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THE HOMILETIC VERSE OF FARID AL-DIN ʿATṬĀR

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Note on Transliteration

In order to allow for the accurate, accessible, and consistent rendering of Persian and Arabic into Latin script, I have developed a system of transliteration based in large part on that of Encyclopaedia Iranica. My major concern, after accuracy, has been readability and accessibility for non-Persophone readers, so I default to Anglicized versions of Perso-Arabic names and technical terms when they are sufficiently well known. In the name of accessibility, I also use digraphs from American English (e.g. “ch,” “sh”) instead more esoteric diacritics to signify Persian consonants whenever possible, and I employ a vowel system that approximates the sounds of spoken Persian and distinguishes between long and short vowels using only a single circumflex: a/â, o/u, e/i. For the most part, I employ this Persian-style transliteration scheme throughout the dissertation, even when rendering Arabic titles of Persian books into Latin script. When transliterating directly from a quoted Arabic source, however, or referring to major authors who wrote primarily or exclusively in Arabic (e.g. Ibn al-Jawzī), I rely on a version of the Arabic transliteration system used by the International Journal of Middle East Studies; the difference between the two systems lies mainly in the vowels. For the sake of clarity, I generally drop the definite article “al-” before a nisba that is used as a stand-alone proper name (e.g. Qushayri). The details of these two systems (including their handling of the construct state, compounds, diphthongs, etc.) should be readily recognizable to those who are familiar with Persian and Arabic.
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Introduction

Persian verse, and in particular mystical Persian verse, has found a sizable audience in the United States and Europe. The current favorite is, of course, Rumi, and translations (or looser “renderings”) of his poems continue to sell briskly in the American market. His predecessor, Farid al-Din ʿAṭṭâr, is much less well known, but his work has also been translated multiple times into European languages in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the Persian-speaking world he is widely celebrated, and he has been a key figure in the canon of mystical poets since it was first formalized in the Timurid era. Today he is commonly understood by scholars as something of a “missing link” between Sanâʿi (d. c. 1131) and Rumi (d. 1273), and although such teleological literary histories can be problematic, ʿAṭṭâr’s importance in the development of mystical verse is hard to overstate.¹ Whereas Sanâʿi’s religious poetry is much more ascetic in tone, ʿAṭṭâr characterizes divine union in amatory terms, displays an ecstatic sensibility, and flirts more directly with antinomian imagery, and thereby paves the way for Rumi, ʿErâqi, and other more explicitly sufi poets. Perhaps even more significantly, ʿAṭṭâr is one of the first truly successful amateur versifiers. He did not participate in the patronage economy but nonetheless managed to produce an expansive textual oeuvre dominated by courtly poetic forms like the ghazal, qaṣida, and maṣnavi. He thus marks a turning point in the popularization and mysticization of Persian literature.

‘Atţâr’s output is immense, including a large collection of lyric verse (divân), a separate anthology of quatrains, a prose hagiographical compilation, and four didactic mašnûvis—long poems of rhyming couplets that narrate edifying stories pointed with exhortations and admonishments.\(^2\) Out of his entire oeuvre, the mašnûvis are generally considered the highlight and have garnered the most attention. He is a master of the short, dramatic anecdote, unlike Rumi, whose narratives tend to be more sprawling, and Sanâ’i, whose works tend to be dominated by direct exhortation. Moreover, ‘Atţâr brings a new twist to the genre by embedding these various anecdotes and exhortations in an overarching frame-tale à la *One Thousand and One Nights.* Three of his four mašnûvis feature such frame-tales, the most famous being the *Conference of the the Birds (Manţeq al-ţayr),* in which a group of birds, led by the hoopoe, embark on a quest to reach their king, the Simorgh: it is commonly understood as an allegory of the sufi path. Similarly, the *Book of Affliction (Moşibat-nâma)* tells of a cosmic journey made by a sufi adept under the direction of his spiritual guide, and the *Divine Book (Elâhi-nâma)* recounts a pedagogical discussion between a king and his princely sons.

The bulk of the scholarship on ‘Atţâr’s mašnûvis has taken a straightforward hermeneutical approach, in the sense that it seeks to decode the poems’ theological, ethical, and metaphysical meanings. The allegorical frame-tales in particular have received quite a bit of attention, perhaps because their extended, book-length narratives are more amenable to modern

sensibilities: scholars like Corbin, Meier, and Purnâmdâriân have all attempted to interpret their mystical significance.\(^3\) It is somewhat more difficult to deal with the hundreds of short anecdotes that make up the bulk of each mašnavî, but several studies have focused on particular thematic subsets of the corpus in order to reconstruct specific aspects of ʿAṭṭâr’s personal thought-world: studies by Kermani, Yaghoobi, and Pourjavady all fall into this category.\(^4\) A more comprehensive approach has been taken by Hellmut Ritter in his massive work, the Ocean of the Soul, in which he extracts hundreds of stories from across the mašnavis, rearranges them into a thematic rubric of his own making, and interprets their didactic points.\(^5\)

Another, somewhat smaller group of scholars has been more interested in ʿAṭṭâr’s poetics from a formal, structural, and structuralist perspective. According to Dick Davis, for instance, the structure of the Conference of the Birds frame-tale is mirrored in two of the poem’s embedded anecdotes, both of which occupy structurally key positions in the text.\(^6\) Julian Baldick has also concerned himself with the poetic structure of the frame-tales, and Franklin Lewis has examined the semiotics of conversion and gender that underlie several of ʿAṭṭâr’s narratives and favorite poetic tropes.\(^7\)


Although many of these studies are insightful and useful, they tend to understand meaning as something fixed within the text, and they thus overlook the performative, socially situated manner in which meaning emerges from the audience’s act of reading or listening. As ‘Aṭṭār himself seems to have been aware, his texts are not simply carriers of religious information, but discursive performances that seek to create certain effects in the social realm. The pertinent question, then, is not just “what do these texts mean?” or “how are they structured?” but “what do these meanings and structures do for sufistic reader-listeners, and how do they do it?” In response to this question, I argue that ‘Aṭṭār adopts the rhetorical positioning of a popular preacher, and that his poems, like a preacher’s sermon, are designed to inculcate a sufi ethos in their audiences and spur pious reform. They are eminently rhetorical, being self-consciously directed towards an audience whom they seek to spiritually educate. At the same time, however, these are poetic texts, not oral performances, and they thus entail a very different mode of relationality between sender (in this case author) and recipient (in this case reader, or perhaps listener when the text is read out loud). Indeed, ‘Aṭṭār is keenly interested in his own textual legacy and its rhetorical possibilities, and a good portion of our investigation will be devoted to the forms and implications of ‘Aṭṭār’s “textualized” oral homiletics.

Even though ‘Aṭṭār’s homiletic poetry exerts an influence on its readers (or listeners), they are by no means passive targets for his rhetoric. As we will see, ‘Aṭṭār elicits active en-

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gagement from his audience, not only in the sense of hermeneutic effort, but also specific textual practices—recitation, memorization, and liturgical reading—which maximize the poems’ pedagogic potential. The poems only do something for their reader-listeners because reader-listeners do something with the poems. Under the guidance of ʿAttār’s homiletic voice, and through a disciplined encounter with text, sufi readers can progress along the spiritual path and reach higher mystical states. The textual encounter, in this context, becomes a spiritual practice and a technique for ethical self-fashioning.

Despite their significance, however, the homiletic and pedagogical aspects of ʿAttār’s poetics have been more or less ignored in the scholarship. There are some exceptions, of course, but on the whole, hermeneutical and formal approaches to his work have dominated.\(^9\) This can be partly explained, I think, by the fact that we know very little about ʿAttār’s life and biography, which would seem to make it difficult to identify the context within which he wrote and disseminated his works, to say nothing of how they were consumed and received. Indeed, it has become something of a cliché to open studies on ʿAttār with the claim that we know nothing about ʿAttār’s life or his intended readers.\(^9\) These claims, however, are somewhat overblown. Indeed, as I will argue in the first chapter, we can tell a good deal about ʿAttār’s relationship to his earliest audience through a reassessment of the standard sources and the incorporation of some new data. The works themselves allude to a textual community that had formed around him in Nishapur and knew him personally, and beyond this it is also clear that ʿAttār hoped his works would circulate and reach a larger public. His allusions to this early


textual community are thus not entirely disinterested, but constitute an attempt to summon a more distant readership to a certain subject-position; by attending to his rhetoric, we can therefore uncover the sorts of relations he sought to establish with this public and the reactions that he hoped to elicit.

In undertaking this project, we aim to show how Persian mystical poetry is not merely reiterative of pre-existing dogmatic systems, but constitutive of certain religious subjectivities. By bracketing questions of reception, scholars have ossified ʿAṭṭār’s poems into self-contained literary artifacts unconnected to the lifeworlds of their audiences, reflecting a set of poetic assumptions that could not be further from ʿAṭṭār’s own. Beyond a more accurate understanding of ʿAṭṭār and his poetry, we aim to encourage the field of Persian literary studies to start taking the question of audience more seriously. Our study of ʿAṭṭār serves as a useful test-case in this effort: despite the scarcity of sources on his life and reception, this dissertation shows that we can still productively think about the social-spiritual implications of the textual encounter. We are therefore hopeful that this dissertation will spark more research into the ways in which Persian religious literature is imbricated in the social lives and subjectivities of its audiences.

We focus predominantly on the maṣnavīs, especially the Conference of the Birds (Manṭeq al-ṭayr) and the Book of Affliction (Mosibat-nāma). Although all of ʿAṭṭār’s works could be productively explored from the perspective of pragmatic homiletics, the maṣnavīs are most clearly informed by contemporary preaching practices and thus present a natural starting point. The frame-tale maṣnavīs are especially germane to our topic because their anecdotes and exhortations are framed as fictional homiletic performances, and this carries important consequences for how reader-listeners relate to those texts. We have not hesitated to draw on ʿAṭṭār’s other works, however—including the quatrains, prose hagiography, and lyric verses—whenever they helped elucidate his overall poetic project or the reception of the maṣnavīs.
In the first chapter, we lay the groundwork for our inquiry by reviewing ‘Aṭṭâr’s biography and oeuvre. One of the major issues in ‘Aṭṭâr studies has been sorting out his authentic works from the mass of spurious attributions; we review the scholarship on this issue, which has been conducted mostly in German and Persian, and then, in conjunction with external sources, attempt to trace the contours of ‘Aṭṭâr’s life. Although specific biographical details remain largely unknown, we argue that we can place him in a generally mystically minded milieu in Nishapur and that he regularly delivered popular sermons. A loose community formed around him by virtue of his preaching practice, which also informed his poetic activities.

The second chapter seeks to reconstruct the circumstances of his texts’ production and dissemination, and their assumed models of homiletic communication, by examining their self-reflexive portrayals of their intended audiences and spiritual function. We show that ‘Aṭṭâr wrote in the first instance for a textual community that considered his works to be not just beautiful literary artifacts, but also routes for spiritual transformation: one of the dominant metaphors used to characterize his work is that of a medicine for the heart, capable of restoring audiences to spiritual health. ‘Aṭṭâr’s depiction of this community and their modes of reading, although interesting for historical reasons, also functions rhetorically as an embodiment of ‘Aṭṭâr’s ideal recipients. We will examine how this imagined audience, in conjunction with ‘Aṭṭâr’s poetic persona and reflexive self-commentary, functions as a route of authorial control to promote the pedagogical efficacy of his texts.

The third chapter zooms in on the Conference of the Birds’ frame-tale and explores, from a narratological perspective, how it influences the audience’s experience of the embedded anecdotes. Didactic maṣnavis recall popular preaching in terms of their material and rhetorical positioning, but as public literary texts, they lack the co-presence of preacher and audience so critical to homiletic performance: the author is necessarily removed. ‘Aṭṭâr, however, compen-
sates for this decontextualization through the frame-tale, which, among its several other functions, imagines a detailed performance context for the embedded anecdotes, complete with an elaborated speaker (the hoopoe) and a reactive audience (the birds). The relationship between the hoopoe and the birds, narrated in the frame-tale, parallels and elides with Ṣṭṭâr’s own rhetorical stance vis-à-vis his reader-listeners: the hoopoe becomes Ṣṭṭâr’s avatar, while readers are encouraged to identify with his avian flock. By constructing this fictional homiletic performance, Ṣṭṭâr thus reinscribes his own homiletic authority.

In the fourth chapter, we turn to the anecdotes and exhortations embedded in the Conference of the Birds to investigate the sufi ethos that Ṣṭṭâr promotes and the rhetorical strategies through which he seeks to inculcate it. Although these edifying stories have often been examined in isolation by scholars such as Ritter, we emphasize how they are clustered into larger discourses on specific themes by virtue of the frame-tale structure. Their formal and thematic connections suggest that they are not to be approached independently, but as a network of mutually informing, edifying anecdotes that together illustrate a set of heuristic principles for pious living. To concretize the discussion we will explore three discourses in detail—one focusing on the ontological connection between God and humankind, another on the terror and inevitability of death, and one on spiritual “manliness.”

The fifth and final chapter examines the frame-tale allegory of the Book of Affliction, in which a sufi adept undertakes a cosmic journey and visits forty different beings from all realms of creation before finally discovering a connection to the divine in his own soul. As many have pointed out, the narrative recalls the Prophet’s ascension (me’râj). It is also structured like the forty-day sufi retreat (chella), and it functions as an allegory of the spiritual path (ṭariqat). But these congruencies are also reflexively extended to the reading process itself. The poem is offered to the reader as a simulated visionary experience, through which one can not only ob-
serve the adept from a distance, but also accompany him on his journey, synecdochically performing the sufi path in miniature. We will thus examine how the ascent, the sufi retreat, and the sufi path are all used to conceptualize the textual encounter, and what this can tell us about the ritualistic use of mystical literary texts.
Chapter I

ʿAṭṭâr, Preacher and Poet

Reliable biographical information on most pre-modern Persian poets is scanty, but the dearth is particularly acute in the case of ʿAṭṭâr. Although his textual output is enormous, he seems to have remained a relatively minor poet of primarily local importance during his own lifetime. He sought no court patronage, and his followers never institutionalized into any sort of sufi brotherhood. Only two contemporaries mention him, and they both spent time in Nishapur—otherwise they likely would have never have heard of him—and their accounts are brief and conventional, conveying few biographical “facts.” ʿAṭṭâr’s works themselves also seem to be of little help, containing only a couple of allusions to his biography and contemporary events. With such a paucity of evidence, many scholars have been reluctant to speculate on the social contexts in which ʿAṭṭâr’s works took shape and were initially circulated. J. T. P. de Bruijn starkly sums up the situation as follows: “Next to nothing is known about his life. . . . Nothing can be known about the social circle for which his poems were written; no internal indications at all can be identified which could help us to identify their context.”

