DEPARTURE IN SEARCH OF THE DIVINE IN THE ARABO-PERSIAN AND FRANCO-ENGLISH TRADITIONS

In this comparative study of medieval narratives dealing with the search for the divine in two traditions, the focus will be on the defining moment of departure as it occurs in literary texts. A journey has to start inevitably with departure – an act of separation and displacement. It may or may not reach its intended destination, but it must leave one location for another. However, the search for the divine leaves the traveler somewhat perplexed because the divine has no address. Searching for the divine in this study is not the search for a holy place. It is not a pilgrimage or a ziyāra (shrine visit). Rather, it is traveling to seek the mystery of the divine.

The two traditions – the Eastern Islamic and the Western Christian – have provided us with seminal narratives of such voyages. Texts ranging from narrative poems to extended allegories and passing by mystic epistles mark sufī discourse in the medieval Islamic world. In Europe chivalric romances and the Grail quests partake in the search for the divine. In my own search for comparisons – similarities and differences – I look for parallels and resonances rather than for documented influences. Thus it is analogy that triggers my interest and not source hunting to find the genesis even though there has been a great deal written on the connection between Islam and the Holy Grail.¹

¹ See, among others, Ponsoye, L’Islam et le grail and Adolf, «Christendom and Islam».
1. The Flight of Birds

The best of the vanguard are those strong of flight.

Ibn Sinā

All cultures have invested in narrating with the tongues of animals. Whether fables or folktales such stories often represent human beings and a diversity of characters that one can find in society. Proverbs also use at times animals to pinpoint a lesson. In the Arabic cultural tradition we find animal fables in Kalila wa-Dimna and in the Arabian Nights, just as we find them in the works of La Fontaine and in the Canterbury Tales. In the epistles of Iḥwān al-Ṣafāʾ (The Brethren of Purity), the animals expose the cruelty of mankind in what is framed as a court and a debate on their animal rights. But here the animals do not stand for human types but represent animals that have been exploited and abused for the pleasures of men.

The connotation of various animals is often culturally determined. The gazelle, for example, connotes the feminine, the horse the masculine, in pre-Islamic and post-Islamic Arab culture. The human soul has been associated with birds: a murdered person’s soul becomes a bāma, a bird that remains thirsty until it has been avenged. ² The bird in its flight resembles the soul that departs from the body. In the Arabic poetic and prose literary corpus the bird as a metaphor for the soul is well known. A speaking bird is then a common motif in Arabic literature and it stands for the soul or the spirit.³

The centerpiece of my analysis is the work of the twelfth-century Persian poet and sūfī Farīd al-Dīn al-ʿAṭṭār. ⁴ His work came to be known as Maṭṭīq al-ṭayr written in maṭnavī verse (couplets), but it is also referred to as Maqāmāt al-tuyūr. It is translated as The Conference of the Birds by many, but can also be rendered as the logic, language, argument, discourse, or speech of the birds. To understand the significance of the title, it is important to note that the expression occurs in the Qurʾān

² al-Ṣārūnī, p. 196.
³ In Christian iconography the Holy Spirit is also presented as a bird. In many animist religions the divinity is represented as a bird.
⁴ Dates of birth and death of al-ʿAṭṭār vary a great deal with the most likely c. 514/1120-589/1193.
in *Surat al-naml*: «And Solomon was David's heir, and he said, “Men, we have been taught the speech of the birds, and we have been given of everything; surely this is indeed the manifest bounty.”» (Qur’ān XXVII: 16). Nor is al-ʿAttār the first to use it as a title of a literary work. Persian poet al-Ḥāqānī has also used it for a poem that overlaps with that of al-ʿAttār. Both Ibn Sīnā/Avicenna (d. 428/1037), and al-Ǧazālī (d. 505/1111) wrote epistles dedicated to birds. A brief summary of these works will inscribe al-ʿAttār’s work in a tradition of writing about spiritual issues using birds allegorically, while showing the specificity of al-ʿAttār’s writing.

Al-Ḥāqānī, a twelfth-century Persian poet, wrote a poem in his divan entitled *Mantiq al-tayr* which is essentially a panegyric for the Kaʿba and the Prophet. Eight birds undertake a journey towards the phoenix. They meet to celebrate the spring and they discuss the virtues of flowers and trees – each preferring one flower over the others. Since they cannot agree on the best flower, they leave together to find the phoenix, the queen of birds, to find out the right answer. As they reach the phoenix, the entry is blocked but as she hears their protest she allows them in. ¹ This delay in meeting the queen creates suspense; it gets the reader or listener mentally mobilized to find the verdict on the superlative flower. We end up learning that the best flower is indeed the Rose as it is made from the Prophet’s sweat. Thus, in this narrative poem, the motivation behind the departure is to settle a question and to conclude a debate. Seeking the phoenix is indicative not only of political hierarchy, but of spiritual one as well as she stands for perpetual life.

