

That Melodious Linguist:

Eloquence and Piety in Christian and Islamic Songbirds

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“Birds,” writes Albertus Magnus, “generally call more than other animals. This is due to the lightness of their spirits.”¹ Although Albertus here employs “lightness” (*levitas*) as a technical term, the broader valences of the word are very significant; a lightness of spirit does not only indicate one who is fickle, flighty, and unconcerned with the problems of the world (as we see in its cognates *légèreté* in French and *levity* in English), but can also suggest a state of moral purity and innocence. The etymological relationship between lightness (*levis*) and light itself (*lux*, both from the Indo-European root *leuk-*)² adds another level of interpretive meaning—as Dante illustrates in the *Divina Commedia*, sin is both dark and heavy, a kind of moral weight that crushes the body and hinders spiritual progress.³ As creatures of light and levity, whose wings take them beyond the borders of *terra firma* that demarcate the domain of man, birds can be seen as residing in a state of proximity to the spiritual world that no other living thing may access; their myriad and musical songs only reinforce their depiction as bearers of secret knowledge, concealed by a secret tongue. Solomon, wisest of all kings, is granted the ability to speak with the birds in both Jewish and Islamic tradition;⁴ the Qur’anic passage *‘ulimnā manṭiq al-ṭayr* (“We were taught the language of birds,” Qur’an 27:16) is directly referenced by the Persian poet and mystic Farid al-Din ‘Attar (d. c. 1221) in his well-known *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr*, a metaphysical journey into the sublime realm of unity, usually translated into English as *The Conference of the Birds*.⁵ Birds have long played the role of messengers of heavenly tidings and portents in Jewish and Hellenic augury, while the Holy

1. Albertus Magnus, *On Animals: A Medieval Summa Zoologica*, trans. Kenneth F. Kitchell and Irven Michael Resnick, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 23.6, p. 1546. Cf: “Sunt aves generaliter magis vocantes aliis animalibus: et hoc contingit propter spirituum ipsarum levitatem.” Albertus Magnus, *De Animalibus Libri XXVI*, ed. H. Stadler, 2 vols., *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters*, 15–16 (Munster: Aschendorff, 1916–21), 23.6, p. 1432.

2. Calvert Watkins, ed., *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1985), cf. LEUK-.

3. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, trans. Robert M. Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Canto VII, ll. 25–30; Canto XIX, ll. 73–75; Canto XXIII, ll. 65–67.

4. Ellen Frankel, *The Classic Tales: 4,000 Years of Jewish Lore* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1989), 214.

5. Farid al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin Books, 1984).

Spirit takes the form of a dove at Jesus's baptism in the Bible (Luke 3:22) and is similarly depicted at the Annunciation in Christian iconography. Birds are found in the liminal spaces at the ends of the earth: in the early Irish Voyages (*immrama*) of Bran (8th c.) and St. Brendan (10th c.), birds are found to sing the Canonical Hours in the Isles of Earthly Paradise and transform into angels.⁶ Similarly, Alexander travels to the edge of the Far East and speaks to the birds in his search for wisdom.⁷ Through a shared heritage of scriptural traditions and natural philosophy, an intimate relationship between birds and the spiritual realm is consistently evident in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic literature of the medieval period.

Although I am convinced that this common background exists and plays a significant role in both the literatures of Latinate Europe and the Hellenic-Islamic Near East, this essay does not presume that writing on this theme was by any means uniform or consistent between different periods of time, religious contexts, or even individual writers, nor does it seek to dismiss the possibility of polygenesis. Wendy Pfeffer argues for the latter in her comparison of the nightingale (a beloved trope throughout European and Asian poetry) in European vernacular, Arabic, and Persian verse, concluding that whatever similarities we see are nothing more than "parallel developments" of the image in different environments: "Despite the decades of debate over possible Arabic influences on medieval European literature, with regard to courtly love, in particular, it seems clear that with reference to the figure of the nightingale there was no influence whatsoever."⁸ While the question of "influence," as she herself admits, has been (and remains) a topic of fierce debate, there is no reason in my mind why one could not consider the depiction of birds in these literatures, if not in direct dialogue with one another, then at least emerging from a set of values, ideas, and beliefs that are common to Europe and the Near East alike, in accordance with the recommendation of G. E. von Grunebaum, who writes, "The interaction between East and West in the Middle Ages will never be correctly diagnosed or correctly assessed and appraised unless their fundamental cultural unity is realized and taken into consideration."⁹ In the realm of natural science, the adoption of Aristotelean organizational principles is apparent in the work of both Avicenna and Albertus Magnus; the divergent ways in which these physical concepts are recast in scriptural exegesis and literary metaphor are more indicative, I would say, of the particular motives and outlook of the individual author, rather than their religious or cultural biases. As we shall see, the variety and versatility of birds as bearers of symbolic meaning is nothing short of astonishing, impossible to fully document in a single essay; but to return to this generally understood theme of "lightness" and its physical and moral connotations in birds, I agree with Beryl Rowland's observation that "It is a rare bird that is found in Hell. . . . Taken collectively, they most commonly represent the spirit with its capacity for joy, and they sing of the day of Grace."¹⁰