It is true that little positive data regarding ʿAṭṭâr’s life can be directly extracted from his poems or other sources. Nevertheless, the situation is not quite so dire as de Bruijn suggests. Although names and dates—the building blocks of positivistic biography—are mostly absent, the general contours of the milieu in which ʿAṭṭâr was writing can be partially recovered through a careful consideration of his poems in conjunction with the biographical literature. As we shall see, much of this evidence is oblique and indirect, but it collectively suggests that

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ʿAṭṭār moved in sufi circles, delivered mystically minded sermons to popular audiences, and saw his poetry as part of a larger homiletic project.

Dozens and dozens of works have been attributed to ʿAṭṭār over the centuries—more spurious poems have accreted around him than perhaps any other medieval Persian poet—and since many of these more dubious works contain biographical information, it is imperative that we begin with a clear idea of which poems are authentic so as to build our analysis on firm foundations. Fortunately, thanks to the efforts of Saʿid Nafisi, Hellmut Ritter, and Moḥammad Reżā Shafiʿi-Kadkani, a relatively stable (although not entirely unproblematic) scholarly consensus regarding ʿAṭṭār’s oeuvre is beginning to form. Much of this research has been published in German and Persian; a comprehensive review will be provided here for the first time in English, along with emendations and qualifications where necessary.

On the basis of internal evidence, in conjunction with a reconsideration of the external accounts, we will argue that ʿAṭṭār operated as a mystically minded preacher and informal spiritual teacher in Nishapur for a loose community that had formed around him. Much of the scholarship on ʿAṭṭār has questioned whether he was “really” a sufi, often suggesting that he was not: such a question, however, assumes that practitioners of sufi piety constituted a distinct social and religious category when the historical reality on the ground was likely much more fluid. Although he may not have been formally invested by a sufi teacher, ʿAṭṭār was certainly committed to the cluster of devotional practices and beliefs that we often label “mystical” or “sufi,” and he seems to have maintained social contacts with like-minded scholars and religious figures. Moreover, as we will see, he actively sought to propagate these forms of piety through popular sermons and informal discussions with interested individuals. And, most importantly, his poetry seems to have functioned as an extension of these homiletic activities,
through which he aimed to inculcate mystical piety not only in his local audience in Nishapur, but also in a wider reading public.

‘Aṭṭār’s Oeuvre and the Problem of Spurious Attributions

Although the debate has not yet been entirely settled, a scholarly consensus is beginning to form that out of the dozens of works attributed to ‘Aṭṭār, only seven are likely genuine. These include four mašnavis—the Book of Affliction (Mošibat-nâma), the Conference of the Birds (Manteq al-ṭayar), the Divine Book (Elâhi-nâma), and the Book of Secrets (Asrâr-nâma)—all of which are long didactic poems composed of hundreds of anecdotes and homiletic exhortations in the vein of Sanâ‘i’s Garden of Truth (Ḥadiqat al-ḥaqiqat) and Neẓâmi’s Treasury of Secrets (Makhzan al-asrâr). With the exception of the Book of Secrets, however, ‘Aṭṭār’s mašnavis are distinguished from their models by their innovative use of the frame-tale structure, a literary device in which ‘Aṭṭār seems to have been particularly interested. 2 ‘Aṭṭār also produced the first authorially curated and thematically organized collection of quatrains in Persian literary history, the Choice Book (Mokhtâr-nâma). 3 His Divân (collected lyrical works) consists primarily of ghazals, but also includes a handful of qaṣidas and tarji‘is; it represents an important mystical turn in the development of the Persian lyric. Finally, ‘Aṭṭār’s collection of saints’ lives and dicta, the Memorial of the Saints (Taṣkerat al-owleyā), is routinely regarded as one of the high-points of the “simple” style of early Persian prose. 4 Besides these seven extant works, ‘Aṭṭār

2. For an overview of ‘Aṭṭār’s frame-tales, see Ritter, Ocean of the Soul, 2-4.
3. Although the authenticity of the Choice Book (Mokhtâr-nâma) has been doubted by Zarrinkuh, his arguments are not entirely convincing. See Sayyed ‘Ali Mirażizâlî, “Āyâ Mokhtâr-nâma az ‘Aṭṭâr ast?,” Nashr-e dânesht 17, no. 1 (Spring 1379 [2000]): 32-43.
4. For an early assessment of the literary merit of the Memorial (Taṣkerat al-owleyā), see Mirzâ Mohammad Qazvini, introduction to Taṣkerat al-owleya, by Farid al-Din ‘Aṭṭâr, ed. Reynold Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1905), 1:15. The authenticity of the work has occasionally been questioned. For example, Mohammad Habib suggests that it is spurious, pointing out that Jâmi‘ seems to express some doubt as to ‘Aṭṭâr’s authorship when he writes that the Memorial “is attributed (mansub) to him [‘Aṭṭār].” Although the phrasing is somewhat weaker than a positive claim of authorship, this is a far cry from an actual assertion of the work’s spuri-
also claims to have written—but to have subsequently destroyed—two other verse works, *Husking the Heart* (*Sharḥ al-qalb*) and the *Book of Essentials* (*Javāher-nāma*).  

Unfortunately, there are no known autograph copies of any of Āṭṭâr’s extant works, but they can all be found in the manuscript tradition within about a century of his death. Although the identification of earlier reliable manuscripts would go a long ways towards alleviating some of the philological difficulties facing the study of Āṭṭâr and his oeuvre, this is not an atypical situation for a pre-Mongol Persian poet: the earliest manuscripts of the *Book of Kings* (*Shâh-nāma*), for instance, date from around 200 years after the poet Ferdowsi’s death.

Besides the above-mentioned genuine works, a number of spurious *masnāvis* also came to circulate under Āṭṭâr’s name. The pen-name “Āṭṭâr” was relatively common, and as Farid al-Din Āṭṭâr’s fame grew, the works of other, lesser-known poets who had written under the same nom de plume were absorbed into his oeuvre; some poets even deliberately encouraged this confusion, eager to endow their own works with Āṭṭâr’s fame and aura of sacrality. Some

5. *Mokhtār-nāma*. 80. *Husking the Heart* (*Sharḥ al-qalb*) is also mentioned twice in the *Memorial*. In the second instance Āṭṭâr implies that he is its author, writing, “Just as we have mentioned in *Husking the Heart* . . .” Āṭṭâr, *Taẓkerat al-owlēyā* 4, 466.


of these accretions were indexed in the fifteenth century by the Timurid anthologist Dowlat-Shâh, who believed them to be genuine: according to him, ʿAṭṭâr composed a total of forty poetic works out of which thirteen survived, including titles such as the Book of Hallâj (Hallâj-nâma), the Book of the Camel (Oshtor-nâma), and the Extracts of the Essence (Javâher al-ṣât). By the sixteenth century, ʿAṭṭâr was said to have produced 114 individual works, the same number of chapters (suras) as is in the Quran. Such a conventional and religiously charged number certainly cannot be taken as an accurate count of attributions, but it indicates something of the religious halo that had formed around ʿAṭṭâr as well as the voluminosity of his alleged output. According to Miranšâri, the author of an extensive biographical survey on ʿAṭṭâr, at least fifty-nine independent works, many of them still extant, have at some point been attributed to him.

These attributions are widely divergent in terms of style and content, so much so that at least one of them—the Haydari Book (Haydari-nâma)—was questioned even in the pre-modern era. According to Dowlat-Shâh, some of his contemporaries argued that this poem was so stylistically unlike ʿAṭṭâr’s other works that it could not possibly have been composed by him; instead, they argued, it was likely a false attribution encouraged by the followers of the Ḥaydari

9. Dowlat-Shâh enumerates ʿAṭṭâr’s poetic works as follows: “In verse, that which is well-known is as follows: first, the Book of Secrets; second, the Divine Book; third, the Book of Affliction; fourth, the Book of the Camel; fifth, the Book of Affliction [sic]; sixth, the Choice Book; seventh, the Extracts of the Essence; eighth, the Conference of the Birds; ninth the Book of the Nightingale (Bolbol-nâma); tenth, Gol and Hermez; eleventh, the Haydari Book (Haydari-nâma); twelfth, the Black Book (Siâh-nâma); and thirteenth, the Book of Hallâj; these thirteen works are all in verse. They say that he composed forty poetic works, but these other texts are lost and unknown.” In addition to the poetic works, Dowlat-Shâh also mentions the Memorial and a prose work by the name of the Brethren of Purity (Ekhvân al-ṣafâ). Taṣkerat al-sho’arâ, ed. Fâtema ʿAlâqa (Tehran: Pâzhu hesh-gâh-e ‘Oulum-e Ensâni va Motâla’-at-e Farhangi, 1385 [2006-7]), 136.

10. This legend first appears in the Assemblies of the Believers (Majâles al-mo’menin), a Shi‘i-inflected biographical work by Nur-Allâh Shushari (d. 1610); the notice on ʿAṭṭâr begins with a verse epigraph that ascribes to him an equal number of works as there are chapters in the Quran. Majâles al-mo’menin (Tehran: Ketâb-forushi-ye Eslâmiya, 1365 [1986-7]), 99.

order. Against these critics, however, Dowlat-Shâh accepts the poem’s authenticity and explains its stylistic inconsistency as a result of the poem being a work of ‘Aṭṭâr’s youth. Nevertheless, this intriguing statement shows that some serious literary-historical work was taking place in the Timurid milieu, and even if Dowlat-Shâh himself missed the mark, it leaves open the possibility that other attributions may have occasionally been challenged on stylistic grounds by more discerning readers. It was not until the early twentieth century, however, with the application of modern philological methods to Persian texts, that the vast majority of these attributions came to be questioned and rejected.

_The Shi’i ‘Aṭṭâr_

The most significant early pioneers in this endeavor were Mirzâ Moḥammad Qazvini, with his lengthy introduction to Nicholson’s 1905 edition of the _Memorial_, and Hellmut Ritter, with his 1939 article “Philologika X.” They both emphasize the need for skepticism when dealing with works allegedly composed by ‘Aṭṭâr, and they convincingly show several attributions to be either completely spurious or, at the very least, exceedingly suspect. For example, Qazvini demonstrates that the _Treasure of Secrets_ (Kanz al-asrâr) cannot possibly be ‘Aṭṭâr’s work because, according to the text itself, it was completed in 1299-1300, likely at least seventy years after ‘Aṭṭâr’s death. Moreover, the work’s authorial persona refers to himself as “the ‘Aṭṭâr of the age,” suggesting that he was a later poet who took ‘Aṭṭâr as his namesake and poetic model. Subsequent copyists and readers, however, failed to distinguish between the two poets, and the _maṣnavi_ of this later ‘Aṭṭâr was absorbed into the oeuvre of his more famous predecessor. Other spurious works seem to have become attached to ‘Aṭṭâr simply on the basis of their reli-

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igious content. The author of the attributed *Key of Revelations (Meftâh al-fotuh)*, for instance, never identifies himself as ‘Aṭṭār; on the contrary, he informs his readers that he hails from Zanjân and reports to have finished the work in 1290, many decades after ‘Aṭṭār died. Nevertheless, the poem circulated under ‘Aṭṭār’s name.\(^\text{14}\) A few other minor attributions are classified as “doubtful” in Ritter’s initial article but not rejected outright, including the *Book of the Tailor (Khayyât-nâma)*, the *Last Will (Vasiyat-nâma)*, and the *Treasure of Truths (Kanz al-ḥaqâ’eq)*.\(^\text{15}\)

Despite their skepticism, both Ritter and Qazvini continued to accept two Twelver-Shi’i inflected *maṣnânâs* as genuine: the *Tongue of the Unseen (Lesân al-ghayb)* and the *Locus of Wonders (Maẓhar al-‘ajâ‘eb)*; an epithet for ‘Ali). Even though these poems diverge from ‘Aṭṭār’s early works in terms of style and religious content (according to Qazvini, ‘Aṭṭār must have suffered from “a decline of skill in old age,” and the earlier works all display a clearly Sunni orientation), they were accepted by Ritter and Qazvini because their author explicitly identifies himself as Farid al-Din ‘Aṭṭār, the composer of the *Conference of the Birds*, the *Book of Affliction*, and the *Memorial*.\(^\text{16}\) And because the *Locus* and *Tongue* contain rich biographical data, maintaining their authenticity allowed these scholars to provide fuller and seemingly more satisfying reconstructions of ‘Aṭṭār’s life. For example, this pseudo-‘Aṭṭār claims to have been born in Nishapur to a family that hailed from Tun;\(^\text{17}\) spent thirteen years as a youth in Mashhad;\(^\text{18}\) had some sort of spiritual relationship with Najm al-Din Kobra;\(^\text{19}\) and to have traveled extensively

19. Ibid., 1:15.
to Damascus, Egypt, Kufa, India, Turkestan, and China before resettling in Nishapur. According to a long denunciation found in the *Tongue*, this pseudo-ʿAṭṭār was persecuted for his Shiʿi beliefs by a sectarian jurist who reportedly burned the poet’s *Locus* and incited the local people to violence against him; as a consequence, he was forced to flee to Mecca. He also extensively catalogs his alleged oeuvre, claiming as his own not only ʿAṭṭār’s authentic works, but also poems that are now viewed with suspicion, such as the *Extracts of the Essence* (*Javâher al-zât*) and the *Book of the Camel* (*Oshtor-nâma*). Accepting the authenticity of the *Tongue* and *Locus* thus also entailed, for Qazvini and Ritter, accepting the above-named works as genuine. To confuse matters even more, many of these works diverge stylistically and religiously not only from the authentic works of ʿAṭṭār, but also from the explicitly Shiʿi *Tongue* and *Locus*, exhibiting, in Ritter’s words, a “dithyrambic” ecstasy focused not on ʿAli but the figure of Ḥallâj, whom they elevate to an almost divine status.

