

# The Language of Birds

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*Wassaffate saffan*

*Faz-zajirati zajran*

*Fat-taliyati dhikran*

(By those who are ranged in ranks,

Who repel and rout,

And who recite the invocation)

THERE is often mention, in different traditions, of a mysterious language called the "language of the birds". The expression is clearly a symbolic one since the very importance which is attached to the knowledge of the language—it is considered to be the prerogative of a high initiation—precludes a literal interpretation. The Quran for example says (XXVII, 15) "And Solomon was David's heir and he said, 'O men, we have been taught the language of the birds (*ʿullimnā mantiq at-tayr*) and all favours have been showered upon us'." Elsewhere we read of heroes, like Siegfried in the Nordic legend, who understand this language of the birds as soon as they have overcome the dragon, and the symbolism in question may be easily understood from this. Victory over the dragon has, as its immediate consequence, the conquest of immortality which is represented by some object, the approach to which is barred by the dragon, and the conquest of immortality implies, essentially, reintegration at the centre of the human state, that is, at the point where communication is established with the higher states of being. It is this communication which is represented by the understanding of the language of the birds and, in fact, birds are often taken to symbolise the angels which are precisely the higher states of being. That is the significance, in the Gospel parable of the grain of mustard seed, of "the birds of the air" which came to lodge in the branches of the tree<sup>1</sup>—the tree which represents the axis that passes through the centre of each state of being and connects all the states with each other.<sup>2</sup>

In the Qurānic text given above the term *as-sāffāt* literally designates the birds but symbolically refers to the angels (*al-malā'ikah*), and thus the first line signifies the constitution of the celestial and spiritual hierarchies.<sup>3</sup> The second line denotes the struggle of the angels against the demons, the celestial powers against the internal ones, that is, the opposition between the higher and the lower states.<sup>4</sup> In the Hindu tradition this is the struggle of the *Dēvas* against the *Asuras* and also, according to a symbolism which comes very close to the symbolism of our theme, the fight of *Garuda* against the *Naga* which is, moreover, none other than the above mentioned serpent or dragon. *Garuda* is the eagle and elsewhere his place is taken by other birds such as the ibis, the stork or the heron,<sup>5</sup> all enemies and destroyers of reptiles. Finally, in the third verse, the angels recite the *dhikr* which normally means the recitation of the Quran—not, needless to say, the

Quran expressed in human language but its eternal prototype inscribed on the Guarded Tablet (*al-lawh al-mahfūz*) which stretches from heaven to earth like Jacob's Ladder throughout all the degrees of Universal Existence.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in the Hindu tradition, it is said that the *Dēvas* in their struggle against the *Asuras* protected themselves (*acchandayan*) by reciting Vedic hymns which, for this reason, were given the name of *chandas*, a word which denotes rhythm. The same idea is contained in the word *dhikr* which, in Islamic esoterism, is used of the rhythmic formulae that correspond exactly to Hindu *mantras*. The repetition of these formulae is intended to bring about the harmonization of the different elements of the being and to cause vibrations which, by their repercussions throughout the whole hierarchy of the states, are capable of opening up a communication, with the higher states. This is, moreover, generally speaking, the essential and primordial purpose of all rites.

This brings us back directly to what was said at the outset about "the language of the birds", which can also be called "angelic language", and which is symbolized in the human world by rhythmic language, for the science of rhythm, which has many applications, is in fact ultimately the basis of all the means which can be brought into action in order to enter into communication with the higher states of being. This is why it is said in an Islamic tradition that Adam, whilst in the Earthly Paradise, spoke in verse, that is, in rhythmic language. It is also why the Sacred Books are written in rhythmic language, which clearly makes them some-thing altogether different from the mere "poems" (in the purely profane sense) which the antitraditional prejudice of the "critics" would have them to be; nor was poetry itself, in its origins, the vain literature it has now become as a result of the degeneration which is part of the downward march of the human cycle.<sup>7</sup> It had on the contrary a truly sacred character. Examples can be found as far back as classical Western antiquity, of poetry being called the "language of the Gods", an expression equivalent to that we have already used since the "Gods", that is, the *Dēvas*,<sup>8</sup> represent, like the angels, the higher states of being. In Latin, verses were called *carmina*, a name connected with their use in the accomplishment of rites, for the word *carmen* is identical with the Sanskrit *Karma* which must be understood here in its special sense of "ritual action".<sup>9</sup> The poet himself, the interpreter of the "sacred language", which is as a transparent veil over the Divine Word, was *vates*, a word which implies a certain degree of the prophetic inspiration. Later, by a further degeneration,<sup>10</sup> the *vates* became no more than a common "diviner"<sup>11</sup> and *carmen* (whence the word "charm") no more than a "spell", that is something brought about by low magic. We have here yet another illustration of the fact that magic—we might even say sorcery—is the last thing to be left behind when traditions disappear.