6. Edward A. Armstrong, *Saint Francis: Nature Mystic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 65–67, 95.

7. Dick Davis, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings by Abolqasem Ferdowsi*, Translated by Dick Davis, with a foreword by Azar Nafisi (New York: Viking, 2006), 513.

8. Wendy Pfeffer, "Spring, Love, Birdsong: The Nightingale in Two Cultures," in *Beasts and Birds of the Middle Ages: The Bestiary and Its Legacy*, ed. Willene B. Clark and Meredith T. McMunn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 93.

9. G. E. von Grunebaum, "Avicenna's *Risāla fī 'l-Ṭīq* and Courtly Love," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 11, no. 4 (1952): 238.

10. Beryl Rowland, *Birds with Human Souls: A Guide to Bird Symbolism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1978), xv.

The Animal Soul

Let us, then, turn back to Albertus Magnus and ask: what is it about birds that makes them sing? As a key figure in the chain of medieval Peripatetic philosophy in Europe, preceded by Avicenna (Ibn Sina, d. 1037), Averroës (Ibn Rushd, d. 1198) and Maimonides (Musa ibn Maymun, d. 1204), Albertus (d. 1280) will seek to resolve this question through the established laws of physical science. It is literally an abundance of air, especially in the bodies of the smaller birds, that endows them with the property of *levitas*.¹¹ This is not a necessarily good thing; these birds of light spirit, such as sparrows, jays, magpies, finches, and wrens, are prone to lust and intemperance: “I would say that birds generally chirp or call only during the time when they seek intercourse”; “the excessive chattering of birds is caused by the many desires.”¹² Birds have little inherent substance of their own; light spirits are easily molded and imprinted by any form, which means that birds are apt to mimic the speech of others as much as they are to represent themselves. However, this capacity to learn, adopt, and imitate borne out of lightness gives birds a cleverness and subtlety unrivaled in the rest of the animal kingdom: swallows, for example, build nests that are so fine “they seem to exhibit some art and intellect in their design,” while the jay shows both “imagination and foresight” in its inventive minstrelsy and prudent gathering of acorns for the winter.¹³ Some birds, like the stork and the turtledove, even demonstrate acts of apparent piety and chastity, the former in caring for its parents in their old age, the latter in practicing life-long monogamy, even after the death of its mate.¹⁴

Some would say that Albertus is treading on treacherous ground with these descriptions of pious, intelligent birds, for they smack dangerously of anthropomorphism, the universal bogeyman of modern science.¹⁵ However, it seems that this was not a concern within the medieval understanding of how humans and animals are related to each other, an attitude that is quite distinct from both the classical Aristotelian view that preceded it and the later theories of Descartes and other philosophers of the Enlightenment, which both assume a fundamental divide between man and beast. Although some scholars such as Linda Kalof argue that this “preoccupation with maintaining the sharp distinction between humans and animals” never goes away in the medieval period, it must be noted that this delineation existed in a very different form and on very different criteria than what would succeed it.¹⁶ In the *Historia Animalium*, Aristotle allows that animals have properties “akin” to knowledge, wisdom, and sagacity (*techne*, *sophia*, and *synesis*), but that they are purely accidental results of their physiology, such as whether the blood is hot or cold, thick or thin; animals fundamentally lack the inherent powers of sense and reason that exist in man.¹⁷

11. Albertus Magnus, *On Animals* 21.26, p. 1426.

12. Ibid., 8.223, p. 765; 21.27, p. 1426.

13. Ibid., 8.52, p. 689; 8.74, p. 698.

14. Ibid., 8.68, p. 695; 8.56, p. 690.

15. Emanuela Cenami Spada, “Amorphism, Mechanomorphism, and Anthropomorphism,” in *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes, and Animals*, ed. Robert W. Mitchell, Nicholas S. Thompson, and H. Lyn Miles (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 37–50.

16. Linda Kalof, *Looking at Animals in Human History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 45.

17. Peter G. Sobol, “The Shadow of Reason: Explanations of Intelligent Animal Behavior in the Thirteenth Century,” in *The Medieval World of Nature: A Book of Essays*, ed. Joyce E. Salisbury (New York; London: Garland Publishing, 1993), 111.