To explain these changes, Ritter proposed a threefold periodization of ʿAṭṭār’s life and works. (1) The first period allegedly saw the composition of the *Book of Secrets*, the *Divine Book*, the *Book of Affliction*, and the *Conference of the Birds*, which are, in Ritter’s words, characterized by a balance of narrative and exhortation and a tightly structured disposition. Also attributed to this period are the *Divân*, the *Choice Book*, and the *Memorial*, as well as the *Book

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20. Ibid., 1:6. Nafisi (*Jostōju*, 151) excoriates ʿAṭṭār-e Tuni as a liar in regards to these alleged travels. It is probably more productive, however, to see these claims as a mode of constructing of a certain sort of poetic persona that may not necessarily correspond in a one-to-one manner with his biographical self.

21. Ibid., 1:8-10.


24. This three-part development is first suggested by Ritter in “Philologika X” (143-4). Even after he accepted that the works of the second and third periods were not genuine, he continued to use these groupings as a useful way of distinguishing between attributed works in "Philologika XIV," 7-8; "ʿAṭṭār."
of Advice (Pand-nâma), the Book of the Nightingale (Bolbol-nâma), the Book of Ascent (Meʿrâj-nâma), the Book of the Skull (Jomjoma-nâma), and the romance Gol and Hermez (often erroneously voweled as Gol and Hormoz).25 (2) The poems of the second period in Ritter’s scheme are characterized by a decreased interest in narrative, a marked use of anaphora, and a religious shift towards ecstatic celebrations of apotheosis, especially that of Ḩallâj; the Book of the Camel (Oshtor-nâma) and the Extracts of the Essence (Javâher al-zât) are emblematic of this group of works.26 (3) Finally, according to Ritter, ‘Aṭṭâr must have converted to Shi’ism in the third period of his life and then composed the Locus and the Tongue.

The authenticity of the Locus and the Tongue, however, is thrown into question by several anachronisms and inconsistencies. These were first pointed out in 1927 by Mahmūd Sherâni, writing in Urdu, who argued that the Locus, among many other attributions, cannot possibly be authentic.27 Ritter knew of the article, and he had access to an English summary of it while composing “Philologika X,” but he claims to have found its arguments unconvincing (although he would later reevaluate his position).28 It was Nafisi, who seems to have been unaware of Sherâni’s earlier work on the subject, who finally succeeded in casting doubt on the authenticity of the Locus for an Iranian and Orientalist audience with his revolutionary 1941 monograph on ‘Aṭṭâr’s life and works. As Nafisi convincingly shows, echoing many of

25. The name of the romance’s eponymous hero is usually voweled as “Hormoz,” but Shafi’i-Kadkani has pointed out that this cannot be the case since, within the poem, it rhymes with hargez. He thus suggests the name is associated not with the Iranian Homorzd, but with the hellenistic Hermes. See Zabur, 101.
26. This group also contains the Book of Ḩallâj (Ḥallâj-nâma/Haylâj-nâma), the Book of Manṣur (Manṣur-nâma), and the Headless Book (Bisar-nâma). Ritter characterizes the Book of the Camel (Oshtor-nâma) as a stylistic hybrid of the first and second periods because it combines the frame-tale structure associated with the former with the “dithyrambic” tenor of the latter. Ritter, “Philologika X,” 155.
Sherâni’s earlier arguments, the Locus and the Tongue must have been products of a later poet who lived in the fifteenth century, wrote under the name Ḍḍṭṭ, and deliberately encouraged confusion between his own works and those of his more famous predecessor. This pseudo-Ḍḍṭṭ claims to have been known as Farid al-Din and to have been born in Nishapur, but unlike his more famous namesake, he mentions that his family hailed from Tûn; Nafisi thus styles him “Ḍḍṭṭ-e Tûn.”29 The stylistic and religious divergences between the works of Ḍḍṭṭ-e Nayshâburi and Ḍḍṭṭ-e Tûn, are, according to Nafisi, simply too great to be explained by the evolution of personal style, with the explicit Twelver Shi’ism of the Locus and the Tongue being more consistent with the religious and poetic atmosphere of the fifteenth century than the thirteenth. Besides these general observations, a number of specific passages from the poems support the theory of their later provenance. As Ritter points out in a revised treatment of the poet informed by Nafisi’s research, Ḍḍṭṭ-e Tûn refers to himself as a “second Ḍḍṭṭ” (“Ḍḍṭṭ-e ṣâni āmadam”), which explicitly signals a distance between him and his more famous predecessor.30 Various verses in the Locus “foretell” the coming of future poets like Rumi (and his friend Shams al-Din), Qâsem-e Anvâr, and Ḥâfez, which means that these verses must have been written after those figures gained fame.31 Some verses even allude to the legend that after Ḍḍṭṭ was killed, his decapitated head miraculously continued to speak as his headless body carried it towards the graveyard; these lines could only have been composed after Ḍḍṭṭ died and legends of his martyrdom and miraculous post-decapitation recitation had begun to circulate.32 Ḍḍṭṭ-e Tûn thus appears to have been a later poet who sought to pass his work off as that of

32. Nafisi, Jostojû, 153-4. A spurious work of Ritter’s second group, the Headless Book (Bisar-nûma), is said to be the very poem that Ḍḍṭṭ’s decapitated head recited. It is first attested in sixteenth century. See Miranštâri, Ketûb-shenâsi, 181-6; Nafisi, Jostojû, 107-8.
Farid al-Din ‘Aṭṭâr, perhaps to ensure his own poetry’s dissemination or to appropriate the latter’s persona and oeuvre for the Shi‘i poetic canon. As part of his archaizing project, this pseudo-‘Aṭṭâr of Tun even claims to have composed the Locus in 1188-89 at an age of over one hundred years, meaning that he would have had to have been born prior to 1091-92, dates that must be dismissed as chronologically impossible given that the real ‘Aṭṭâr-e Nayshâburi likely died in 1221 or 1230.\textsuperscript{33}

In his revised 1958 investigation, Ritter accepted Nafisi’s argument that the works of the third group in his tripartite division of ‘Aṭṭâr’s oeuvre (i.e., the Locus and the Tongue) must have been composed by a later Shi‘i poet, thereby opening up the works of the second group to renewed scrutiny as well. Nevertheless, he resisted Nafisi’s uncritical urge to attribute many of the works in this second group to the same ‘Aṭṭâr-e Tuni.\textsuperscript{34} First, they display significant stylistic and religious deviations: as previously mentioned, it is Ḥallâj, not ‘Ali, who plays the central role in these works, and there is no trace of the Shi‘ism that is openly confessed in the Locus and the Tongue.\textsuperscript{35} Second, an early manuscript of the Extracts of the Essence (Javâher al-zât), one of the main representatives of this group of texts, is dated 1335, much earlier than ‘Aṭṭâr-e Tuni was thought to have been active.\textsuperscript{36} There is some evidence that these Ḥallâj-centered works may have been circulating even earlier, perhaps even by the middle of the thirteenth century. According to an anecdote recounted in Aflâki’s Mevlevi hagiography, Rumi (d. 1273) spoke of a special relationship between ‘Aṭṭâr and Ḥallâj, claiming that the poet served as a site for the manifestation of the famous sufi martyr’s spiritual light: this may indicate that Rumi

\textsuperscript{33} Nafisi, Jostoju, 149.

\textsuperscript{34} Ritter, "Philologika XIV," 7-8.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 7.

was familiar with some of the Ḥallāj-centric works of the second group. Ritter thus holds out the possibility that the poems of the second group may be authentic works of Ḵāṭṭār, although he admits that the likelihood is remote. Even though they have not yet been analyzed in depth, there is ample circumstantial evidence suggesting that these works are spurious: not only because they differ stylistically and religiously from Ḵāṭṭār’s known authentic poems, but also because they entered the manuscript tradition later than them and they do not appear in the earliest manuscripts of his collected works (kolliyāt).

Similar philological and stylistic evidence has also led scholars to reassess the authenticity of some of the poems in Ritter’s first period. There are no internal anachronisms or contradictions that would indicate that these works are spurious, and Ritter initially held them to be genuine. Perhaps the most popular work ever ascribed to Ḵāṭṭār, the Book of Advice (Pand-nāma), is a member of this group: over three hundred manuscripts are recorded by Miranṣārī, and it was often translated, especially into Turkish. Although it was originally accepted by Ritter as authentic, by the end of his career he came to question that assumption: he pointed out that “manuscripts of the work are first known [only] in the 9th/15th century, it is not mentioned by the poet in his authentic works, it does not appear in the oldest kulliyāt-

37. Ritter, “Philologika XIV,” 7-8; Shams al-Dīn Ahmad Aflākī, Manāqeb al-ʿārefīn, ed. Tahsin Yazıcı (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basmevi, 1959-61; repr., Tehran: Donyâ-ye Ketâb, 1382 [2003-2004]), 2:582. Jāmī alludes to the same anecdote in the Nafahât al-ḥums (597) and reports that some of his contemporaries used it as evidence to support the idea that Ḵāṭṭār was an Uwaysi inducted into sufism by the spirit of Hallāj.

38. “I therefore do not regard it as utterly impossible that the works of the second group should be genuine, though it is rather doubtful,” Ritter, “Ḵāṭṭār.”

39. The Book of the Camel (Oshtor-nāma) and the Book of Hallâj (Hallâj-nāma) are first attested in the fifteenth century, and the Headless Book (Bisar-nāma) in the sixteenth. The Extracts of the Essence (Jâvâher al-żârī) is the exception, being attested as early as 1335. See Miransäri, Ketâb-shenâsi, 173-75, 182-85, 225-26, 283-85.

40. Nafisi also claimed that the Book of Advice (Pand-nāma) was “certainly from Ḵāṭṭār,” but he believed the Book of the Nightingale (Bolbol-nāma) to be a spurious attribution on the basis that it he found it “to a certain degree poetically weak and fair from the style of Ṭṭṭār.” Jostoju, 106-7, 108.

manuscripts, and, finally, it does not accord with ʿAṭṭār’s thought-world.”42 Ritter’s reasoning does not decisively disprove the authenticity of the Book of Advice’s attribution to ʿAṭṭār, but it shows it to be circumstantially unlikely, and in response the scholarly community has adopted a circumspect attitude towards the text.43 The same sort of reasoning can also be applied to the Book of Ascent (Meʿrāj-nāma), the Book of the Nightingale (Bolbol-nāma), and the Book of the Skull (Jomjoma-nāma): like the Book of Advice, none appears in the earliest collected works, none is referenced by ʿAṭṭār in a known authentic work, and none enters the manuscript tradition before the fifteenth century.44

The Case of the Wandering Titles
It has proven somewhat more difficult, however, to determine the authenticity of the romance variously known as the Khosrow-nāma, Gol and Hermez/Hormoz, and Gol and Khosrow.45 Originally classified by Ritter as a work of ʿAṭṭār’s first period, this poem was always considered something of an outlier because it is not an overtly mystical or religious maṣnawi, but a perso-hellenistic romance like Varaqa and Golshāh or Vis and Rāmin.46 Despite its incongruity with the rest of ʿAṭṭār’s oeuvre, it was widely assumed to be authentic for two main reasons: first, because it includes a preface in which ʿAṭṭār seems to identify himself as the author; and, sec-

44. Manuscripts of the Book of the Nightingale (Bolbol-nāma) and the Book of Ascent (Meʿrāj-nāma) are first attested in the fifteenth century, and the Book of the Skull (Jomjoma-nāma) in the seventeenth. Miranṣârī, Ketāb-shenāsī, 178-79, 222, 261.
45. On the voweling of “Hermez,” see p. 18n25.
46. For a synopsis of the plot, see Ritter, “Philologika X,” 161-71.
ond, because it is mentioned along with other genuine poems from the first period in the preface to the Choice Book (Mokhtâr-nâma).47

The dominion of the Khosrow-nâma [lit. Book of the King] has appeared in the world, and the Book of Secrets has been published, and the language of the birds of the Book of the Birds (Tâyur-nâma) has transported rational souls to the site of unveiling, and the burn of the Book of Affliction has passed bounds and limits, and the register of the Divân has been made complete. And the Book of Essences (Javâher al-zât) and Husking the Heart (Sharh al-galb), both of which were in verse, were left unfinished out of passion, surrendered to the flame, and washed away.

سلطنت خسروانه در عالم ظاهر گشت و اسرار اسرارنامه منتشر شد و زبان مرغان طیورنامه
ناظر ارواح را به محل کشف رسید و سوز مصیبتی مشابه از حذ‌و غایب در گشت و
دیوان دیوان ساختن تمام داشته امد و جواهرنامه و شرح القلب که هر دو منظوم بودند از سر
سودا نامنظم ماند که حرق و غسلی بدان راه یافت.48

This seemingly unambiguous claim to authorship is repeated a second time at a later point in the same introduction; here ‘Aţţâr divides his oeuvre into two trilogies (moşallas), the first composed of the Book of Secrets, the Khosrow-nâma, and the Conference of the Birds (Maqâmât-e tâyur), and the second composed of the Divân, Book of Affliction, and the Choice Book.49 Thus, if the authenticity of the Choice Book and its introduction is accepted, as it is by most scholars, then it would seem to follow that the Khosrow-nâma must be accepted as well.50 Shâfi‘i-Kadkani, however, has recently cast considerable doubt on the attribution of the so-called Khosrow-nâma, suggesting on the basis of both internal and manuscript evidence that it is the product of a later poet. According to this argument, the title Khosrow-nâma was originally applied not to

48. ‘Aţţâr, Mokhtâr-nâma, 70.
49. Ibid., 71-2. Over the course of only a few pages, the Conference of the Birds is referred to as both the Tôyur-nâma and the Maqâmât-e tâyur, showing the fluidity of titles even for a work’s own author.
50. On ‘Aţţâr’s authorship of the Choice Book, see Miraftâlî, “Âyâ Mokhtâr-nâma az ‘Aţţâr ast?”
this romance, but to the *maṣnavi* now known as the *Divine Book*, and it is to that work which ʿAṭṭār refers in the above-quoted enumeration.\(^{51}\)

The argument begins with certain “inconsistencies” in the introduction to the romance *Khosrow-nāma* (i.e., *Gol and Hermez*), in which the poem’s author explicitly identifies himself as ʿAṭṭār-e Nayshāburi. The poet recounts how he composed the *Book of Affliction* and the *Divine Book* in his drugstore between patients, an element which made its way into scholarly biographies of ʿAṭṭār, and he also mentions the titles of the *Conference of the Birds* and the *Choice Book*.\(^{52}\) The presence of this last title, however, presents a problem: the *Khosrow-nāma* is mentioned as a completed work in the *Choice Book*, and the *Choice Book* is mentioned as a completed work in the *Khosrow-nāma*. There are other puzzling elements of introduction as well, including a complex, multi-stage origins story: first, one of ʿAṭṭār’s friends allegedly asked him to versify a pre-existing prose *Khosrow-nāma*, but later we are told that the poem is actually an abridgment of an earlier poem that too closely resembled the *Book of Secrets*. To make sense of this data, Ritter proposes that ʿAṭṭār composed one version of the *Khosrow-nāma*, then the *Choice Book*, and then reworked the *Khosrow-nāma* into its current form. Shaﬁʿi-Kadkani, however, believes that something more nefarious is going on.\(^{53}\)

More specifically, according to Shaﬁʿi-Kadkani, the introduction to the *Khosrow-nāma*—which connects the poem to ʿAṭṭār—is a fifteenth-century forgery.\(^{54}\) Besides his general suspicion of the origins story, Shaﬁʿi-Kadkani points out that the introduction uses mystical terminology associated with Ibn ʿArabī, which was not popularized in Persian poetry until the four-


\(^{52}\) Reinert, “ʿAṭṭār, Farīd-al-Dīn.”