Ibn Sīnā’s *Risālat al-tayr* (The Epistle of Birds) is an ambiguous one. ² Peter Heath, in his analysis of the epistle, asserts that in order to understand the meaning and symbolism one needs to know the psychology and cosmology of Ibn Sīnā. ³ It narrates – after a prologue which incites «the brothers of Truth» to unveil themselves to each other – that some hunters set nets and prepared the bait. Then the narration shifts to the first person singular, *wa-anā fi surbat ṭayr* (as I was with a flock of birds), ⁴

² I consulted two editions of the epistle, one edited and translated to French by Mehren and the other edited by Cheikho. For an English translation see Heath, «Disorientation and Reorientation».
the hunters saw them and attracted their attention by whistling, so the birds did not suspect fowl play. As they approached the hunters they all fell into their nets. They were completely trapped—neck, wings, and feet. The more they moved the worse their entanglement was, so each was taken up by his grief. Trying to escape did not work so they got used to being caged. Our narrating bird goes on to say that one day he saw a group of birds that managed to fly out of their nets even though they continued to have the ropes of the nets on their feet. This image of escaping birds from a cage pushes our bird protagonist to wish to leave his confining world and he calls to the flying birds to help him do the same. They, then, helped him free his neck and wings but not his legs as they themselves could not do so. They all left together, crossing vales and eight mountains while confronting risks. When reaching the seventh mountain, they rested in a spot with rivers and trees, pleasant music and scents—a paradisiacal image—which they enjoyed. However, fearing their enemies may catch up with them they decided to go on in their journey until they reached the eighth mountaintop where birds were singing beautifully. As they talked to them they were told that behind the mountain there is a city governed by a great and just king. Ultimately when they see him and are taken by his splendor, he tells them no one can free them from the chains on their legs except the one who tied them and he sends a messenger with them to do so. Most commentators associate this messenger with the Angel of Death who will free the birds completely from the burden of this world. As for their partial liberation that allowed them to travel to the king, this was done by themselves and indicates renunciation of the worldly. Departure then is undertaken as a way of escape from (worldly) incarceration. The need for a collectivity to fly the long distance before getting to the king is clear in the narration. Equally clear, is the dependency of the group on the (divine) king to free them completely.

In al-Gazālī’s Risālat al-tayr, a variety of birds come together looking for a king and agreeing that no one deserves to be their sovereign except the phoenix. They learn that he lives in the west and they decide to travel seeking him. The warning they hear about their losses on such a journey only adds to their longing. This story is narrated in prose but punctuated with verse. Armed with love and determination they leave for this momentous journey. Many perish on the way but a small group makes it to the king’s island. When asked why they came that
far, they say because they wanted the phoenix to be their king. However, they were told that the phoenix is their king already without the need to make him one. They were taken aback with this and felt that going back would be too difficult and were on the verge of despair. That is when the king was willing to host them, following their recognition of their impotence since the one who realizes his lack is worthy of being the companion of the phoenix. The allegorical nature of the narrative is emphasized by al-Gazâlî when he ends the story by saying «the speech of the birds cannot be understood except by he who belongs to birds»; in other words, only those who are initiated in sufi ways can apprehend the significance of such stories.

We note that the departure here is triggered by dâ̄ciyat al-šawq (impulse of longing) which is multiplied when others dissuade the birds and warn them about their intended voyage. They become determined to leave on their risky journey when nada la-bum al-banîn wa-dabbâ fihim al-ğunûn (nostalgia called on them and mad obsession penetrated them). There is, as in The Conference of the Birds of al-ʿAttâr, an ironic twist. The realization of one's insignificance at the end of the voyage is the condition to become a companion to the divine.

In al-ʿAttâr's Mantiq al-tâyr, in the Persian original, the Hoopoe-as-Guide is referred to by an Arabic epithet, hudbud hâdâ, which means the hoopoe master – literally hoopoe who directs to the right path. Apart from the soothing alliteration based on repetition of the b and d sounds in hudbud hâdâ, hudbud (hoopoe) occurs in the Qurʾān (XXVII: 20). Hâdâ occurs several times in the Qurʾān, meaning a guide applied both to God and to a human guide (VII: 186; XIII: 7, 33; XXII: 54; XXVII: 81; XXV: 31; XXIX: 23, 26; XXX: 53; XL: 33).

As the birds were wondering how to go about their quest, the Hoopoe offered to be their guide and their leader in this arduous journey. The text gives us three reasons for his position as a guide when departing for such an adventure:

10 Ibidem, p. 919.
11 Ibidem, p. 920.
13Scarabel (Master and Disciples, p. 94) states wrongly that the Quranic term huda (the right path) occurs in the Qurʾān, but not hâdâ, guide. There are far more references to hudâ in the Qurʾān (79 times) than hâdâ (10 times).
1. He, like Virgil in Dante's *Inferno*, is «heaven-sent» and marks of his
divine mission are on his body:

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
*Bismillah* etched for ever on my beak».  

2. He is associated with Solomon and is his closest friend and thus has
his wisdom:

«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!)».  

3. He is a world traveler who has been all over the globe since the
Deluge of Noah:

«For years I traveled 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».  

However, the Hoopoe does not want to seek the Simurğ by
himself, as he «Cannot endure the journey to His distant throne»
all alone (p. 33).

Before undertaking the journey, the Hoopoe indicates where
the Simurğ is not by using geography but mythology. Rather than
pointing to a place, he points to what goes beyond the place
«We have a king; beyond Kaf's mountain peak/The Simorgh lives,

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"P. 32. All page numbers in the text refer to the translation by Afkham
Darbandi and Dick Davies (henceforth *Conference*). Another translation
that has been consulted is translated from the French by C.S. Nott. I have also consulted
the abridged Arabic translation by Ahmad Naği al-Qaysî, in "Attârnaneh

"Conference, p. 32.