Thus, any displays of cleverness or sagacity on the part of animals are merely similar in appearance, and not in substance, to those in humans: “Corresponding to art, wisdom and intelligence in man, certain animals possess another natural capability of a similar sort.”¹⁸ Descartes, of course, believes that animals are soulless automata devoid of language, thought, or self-consciousness, all factors that obviously separate them from humans.¹⁹ Albertus’s position is much more nuanced in this regard, for although Aristotelian natural science lies at the root of his work, it is the contribution of Islamic philosophers to the tradition, most importantly by Avicenna, that informs the terms of his analysis.

The discussion on animal intelligence takes an interesting turn in the Islamic context, beginning with the startling attitude of the Qur’an on this topic. Although there are passages that assume a relationship of service and reward between humans and animals, animals are never explicitly defined as human property—all things turn directly to God. Thus, all animals are inherently Muslims; they have their own language and prophets, and even receive the revelation.²⁰ In comparison, almost all the references to people as a category (*insān*) occur in a negative light, criticizing them for their arrogance, short-sightedness, and denial of God’s bounty. Even the only apparent proof of a natural hierarchy of creatures in the Qur’an, the oft-cited *la-qad khalaqnā al-insān fī aḥsan taqwīm*, “We created man in the best of forms,” is immediately complicated in the following verse, *thumma radadnāhu asfal sāfilīn*, “Then we returned him to the lowest of the low,” emphasizing that it is only by virtue of their belief, and not their bodies, that humans are beloved of God (Qur’an 95:4–5). In hadith literature, the Prophet’s kindness to animals is a recurring feature, and in the Shi’a tradition, the Prophet and his companions directly converse with them.²¹ Thus, from a scriptural standpoint, there is little evidence to suggest that human and animal souls are fundamentally different.

With the advent of the translation movement of the 8th–10th centuries, Muslim philosophers and jurists began to absorb Neoplatonic and Aristotelian elements into their natural science and theology. Avicenna, who in the words of Dimitri Gutas, “represents the culmination of the tendencies that preceded him and constitutes the fountainhead of everything that came after him,”²² complicates Aristotle’s claim that animals only accidentally exhibit something akin to reason and intelligence, arguing that animals can perceive inherent qualities through their perceptive faculties and thus discern abstract universals, such as danger, harm, and benefit, in particular forms.²³ These ideas are found in his monumental *Kitāb al-Shifā’* (*The Book of Healing*) which was widely translated and discussed throughout medieval Europe—Amos Bertolacci argues that not only Roger Bacon but his contemporary Albertus Magnus had direct experience with the work and its expository

18. Aristotle, *History of Animals, Books VII–X*, trans. D. M. Balme, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1991), 588a29–31, p. 61.

19. John Cottingham, “Descartes’ Treatment of the Animals,” in *Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham, Oxford Readings in Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 225–228.

20. Richard C. Foltz, *Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Cultures* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006), 17.

21. Ibid., 20–24.

22. Dimitri Gutas, “The Heritage of Avicenna: The Golden Age of Arabic Philosophy, 1000–ca. 1350,” in *Avicenna and his Heritage: Acts of the International Colloquium Leuven-Louvain-la-Neuve, September 8–September 11, 1999*, ed. Jules Janssens and Daniel De Smet (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002), 81.

23. Sobol, “The Shadow of Reason: Explanations of Intelligent Animal Behavior in the Thirteenth Century,” 112–13.

Prologue.²⁴ In another text, the *Risālah fī al-ʿIshq* (*The Treatise on Love*), Avicenna explains how the movement of all forms, human and animal alike, is an imitation (*tashabbuh*) of the Absolute Good in accordance with their individual capacities for perception, contemplation, and action.²⁵ Thus, the actions of a donkey, a man, and an angel are essentially the same, being driven by the same fundamental force of desire for the Good. While there is an explicitly named hierarchy in terms of a being's *capacity* to act, it is an accumulated span of potentialities over the same basic substance of the soul, rather than an either/or situation between two separate kinds of souls, one sensitive and the other rational. The human soul *is* an animal soul, albeit with a more refined capacity to comprehend and imitate perfection. It is therefore not so difficult for Avicenna to consider animals as sensitive creatures endowed with the capacity for intelligent, prudent, and noble behavior to varying degrees, which is precisely what humans are, nor is there any theological necessity to sharply delineate where "animal" ends and "human" begins.