These few indications should be enough to show how inept it is to make fun of stories which speak of the "language of the birds". It is all too easy and too simple to disdain as "superstitions" everything one cannot understand; but the ancients themselves knew very well what they meant when they used symbolic language. The true superstition in the strictly etymological sense (*quod superstat*) is what outlives itself, that is, the "dead letter"; but this very survival, however lacking in interest it may seem, is none the less not so totally insignificant, for the Spirit which "bloweth where it listeth" (and when it listeth) can always come to breathe fresh life into the symbols and the rites, and give them back their lost meaning and the fulness of their original virtue.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Man and His Becoming according to the Vēdānta*, p. 41, note 1.

<sup>2</sup> In the medieval symbol of the *Peridexion* (a corruption of *Paradision*) one sees birds on the branches of a tree and a dragon at its foot (see *The Symbolism of the Cross*, Ch. IX). In a study of the symbolism of "the birds of Paradise", Charbonneau-Lassay has reproduced an illustration of a piece of sculpture in which the bird is shown with only a head and wings, a form in which angels are often represented.

<sup>3</sup> The word *saff*, "rank", is one of the many which have been suggested as the origin of the word *sufi* and *tasawwuf* (Sufism). Whilst this derivation does not seem to be acceptable from the purely linguistic point of view, it is none the less true that, like many other derivations of the same kind, it does represent one of the ideas actually contained in these two terms, for the "spiritual hierarchies" are essentially identical with the degrees of initiation.

<sup>4</sup> This opposition exists in all beings in the form of the two tendencies, one upward and the other downward, called respectively *sattva* and *tames* in the Hindu tradition. It is also what is symbolized in Mazdeism by the antagonism between light and darkness, personified respectively by Ormuzd and Ahriman.

<sup>5</sup> See, in this connection, the remarkable works of Charbonneau-Lassay on the animal symbols of Christ (in *Le Bestiaire du Christ*). It is necessary to point out that the symbolic opposition between the bird and the serpent exists only as long as the serpent is seen in its malefic aspect. In its benefic aspect it is sometimes united with the bird as in the figure of Quetzalcohuatl in the ancient American tradition. On the other hand the combat between the eagle and the serpent is also mentioned in Mexican myths. In connection with the benefic aspect we may recall the Biblical text "Be ye therefore as wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (St. Matthew, X, 16).

<sup>6</sup> As regards the symbolism of the book, with which this is directly connected, see *The Symbolism of the Cross*, ch. XIV.

<sup>7</sup> One can say, in a general way, that art and science have become profane by a similar degeneration which has stripped them of their traditional character and consequently of everything that has a higher meaning. This subject has been discussed at length in *L'Esotérisme de Dante*, ch. II, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, ch. IV, and *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, ch. VIII.

<sup>8</sup> The Sanskrit *Deva* and the Latin *Deus* are one and the same word.

<sup>9</sup> The word "poetry" is derived from the Greek word *poiein* which has the same meaning as the Sanskrit root *Kri* from which *Karma* stems, and which is to be found in the Latin verb *creare* understood according to its primal significance. The idea in question was thus originally quite different from the mere production of artistic or literary works in the profane sense which Aristotle seems to have had exclusively in mind when speaking of what he called "poetic sciences".

<sup>10</sup> The first degeneration was the isolation of the *vates* from the generality, that is, his becoming an exception rather than a norm. (Translator's note).

<sup>11</sup> The word "diviner" itself has deviated just as much in meaning, for etymologically it is no less than *divinus*, that is "the interpreter of the Gods". The "auspices" (from *aves spicere*, meaning to "observe the birds"), omens drawn from the flight and song of birds, are more particularly related to the "language of the birds" understood here in the literal sense but none the less identified with the "language of the Gods" since the Gods were held to make known their will through these omens. The birds thus played the part of messengers analogous (but on a very much lower plane) to the part that is generally attributed to the angels (hence their name, since "messenger" is precisely the meaning of the Greek *angelos*).