"Ibidem, p. 33."
the sovereign whom you seek» (p. 33). The legendary mountain Ka‘f/Qaf figures in Arabic folktales frequently.

This spiritual journey follows the stages of rites de passage, as the French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep described them in his seminal book published in 1908. Such rites of transition start with separation, then go through the phase of limen (the in-between), followed by aggregation (reunion). In fact, Van Gennep sees rites of passage from one state to another in society – such as from childhood to maturity, from celibacy to married – as structured after territorial passages from one country to another, including the crossing of boundaries: «Territorial passages can provide a framework for the discussion of rites of passage». 17 In The Conference of the Birds, the voyage itself, or the territorial passage itself is used to indicate a rite of passage. The act of separation as Van Gennep points out is an act of differentiation from the rest that would allow «the passage from one social and magico-religious position to another». 18 In al-‘Attār’s work, the transition is from one spiritual position to another in which a guide, an instructor, a šayh, a messenger, or a prophet is necessary. The separation in rites of passage is symbolically portrayed to indicate crossing frontiers from one world to another. 19 The crossing of thresholds in al-‘Attār implies rites of preparation for the gradual passage before union takes place. To use Van Gennep’s terminology, the wayfarer goes through pre-liminal rites (rites of separation from a previous world), to liminal rites (undertaken in the transitional stage), and finally the post-liminal rites (celebration of the incorporation in a new world). As this article is concerned with departures, the emphasis will be on the pre-liminal and liminal stages. The post-liminal in al-‘Attār is really an act of identification with the divine rather than simply membership in a new world. The very contrast between human and divine in the post-liminal phase is erased as the birds become one with the Ultimate. It is more than a sense of intimate belonging. It is more of the mystic rapture where the divine is within rather than without and thus the Unity of Being is evoked and not simply that of communitas as outlined by Victor W. Turner in his The Ritual Process. While in rites of passage in some parts

17 Van Gennep, Rites of Passage, p. 15.
18 Ibidem, p. 18.
19 Van Gennep – unlike other anthropologists, folklorists, and comparatists of his time – did not look for shared content of rites across cultures, but for shared structures, schemas (Belmont, Arnold van Gennep, p. 76).
of the world and particularly West Africa, ordinary men wear masks to present the deities, in al-‘Attār’s narrative, the divine is masked by everyday concerns and worldly interests; and it is only in this voyage of the thirty birds (si morgh in Persian) that they discover that they are themselves the Simurg, the phoenix — a symbol of the divine.

It should be clearly understood as Van Gennep states that «The rites of the threshold are therefore not “union” ceremonies, properly speaking, but rites of preparation for union, themselves preceded by rites of preparation for the transitional stage». 20 Thus in departing it is important to examine both the preparation for taking leave as well as the act of departing itself in order to understand how a rite of spatial passage expresses a rite of spiritual passage in the case of The Conference of the Birds.

Hoopoe, the guide, warns the novices before undertaking the journey:

«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.» 21

What the Hoopoe says is a clarification of what was said before to the Partridge:

«Destroy the mountains of the Self, and here
From ruined rocks a camel will appear;
Besides 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.» 22

With the destruction of the ego the promise of Paradise is embedded in the milk and honey imagery. The reference to Sālih alludes to the prophet’s warning the tribe of Ṭāmīd, but they did not heed his admonition and killed his camel. A similar dissolution of ego is present in Christian pilgrimages as well. 23

20 Van Gennep, Rites, pp. 20-1.
21 Conference, p. 34.
22 Ibidem, p. 29.
23 Turner borrows a term from Mihaly Csíkszentmihalyi, «flow» to describe
The birds were excited by the prospect of the quest and finding their king, but such excitement was short-lived. Following the Hoopoe’s speech:

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.

Al-ʿAttār goes on to show how the variety of birds, representing the diversity of human types, found reasons why they could not depart: the Nightingale because he was in love with the rose and could not leave her. The Parrot because she has been caged and if liberated she would only seek the stream of immortality and not the Simūrg. The Peacock regrets his banishment from Paradise – the only place he would like to go back to. The Duck refuses to leave because she does not want to depart from her watery home. The Partridge desires only jewels. The proud Homa whose shadow falls on kings refused to join the expedition because he has already been associated with powerful kings so the Simūrg would not add much to him. Similarly the Hawk rejects to join as he is content to be fed by the sovereign’s hand: «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» (p. 45). The Heron’s response is equally negative as he prefers to stay next to the sea which he loves. The Owl prefers to stay in desolate places where she could find buried treasures and gold rather than go to see the Simūrg whom she considers a figure in a «childish story» (p. 49). The Finch doubts his ability to take up the journey and decides to seek love in wells nearby. The Hoopoe refutes their arguments by showing how their attachments and desires are superficial at bottom. The Nightingale’s love is for the «outward show of things» (p. 36). The lovely rose does not bloom for him and will fade soon. In order to demonstrate the non-reciprocity of the beloved and the lover’s misunderstanding of the relationship, on one hand, and

this state of «merging of action and awareness... There is a loss of ego, the self becomes irrelevant. Flow is an inner state so enjoyable that people sometimes forsake a comfortable life for its sake» (Turner, Image, p. 254).