In response to Avicenna, Albertus concedes that things like memory, imagination, estimation, appraisal, and instruction do indeed exist in animal species. However, he believes that they only learn through their sensual perception of immediate motion and comparing it with their memory and experience, rather than through a recognition of universal abstracts that exist throughout time.²⁶ This does not arise from a fundamental divergence of modes of perception, but rather from the mind's quality and sophistication. There are, for example, two kinds of reason, a "reason of shadows" that is born of inferences and associations made through sensory perception, and a "reason of light," which is only done through abstract reasoning.²⁷ All sensing creatures have access to the first mode, while only fully developed humans (excluding apes, pygmies, and perhaps even children) can arrive to the second. Animals can perceive and demonstrate language, virtue, and piety, but do so without a full comprehension of their significance; thus, these behaviors can be understood as derivative: "Animals which participate in a lifestyle only participate in it through some sort of imitation, for the principle of their actions does not possess virtue but rather some natural inclination to a likeness of virtue. Thus the turtledove and ringdove *imitate* chastity."²⁸ Albertus reiterates this stance in regards to the speech of birds: "When speaking they do not conceive the articulation of the voice, but they only chatter, bringing forth the configuration of a word by imitating it."²⁹ Although Albertus reflects Aristotle's contention that animals cannot think on the same level as humans, he does so through the Avicennan argument that the intellect does not constitute a wholly new faculty that clearly divides humans from animals, but is rather an additional dimension of thought that enriches and refines the sensitive capacities that are common to both humans and animals.

24. Amos Bertolacci, "Albert the Great and the Preface of Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Šifāʾ*," in *Avicenna and his Heritage: Acts of the International Colloquium Leuven-Louvain-la-Neuve, September 8–September 11, 1999*, ed. Jules Janssens and Daniel De Smet (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002), 139, 151–152.

25. Joseph Norment Bell, "Avicenna's Treatise on Love and the Nonphilosophical Muslim Tradition," *Der Islam* 63, no. 1 (1986): 77.

26. Albertus Magnus, *On Animals* 21.15–18, p. 1419–21; Sobol, "The Shadow of Reason: Explanations of Intelligent Animal Behavior in the Thirteenth Century," 118.

27. Albertus Magnus, *On Animals* 21.12, p. 1417.

28. *Ibid.*, 1.54, p. 65. Emphasis mine.

29. *Ibid.*, 21.27, p. 1426.

On both sides of the medieval Mediterranean, we can see a consensus building among the philosophers: while birds (and other animals) cannot enact the human condition to its fullest extent, they can approximate and imitate it within the limits of their individual capacity. This does not decrease the birds' potency as symbols of morality, virtue, and wisdom—if anything, the natural sciences only justify their preeminent position in this rôle, for as Albertus says, the avian body is more or less purged of bodily contaminates, and the avian soul is naturally euphoric.³⁰ His contemporary Brunetto Latini (d. 1294) claims in his encyclopedic *Li Livres dou Tresor* that as creatures of air and fire, choler and blood, birds are joyful and active, free of the covetousness and lethargy that afflicts those of cold complexion—weightless, they ascend towards the outer spheres, where they approximate the eternal and incorruptible nature of God.³¹ It is important to note that Brunetto does not explicitly link this characteristic to individual birds, but rather speaks of them in the context of the cosmic order; while his section on individual birds is little more than a compendium of *mirabiles*, typical of many medieval bestiaries, the necessary background is there for birds to be the angels of the animal kingdom, inhabiting the heavenly spheres and joyfully offering their song to God's glory.

Singers of Faith and Devotion

In the 960s and '70s, a group of thinkers and philosophers living in Basra, then the seat of the Abbasid Caliphate, began to issue epistles (*rasā'il*) under the collective name “the sincere brethren and loyal friends” (*ikhwān al-ṣafā' wa-khillān al-wafā'*), often abbreviated to the “Brethren of Purity” in English scholarship. While there is some debate around the true identity of the Brethren and where their theological loyalties lie, it is clear that they are chiefly concerned with the art of discernment, that subtle process of extracting universal truth out of the temporal world we inhabit. Neoplatonists to the core, the Brethren consistently demonstrate how the underlying singularity of creation and essential being paradoxically manifests itself in the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the physical world. Their work can often be read on multiple levels, where the superficial ideas of a story are enriched and complicated through extended metaphor and polysemous idiom. One of these epistles, translated by Lenn Goodman as “The Case of the Animals Versus Man,” is a unique foray into the problem of animality, simultaneously questioning man's assumed superiority at the top of the hierarchy while offering an alternative world-view from the perspective of the animals, who have had enough of man's lording it over them and take their grievances to court, presided by the king of the *jinn*. Each animal kingdom, that of the beasts, the birds, the swimmers, and the crawling creatures, is charged to send an ambassador to represent their kind in the upcoming contest. The simurgh, the Persian analogue to the phoenix and ruler of the birds, asks the peacock, his vizier, to list for him the potential candidates for the job.