\(^{53}\) Ritter, “Philologika X,” 144-55.

\(^{54}\) Shaﬁʿi-Kadkani, intro. to *Mokhtār-nāma*, 57.
teenth century with the works of Shabestari. Several verses, moreover, appear to be poetic responses (tażmin) to verses of that poet, a clear indication of their later origin. Unlike ‘Atṭâr’s genuine works, in which the poet vows to never compose any panegyric, the introduction to Gol and Hermez praises a certain Sa’d al-Din Abu’l-Fazl b. al-Rabib in terms appropriate for a spiritual guide of the Timurid era. A Timurid provenance for the introduction is further suggested by a reference to the riddle (mo‘ammâ) as a high literary art, which is consonant with the cultural milieu of the fifteenth century, but not the thirteenth. Such a dating would also be consistent with Gol and Hermez’s manuscript tradition, which, Shafi’i-Kadkani claims, cannot be reliably identified until the beginning of the fifteenth century, almost a full century after the appearance of all of ‘Atṭâr’s genuine works. As for the romance itself, sans introduction, Shafi’i-Kadkani originally identified its excessive anaphora as a sign of Timurid decadence far from the style of ‘Atṭâr. The point is not entirely convincing, however, as protracted anaphora can also be found in ‘Atṭâr’s genuine works, although perhaps not quite to the same extent. More recently, he has suggested that the romance was written by another Farid-e ‘Atṭâr, roughly contemporary with our ‘Atṭâr-e Nayshâburi, who was a panegyrist to the

55. Ibid., 48-50. He highlights a technical usage of the terms asmâ (names) and mosammâ (named).
56. Ibid., 46-7.
57. Ibid., 50-2. For example, the honorifics Pole of the Saints (Qoţ b al-owleyâ) and Khwâja are both applied to Ebn al-Rabib, which, according to Shafi’i-Kadkani, were not used for spiritual leaders in Persian until the fifteenth century.
58. Ibid., 45-6.
59. Ibid., 55-6. Numerous manuscripts of the Khosrow-nâma exist from the fifteenth century onwards; the earliest is dated 816/1413 (Ritter, “Philologika XIV,” 9) and not 826/1423, as Shafi’i-Kadkani claims. See Miransâri, Ketâb-shenâsi, 234-6; De Blois and Storey, Persian Literature, 5.2:276-78; Ritter, “Philologika X,” 172-3. An allegedly very early manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale (Blochet 1294) is dated 696/1297, but a number of its folios bear traces of alteration in the nineteenth century. A detailed examination of this manuscript remains a desideratum; if authentic, it could have major implications for the validity of Shafi’i-Kadkani’s theory. Somewhat surprisingly, he himself never acknowledges its existence. E. Blochet, Catalogue des Manuscrits Persans (Paris: Réunion des Bibliothèques Nationales, 1905-34), 3:144-5; Ritter, “Philologika X,” 87-8.
60. Shafi’i-Kadkani, intro. to Mokhtâr-nâma, 57. For an example of anaphora in ‘Atṭâr’s authentic works, see the extensive repetition of “stone” (sang), “finger” (angosht), and “ring” (angoshtari) in the Asrâr-nâma’s opening praise of the Prophet (195-242).
Khwârazm-Shâh Mohammad b. Tekish.\textsuperscript{61} That the two poets shared a name could naturally lead to mix-ups, so it is unsurprising that the spurious fifteenth-century introduction attributed the work to ‘Aṭṭâr-e Nayshâbûri, who was by then much more well known.\textsuperscript{62}

Shafi‘i-Kadkani further argues that ‘Aṭṭâr’s \textit{Divine Book} was originally known as the \textit{Khosrow-nāma}. He points out that in the introduction to the \textit{Choice Book}, ‘Aṭṭâr lists the otherwise doubtful \textit{Khosrow-nāma} but fails to mention the \textit{Divine Book}, which is almost certainly an authentic work. To solve this problem, Shafi‘i-Kadkani suggests that ‘Aṭṭâr used the title “\textit{Khosrow-nāma}” to refer not to the romance \textit{Gol and Hermez}, but to the \textit{maṣnawi} that is today known as the \textit{Divine Book}. The title “\textit{Divine Book}” is itself rather generic, being, in De Bruijn’s characterization, “an appellation rather than the proper name of a book,” indicating simply “a book of religious contents.”\textsuperscript{63} The \textit{Khosrow-nāma}, however, would have been an appropriate title for this \textit{maṣnawi} because its frame-tale recounts a spiritually edifying dialogue between a caliph/king (\textit{khosrow}) and his six sons.\textsuperscript{64} The extant manuscripts of this poem are all titled the \textit{Divine Book}, but even the earliest one dates from around one hundred years after ‘Aṭṭâr’s death, ample time

\textsuperscript{61} Shafi‘i-Kadkani, intro. to \textit{Maṣneq al-ṭayr}, 83-6. He also claims that a number of this poet’s \textit{ghazals} and \textit{qaṣīdas} have found their way in to ‘Aṭṭâr-e Nayshâbûri’s \textit{divān}.

\textsuperscript{62} Although he initially discounted the entire introduction, Shafi‘i-Kadkani now believes that certain portions of it—specifically its opening praise of God and the Prophet—originally belonged to the \textit{Divine Book}, and that they were removed by the forger and placed in the \textit{Khosrow-nāma} to bolster its attribution to ‘Aṭṭâr. This explains, in his opinion, the widely divergent versions of the \textit{Divine Book}’s doxology in the extant manuscripts—they are all spurious attempts to reconstruct that which was excerpted. This means, however, that Shafi‘i-Kadkani must now date this intervention to before 1331, the year of the earliest reliable manuscript of the \textit{Divine Book}, in spite of his former (very strong) arguments that the current introduction to the \textit{Khosrow-nāma} was forged in the fifteenth century. Perhaps this shift is also an attempt to account for the existence of the early Paris manuscript? It is also not exactly clear how a single forger (or a small group of forgers) could have completely removed all traces of \textit{Divine Book}’s original doxology from that poem’s textual tradition. Mohammad Reza Shafi‘i-Kadkani, introduction to \textit{Elâhi-nāma}, by Farid al-Din ‘Aṭṭâr, 2nd ed. (Tehran: Sokhan, 1388 [2009-10]), 54-63, 85-86. Cf. Shafi‘i-Kadkani, intro. to \textit{Mokhtâr-nāma}, 57.

\textsuperscript{63} J. T. P. de Bruijn, \textit{Of Piety and Poetry: The Interaction of Religion and Literature in the Life and Works of Hakim Sanâ‘i of Ghazna} (Leiden: Brill, 1983), 128. He gives the example of Sanâ‘i’s \textit{Ḥadiqat al-ḥaqīqa}, one manuscript of which bears the name \textit{Divine Book} in the colophon; Rumi also refers to the \textit{Ḥadiqat al-ḥaqīqa} by this name, as does Ḥâjjī Khalîfa.

\textsuperscript{64} Shafi‘i-Kadkani, intro. to \textit{Mokhtâr-nāma}, 37-8.
for the title to shift, and there is no philologically reliable internal evidence to suggest that the *Divine Book* is necessarily the work’s original proper name. On the contrary, Shafi’i-Kadkani has managed to pull together some positive indications that the *maṣnawi* may have originally circulated under the name of the *Khosrow-nâma*. As already mentioned, the introduction to the romance *Khosrow-nâma* alludes to an earlier version of the poem that was too similar in content to the *Book of Secrets*, prompting its revision. The content of the romance *Khosrow-nâma*, of course, has absolutely nothing at all in common with the *Book of Secrets*, but this would nicely describe the content of the *Divine Book*, which may have still been circulating under its original name at the time that this introduction was composed. Likewise, an early manuscript of ʿAṭṭār’s collected works lists both titles—the *Khosrow-nâma* and the *Divine Book*—on its simple calligraphic frontispiece, even though the manuscript, which appears to be complete, actually contains only the text of the *Divine Book*. According to Shafi’i-Kadkani, this indicates that both titles likely existed together at the time of the manuscript’s completion, which confused the copyist, who initially took them to refer to separate works. The presence of both titles on the frontispiece (and in the broader literary memory) then motivated later readers and copyists to search for the “missing” *Khosrow-nâma*.

In short, the didactic *maṣnawi* now known as the *Divine Book* was, according to Shafi’i-Kadkani, originally known as the *Khosrow-nâma*. Over the course of the following century, however, the generic title “*Divine Book*” became attached to the work as a proper name, and it is under this title that it is preserved in the manuscript tradition. The romance known as *Gol*

68. Shafi’i-Kadkani, intro. to *Mokhtar-nâma*, 56.
and Hermez or Khosrow-nâma and attributed to ʿAṭṭâr is a later forgery (or at least its introduction—where the attribution is explicitly made—is a forgery) that took advantage of this confusion. Shafī’i-Kadkani’s argument is somewhat speculative, but it has generally been met with approval by the scholarly community. Thus, a stable—if tentative—scholarly consensus has formed regarding ʿAṭṭâr’s oeuvre, which is now thought to consist only of the four didactic maṣnāvis (the Book of Secrets, the Conference of the Birds, the Book of Affliction, and the Divine Book/Khosrow-nâma), the Divān, the Choice Book, and the prose Memorial.69

Table 1: Significant Works Attributed to ʿAṭṭâr

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Provenance</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Ritter’s Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Book of Secrets (Asrār-nâma)</td>
<td>Farid al-Din ʿAṭṭâr</td>
<td>12th-13th century</td>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference of the Birds (Manṭeq al-ṭayr)</td>
<td>Farid al-Din ʿAṭṭâr</td>
<td>12th-13th century</td>
<td>Some manuscripts contain a late 12th-century date</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book of Affliction (Moṣibat-nâma)</td>
<td>Farid al-Din ʿAṭṭâr</td>
<td>12th-13th century</td>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divine Book (Elāhi-nâma)</td>
<td>Farid al-Din ʿAṭṭâr</td>
<td>12th-13th century</td>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husking the Heart (Sharh al-qalb)</td>
<td>Farid al-Din ʿAṭṭâr</td>
<td>12th-13th century</td>
<td>Destroyed</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book of Essentials (Javâher-nâma)</td>
<td>Farid al-Din ʿAṭṭâr</td>
<td>12th-13th century</td>
<td>Destroyed</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorial of Saints (Tazkerat al-owleyā)</td>
<td>Farid al-Din ʿAṭṭâr</td>
<td>12th-13th century</td>
<td>Likely composed before the Mokhtār-nâma</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

69. Many spurious works continue to be read as authentic, especially in non-academic religious circles in Iran. For example, the contemporary religious scholar ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Qâdir Fâzâlî maintains the authenticity of many apocryphal attributions and believes them to be spiritually valuable for modern Shīʿī readers. He has compiled an extensive subject correspondence for ʿAṭṭār’s works, including the Book of Affliction, the Conference of the Birds, the Book of Secrets, the Book of Advice (Pand-nâma), the Locus of Wonders (Maẓhar al-ʿajāʾeb), and the Book of Ḥallāj (Ḥallāj-nâma). See his Farhang-e mowżūʿi-ye adab-e pārsi: Mowżūʿ-bandi va naqd va barrasi, Farid al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār Nayshâburi (Tehran: Talāya, 1374 [1995-96]); Andîsha-ye ʿAṭṭār: Tâhîl-e ofoq-e andîsha-ye Shaykh Farid al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār-e Nayshâburi (Tehran: Talâya, 1374 [1995-96]). Also see Ernst, “Losing One’s Head,” 337-8.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice Book (Mokhtâr-nâma)</th>
<th>Farid al-Din ʿAṭṭâr</th>
<th>early 13th century?</th>
<th>Composed after the mašnavis</th>
<th>I</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Divân</td>
<td>Farid al-Din ʿAṭṭâr</td>
<td>12th-13th century</td>
<td>Reworked around the same time the Mokhtâr-nâma was compiled</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khosrow-nâma</td>
<td>Disputed</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Shafî’i-Kadkani argues that the prologue is a 15th-century forgery</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracts of the Essence (Javâher al-ẕât)</td>
<td>Unlikely ʿAṭṭâr</td>
<td>Before 1335</td>
<td>First known manuscript dated 1335; exhibits a “dithyrambic” style</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book of the Camel (Oshtor-nâma)</td>
<td>Unlikely ʿAṭṭâr</td>
<td>14th century?</td>
<td>Stylistically similar to Javâher al-ẕât</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book of Ḥallâj (Ḥallâj-nâma)</td>
<td>Unlikely ʿAṭṭâr</td>
<td>14th century?</td>
<td>Stylistically similar to Javâher al-ẕât and Oshtor-nâma</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locus of Wonders (Maẓhar al-ʿajâʾeb)</td>
<td>ʿAṭṭâr-e Tuni</td>
<td>15th century?</td>
<td>Contains many references to events that occurred after ʿAṭṭâr’s death; clear Shiʿi orientation</td>
<td>III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tongue of the Unseen (Lisān al-gayb)</td>
<td>ʿAṭṭâr-e Tuni</td>
<td>15th century?</td>
<td>Stylistically similar to the Maẓhar al-ʿajâʾeb</td>
<td>III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book of Advice (Pand-nâma)</td>
<td>Unlikely ʿAṭṭâr</td>
<td>15th century or earlier</td>
<td>Does not appear in the manuscript tradition until the 15th century</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ʿAṭṭâr’s probable oeuvre is thus both quite extensive and formally diverse. This is all the more remarkable when we recall that ʿAṭṭâr operated outside of the confines of the patronage economy. He was not the first amateur to compose poetry, of course, but previous amateur production tended to circulate orally and was limited to specific folk forms like the quatrain. ʿAṭṭâr, by contrast, worked in a full range of poetic forms and carefully managed his textual legacy: it included not only quatrains (which he himself compiled into the Choice Book), but also ghazals, qaṣidas, and mašnavis. By composing in these forms, he proved that he could
work in all of the major formal types expected of a professional poet, even though he rejected the patronage system for ethical and religious reasons.\textsuperscript{70} He speaks admiringly of the verse of court poets like Anvari, Khâqâni, and Azraqi and presents himself as their poetic heir, while simultaneously claiming to surpass these forbearers not only aesthetically, but ethically and religiously as well.\textsuperscript{71} Likewise, ‘Aṭṭâr seems to have been familiar with, influenced by, and in competition with his near-contemporary Nezâmi, even though he does not mention him by name. Aṭṭâr’s penchant for long, book-length narrative structures was likely inspired by Nezâmi’s example, and Barât Zanjâni has identified a number of verses in ‘Aṭṭâr’s \textit{maṣnāvis} that seem to be agonistic responses to lines from Nezâmi.\textsuperscript{72} ‘Aṭṭâr’s oeuvre thus seems to have been carefully planned in order to demonstrate the breadth of his talent and engagement with the tradition: through it, he lays claim to a place in the canon even as he distances himself from his models by rejecting the practice of patronage, celebrating his amateur status, and stressing the religious content of his poems.