14 Conference, p. 35.
the ephemeral nature of the beloved, on the other hand, the Hoopoe tells the parable of «The Dervish and a Princess». The tale can be summarized as the infatuation of a dervish with a princess who smiled at him. It turns out that she smiled not out of affection but out of pity and soon departed. 35

The excuses for not joining the travelers are four fold: (1) attachment and love for what is nearby such as the rose for the Nightingale and the water for the Duck; (2) wanting something else that can be found elsewhere such as the Parrot who wants the stream of immortality watched over by al-Hidr and the Owl who looks for buried gold; (3) satisfaction with their worldly position and not wanting to seek something else such as the Hawk and the Homa, and (4) fear of inability to accomplish such a demanding journey as the Finch feared. The way the Hoopoe answers is first by telling them how insubstantial their attachments are followed by a parable or an allegorical story that shows it.

Other birds continue to protest and the Hoopoe tries to explain the significance of the Simurğ who is Truth itself and is worthy of the quest. Even though the birds understand the Hoopoe’s argument, the birds’ reluctance to undertake the journey continues, as they deem themselves unworthy and too weak to go through the difficulties of such displacement, as Dante felt before embarking on his voyage to the Other World:

«We are 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.

...He seems like Solomon, and we like ants;
How can we 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?» 36

The response of the Hoopoe is to invite them to open themselves to risk: «A man whose eyes love opens risks his soul/His dancing breaks beyond the mind’s control» (p. 52).

The birds when asking the Hoopoe to explain how they could aspire to reach the Simurğ given they are so insignificant, the Hoopoe responds:

36 Ibidem, pp. 52-3.
«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.»  

This Neoplatonic view of divinity is condensed in these lines. They point from the outset to the divinity in each of us. Stories galore follow elucidating the doctrine of the ṣūfīs: seeing with the heart, distinguishing between the zāhir (the outer) and the bāṭin (the inner), and the call to go beyond formal religion:

«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.»  

When the speech of the Hoopoe – studded by stories – is over, the birds depart for their journey in what one can call the liminal stage of the voyage and of the rite of passage – where they have left one world but have not yet arrived to another one. They are defined by what Victor Turner calls the «betwixt and between» period in rites of passage.  

In the end, some birds were convinced that seeking the Simurğ is the right path and chose the Hoopoe for their leader and a hundred thousand of them set off in flight. This is the liminal stage par excellence. The birds have to cross seven valleys before they arrive to the summit of Mount Kaf. These valleys stand for: (1) Search, (2) Love, (3) Mystic Apprehension, (4) Detachment, (5) Unity, (6) Bewilderment, and (7) Fulfillment-in-Annihilation. The function of the voyage is purification of the wayfarers.  

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37 Ibidem, p. 52.
38 Ibidem, p. 57.
39 Turner, Forest, pp. 93-111.
On their way to the valleys, the birds were frightened by the desolation and wondered why their Way is lifeless. The Hoopoe answers again by telling a story of Sheikh Bayazid, the gist of which is that the path leading to the Divine is for the elite and not for everyone. That is why the path leading to the Simurg is untrodden and lifeless. The birds continue to express their doubts and fears while the Hoopoe admonishes them by telling them how to struggle against doubt and despair through short allegorical narratives. He tells them how even Rabi‘a the saint found obstacles in her Way, yet with concentration tranquility would come about. Whether it is the ego that tempts the selfless travelers or pride that haunts them, the Hoopoe has the answer in a telling anecdote. All along, the birds question their leader about justice, purity, audacity, etc. and the Hoopoe answers, responding directly to the inquiries and reinforcing his answers by exempla and episodes from the lives of ṣūfīs.

In crossing the distance, each valley is defined, followed by tales exemplifying the theme. In the first valley of search and quest «Misfortunes will deprive you of all rest» (p. 167). In the second valley of love, «... desire/Will plunge the pilgrim into seas of fire» (p. 172). In the valley of mystery the travelers will have «insight into hidden mysteries;/Here every pilgrim takes a different way,/And different spirits different rules obey» (p. 179). In the fourth valley of detachment, «All claims, all lust for meaning disappear» (p. 184). In the valley of unity, «The many here are merged in one; one form/Involves the multifarious, thick swarm/(This is the oneness of diversity,/Not oneness locked in singularity)» (p. 191). As for the valley of Bewilderment, it is «A place of pain and gnawing discontent/Each second you will sigh, and every breath/Will be a sword to make you long for death» (p. 196). Finally, in the vale of Poverty and Nothingness associated with nirvana, «Here you are lame and deaf, the mind has gone;/You enter an obscure oblivion». "The division of the valleys into seven has hermetic significance as it indicates the number emblematic of completion, with valleys corresponding to the stations (maqāmāt) of the sufī path.

The arrival partakes of what the Hoopoe told the birds in the beginning: they are shades of the Simurg and thus a version of Him. The bliss the birds found in seeing the Simurg who is no other but themselves, after being purified through the long

31 Conference, p. 203.
journey, is something that al-Ćattār tells us goes beyond words. It was hinted at in the pre-liminal period and in the post-liminal period it is left unspoken: «Alone at last, together they conferred;/ Blindly they saw themselves and deaf they heard/But who can speak of this». Even though this article focuses on departure, arrival reveals retrospectively what was latent, but not absent, in the departing scene and preparations for the separation. In some sense then, departures program the voyage and its outcome, hinting at the finales.