There are the hoopoe who scouts, the cock who calls to prayer, the pigeon who finds
the way, the calling partridge, the singing pheasant, the preaching lark, the mocking

30. Albertus Magnus, *On Animals* 62.

31. Brunetto Latini, *The Book of the Treasure (Li Livres dou Tresor)*, trans. Paul Barrette and Spurgeon Baldwin (New York; London: Garland Publishing, 1993), 61–65, 113.

bird, the swallow who builds, the soothsaying raven, the watchful crane, the dusky sand grouse, the cheery sandpiper, the lusty sparrow, the green woodpecker, the mournful ringdove, the sandy wood pigeon, the Meccan turtledove, the mountain bullfinch, the Persian starling, the quail of the plains and the stork from its forts, the magpie of the garden, the duck of Kaskar, Abû Tîmâr the heron from the shore, the goose from the dell, the cormorant from the sea, the ostrich of the desert, and that melodious linguist the nightingale.³²

Saying this, the vizier takes the king around to interview each bird, one after another. As diverse a host as they are, they all have two things in common: first, they worship God, and second, they speak in poetry. The first attribute is consistent with and confirms the Islamic belief that as Muslims, all creatures love God and obey His word. The capacity for poetic speech, on the other hand, seems to be a distinct property of the bird kingdom (with some exceptions, such as the cricket who sings while he plays his fiddle). Although the physical description of each bird is rather brief, the poems they recite are most illustrative of their characters, running the stylistic gamut from the exhortations of an impassioned preacher to the polished literary language of the Qur'an and classical poetry. The cock, announcer of the new day, enjoins his brethren to piety and summons them to the morning prayer: "How long, neighbors, will you sleep! / Remember God, you mindless of death and decay!"³³ The partridge, "stooped from long prostration, genuflection, and kneeling in prayer," thanks God for the blessings of the world and offers a personal supplication: "O Lord, shelter me from jackals, birds of prey, and human hunters, and protect me from human physicians' describing the benefits that are in me as nourishment for the sick."³⁴ The wise and watchful crane, standing awake throughout the night, intones, "Praised be He who yoked two lights in heaven. / Praised be He who loosed two seas on earth."³⁵ The raven is a soothsayer, warning all the world of the inevitable Day of Judgement: "Haste! Haste! Away! Away! Watch out for ruin, Sinner! Lecher! Seeker of this world's life!"³⁶ The mocking bird "speaks clearly and expressively and has many tunes"—he lives among men and reminds them in their dalliance to remember God:

Lord, Lord! Are you still playing!
The time to laugh is done.
Lord! Lord! You should be praying,
Not coveting what you've not won.³⁷

As Goodman notes, this diversity of song belies a unicity of devotion; while humans claim to be superior to animals in that they all have the same approximate form, and thus more closely approximate God's unity, they are in fact scattered and divided on the spiritual level, while the

32. Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *The Case of the Animals Versus Man Before the King of the Jinn: A Tenth-century Ecological Fable of the Pure Brethren of Basra*, trans. Lenn Evan Goodman (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 90–91.

33. Ibid., 91.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., 95.

36. Ibid., 94.

37. Ibid., 93.

birds, possessed of different bodies and melodies, are of a single mind as they praise their Creator.³⁸ Moreover, the birds demonstrate a way of devotional living that would not be unfamiliar to the monks and theologians of Christian Europe: truly pious beings do not speak, they only sing. As the Brethren were writing their epistles in Basra, the monastery of Cluny was meanwhile adopting a bold policy that forbade its monks from making any vocalization except for songs of praise, gratitude, and supplication: “the avoidance of speech not only protected monks from sins of the tongue, but also directed and shaped their behavior to make it consonant with that of the angels, whose ranks they hoped to join in the life to come.”³⁹ Not all angels are equal, however, and neither are all birds. Although it is clear that all of the candidates are devout servants of God, the one who is ultimately chosen to be their ambassador is the nightingale, for it is he who is “the most eloquent and expressive of them all, the finest singer and the most melodious.”⁴⁰ In both secular and religious aspects, the power of persuasion is an undeniable asset, for it will bolster the animals’ defense before the judge while simultaneously exhorting the human opposition to consider their wicked ways and repent. Armed with such silver-tongued warriors as the nightingale, the animal delegation easily presses its case against the humans, systematically destroying their claims of superiority *vis-à-vis* science, learning, agriculture, art, politics, or religion—all of these things, the animals prove, are either unimpressive next to the wonders of the natural world, or are the cause of more suffering and destruction than they are of joy and contentment. The single arrow in the humans’ arsenal that finally wins them the day is the question of immortality, which, despite their eloquence, no animal can dispute. It is not what humans *are* that secures them divine favor over animals, it is what they can *become*.⁴¹ Humans are monsters, rarely if ever surpassing the example of their animal brethren, but it is their ability to choose and adopt the angelic life that ultimately counts in their favor. In this way, the devotional songs of the nightingale and other birds are actually best read as reminders to men of their inherent potential as the best of worshippers.