\textbf{Biography and Social Milieu}

The scholarly inquiry into the authenticity of ‘Aṭṭâr’s works carries important consequences for our understanding of his biography. For both Qazvini and Ritter, the \textit{Tongue of the Unseen (Lisân al-ghayb)} and the \textit{Locus of Wonders (Mażhar al-‘ajâ’eb)} served as major sources for their initial reconstructions of ‘Aṭṭâr’s life, but because these poems were later recognized as fabrications, the seemingly rich conclusions that they were able to draw had to be dismissed, including ‘Aṭṭâr’s alleged travels, his meeting with Najm al-Din Kobrá, Shi‘i confession, conflict

\textsuperscript{70} See Chapter 2, p. 97-100.
\textsuperscript{72} Barât Zanjâni, “Hakim Nezâmi-ye Ganjavi va Shaykh Farid al-Din ‘Aṭṭâr,” \textit{Āyanda} 2, no. 9 (Ordibehesht 1362 [April-May 1983]).
with the jurist Samarqandi, and subsequent exile to Mecca.\(^7\) The doubts regarding the authenticity of the romance *Khosrow-nāma* also reverberate through any potential biography of 'Aṭṭār: no longer can Ebn al-Rabib be considered ‘Aṭṭār’s spiritual guide, nor can ‘Aṭṭār be assumed to have been a successful perfumer-druggist, composing his poems in his store between patients.\(^7\) In the works now accepted as authentic, ‘Aṭṭār reveals almost nothing directly about himself or his contemporary circumstances: he mentions no birthdate, no legal affiliation, no sufi shaykh, and no contemporary political events; he provides no overview of his literary contacts, personal travels, or chronology of his poetic activities.\(^7\) Reliable external sources do not fill many of these biographical gaps, either. The earliest notices on the poet, found in the works of Ibn al-Fuwaṭi and ‘Owfi, are exceedingly terse, providing only a few lines of information and omitting the sort of positive biographical data that twentieth-century researchers longed for.\(^7\)

And while later sources such as Jāmi and Dowlat-Shāh are much more extensive, they were written more than 200 years after ‘Aṭṭār’s death and motivated by a hagiographical agenda, narrating ‘Aṭṭār’s life according to the strictures of saintly biography (which, ironically, ‘Aṭṭār

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74. Badi‘ al-Zamān Foruzānfar, *Sharḥ-e āhvāl va naqd va tablīl-e āsār-e Shāykh Farīd al-Dīn Mohammad ‘Aṭṭār-e Nayshābūri* (Tehran: Chāp-khāna-ye Dāneshgāh, 1339 [1960-1]; repr., Tehran: Āsim, 1389 [2010-11]), 27-30. Page numbers refer to the reprint edition. It is Foruzānfar who has most strongly suggested that ‘Aṭṭār was a disciple of the Ebn al-Rabīb, and he exerts a great deal of effort trying to identify this figure. Regarding ‘Aṭṭār’s profession, once the *Khosrow-nāma*’s description of his bustling drugstore is rendered inadmissible, there is little evidence in the authentic works to suggest that ‘Aṭṭār actually worked as an apothecary except for a short anecdote in the *Asrār-nāma* (2858-74). According to its narrative, ‘Aṭṭār was once asked to compound a syrup (sharbat) for an afflicted miser in Nayshābūr; he attempted to administer rosewater but the patient refused the treatment. The anecdote does not necessarily imply that ‘Aṭṭār was a professional apothecary, however. As Shafī‘i-Kadkani points out (intro. to *Mokhtār-nāma*, 28-9), the pen-name could also have been inherited from his father.
75. Although he mentions no legal affiliation, Este‘lami argues that he was a Ḥanafī on the basis of the sobriquets applied to Abu Ḥanīfa in the *Memorial*. See “Narratology and Realities,” 59-60.
had himself helped to popularize in the Persian language), complete with sudden conversion, extravagant martyrdom, and continuing spiritual presence in the world after death.\textsuperscript{77}

It has therefore become common to bemoan that lack of reliable data regarding ‘Atţār’s life and social milieu. Nevertheless, even though details of his biography remain murky, we can still infer the broad outlines of his social context, and, more importantly, the sorts of readers and listeners that he was targeting. In the following pages, we will review what is known about ‘Atţār’s life and show that he was, in addition to an amateur poet, a mystically minded preacher and informal spiritual guide, and that these homiletic activities formed an important context for his poetic work.

\textit{Towards a Chronology of Attar’s Life and Poetic Activity}

The earliest mention of ‘Atţār’s death is found in the work of Ibn al-Fuwaṭī, according to whom the poet “was martyred by the Tatars [Mongols] at Nishapur.”\textsuperscript{78} Most scholars have taken this to refer to the initial Mongol destruction of the city in 1221, but this need not necessarily be the case.\textsuperscript{79} Jāmi and Dowlat-Shāh both give a death date of 1230, and Shafi‘i-Kadkani has argued, not entirely convincingly, that this is more likely to be correct.\textsuperscript{80} In particular, he points out that Dowlat-Shāh provides not just the year of ‘Atţār’s death, but the month and day as well—10 Jomâdi II 627 / 3 May 1230. According to Shafi‘i-Kadkani, such specificity is contrary to Dowlat-Shāh’s standard habit; therefore, he likely had access to a “special source” that he

\textsuperscript{77} On the narrative conventions of saintly biography and the tendency towards typification, see John Renard, \textit{Friends of God: Islamic Images of Piety, Commitment, and Servanthood} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 11-140, 235-55.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibn al-Fuwaṭī, \textit{Talkhiš}, 462.


\textsuperscript{80} Jāmi, \textit{Nafahāt}, 598; Samarqandi, \textit{Taţkerat al-sho‘arā}, 332.
deemed particularly reliable, because otherwise he would not have included this unusually exact date. Furthermore, Shafi‘i-Kadkani speculates that this “special source” was ‘Aṭṭâr’s original gravestone, which he suspects Dowlat-Shâh had personally visited.81 His argument, however, assumes a rather high level of historical subtly on the part of the notoriously unreliable Dowlat-Shâh, and there is no way for us to independently verify the accuracy of this “special source.” Even if such a source existed, and even if Dowlat-Shâh believed it to be particularly reliable, the exact day and month that it gives could still have easily been invented by its author in order to endow the date with an appearance of exactitude and authenticity.

The birthdate that Dowlat-Shâh provides, 6 Sha‘bân 513 / 19 November 1119, is even more problematic because it would mean, as he himself points out, that ‘Aṭṭâr lived a miraculously long life of 114 (lunar) years.82 (It seems Dowlat-Shâh’s arithmetic here is a little bit off; if ‘Aṭṭâr was born in Sha‘bân and killed in Jomâdi II, then he would have actually died just a couple of months shy of his 114th birthday.) Shafi‘i-Kadkani attempts to account for this and maintain the credibility of his hypothetical “special source” by suggesting that Dowlat-Shâh misread (or miscopied) it, rendering khamsin (fifty-) as ‘ashar (-teen), so that ‘Aṭṭâr would have actually been born in 553/1158.83 It seems rash, however, to attribute any sort of accuracy to a “reverse engineered” date in a completely unknown and unseen source that a rather careless biographer like Dowlat-Shâh may have deemed accurate. Moreover, the legend of ‘Aṭṭâr’s 114-year life certainly could not have originated with Dowlat-Shâh’s alleged mistake as Shafi‘i-Kadkani suggests, since Jâmi, who wrote before Dowlat-Shâh, also assigns a death year of 1230

and a lifespan of 114 years to ʿAṭṭār. It is more likely that these dates were already circulating, and that part of their attraction for biographers like Dowlat-Shâh can be explained by the sacrality associated with the number 114. And by quoting the exact day and month along with the year, Dowlat-Shâh bolsters the authenticity of this miraculously long life.

Other sources are not much help in establishing a birthdate, either. ʿOwfi includes ʿAṭṭār among the poets who lived after Sultan Sanjar (d. 1157), by which he likely means that most of his poetic activity occurred after Sanjar’s reign, but which leaves open the possibility that he was born earlier. Foruzânfar notes that ʿAṭṭār never attributes more than “seventy-some” (haftād-o-and) years to himself, and on this basis he counts back from 1221, which he takes as ʿAṭṭār’s death, to arrive at a possible birth year of around 1145. If, however, we follow Shafi’i-Kadkani in taking 1230 as his death year, then this methodology would suggest that a birthdate around 1155 is most likely.

The relative chronology of ʿAṭṭār’s literary activity is also difficult to reconstruct. None of his works can be reliably dated on the basis of internal evidence. Some manuscripts of the Conference of the Birds include a concluding verse that claims the poem was completed in 573/1177-7; other variants cite different years, including 583/1187-8 and 570/1174-75. In any case, these dates do not appear in most manuscripts, including the earliest ones, so they are difficult to accept with any certainty, and most scholars have deemed them later interpolations. The only point of chronology that seems beyond dispute is that the Choice Book must

84. Jâmi, Nafâḥât, 598.
85. The number’s significance derives from the fact that the Quran contains 114 suras. ʿAṭṭār was also said to have composed 114 works; see p. 14 above.
86. ʿOwfi, Lobāb al-albāb, 2:337.
87. Foruzânfar, Sharḥ-e ahvâl-e ʿAṭṭār, 7-11.
have been completed and disseminated in its current form after the other authentic poetic works mentioned by name in its introduction. Even this fact, however, does not preclude the possibility that ‘Aṭṭār revised those earlier works at a later date: many works of pre-modern Persian literature existed in multiple authorial recensions, and the Choice Book itself explains how the Divân went through at least two very different forms.\(^9\)

Although the poems themselves are not much help in establishing a chronology, some external evidence suggests that the maṣnāvis were produced closer to the end of ‘Aṭṭār’s life. More specifically, the biographer-anthologist ‘Owfi, who visited Nishapur in 1206-7, fails to mention any of ‘Aṭṭār’s maṣnāvis even though he always enumerates maṣnāvis attributed to other poets. According to Shafi’i-Kadkani, this may suggest that ‘Aṭṭār’s maṣnāvis were all completed after ‘Owfi’s visit (assuming, of course, that the date in some manuscripts of the Conference of the Birds is a later interpolation).\(^9\) Even if we follow Shafi’i-Kadkani in attributing ‘Aṭṭār’s maṣnāvis to the last decades of his life, however, the order in which they were written remains difficult to determine. For example, Foruzânfar argued that the Book of Secrets and the Divine Book must have been produced later than the other maṣnāvis because they contain more vociferous complaints against old age, but given the conventionality of this trope, it does not seem to be a particularly reliable way to establish the relative dating of works in the corpus, especially if they were all written near the end of the ‘Aṭṭār’s life as Shafi’i-Kadkani suggests.\(^9\) Others have claimed that the Book of Secrets was likely ‘Aṭṭār’s first maṣnāvi because it lacks a frame-narrative, a sign of his alleged poetic immaturity.\(^9\) The Divine Book was

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89. ‘Aṭṭār, Mokhtār-nāma, 70-1.
91. Foruzânfar, Sharḥ-e aḥvāl-e ‘Aṭṭār, 61.
92. ‘Abd al-Hosayn Zarrinkub, Šedā-ye bāl-e simorgh (Tehran: Sokhan, 1386 [2007-8]), 70-1; J. A. Boyle, “The Religious Mathnavis of Farid al-Din ‘Aṭṭār,” Iran 17 (1979), 9-10; De Bruijn, “Preaching Poet,” 93; Kermani, Terror of God, 30-1; Reinert, “‘Aṭṭār, Farid-al-Din.” Boyle’s oft-quoted assertion seems to be based partly on a misun-
thought for a time to be the last of the mašnavîs, because it is absent from Ḍâr Ṭṭṭâr’s enumeration in the Choice Book; but if we accept the argument that this work was originally known as the Khosrow-nâma, then this data-point must be jettisoned.93 Shafî’-i-Kadkani himself has suggested that the mašnavîs were written in the order that they are mentioned in the Choice Book: first the Divine Book, then the Book of Secrets, the Conference of the Birds, and the Book of Affliction.94 Some scholars have also argued that either the Book of Affliction or the Conference of the Birds is Ḍâr Ṭṭṭâr’s last mašnavî on the basis that it embodies a more “mature” mysticism or world-view; the difference of opinion here betrays the subjectivity of the criterion.95

Did Ḍâr Ṭṭṭâr Have a Sufi Master?
But for most scholars, premodern and modern alike, the most vexing problem of Ḍâr Ṭṭṭâr’s biography has been whether or not he ever had a formal spiritual guide (pir, shaykh), and the attendant question of the nature of his relationship to the sufi tradition. A novice’s initiation into the sufi tradition, as portrayed in normative manuals of sufi practice and dogma, required a period of tutelage and training in the service of a sufi master; after this period, generally several years, the novice would be granted a cloak (kherqa) signifying his membership in the community.96 In his authentic works, however, Ḍâr Ṭṭṭâr does not allude to any spiritual master he may have had, much to the consternation of later scholars. On one occasion, in the introduction to the Memorial, he recounts a visit to a certain pious man whose name is given in Este’lami’s edi-

96. For one of the classic early descriptions of sufi training and investiture, see ‘Ali b. ‘Oşmân Hojviri, Kashf al-mahjûb, ed. Mahmûd Ābêdi (Tehran: Sorush, 1392 [2013-14]), 74-5. Translated by Nicholson as The “Kashf al-Mahjûb”: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism (London: Luzac, 1911), 54-56.
tion as Majd al-Din Khwârazmi; some scholars have taken this figure to be ʿAṭṭâr’s pîr, although the anecdote itself seems to suggest only an informal relationship between two men with a shared inclination towards mystical piety.97 According to this narrative, ʿAṭṭâr once visited Khwârazmi—whom ʿAṭṭâr styles “imam”—to find him weeping; when he asked him why, Khwârazmi replied, “last night I prayed to God to make me one of that tribe [i.e., sufis of elevated spiritual states], or an observer of that tribe, and perhaps God has answered my prayer.” Their exchange suggests that ʿAṭṭâr respected and was on intimate terms with this Khwârazmi, who shared his veneration of sufi holy men, but it does not necessarily imply he was his formal disciple.