The Conference of the Birds is, undoubtedly, an allegorical work. A reader is supposed to replace the birds with human types and thus the fantastic element of birds talking is on the surface. It is thus constructed on the metaphoric principle, in comparison to what is similar: Sīmūrgh as the Divine Presence, the Hoopoe as the Šayh (master) of sufi tariqa (mystic order) and the journeying birds as murīds (disciples). The meaning of the work deals with human frailty and the quest for perfection. Its disdain of formal religion is both on the level of zāhir (exoteric) and bātin (esoteric): «Forget what is and what is not Islam». The issue – as the text enunciates boldly – is not the teaching of Islam as formal religion, but the quest for the spiritual by giving up on egotistic desires and risking all for attaining perfection and divine essence. The narrative has been summed up by Muhammad Afzal of Lahore (d. 1715) in one quatrains:

_Si morgh ze shawg bal o par begoshudand_
_Dar jostan-e simorgh hava paymdand,
Kardand shomar-e khūsh, chawn akbar-e kar,
Didand keh simorgh haminha budand._

Thirty birds spread their wings eagerly
They traversed the sky in search of the simorgh
When, as the last task, they counted their own number,
They saw that the simorgh was in that very spot.

The narrative then is not based only on metaphor but also on irony, sufi irony and structural irony. One travels a risky journey only to find the destination located within one’s self. It is the voyage in that cannot be undertaken except through the voyage

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33 Ibidem, p. 57.
34 Quoted in al-Qaysi, Ąttārmameh, p. 498.
35 I am grateful to my colleague Amy Motlagh for translating the Persian quatrains to English.
out. The journey though is not superfluous. Without it, the seeker would not have been able to realize its divine potential.

2. The Search for the Holy Grail

A beam of light seven times more clear than day:
And down the long beam stole the Holy Grail.

*Alfred Tennyson, The Holy Grail*

We encounter the Holy Grail in the chivalric romance of Chrétien de Troyes (flourished in the second half of the 12th century) as simply a dish in his *Le Conte du Graal* (more often referred to as *Perceval*). But since the author died and left his romance suspended literally – without completing the last sentence (*Et quand la reine le vut elle lui demande ce qui elle a...*) – then others took over finishing the work. 37

*Graal* (Grail) comes from the medieval Latin *gradale*, that signifies «in stages» and is a term that refers to «a dish or platter that was brought to the table at various stages or servings during a meal». It was described in *Patrologia Latina* as «a wide and somewhat deep dish in which expensive meats are customarily placed for the rich». 38 It was Chrétien de Troyes who gave it a magic association and others followed making those magical associations specifically Christian. Robert de Boron saw in it «the vessel of the Last Supper used by Joseph of Arimathea to catch Christ’s blood after the Deposition... Robert transformed Chrétien’s enigmatic vessel, *un graal*, into *le Graal*, a type of Christian chalice and symbol of Christ’s real presence. The transition from a vessel producing food for the body to the vessel of the Christian cult, the chalice, which produces nourishment for the soul, was an obvious one in an age imbued with Christian typology». 39

In *Le Conte du Graal*, Perceval sees a fantastic vision of each course of the sumptuous meal, appearing in one chamber and disappearing into another. The vision includes one youth with a bleeding lance followed by two with candelabra and then the Grail appears:

36 On chivalric romance as genre see Fredric Jameson’s «Magical Narratives».
39 Ibidem, p. 239.
Un graal antre ses deus mains
Une dameisle tenoit
Et avoec les vaslez venoit,
Bele et jointe et bien acesmee.

... Li graax qui aloit devant,
De fin or esmeré estoit;
Pierres precieuses avoit
El graal de maintes menieres,
Des plus riches et des plus chieres
Qui an mer ne en terre soient:
Totes autres pierres valoient
Cele del graal sanz doissance.

Entered with them, holding
A grail-dish in both her hands –
A beautiful girl, elegant,

... The grail that led the procession
Was made of the purest gold,
Studded with jewels of every
Kind, the richest and most costly
Found on land or sea.
No one could doubt that here
Were the loveliest jewels on earth. 40

Perceval, who sees this vision, while sitting in the castle of the Fisher King, fails to ask why the lance bleeds and for whom is the grail. He was worried if he asked this question it would not be well received and thus he abstains, Si crient que s’il li demandast/Qu’an li tornast a vilenie,/Et por ce n’an demanda mie (To question his host or his servants/Might well be vulgar or rude,/And so he held his tongue). 41 Topsfield in his study of Chrétien de Troyes, finds in this scene the drama of the Romance:

1. The King who is wounded and impotent. 2. The Waste Land surrounding his castle which is a prey to misfortune associated with the King’s infirmity. 3. The Castle which is seen only by Perceval and which disappears when he departs from it. 4. The Lance which bleeds from the tip of its blade. 5. A Grail, which is a flat, hollow dish for the service of food. 6. Perceval’s role as an Elect, who, if he asks the right question, can heal the Fisher King and restore happiness and fertility to the land. 7. The disasters which must follow his failure to do this. 42