A similar idea occurs in another mock-trial, this time written in Middle English in the early thirteenth century: *The Owl and The Nightingale*.⁴² This poem recounts a dispute that arises between its two namesakes, brought about by the owl’s hideous screech and the nightingale’s incessant twitter. Like the birds in the Brethren of Purity’s epistle, there is no disagreement on the fundamental truth of the world—both birds are believing Christians, and both praise God in their song. The whole confrontation revolves around the question of speech; when is it appropriate to speak and when is it best to remain silent; whether lovely words are better than somber warnings; if the power of eloquence to incite sin outweighs its ability to inspire faith. While the owl lives by the motto *do not speak unless you can improve the silence*, the nightingale defends herself on the claim that her eloquent and beautiful song will fill the soul with joy and the desire to praise God—how

38. Lenn E. Goodman, “Reading The Case of the Animals Versus Man: Fable and Philosophy in the Essays of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’,” in *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ and their Rasā’il*, ed. Nader El-Bizri (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 269–70.

39. Scott G. Bruce, *Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism: The Cluniac Tradition c. 900–1200* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 14.

40. Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, *Animals Versus Man*, 97.

41. Goodman, “Fable and Philosophy,” 273.

42. The actual date of authorship, and the author himself, is unknown; scholars estimate that the poem was written between 1189–1272. Cf. Neil Cartlidge, ed., *The Owl and the Nightingale: Text and Translation* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2001), xv.

could silence compete with such a voice?

Don't you know what man was born for? For the bliss of the kingdom of heaven, where there is perpetual song and rejoicing. Towards that place strives everyone who knows anything about virtue; and that's why there is singing in church and clerks set about performing their songs—so that people may realize by means of the song where they are going and where they will long remain; so that, rather than forgetting that bliss, they may meditate upon it and acquire it; and so that they may take notice from the voices in church how merry is the rejoicing in heaven. . . . And I help them as best I can. . . . I remind people of what is good for them, and that they should be cheerful in spirit; and I urge them that they should be seeking that song that is perpetual.⁴³

The owl retorts that such frivolous warbling will only incite lechery and carnal desire, a claim not unsubstantiated by the natural sciences. The nightingale is a bird of spring, and any sage worth his salt knows that this is the time of year when the blood quickens and passions are at their peak. The nightingale acknowledges that she always sings to girls in love, admitting that even “if women are bent on secret affairs, I can't withhold my singing,” but she insists that this does not directly inculcate her song: “There is nothing in this world so good that it can't do some evil if someone wants to turn it amiss.”⁴⁴ If the owl can turn to Aristotle, the nightingale can turn to Plato. Her beautiful song—just like the beautiful form of a young man or woman—has the capacity to inspire sublime love of the highest order, by turning the lover's thoughts towards the perfect and eternal Creator of such beauty. If the lover fails to do this and succumbs to common desire, the fault is with the lover, not with beauty. Avicenna offers a similar argument in his *Treatise on Love*:

If a man loves a beautiful form with animal desire, he deserves reproof, even condemnation and the charge of sin. . . . But whenever he loves a pleasing form with an intellectual consideration, . . . then this is to be considered as an approximation to nobility and an increase in goodness.⁴⁵

In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates describes Love “as an interpreter and means of communication between gods and men.”⁴⁶ In the context of courtly love, the nightingale seems prepared to assume a similar role. Her voice is the vehicle that stirs the spirit, inspires joy, and necessitates devotion. Through the beauty of her words, people can realize their inner potential and assume their rightful place at the forefront of God's worshippers. Her work is the work of an itinerant friar, flitting from window to window, roaming from town to town, constantly offering inspiration through a voice uplifted in song.

Such an image may help explain the distinctive relationship between St. Francis of Assisi and the birds, who almost always appear in the context of a sermon, either as partners or competitors.

43. Cartlidge, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 18–19.

44. *Ibid.*, 33.

45. Emil L. Fackenheim, “A Treatise on Love by Ibn Sina,” *Mediaeval Studies* 7 (1945): 221.

46. Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Tom Griffith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 202e2.