The exact identity of Majd al-Din Khwârazmi is also opaque, and the name does not appear in any of our standard sources.98 Many pre-modern scholars seem to have found the name just as puzzling since they often “correct” it to Majd al-Din BaghÎdÎ, a famous disciple of Najm al-Din Kobrá who was allegedly executed by drowning in 1209.99 Jâmi, for example, quotes this passage in his hagiographical Breaths of Intimacy (Nafaḥât al-ons), where he renders the name as Majd al-Din BaghÎdÎ and interprets the encounter to mean that ʿAṭṭâr was Bâghdâdi’s formal disciple (morîd).100 There is a certain logic to this identification since BaghÎdÎ did indeed hail from the region of Khwârazm—the village of BaghÎdak to be precise (hence his sobriquet). Nevertheless, he does not seem to have ever been known as Khwârazmi and most modern scholars thus reject the identification.101

97. ʿAṭṭâr, Taʿzkirat al-owleyâ, 8-9.
101. One still finds instances in which modern scholarship continues to identify this Majd al-Din Khwârazmi as BaghÎdÎ, however; see Kermani, Terror of God, 26; Reinert, “ʿAṭṭâr, Farîd-al-DÎn.”
One early manuscript of the *Memorial* gives the name as Aḥmad Khwâri, yet another Kobravi mystic.\(^{102}\) Shâfi‘i-Kadkani has opined that this reading is likely correct, but a more rigorous analysis of the *Memorial’s* manuscript tradition would be necessary before his claim could be accepted as anything more than initial speculation.\(^{103}\) Nevertheless, the possibility is intriguing, since Aḥmad Khwâri was one of Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī’s prominent disciples, for whom he wrote his treatise the *Gift of the Free (Toḥfat al-barara).*\(^{104}\) ‘Aṭṭâr would thus be connected to Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī after all (albeit indirectly though his student) and therefore likely familiar with Kobravi doctrines and practices.\(^{105}\) According to Hermann Landolt, if the anecdote does indeed refer to Aḥmad-e Khwâri, then his weeping and cryptic remarks could be understood as a veiled reference to the execution of his teacher, Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī, meaning that the *Memorial* was compiled after 1209.\(^{106}\) In any case, regardless of whether ‘Aṭṭâr refers here to Aḥmad-e Khwâri or an otherwise unknown Majd al-Dīn Khwârazmi, the anecdote is significant in that it shows ‘Aṭṭâr was embedded in a social context in which he associated with other mystically minded individuals even if no formal relationship of spiritual discipleship can be ascertained.

Jâmi’s desire to identify this Majd al-Dīn (whoever he may actually have been) as ‘Aṭṭâr’s formal sufi master is emblematic of a broader tendency within Timurid sacred biogra-


\(^{105}\) Ibid., 10-1. ‘Aṭṭâr’s works, at times, seem to suggest such a familiarity. For example, as Landolt points out, he makes a distinction between the “journey to God” and the “journey in God” at the end of the *Book of Affliction (7078-79)*. ‘Aṭṭâr’s interest in sufi retreat (*chella*), as evinced in the frame-tale of the same work, was also shared with the Kobravis. Also See Muhammad Isa Waley, “Najm al-Dīn Kubrâ and the Central Asian School of Sufism (the Kubrawiyyah),” in *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 89.

\(^{106}\) Landolt, “‘Aṭṭâr, Sufism, and Ismailism,” 10.
phy. From the earliest periods of sufism, legendary spiritual heroes tended to be attached to other prominent sufi figures in the tradition’s hagiographical writings, and this trend was reinforced in the Timurid era by the growing importance of the selsela, chains of spiritual initiation stretching back to the Prophet, which had become a pre-requisite for every self-respecting sufi. In ‘Atṭâr’s case, Timurid biographers were particularly troubled by the poet’s failure to explicitly identify the spiritual guide they assumed that he must have had. They thus proposed several possible candidates for this historical role, all based on spurious sources or overly biographical readings of ‘Atṭâr’s works. For example, according to Dowlat-Shâh, ‘Atṭâr did associate with the aforementioned Majd al-Din Baghdaḍi, but received only a non-initiatory cloak of benediction (kherqa-ye tabarrok) from him; his primary shaykh, according to Dowlat-Shâh, was Rokn al-Din Akkâfî (d. 1155). This Nayshâburi religious scholar features prominently in a number of anecdotes in ‘Atṭâr’s maṣnâvis, and he is usually portrayed in a positive light; this fact, combined with the Timurid expectation of a clear selsela, likely motivated Dowlat-Shâh’s identification of him as ‘Atṭâr’s pir. None of these anecdotes, however, implies that ‘Atṭâr personally met Rokn al-Din, and given that the latter died from complications of his imprisonment at the hands of the Ghuzz Turks when ‘Atṭâr was either very young or possibly not even born, any relationship of spiritual training is unlikely. Also according to Dowlat-Shâh, ‘Atṭâr associated with Qoṭb al-Din Ḥaydar (d. c. 1221), the famous qalandar mystic of Khorâsân. ‘Atṭâr’s father was allegedly a disciple of Ḥaydar, and the poet also “found the gaze” of the holy man in

107. Samarqandi, Tażkerat al-sho‘arâ, 326, 332-33; Ritter, Ocean of the Soul, 712.
his youth, foreshadowing his future spiritual achievement. Various assertions of Dowlat-Shâh’s is difficult to take seriously when ‘Aṭṭâr himself makes no mention of the incident in any genuine work. The account seems to be motivated by the spurious Ḥaydari Book (Ḥaydari-nâma) that Dowlat-Shâh accepts as genuine, but which was a controversial attribution even in the Timurid era. Finally, even though Jâmi himself argues that Majd al-Din Bâghdâdi was ‘Aṭṭâr’s pir, he reports that others believed him to be an Uwaysi saint inducted into sufism by the spirit (ruḥāniyat) of Ḩallâj, a notion that likely derived from the spurious Ḩallâj-centric maṣnavi of Ritter’s second group, such as the Book of the Camel (Oshtor-nâma) and the Extracts of the Essence (Javâher al-zât).

Perhaps more reliable, but still far from certain, is the spiritual lineage recorded for ‘Aṭṭâr by Faṣiḥ Khwâfî in his fifteenth-century chronicle, the “Faṣiḥ-ian” Compendium (Mojmal-e Faṣihi), in which he connects the poet to Abu Sa’id by way of the latter’s well-known great-great-grandson and hagiographer, Ebn Monavvar, via a series of rather obscure figures. More specifically, he claims that ‘Aṭṭâr was trained in sufism by one Jamâl al-Din Moḥammad b. Moḥammad al-Noghondari al-Ṭusi, known as Imam al-Râbbâni; from there the lineage passes

112. Jâmi, Nafahât, 597. It was a widespread notion in the Timurid era, especially among those associated with the Naqshbandi order, that a certain class of holy figures existed who were inducted into sufism by the spirit of deceased masters; they were called Uwaysis after Uways al-Qarani, the legendary “companion” of the Prophet who never actually saw Muhammad in the flesh but communicated with him telepathically. ‘Aṭṭâr himself discusses Uwaysis in his notice on Uways al-Qarani in the Memorial (25), but he understands them only as holy men instructed by the Prophet across space and/or time, and not as sufis inducted into sufism by the spirits of deceased sufi masters. In the Nafahât (16), Jâmi actually quotes ‘Aṭṭâr’s discussion of Uwaysi saints and their special relationship to Muhammad, but he amends it with his own explanation of how one can also be initiated by the spirits of past sufis masters, a relationship which, he claims, also qualifies one to be “included among the Uwaysis.” As evidence for the claim that ‘Aṭṭâr was an Uwaysi, (which he himself does not espouse), Jâmi alludes to an anecdote, transmitted by Aflâki, in which Rumi suggests that the light of Hallâj manifested itself in ‘Aṭṭâr’s heart and guided him: see p. 20 above. ‘Aṭṭâr also makes reference to a “Hallâjian pir” in one of his ghazals, which may be significant in this regard; see Matthew Thomas Miller, “Poetics of the Sufi Carnival: The ‘Rouge Lyrics’ (Qalândarîyât) of Sanâ’î, ‘Aṭṭâr, and ‘Erâqi” (PhD diss., Washington University in Saint Louis, 2016), 130-1.
back through a Shaykh Sharaf al-Din al-Radâd and a Shaykh Salâh al-Din Aḥmad al-Ostâd to Ebn Monnavar, and from there to the hagiographer’s grandfather, Abu’l-Fath Ī Taher, before terminating with Abu Sa’id himself.\textsuperscript{113} Initially noted by Nafisi, this spiritual lineage has recently received renewed attention from Shafi’i-Kadkani who, ever the philologist, suggests that the very obscurity of its members may be a testament to its authenticity.\textsuperscript{114} According to Shafi’i-Kadkani, the text-editing principle of \textit{lectio difficilior} can be usefully applied to \textit{selsela}-criticism; if the lineage were forged, so the argument goes, it would have likely included well-known scholars and mystics who could easily be imagined as the spiritual forefathers of the great ‘Aṭṭâr, and not the three obscure figures who appear here between ‘Aṭṭâr and Ebn Monavvar. And despite their obscurity, Shafi’i-Kadkani believes that he has managed to locate possible references to these seeming-unknowns in various other sources that fit chronologically with the proposed \textit{selsela}.\textsuperscript{115}

Shafi’i-Kadkani’s arguments have been criticized by Landolt, who claims that the entire lineage was likely invented to bestow some historicity on the spiritual relationship between Abu Sa’id and ‘Aṭṭâr alluded to in some of the latter’s poems.\textsuperscript{116} According to Landolt, the desire to connect ‘Aṭṭâr to the famed Abu Sa’id could have easily motivated the emergence of this \textit{selsela}, especially during the Timurid era when unbroken spiritual lineages had become de rigueur. Nevertheless, even if the historical connection to Abu Sa’id is rejected as suspect and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{114} Sa’id Nafisi, \textit{Sar-chashma-ye tasavvof} (Tehran: Etehad, 1343 [1965]), 190-1; Shafi’i-Kadkani, intro. to \textit{Man’eq al-tayr}, 63-74.
\item \textsuperscript{115} Shafi’i-Kadkani, intro. to \textit{Man’eq al-tayr}, 65-8.
\item \textsuperscript{116} Landolt, “’Aṭṭâr, Sufism, and Ismailism,” 10. ‘Aṭṭâr speaks of Abu Sa’id quite often in his anecdotes, where he portrays him as an exemplary figure of mystical piety. Moreover, in one of his \textit{qaṣidas} (792) he claims to have found fortune through the “the breath of Bu Sa’id” and the “light of his breast.” On the basis of these lines Foruzânfar (26) also suggests that ‘Aṭṭâr may have been an Uwaysi, initiated not by the \textit{rühaniyat} of Ḥallâj, but by Abu Sa’id.
\end{itemize}
the entire notion of a formal *selsela* a later back-projection, the point still stands that if the lineage were wholly invented, one would not expect ‘Aṭṭâr’s immediate teachers to be so obscure. Rather than a complete forgery, it seems more likely that ‘Aṭṭâr had some sort of relationship with this relatively minor Imam al-Rabbâni, which was later remembered as a formal spiritual discipleship in a *selsela* stretching back to Abu Sa’id. Thus, even if we reject the designation of Imam al-Rabbâni as ‘Aṭṭâr’s formal *pir*, the proposed lineage still suggests that ‘Aṭṭâr interacted in some capacity with local religious leaders.

Finally, even if ‘Aṭṭâr cannot be definitively linked to a specific spiritual guide, his own work suggests that he was committed to the idea that some sort of pedagogical guidance was necessary for spiritual success, although perhaps not necessarily within the confines of formal discipleship to a sufi *pir.* The importance of spiritual guidance is emphasized in various anecdotes in the *maṣnavis* as well as their frame-tales, all three of which are structured as discourses between a spiritual authority and those who seek his guidance. In the frame-tale of the *Divine Book*, a king dialogues with his six sons, explaining to them the meaning of their desires and guiding them towards the alchemy of the heart; in the *Conference of the Birds*, a hoopoe shepherds the other birds on an arduous quest towards union with their king, the Simorgh; and in the *Book of Affliction*, a *pir* guides his disciple on a visionary journey through the universe and into the self, where he is finally effaced in the the divine. Given ‘Aṭṭâr’s high estimation of such pedagogical relationships, it would seem odd if he had not received some sort of spiritual guidance himself, even if we cannot specifically identify his teacher.

But Was He Really a Sufi?

In part because of the ambiguity surrounding his spiritual training, there has been a tendency to doubt whether ʿAṭṭār was an “actual” sufi.118 Ritter, for example, concludes that “ʿAṭṭār was a pharmacist and doctor, and whilst not actually a Şûfî, he admired the holy men and was edified by the tales told about them, from his youth onward.”119 According to Kermani, ʿAṭṭār was “more of an empathetic observer of Sufism than an active exponent,” who “consciously kept his distance from the Sufi scene, concentrating all the more intently on saving the great legacy from oblivion with his Lives of the Saints and verse epics.”120 Besides the lack of a pir, proponents of this theory often turn to ʿAṭṭār’s own writings for support, especially a few lines from the Memorial in which ʿAṭṭār claims to be merely “pretending” (tashabboh) to sufism and impudently seeking the friendship of the friends of God.121 For ʿAṭṭār, however, such claims functioned not as transparent statements of autobiographical “fact,” but as performative proclamations entirely consistent with an eastern Iranian, Malâmati-infused sufism that stressed humility, veneration of past spiritual heroes, and the active rejection of a pious reputation.