40 Chrétien de Troyes, Perceval, in Œuvres complètes, ed. Poirion (henceforth Perc.), II, 3220-3; 3322-9 (p. 765; Raffel, pp. 102-3).
41 Perc., II, 3210-2 (p. 765; Raffel, p. 102).
42 Topsfield, Chrétien de Troyes, p. 207.
The romance of the Grail is too complex to narrate, but suffice it to say that the first gaze at the Grail leaves Perceval without recognition of what it implies. According to the rite of passage pattern, Perceval failed to differentiate himself from others as is expected in the pre-liminal stage. Thus, all his traveling is not part of the liminal stage at this point. Wandering in the waste forest, having lost his bearings and his memory, he meets a group of knightly believers who admonish him and show him literally the right path to the Hermit who explains the significance of the Grail. It is this departure to the Hermit that resembles the departure of the birds in *The Conference* and that conforms to the tri-partite structure of Van Gennep’s rite of passage. But while the birds are accompanied by the Hoopoe who explains the importance of the spiritual over the worldly during the journey towards the divine presence, Perceval has already encountered the divine – in the form of the grail – without realizing what it is. It is his journey to the Hermit that ends in his understanding of what he has already seen. The Hermit’s discourse resembles that of the Hoopoe’s address to the birds. But since this article is focusing on departure, it will zoom in on the departing Perceval towards the Hermit. The departure is triggered and laid out by a company whose words are a prologue to what the Hermit will be saying:

*Ensi les cinc anz anplea*
*C'onques de Deu ne li souint.*
*Au chief de cinc anz li avint*
*Que il par un desert aloit*
*Cheiminant, si con il soloit,*
*De totes ses armes armez;*
*S'a cinc chevaliers ancontrez*
*Et, avoec, dames jusqu'a dis,*
*Lor chiés an lor chaperons mis,*
*Et si aloient tutt a pié*
*Et an langes et deschaucié.*
*De ce que il armez estoit*
*Et escu et lance portoit*
*Se mervellèrent trop des dames,*
*Que por pauvment de lor ames*
*Lors penitence a pié feisoient*
*Por lor pechiez que fez avoient.*

And so he spent five years
Without a thought of God.
And then at the end of those years,
He found himself in a wilderness,
Riding, as he usually rode,  
Armored from head to foot,  
When he met with five knights,  
Along with ten ladies,  
Their heads completely covered,  
And all were walking, not riding,  
In woolen robes, and wearing  
No shoes. Seeing him mounted  
As he was, armored, with his shield  
And his lance, all the ladies  
Doing penance for their sins,  
Barefooted, striving for the good  
Of their souls, were struck with astonishment.

One of the knights asked Perceval how come he was bearing arms on the very day of the crucifixion of Christ. This revealed that not only did Perceval not know that it was Good Friday but also he did not know what year it was. They then told him the story of Christ and his passion on the cross and ended up by admonishing him:

’Tuit cil qui an lui ont creance  
Doivent lui estre an penitance.  
Hui ne deust hon qui Deu croie  
Armes porter ne champ ne voie.

...Those who believe in  
Him must give Him our penance,  
This day; no believer  
Should wear armor or fight.

When he asks them from where they had come they tell him about the saintly Hermit who lives for God’s glory. He inquires about their search and what they asked for from the Hermit, to which the answer is confession and penance. This moved Perceval:

’Ce que Percevax oit  
Le fist ploer, et si li plot  
Que au bon home alast parler.  
‘La voldroie, fet il, aler,  
A l’ermite, se ge savoe  
Tenir le santier et la voie’.

Hearing these words, Perceval  
Wept, and wanted to speak

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41 Perc., ll. 6236-52 (p. 839; Raffel, p. 197).  
44 Perc., ll. 6297-300 (p. 840; Raffel, p. 199).
With the holy hermit himself.
«That's where I want to go,
He said, to this hermit, if only
I knew which road to take.» 45

Gaining faith through an example, as in the above episode, echoes Saint Augustine's *Confessions* where the conversion of Saint Paul and Saint Anthony entices others to do the same. Now that Perceval wants to follow the example of the good company he encountered, he must find the way to the Hermit and he is told that he should follow the path they took. This is the beginning of a journey that resembles the flight of al-Attār's birds. It starts with an intention of finding the Hermit, a Hoopoe-like character, who leads to the ultimate grasping of divine vision. This decisive moment separates Perceval from his older self as is required in the pre-liminal stage:

«Sire, qui a voldroit,
Si tenist le santier tot droit
Einsi con nos sommes venu
Parmi cest bois espès, menu
Et se preist garde des rains
Que nos noames a noz mains;
Qant nos par ilueques venismes,
Tex antresaignes i feismes
Por ce que nus n'i esgarast,
Qui a ce saint hermite alast.»