This is not without precedent in Christian tradition; the book of Revelation has an angel preach to the birds (19:17), and the stories of saints like Brendan, Brigid and Guthlac and their rapport with birds were certainly known to Francis's hagiographers.⁴⁷ There are a number of stories in which Francis is about to begin preaching when he is distracted by the sound of a flock of birds chattering among themselves. At some times, he simply rebukes them for interrupting him and tells them to wait their turn,⁴⁸ while at others he is inspired by their example, saying: "Our bird sisters are praising their Creator. Let's go among them and also sing our regular Praises to the Lord."⁴⁹ Once, he is so moved by the nightingale's beautiful song he challenges it to see who can sing God's praise the longest, a contest he finally loses.⁵⁰ The birds occasionally assist Francis in his preaching, such as when he is giving a sermon on a particularly hot day, and a flight of swallows descend upon his audience and cool them with the beating of their wings.⁵¹ In another episode, Francis preaches to the birds themselves to censure the arrogant people of Rome that "intelligent and rational people should scorn to listen to the word of God, while birds not gifted with reason received it with great joy."⁵² The most famous story of all takes place in the Spoleto valley, where Francis comes across a great congregation of birds and preaches them this sermon:

My brothers, birds, you should praise your Creator very much and always love him; he gave you feathers to clothe you, wings so that you can fly, and whatever else was necessary for you. God made you noble among his creatures, and he gave you a home in the purity of the air; though you neither sow nor reap, he nevertheless protects and governs you without any solicitude on your part.⁵³

In one version of the story, from the *Fioretti* accounts, the birds rise up after the sermon in the shape of a cross, then split into four groups, each one flying in a cardinal direction as they joyfully sing.⁵⁴ In addition to the clearly miraculous nature of this event, there is a symbolic intensity embedded in its visual depiction that cannot be overlooked. It is as if Christ, the cross, has risen again through Francis's preaching, and his message will spread to the four corners through the singing-preaching of his disciples. The narrator explicitly links the Franciscan monks to birds, saying that they too "possess nothing of their own on earth and commit themselves entirely to the Providence of God."⁵⁵

The merging of human and avian bodies reaches a peak in Hugh of Fouilloy's *Aviarium*, composed sometime between the late 1130s and 1140s, a contemplative and mystical work whose intricate reading of the physical world rivals the esoteric writings of the Brethren of Purity. Part of the *Aviarium*'s complexity lies in its intertextuality and harmonization of divergent sources into a unified, if multi-layered, discourse, combining the allegorical sermons of the Greek *Physiologus* and

47. Armstrong, *Saint Francis: Nature Mystic*, 67, 69.

48. Raphael Brown, *Fifty Animal Stories of Saint Francis* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1958), 36, 57.

49. *Ibid.*, 35.

50. *Ibid.*, 38.

51. *Ibid.*, 56.

52. *Ibid.*, 41.

53. Thomas of Celano, *St. Francis of Assisi: First and Second Life of St. Francis, with selections from Treatise on the Miracles of Blessed Francis*, trans. Placid Hermann O.F.M. (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1962), 54.

54. Armstrong, *Saint Francis: Nature Mystic*, 59.

55. Brown, *Fifty Animal Stories of Saint Francis*, 45.

the bestiaries that are its descendants with the observations of a naturalist and a highly inscribed mystical narrative, girded by a strong foundation in Scripture and its exegesis. In addition, the work is accompanied by an elaborate and highly nuanced series of images in which the typical variety and idiosyncrasy exhibited in bestiary illustrations is stabilized into a visual corpus that is transmitted “with surprising fealty” throughout the book’s history.⁵⁶ While there is an element of *mirabilia mundi* in the work that bespeaks a certain degree of kinship with the bestiaries, the general intention of the work resides undoubtedly in the realm of sacred literature, in which the engagement and reflection of the audience plays a vital role. Just as the reader is converted from passive onlooker to active believer through his encounter with the text, so too are the bodies of birds transmuted from representative symbols of the Church to becoming the Church itself.

In both text and image, Hugh seeks to “paint the dove” in a way that will impart the moral teaching of his work in registers both simple and subtle, offering benefit to both the “unlettered” and the “learned man” alike (i.e., laymen and the clergy).⁵⁷ The three doves of the Bible, who are associated with Noah, David, and Jesus, are symbols that represent the three virtues of a penitent heart, a brave spirit, and a tranquil mind that will guide all souls, unlettered and learned, down the road to salvation.⁵⁸ The body of the dove can be understood as an embodiment of the soul, silvered (*deargentata*) in its feathers and manifest (*declarata*) in its virtues (the fact that both the dove, *columba*, and the soul, *anima*, are feminine nouns allows these characteristics to be freely applied to both).⁵⁹ The dove’s eyes remember the past and anticipate the future, its wings decline to its neighbor in humility and incline to God in reverence. Within this paradigm, the dove is not just portrayed *like* but the Church but actually *becomes* the Church, where each organ and every limb of its body serves a function and maintains its integrity as a whole: the red feet upon which it stands are the sacrifices of the martyrs; the silvered wings with which it flies are the divine eloquence of the preachers; the yellow eyes through which it sees are the mature judgement of a mind well versed in Scripture.⁶⁰

