, 1981.
- (29) *The Mathnawî*, page 5-87, volume III.
- (30) ‘Abd Al-Qâdir al-djazâ’irî, *mawfiq* 51.
- (31) Chodkiewicz, 1993, page 104-5.
- (32) *The Mathnawî*, verse 39, page 6, volume III.
- (33) ‘Abd Al-Qâdir al-djazâ’irî, *mawfiq* 25.
- (34) Probably, Ar-Rûmi intended the sin of the sons of Adam (peace upon him).
- (35) Originally, the effect of these two elements on the human being is the opening and the pure receptivity or passivity towards God influence and blessings. In other words, total humility (*humus* = earth, from the same root of the word *human*) towards God. The preponderance of these two qualities over air and fire, which are the most preponderant in Jinns, to which Iblis belongs, determines the true nature of the human being. Indeed, their preponderance over the other two elements is the necessary condition for the human being to walk to the path to God. The ‘corruption’ of the element earth and water results in a passivity towards the sensory and sensual world.
- (36) On this subject, see Charles-André Gilis, *Aperçus sur la Doctrine Akbarienne des Jinns*.
- (37) *The Mathnawî*, verses 302-4, page 20, volume III.
- (38) ‘Abd Al-Qâdir al-djazâ’irî, *mawfiq* 16: ‘Say: Who provides you with the nourishment from the heaven and the earth? Who is the possessor of the hearing and the sights? Who draws the living from the dead, and the dead from the living? Who governs every thing (or: every order)? Qur’an X,

31.

(39) *The Mathnawí*, verses 669, page 48, volume III. On the contrary, wishing for a long life in the search and the service for God is laudable in Islam. Indeed, according to a Prophetic tradition, the greatest happiness human beings can wish for is a long life spent in the obedience to God.

(40) Al-Muqaddisi, page 15.

(41) Matthew 12:30.

(42) *The Mathnawí*, verses 525, page 34, volume III.

(43) Farîdu'd-Dîn 'Attâr, *The Speech of the Birds*, page 468, note 21.

(44) Al-Muqaddisi, *The Book of the Revelation*, page 38.

(45) Al-Muqaddisi, *The Book of the Revelation*, page 38.

(46) 'Abd Al-Qâdir al-djazâ'irî, *mawfîq* 175.

(47) Al-Muqaddisi, *The Book of the Revelation*, page 39.

(48) Al-Muqaddisi, *The Book of the Revelation*, page 38.

(49) *The Mathnawí*, page 34-5, volume III.

(50) *The Mathnawí*, page 32, volume III.

(51) La Fontaine, *Les Fables*, number 17, Volume II.

(52) Al-Muqaddisi, *The Book of the Revelation*, page 31-2.

(53) Qur'an 95, 4,5.

(54) *The Mathnawí*, page 238-41, volume I.

(55) *The Mathnawí*, page 279-82, volume I.