On an even more fundamental level, however, the question of whether or not ʿAṭṭār was “really” a sufi relies on a problematic understanding of sufism as a discrete socio-religious category. Such an understanding is partially an anachronistic back-projection from later periods, when being a sufi necessarily entailed membership in a trans-regional, institutionalized ṭariqa. But it is also encouraged by earlier sources, including the manuals of Hojviri, Qushayri, and Kalâbâdhî, who tend to portray the “the sufis” as a stable, clearly identifiable, and more-or-less homogeneous group. A closer reading of these manuals, however, in conjunction with histori-
cal and literary sources, suggests these clear-cut religious boundaries were a rhetorically motivated idealization, and that the reality on the ground was much more fluid. During the eleventh century, when both the madrasah (religious college) and the khânaqâh (sufi lodge) were becoming more widespread, there was significant overlap between the two.\textsuperscript{122} In Nishapur, well-known sufis such as Qushayrî managed madrasahs in which the exoteric religious sciences were taught alongside mystical topics.\textsuperscript{123} Similarly, legal scholars also endowed sufi lodges, as in the case of the khânaqâh of Mohammad-e Mansur, a Hanafi scholar and preacher in Sarakhs.\textsuperscript{124} And despite the emphasis on secrecy and initiation, many sufi figures—including luminaries such as Abu Sa‘īd and Aḥmad-e Ghazzâlî—routinely delivered public sermons in which they disseminated sufi beliefs and practices to a broad public that would have almost certainly been uninitiated to sufism in a formal sense.\textsuperscript{125} Therefore, it seems more useful to approach sufism as a network of practices, attitudes, beliefs, and social relationships that admitted varying degrees of participation rather than a discrete, all-encompassing socio-religious category.

When sufism is understood in this way, ‘Atṭâr can be seen as a deeply engaged sufi, even if he had never been invested by a formal spiritual master. He was familiar with canonical sufi writers like Qushayrî and Hojviri, upon whom he relies as sources, and he promotes mysti-


cal beliefs and sensibilities. Regardless of whether he had a formal spiritual guide, he seems to have been socially involved with other mystically minded individuals, such as Majd al-Din Khwârazmi. We should also note that important sufî figures like Kalâbâdhi and Sarrâj do not seem to have been invested by a shaykh, and no one questions whether they were “real” sufîs.126 Finally, the testimony of contemporaries like ‘Owfi and Naṣîr al-Dîn Ṭūsî shows that ‘Aṭṭâr’s mystical piety was no mere private inclination, as is sometimes intimated, but manifested itself in the public sphere. According to their accounts, ‘Aṭṭâr was recognized as a local mystical authority who actively propagated a sufî worldview through sermons and dialogue.

‘Owfi’s account is the earlier of the two. It is found in his biographical anthology, the Marrow of Minds (Lobâb al-albâb), which was likely completed around 1221-22. The notice on ‘Aṭṭâr, however, is probably based on information he personally collected in 1206-7, when he stayed in Nishapur for a time.127 ‘Aṭṭâr was almost certainly alive then, and ‘Owfi, contrary to his usual habit in the Marrow, speaks of him in the present tense, perhaps signifying that he believed ‘Aṭṭâr to be still living when he finally compiled the work over a decade later.128 There is no indication that ‘Owfi personally met the poet, but at the very least he would have learned of him and his poetry through his local contacts. Although silent on the question of ‘Aṭṭâr’s shaykh, he nevertheless understood ‘Aṭṭâr as a practitioner of mystical piety: he describes him as “a traveller (sâlek) of the path of truth (haqiqat) and a resident of the prayer rug of the way (ṭariqat),” a formulation clearly linked to sufism on a terminological and conceptual level, and ‘Owfi praises other known mystical poets in similar terms.129 He also signals the mystical con-

129. ‘Owfi, Lobâb al-albâb, 2:337; Shafî‘i-Kadkani, intro. to Manteq al-tayr, 44-47, 70. ‘Owfi employs similar plays on ṭariqat and ḥaqiqat in his descriptions of Ṣâfi al-Dîn Yazdi (1:278-79) and Shams al-Dîn Moḥammad b. 45
tent of ‘Aṭṭâr’s work and its popularity among sufi audiences by speaking of its great appeal for the “people of taste” and “lords of passion and taste,” epithets commonly applied to the mystically inclined.130

The only other contemporary report on ‘Aṭṭâr is from the famous Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (b. 1201) via his student Ibn al-Fuwaṭī, who served as the librarian at Ṭūsī’s Marâgha observatory.131 More specifically, Ibn al-Fuwaṭī produced an unfinished biographical dictionary that contains a notice on ‘Aṭṭâr based mostly on information from Ṭūsī, his mentor and teacher. The poet is presented as a practitioner of mystical piety, with the epithet “knower of god” (ʿāref) appended to his name in the heading of the notice.132 He was, according to Ibn al-Fuwaṭī, “one of the virtuous exemplars of the age in speech and deeds, gnosis and fundamentals, and action and knowledge.”133 Quoting explicitly from Ṭūsī, ‘Aṭṭâr is further described as a “prolific and eloquent shaykh, and wonderfully knowledgeable and insightful regarding the dicta of the shaykhs, gnostics, and imams who travel the mystical path.”134 The notice continues, “He has a

Toghân Kermâni (1:279-81), two contemporary mystical poets. Shâfiʿi-Kadkani interprets the phrase sâken-e sejâda-ye tariqat to mean that ‘Aṭṭâr was in seclusion when ‘Owfi visited Nishapur (he speculates that ‘Aṭṭâr would have withdrawn to the village of Kadkan). Although possible, it seems more likely that this phrase signifies not a specific devotional practice (seclusion or otherwise), but rather a general adherence to a sufi way of life.

130. ‘Owfi, Lobâb al-albâb, 2:337.
132. Ibn al-Fuwaṭī, Talkhîṣ, 4.3:461. He gives ‘Aṭṭâr’s full name as “Farid al-Dīn Saʿid b. Yusof b. ‘Ali al-Nisâbûri, known as ‘Aṭṭâr, al-‘Aṭṭâr al-ʿAref.” The given name Saʿid must be mistaken, however, since ‘Aṭṭâr explains that his name is Mohammad in the Book of Affliction (7155) and that he shares a name with the Prophet in the Conference of the Birds (406). According to de Blois, Ibn al-Fuwaṭī may have mistaken the epithet saʿid, which can be applied to deceased individuals much like the English “late,” as a proper given name. Regarding his father’s name, Dowlât-Shâh writes that it is Ebrâhim, which Shâfiʿi-Kadkani believes to be more reliable; he also suggests that the father may have been known as Abu Saʿid and ‘Aṭṭâr as Ibn Abi Saʿid, which Ibn al-Fuwaṭī then mistakenly collapsed into ‘Aṭṭâr’s given name. Foruzânfar, Sharḥ-e ahvāl-e ‘Aṭṭâr, 1-8; De Blois and Storey, Persian Literature, 5.2:271; Shâfiʿi-Kadkani, intro. to Mokhtâr-nâma, 22-3; Shâfiʿi-Kadkani, intro. to Manteq al-tayr, 59-60.
133. Ibn al-Fuwaṭī, Talkhîṣ, 4.3:461.
134. Ibid., 4.3:461-2.
large divân and the Conference of the Birds is one of his maṣnavis. He was martyred at the hands of the Tatars in Nishapur. He said: 'I heard that Dhu’l-Nūn Miṣrí would say: 'sufis prefer God over all things, and God prefers them over all things.'”

It is somewhat unclear if the report of Ṭṭṭār’s fondness for this maxim is to be understood as a continuation of the direct quotation from Ṭusi, but in any case it is likely that Ṭusi is the source. The notion that Ṭṭṭār was “proliﬁc and eloquent” seems a clear reference to his literary activities, and the observation that he was well versed in the saints’ dicta is born out by any cursory examination of his maṣnavis and the Memorial, which contains, in Persian translation, the very same saying attributed to Dhu’l-Nūn mentioned here.

This is the first historical reference to the Conference of the Birds, and it is also the first source to mention Ṭṭṭār’s death, which it attributes to the Mongols. Although no speciﬁc date is given, it is often thought that this must have occurred during the Mongols’ violent razing of the city in 1221. If a 1221 date is accepted for Ṭṭṭār’s death, then the meeting with Ṭusi must have taken place while the latter was relatively young, no more than twenty years old, although he would have already been well into his philosophical education at the time. According to Shafi’i-Kadkani, who maintains that Ṭṭṭār died in 1230, this meeting could have also occurred several years later, which would mean that Ṭusi was active in Nishapur after the attack. In any case, despite the ambiguity over when exactly this meeting occurred, its historicity is on much stronger footing than the later legend of Ṭṭṭār’s alleged encounter with

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135. Ibid., 4.3:462.
137. On Ṭṭṭār’s death date, see page 32 above.
138. Foruzânfar, Sharḥ-e aḥvāl-e Ṭṭṭār, 12-3; Modarres-Rażavi, Aḥvāl-e Naṣir al-Din Ṭusi, 5-9.
139. Shafi’i-Kadkani, intro. to Maṭṭeq al-ṭfayr, 62.
Rumi. Whereas Rumi and his immediate disciples are silent on that encounter, which does not appear in the historical record until a century and a half later, Ṣūsī’s own student, Ibn al-Fuwātī, reports his teacher’s meeting with Ṣāṭṭār within fifty years of his passing. Moreover, there are obvious ideological reasons motivating the story of Rumi’s meeting with Ṣāṭṭār, since Rumi was understood to be Ṣāṭṭār’s poetic-spiritual successor, but it is not exactly clear what Ṣūsī’s friends and disciples could hope to gain by attaching the Shi’i philosopher to the sufi poet from Nishapur.

Ṣāṭṭār cannot be linked to any pir, and he should not be understood as Ṣūsī’s shaykh, either; nevertheless, the anecdote suggests that he played the role of informal spiritual guide on an ad hoc basis, transmitting his knowledge of legendary sufi heroes and their sayings to younger aspirants of diverse intellectual backgrounds. Of particular interest is Ṣāṭṭār’s transmission to Ṣūsī of a saintly dictum that is also found in Persian translation in the Memorial, and which shows that some of the material in his texts was also communicated via oral discourse to younger interlocutors. Although Ṣāṭṭār’s works have come down to us in a textual form—and he himself seems to have been quite concerned with managing his textual legacy—this anecdote provides a glimpse into the oral pedagogical practices that may have complemented his written productions.

Ṣūsī’s meeting with Ṣāṭṭār is confirmed by the recently discovered Miscellany of Tabriz (Ṣafina-ye Tabriz), which provides a more detailed account of their spiritual relationship. This miscellany, compiled in the fourteenth century by the scholar Abu’l-Majd Moḥammad Tabrizi, contains a variety of works on diverse topics. The anecdote in question is found in a collection

140. Landolt, “Ṣāṭṭār, Sufism, and Ismailism,” 12; Lewis, Rumi, 262-3.
of narratives and scholarly discussions that Abu’l-Majd assembled from the lectures of his
teacher, Amin al-Din Häjj Bola.\footnote{142} According to the anecdote, ‘Aṭṭār regularly delivered ser-
mons to an informal group of followers, and it was in one of these preaching sessions that Ṭusi
first became acquainted with him:

When Khwâja ‘Aṭṭâr had become enamored with the divine and would recount miraculous stories, he would go to the Mani’i mosque, which was the congregational mosque of old Nishapur—according to some every day, and according to others three times every week—and proclaim the oneness of God.\footnote{143} One day he was occupied with discoursing on the oneness of God. Khwâja Naṣîr al-Din Ṭusi—may he rest in peace!—who was then in the period of his youth, was behind a pillar.”

خواجه عطار در آن زمان کی شیفته گردیده بود و کرامات می گفت بعضی می گویند هر روز و
بعضی می گویند هر هفته یا سه زور در نیسابور که دن مسجد منبعی کی جامع آنها بود برخی
و کلمات توحیدی روزی به کلمات توحید مشغول بود خواجه تصورالدین طویسی طاب تراه در
زمان جوانی، پس ستونی حاضر بود.\footnote{144}


\footnote{143} The Mani’i mosque was the Shafi’i congregational mosque of “old Nayshâbur”; it was sacked during the Ghuzz rebellion, well before Ṭusi was born. Afterwards, much of Nayshâbur’s cultural and economic life shifted to a “new Nayshâbur” built up in the former suburb of Shâdyâkh. This anecdote would seem to suggest, however, that the Mani’i mosque continued to operate and that ‘Aṭṭâr was based in the old city, not the newer center of Shâdyâkh. It is also possible, however, that this piece of data is a later interpolation driven by the mosque’s fame and name-recognition; anecdotes such as these are often set in emblematic locales. See Richard W. Bulliet, The Patricians of Nishapur: A Study in Medieval Islamic Social History (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 77-8; ‘Abbâs Eqbâl-Ashtiâni, “Jâme’-e Mani’î-e Nayshâbur,” Mehr 3, no. 11 (Farvardin 1315 [March-April 1936]), 1090; Moḥammad b. ‘Ali Râvandi, Râhat al-ṣodur va āyat al-sorûr, ed. Mohammad Eqbâl (London: Luzac, 1921; repr., Tehran: Asâtir, 1384 [2005-2006]), 180-2; Ibn al-ATHIR, al-Kâmîl fi l-târikh, ed. ‘Umar Tadmuri (Beirut: Dâr al-Kitâb al-‘Arabi, 1997), 9:203.

\footnote{144} Tabrizi, Safina-yi Tabriz, 521; Shafi’i-Kadkani, intro. to Manṭeq al-tayr, 60. Shafi’i-Kadkani suggests that instead of “karâmât” we read “tâmât,” which in this context would seem to refer to strange inspired boasts. This reading implies that ‘Aṭṭâr had taken on some of the qualities of the famed holy fools that populate his maṣnâvis.
‘Aṭṭār was explaining the fundamental non-existence of all contingent being, which exists only through the necessary being of God, when a questioner pointedly asked about the status of individual human existence. ‘Aṭṭār replied, “It is the second image of a strabismic eye.”145

When Khwāja Naṣīr al-Dīn heard this, it was as if a spell appeared in his heart. He stood up and kissed the hand of Khwāja ‘Aṭṭār. He said to the crowd (jamā‘at): “Kiss his hand, since he has arrived [at an exalted spiritual station]!” He then went out from that gathering (mahfēl) and sang this quatrain:

The being of God is the primary unicity,
Everything else is just illusion and fantasy.
Whatever enters your gaze besides him,
Is only the second image of a strabismic eye.