Against the dove of the church, Hugh juxtaposes the hawk of the nobility, which, in “spreading its wings to the south wind,” opens its thoughts to the church in confession.⁶¹ The cords and fetters which bind it to its perch are the twin bonds of self-restraint and self-mortification, which similarly bind a lay “brother” who goes out in search of worldly gain, fortified by humility and moral resolve. Although the hawk is carried by the left hand, signaling the preoccupations and concerns of the material world, when it is loosed it flies to the spiritual world on the right, where it literally captures and consumes the dove, thus receiving the grace of the Holy Spirit through the reenacted sacrifice of the Messiah.⁶² Throughout this narrative, it is understood that what Hugh is writing about is not merely a metaphor, but rather the actual and miraculous embodiment of these spiritual conversions in the form of a bird, just as Transubstantiation brings about the actual

56. Hugh of Fouillois, *The Medieval Book of Birds: Hugh of Fouillois’s Aviarium*, Edition, translation, and commentary by Willene B. Clark (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1992), 22.

57. *Ibid.*, 119.

58. *Ibid.*, 123.

59. *Ibid.*, 124–25.

60. *Ibid.*, 129–33.

61. *Ibid.*, 141.

62. *Ibid.*, 145.

conversion of bread and wine to the body and blood of Christ.

In this vein, the voices of Hugh's birds take on a highly symbolic resonance. The song of the dove is a sigh (*gemitum*), which is the sign of regret for past sins committed and the beginning of the road to redemption. The hawk emits a plaint (*questum*) as it refutes the sins of an "indolent past."⁶³ The voice of the turtledove and the sparrow is respectively a lament (*planctum*) and a cry (*clamorem*), through which the soul maintains its virtue and stays vigilant against evil. Hugh's discussion of these birds, mediated through scriptural references, is fundamentally linked to the hidden meaning of their utterances. We are the turtledove, crying its lament in a foreign land, Babylon, where "the mind [is] subjugated to the Devil's power"; therefore when our voices are heard "sin is recognized in a calm mind . . . while the inner ear is humbly inclined towards penitence."⁶⁴ The chastity of the turtledove, as we saw mentioned in the work of Albertus Magus, is utterly transformed in this context; the turtledove is no longer just a bird who refuses to take a second mate, it is a soul who consecrates itself to Christ, the Bridegroom of the Church. The sparrow undergoes a similar transformation. Where the bestiaries hold it to be little more than a capricious and lecherous bird, it is now "feathered in virtues and rules."⁶⁵ Abandoning the forest, it returns to the house of faith, where it avoids the Devil's snares with cunning and guards its nest with a clamorous voice. Like the hawk, the sparrow is a saved soul *in potentia*; its rejection of carnal desires is a manifestation of the miraculous power of God's grace.⁶⁶

To review, we see that birds were not only invoked as natural examples of virtue, suitable for human contemplation, or deployed allegorically as vehicles of meaning and metaphor, but as the *Aviarius* demonstrates, their physical bodies, when understood in the proper way, could become the literal manifestations of the very virtues they were said to imitate. This element of the sublime and miraculous is, in our modern cultural outlook, probably the easiest one for us to overlook and underestimate in our reading of medieval literature. Another obvious work to indicate in which birds undergo a metaphysical transfiguration into saints, angels, or the Eternal Being itself is 'Attar's *Conference of the Birds*, alluded to at the beginning of this essay. Like Hugh of Fouilloy, 'Attar employs a language in which the hidden valences of every word must be taken into account for the full meaning of the text to become clear; just as Hugh juxtaposes the beak (*rostra*) of the dove to the site of its preaching (*rostrum*),⁶⁷ the mythical simurgh whom 'Attar's party of birds seek in their quest for enlightenment turns out to be themselves, thirty birds (*sī murgh*) reflected in a pool of water, and in this knowledge, they experience spiritual annihilation (*fanā'*) and are spiritually reborn as the phoenix-simurgh they sought, a unity of being that far transcends the sum of its parts. Although this brief foray into the world of birds in Christian and Islamic literature may only raise more questions than provide answers, touching on far too many topics without providing the in-depth discussion that is their due, it is my hope that at least our appetites have been whetted to further explore these themes of language, lightness, and spiritual potentialities that seem to accompany the avian form throughout the medieval literature of Europe and the Near East. Whenever birds are around, there is magic to be found.

63. Hugh of Fouilloy, *Aviarius*, 141, 147.

64. *Ibid.*, 153–155.

65. Rowland, *Birds with Human Souls: A Guide to Bird Symbolism*, 157; Hugh of Fouilloy, *Aviarius*, 163.

66. *Ibid.*, 167.

67. *Ibid.*, 123.

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