«Sir, if you wish to see him,
All you need to do is follow
The path that brought us here,
Straight through this dense forest,
Paying careful attention
To the branches we tied together
With our own hands as we came.
We did this so no one seeking
The holy hermit could lose
His way and fail to find him.» 46

Here we have not only a specific destination but also a path paved and marked for the seekers. The aim is not the divine presence but the purification that only the Hermit can bestow. Thus, here the journey itself, representing the liminal and the betwixt, does not perform the purifying act as it does in *The*

45 *Perceval*, II. 6315-20 (p. 841: Raffel, pp. 199-200).
46 *Perceval*, II. 6321-9 (p. 841: Raffel, p. 200).
Conference of the Birds, but constitutes a road taken that leads to penance. Perceval follows the marked road:

*Qui sopire del cuer del vantre*
*Por ce que meslez se savoit*
*Vers Deu et si s'an repantoit.*
*Plorant s'an vet vers le boschage.*

Sighing from the bottom of his heart
For all the sins against God
He'd committed, which he now repented.
He wept as he rode through the wood. 47

When compared to the birds in their journey to the Sîmurğ, we can see that here the emphasis is on the emotions of repentance as if suddenly Perceval came to his senses once the group of knights met him and addressed him. The birds on the other hand kept expressing their doubts and anxieties while the Hoo-poë – their leader – explained to them spiritual facts. Though both works are in a sense didactic, al-Âttâr presents the secret knowledge of the divine and how to reach it but stops short of defining the Divine, opting instead for silence in His presence. As for Perceval, the mystery is articulated:

*Il fu nez de la Virge dame,*
*Et si prist d'ome et forme et ame*
*Avoec la sainte deité.*

He was born of Our Lady, the Virgin,
Mingling His holy self
With the soul and shape of a man. 48

We can see in *Le Conte du Graal* the directness of the lesson that goes on to become homiletic, in contrast to *The Conference of the Birds* where the lesson remains allusive. The Hermit explains past events – the disobedience and departure of Perceval that caused his mother to die. It is his guilt that prevented him from recognizing the significance of the holy vessel. Like a flashback Perceval recalls how he saw the bleeding lance and the Grail but failed to ask for their functions:

«*Sire, chiës le Roi Pescheor*
*Fui une foiz, et vi la Lance*
*Don li fers sainne sanz dotance,*

47 *Perc.*, ll. 6334-7 (p. 841: Raffel, p. 200).
Et de cele gote de sanc  
Que a la pointe de fer blanc  
Vi pandre, rien n'an demandai;  
Ongues puis, certes, n'amandai.  
Et del Graal que ge i vi  
Ge ne sai cui l'an an servi.»

«Once I was at the Fisher King's Castle and I saw – without  
Any question – the bleeding lance,  
And seeing the drop of blood  
On the bright white of its point,  
I never asked what or why  
There are no amends I can make.  
And when I saw a holy  
Grail, I had no idea  
For whom it was meant, and said nothing.»  

In al-Cāṭār’s work, the purification is an ongoing gradual process as the birds fly over the seven vales; with Perceval it is a dramatic and sudden event. From unawareness Perceval becomes aware and from ignorance he becomes knowledgeable and thus repentant. It is worthy of note that Perceval did not happen to find himself in this situation by chance. Thanks to the prayer of his mother he survived and ended up in the Fisher King’s castle who is – as he learns from the Hermit – his own cousin. Perceval in a sense is destined to be the one who sees the Grail that is meant for his maternal uncle. The Hermit says:

«Cil cui l'an an sert fu mes frere.  
Ma suer et soe fu ta mere,  
Et del Riche Peschour roi,  
Que filz est a celui ce croi,  
Qui del Graal servir se fait.  
Et ne cuitiez pas que il att  
Luz ne lanproies ne saumons;  
D'une seule oiste, ce savons  
Que l'an an ce Graal aporte,  
Sa vie sostient et conforte,  
Tant sainte chose est li Graax;  
Et tant par est esperitax  
Que sa vie plus ne sostient  
Que l'oiste qui el Graal vient.»

«He who was served is my brother:  
Your mother was his sister, and mine,

49 Perc., ll. 6372-80 (p. 842: Raffel, p. 201).
And the rich Fisher King
Is the son, I believe, of the man
For whom the grail was intended.
But don't imagine it holds
Salmon and pike and eels!
A single sacred wafer
Is all it contains, and it keeps him
Alive and gives him comfort,
So holy a thing is that grail,
And so exceedingly spiritual
That without the Eucharist he receives
From the Grail he could not live.»

While this explanation takes place following the encounter it
does reflect on the cause of the wandering of our hero and his
ultimate taking of the right path. In the Romance, the narrative
is concerned with the development of a knightly character. By
failing to understand the significance of the Grail and seeing in
it no more than a splendid dish, Perceval «observes the letter
and not the spirit». »

Sir Thomas Malory writing three centuries after Chrétien
de Troyes in English, basing his _Le Morte Darthur_ (1470) on
_Le Conte du Graal_, gives the narrative a different spin. Malory
knew French and his work can be viewed as a free translation
in prose or an adaptation as he wove in it other sources. » It
blends disparate material and is essentially about legendary King
Arthur and the breakdown of the Round Table, but it is also
about the quest for the Holy Grail. Launcelot fails because of
his sinfulness in the quest but his son Galahad succeeds. In this
romance three knights, Galahad, Percivale, and Bors witness the
Eucharist in a magico-religious ritual. We have the entire sacred
drama embodied in this scene:

> And therewithal besemed them that there cam an olde man...
> before the table of sylver whereupon the Sankgreall was... he bade in
> myddis of bys forebede lettirs which seyde, «Se you here Joseph, the
> firste bysshop of Crystedom, the same which oure Lorde succoured
> in the cité of Sarras»... So with that they barde the chambr dore
> opyn, and there they saw angels; and two bare candils of wexe, and
> the thirde bare a towell, and the fourth a speare which bled meruay-
> lously... the bysshop made sembelaunte as thoughe he wolde have

10  Perc., ll. 6415-28 (p. 843: Raffel, p. 203).


13  See Haynes-Berry, «A Tale» on Malory's use of the French source. See
also McCarthy, «Malory and his Sources».

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gone to the sakeryng of a masse, and than he toke an obley which was made in lyknesse of brede. And at the lyftyng up there cam a vigoure in lyknesse of a chylde,… and smote hymself into the brede, that all they saw hit that the brede was fourmed of a fleshyly man. And than he put hit into the holy vessell agayne, and than he ded that longed to a preste to do messe… Than loked they and saw a man com oute of the holy vessell that had all the sygnes of the Passion of Jesu Chryste, bledynge all opynly, and seyde, «My knyghtes and my servauntes and my trew chylde, which bene com oute of dedly lyff into the spirituall lyff, I wolle no lenger cover me frome you, but ye shall see now a parte of my secretes and of my hydde thynge». 53

This climactic moment partakes of the Mystery cults, as «the worshippers partook of the Food of Life from the sacred vessels» 54 and thus a holy communion is engendered. But this scene is foreshadowed in the departure of the knights. Without going into details, one notes a prophecy that points to the destination as well as a temptation that is overcome en route:

... they rode aftir a grete pase tyll that they cam to a valey. And thereby was an ernytaye where a good man dwelted, and the herte and the lyons entird also. Whan they saw all thys they turned to the chapell and saw the good man in a religyous wade and in the armour of oure Lorde, for he wolde synge masse of the Holy Gost. And so they entird in and berde masse; and at the secrets of the masse they three saw the herte becom a man, which mervayled hem, and sette hym upon the auster in a ryche sege. 55

They asked the good man to explain the marvels they had just seen, and he answered that they are «the good knyghtes whych shall brynyge the Sankgreall to an ende». 56 Then they encounter the strange custom in a castle that requires a maid to bleed her right arm. They refuse to allow it and they fight the knights of the castle. This is followed by an explanation as to why this custom exists.

What strikes one in both romances is the reference to Christ and holy Eucharist where the divine becomes man while in The Conference of the Birds it is the man who becomes divine. Furthermore, in the Romance, the departure and search is for the Grail that is associated with Christ. It is a metonymic relationship and not a metaphoric one, as it is in The Conference of the Birds. Perhaps that is why it has to be spelled out.

54 Weston, From Ritual, p. 5.
55 Malory, p. 589.
56 Ibidem.
To conclude, the search for the divine requires definitive departures. The seeker of the divine has to attain a state of purity. In the case of al-ʿAtṭār it is a process of getting rid of the dross, step by step, while putting up with hardship. In the case of the Grail a predestined protagonist attains such a state after a false start. It is repentance that purifies him and makes him eligible. In al-ʿAtṭār, formal religion is eschewed while in the Grail Quests the tenets of formal religion – immaculate conception, transubstantiation, and crucifixion – are stressed. The acts of separation implied in departures are undertaken in both traditions to find the Ultimate. In the Franco-English tradition the preliminal and liminal stages are replete with miraculous events such as the transformation of a hart into a man while in the Arabo-Persian tradition ingenuousness and persistence mark the move. In the Grail Quest the search is for a specific object that is associated with the divine while in the *Flight of Birds* the search is for a state of mind, for a realization. The Christian Romance emphasizes the concrete, an object reached by a heroic and predestined protagonist with magico-religious motifs, while the Islamic Allegory emphasizes the abstract, a spiritual state that is reached by human effort and collective action.

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

In this comparative study of medieval narratives dealing with the search for the divine in two traditions, the focus is on the defining moment of departure. Two traditions – the Eastern Islamic and the Western Christian – possess seminal narratives of voyages seeking the divine. The article examines the allegorical Bird Epistles of Ibn Sinā and al-Gazālī and then analyzes al-Ḥāṭīr’s \textit{Mantuq al-ṭayr} (The Conference of Birds). In Europe chivalric romances and Grail quests partake in the search for the divine: \textit{Perceval ou le Conte de Graal} of Chrétien de Troyes and Thomas Malory’s \textit{Le Morte Darthur}. The literary works show the departure as the first step in a rite of passage that only functions if it meets the spiritual conditions of wayfaring: purity in the Islamic tradition and repentance in the Christian tradition. The Arabic and Persian works use a metaphoric mode to speak of the divine presence and ascension towards Him; the divine is symbolized as Simorgh (Phoenix). The French and English works use a metonymic mode to speak of the divine through an associated object, the Holy Grail (the vessel that collected the blood of Christ). In both traditions the journey requires a spiritual guide, but while in the Islamic tradition the quest is for a mystic union in the Sufi Way, the quest in the Christian tradition recalls the formal dimensions of religion to regenerate the moral wasteland.

\textbf{KEYWORDS}

Sufi Allegory. Holy Grail. Rite of Passage.