خواجه نصيرالدين چو اين بشنيد رقتي در دل او ظاهر گشت بر خاست و بر دست خواجه عطار
بوسه داد و به جماعت گفت «دست او را بوسه دهید کی به جابی رسید» خواجه نصيرالدين از آن
محفل بیرون امد این رباعی باغفت:

باقی همه مهومن و مخیل باشند
هر چیز جزو کی آید اند نظرت
نقش دومین چشم احول باشند146

Ṭūsī continued to associate with ‘Aṭṭār after that, attending his sermons and even copying a selection of his quatrains for personal use:

He [Ṭūsī] said: “I had never heard this expression ‘the second image of a strabismic eye.’” Naṣīr al-Dīn was always a believer (mo’taqed) in ‘Aṭṭār’s poetry. They say that during the period when Naṣīr al-Dīn attended ‘Aṭṭār’s circle (majma‘), he had copied the Pointers (Eshārāt [of Avicenna]) and had solved Euclid, and at the end of that period, he had written down four hundred of ‘Aṭṭār’s quatrains in his own hand.

و گفت من این عبارت کی «نقش دومین چشم احول باشند» نشینیده بودم و خواجه نصيرالدين
همیشه معتقد شعر عطار بودی و گویند در آن هنگام کی خواجه نصيرالدين در مجمع عطار
حاضر بود اشارات یادداشت و اقليس حل کرده بود و در اواخر چهارصد رباعی عطار به خط
خود نوشته بود.147

145. Tabrizi, Safina-yé Tabriz, 521; Shafi’i-Kadkani, intro. to Manteq al-tayr, 60-1.
146. Tabrizi, Safina-yé Tabriz, 521; Shafi’i-Kadkani, intro. to Manteq al-tayr, 61. This quatrain is attributed to Naṣīr al-Dīn in other sources as well; see Modarres-Ražavi, Ahvāl-e Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, 620.
147. Tabrizi, Safina-yé Tabriz, 521; Shafi’i-Kadkani, intro. to Manteq al-tayr, 61.
ʿAṭṭâr thus preached regularly (i.e., “proclaimed the oneness of ʿGod”) to a circle of individuals in his hometown of Nishapur.\(^{148}\) His sessions are portrayed as fairly well attended, the attendees being referred to as a crowd (jāmāʿat) and a gathering (māhfe). Ṭusi is said to have been present in ʿAṭṭâr’s assembly (majmaʿ) for a period of time, implying that these gatherings were consistent and exhibited some continuity. The fact that Ṭusi simultaneously studied philosophy with other masters shows that these were by no means ʿAṭṭâr’s exclusive disciples, but that attendance at his sessions overlapped with other social and intellectual commitments. ʿAṭṭâr was thus situated in a distinctly pedagogical and homiletic socio-rhetorical context, not as a scholar teaching a cadre of students, or as a sufi pir training a circle of disciples, but as a mystically minded preacher delivering regular public sermons and calling his audience to a sufi form of life. And if Ṭusi’s experience is any indication, ʿAṭṭâr was valued not so much for his knowledge as his ability to expound on religious and spiritual issues in a rhetorically powerful fashion. Particularly interesting is the claim that Ṭusi became a “believer” (moʿtaqed) in ʿAṭṭâr’s poetry—terminology that was often applied to the followers of specific popular preachers—and that he copied out 400quatrans for his own use.\(^{149}\) ʿAṭṭâr’s poetry thus seems to have circulated within this group of followers, and in at least one case it was deemed meritorious enough for the compilation of a personal textual recension.

Of course, the Miscellany’s account of their relationship cannot be accepted entirely at face value. The extent of Ṭusi’s devotion to ʿAṭṭâr is likely exaggerated since he never mentions him in any of his works. And the anecdote clearly conforms to the conventional expectations

\(^{148}\) Homiletic poems, especially those that praise God, were often classified as sheʿr-e ṭowhid, or poems of God’s oneness; see Miller, “Poetics of the Sufi Carnival,” 1-2. Owfi (2:337) even introduces one of ʿAṭṭâr’s qasidas as a “qasida of ṭowhid.” In the above-quoted anecdote, “speaking ṭowhid” or “proclaiming the oneness of God” seems to refer to the act of preaching, or perhaps the act of opening a sermon with the testament of faith.

of a conversion narrative: Ṭusi hides behind a pillar as a skeptical outsider, but he is pulled into the group, almost despite himself, by the powerful effect of a particular turn of phrase. Although some details may be doubtful, none of this is fatal to the anecdote’s general portrayal of Ṭʿṭṭâr’s social context and homiletic practice. On the contrary, there is good reason to accept this narrative as a reliable source. First, it originated in an environment that was chronologically, geographically, and socially close to Ṭusi, who was active near Tabriz in the later part of his life. From 1259 until a few months before his death in 1274, he operated the observatory in Marâgha, which became something of a scholarly hub in the region, and his enduring influence on the western Iranian intellectual milieu is evidenced by the large number of his works found within the Miscellany. Amin al-Din Ḩâjj Bola (d. 1320), the direct source of the anecdote, seems to have been a prominent scholar in Tabriz, and it is not out of the question that he may have met Ṭusi himself when he was younger. Alternatively, he may have heard the anecdote as it circulated orally among Ṭusi’s friends, disciples, and students in the area. Second, as previously mentioned, there seems to be little ideological motivation for Amin al-Din or Abu’l-Majd to forge the narrative. Unlike Jâmi or Dowlat-Shâh, they were not invested in establishing chains of poetic initiation. Nor do they seem particularly interested in Ṭʿṭṭâr as a poet; none of his poems were excerpted for inclusion in the Miscellany, although one finds the poems of Sanâ’i, Ferdowsi, Nezâmi, and even Owḥad al-Din Kermâni represented therein. There is no denying the paucity of evidence regarding the life of the historical Ṭʿṭṭâr. Nevertheless, through the accounts of ʿOwfi and Ṭusi, we can begin to trace the outlines of his particular social milieu and his place within it. What emerges is a relatively clear picture of a

150. Seyed-Gohrab, “Casing the Treasury,” 34.
151. Abu’l-Majd was, however, a disciple of Shabestari, who speaks very highly of Ṭʿṭṭâr. See Seyed-Gohrab, “Casing the Treasury,” 20.
mystically minded preacher and spiritual authority who sought to spread sufi piety to a general audience, and this portrait will become even clearer through a careful reading of the rich prefatory and concluding material that mediates his poems. As we will see over the course of this dissertation, ‘Aṭṭâr’s homiletic context is not only of historical interest, but is also critical for understanding his poetry: his maṣnāvis rely on the thematics and formal structures of popular preaching, his authorial persona takes on the rhetorical stance of a preacher vis-à-vis his audiences, and the text itself is conceptualized as a homiletic act aimed at effecting the “re-conversion” of its mystically minded reader-listeners.

‘Aṭṭâr’s Reception in the Persianate World

Although anything beyond local fame seems to have eluded ‘Aṭṭâr in life, after death his renown increased throughout Iran, Transoxania, and Anatolia, especially in sufi circles. Less than half a century after his death, ‘Aṭṭâr’s influence is clearly visible in Rumi (d. 1273), who retells stories from ‘Aṭṭâr’s maṣnāvis and responds to his ghazals; Rumi’s son and successor, Soltân Valad (d. 1312), explicitly names ‘Aṭṭâr and Sanā’i as his father’s poetic-spiritual precur-sors.152 ‘Aṭṭâr is also mentioned with admiration by Mahmud Shabestari (d. c. 1340), the Āzarbājāni sufi poet and theorist in the tradition of Ibn ‘Arabī; in the introduction to his Rosegar-den of Secrets (Golshan-e rāz), Shabestari humbly confesses that his verse pales in comparison to that of ‘Aṭṭâr.153 Another Āzarbājāni, Amin al-Din Hâjj Bola—whose anecdote regarding ‘Aṭṭâr was recorded in the Miscellany of Tabriz (Safina-ye Tabriz) and discussed above—introduces the poet as if he were already a familiar figure for a scholarly audience, but he does not single him out for any special praise. Also around this time in northwestern Iran, ‘Aṭṭâr’s

lyric verses were being recited and interpreted in the mystical sessions of Şafi al-Din Ardbâli (d. 1334), the eponym of the Safavid order, as attested by his hagiographer Ebn Bazzâz.¹⁵⁴ Judging by the number of manuscripts, however, it was ʿAttâr’s Memorial that had the widest readership; his prose work is also the only one to be explicitly named by Ḥamd-Allâh Qazvini in his notice on the poet in his fourteenth-century Selected History (Târikh-e gozida).¹⁵⁵

ʿAttâr’s works also began to appear in India in the fourteenth century. The Memorial came to be particularly popular in the subcontinent, and many later hagiographical compilations relied on it as a model.¹⁵⁶ In the early part of the century, it was explicitly listed as a source by Rokn al-Din Kâshâni in an unusual bibliography that accompanies his extensive sufi compendium.¹⁵⁷ Hagiographical stories about ʿAttâr himself were also circulating during this period; several examples can be found in the famous Maxims of the Heart (Favâʿed al-bâd), a textualization of the mystical sessions of Nezâm al-Din Owleyâ (d. 1325).¹⁵⁸ The Conference of the Birds was also popular, and it was apparently even used for prognostication like the Quran.¹⁵⁹ Several later maṣnawis are said to bear its influence, including the Rose and Nightingale (Gol o bolol) of BuʿAli Shâh (d. 1324) and the Secrets of the Trees (Asrâr al-asjâr) of Bâbâ Dâʿud Kashmiri (d. 1685).¹⁶⁰

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¹⁶⁰ Ibid.
The Timurid era witnessed an explosion in ‘Aṭṭâr’s popularity in Iran with a number of lavishly illustrated manuscripts produced in court ateliers.\(^{161}\) He was not only given a place in the coalescing canon of Persian literature, but also a place in the canon of saintly figures, with Jâmi and Dowlat-Shâh providing extended hagiographical notices on the poet’s life in their biographical anthologies.\(^{162}\) Likewise, he is featured in the Sessions of Lovers (Majâles al-‘oshshâq, completed 1503-4), a collection of imaginative, prosimetric hagiographies of famous sufis (both poets and non-poets) from the earliest times up through the contemporary Timurid period, including the likes of Ebrâhim ebn Adham, Hallâj, Rumi, Bahâ al-Din Naqshband—\(\text{and even} \) Shâykh Ṣan’ân!\(^{163}\) ‘Aṭṭâr’s Conference of the Birds was the subject of a poetic response in the Chaghâtây language by ‘Ali Shir Navâ‘i, the famed litterateur and taste-maker of Ḥosayn Bâyqarâ’s court, who also financed the re-construction of ‘Aṭṭâr’s tomb in Shâdyâkh, a suburb of Nishapur.\(^{164}\) In short, this local, amateur versifier had become firmly ensconced in the cultural memory as an exemplary instance of the saint-cum-poet type, along with cultural heroes like Sanâ‘i, Rumi, and ‘Erâqi.

Any one of these myriad audiences would be a fit subject for a reception study of ‘Aṭṭâr, and together they could be expanded into a full, diachronic reception history of the poet’s works. Although we will occasionally deal with later audiences in the following chapters, we are most concerned with how ‘Aṭṭâr’s poetry was received by the textual community


\(^{162}\) Jâmi, Nafâhât, 596-8; Samarqandi, Tażkerat al-sho‘arâ, 321-33.


among whom it first circulated. Because this community existed during ‘Aṭṭâr’s lifetime and
dynamically interacted with him, their demands and needs are imprinted on the poems—espe-
cially the introductory and concluding sections—through which we can reconstruct their con-
cerns, anxieties, and textual practices, at least as ‘Aṭṭâr perceived and responded to them.
Moreover, beyond this initial textual community, ‘Aṭṭâr clearly addresses an imagined devotio-
nal public that he hoped his poems would reach. Our investigation, by restricting itself to those
audiences that were imagined and engaged with by ‘Aṭṭâr himself—his immediate textual com-
munity and this larger devotional public—is able to account for the intentionality of his
rhetoric in a way that a more traditional reception study could not, but without losing sight of
the poems’ perlocutionary function vis-à-vis real audiences in the social realm.
Chapter II

Talk Therapy:
Audience, Homiletics, Persona

In the previous chapter, we used external evidence to argue that ʿAṭṭār was not an isolated, inward-looking loner, as he has sometimes been portrayed, but that he was a socially active preacher and teacher who called others towards a life of piety. In the present chapter, we turn to internal evidence from ʿAṭṭār’s works themselves in order to explore how his literary activities were integrated into this social, homiletic project. Key to our investigations are ʿAṭṭār’s self-reflective evaluations of his own works’ rhetorical positions and didactic functions. Keeping in mind that these sorts of authorial reflections are not usually transparent descriptions, but themselves rhetorical strategies designed to control a reader-listener’s experience, we will attempt to glean as much information from them as we can about how ʿAṭṭār’s poetry and prose was initially composed and disseminated, and—just as importantly—how ʿAṭṭār imagined it would be consumed and understood by a larger devotional public. As we shall see, reader-listeners are repeatedly nudged towards a contemplative mode of reading in which the textual encounter becomes a means of ethical and ontological self-transformation. By attending to these moments of poetic self-reflection and self-representation, we can better understand how homiletic speech was conceptualized by the mystically minded and how ʿAṭṭār attempted to control his works’ reception within the parameters set by those discourses.

Our investigation draws on authorial reflections from across the oeuvre (especially the Choice Book, the Memorial, and the maṣnavis) that variously represent—and thereby shape—the audience’s relationship to ʿAṭṭār’s texts. These meta-discursive reflections can be divided into three categories, each one focusing primarily on a different component of the literary transaction: audience, text, or author/speaker. These categories often overlap, but they nonetheless
constitute a useful heuristic for structuring our argument. We begin with audience; through a detailed examination of the *Choice Book*’s prose introduction we show that the collection was initially compiled for a loose textual community that had formed around ‘Aṭṭār and who approached his quatrains as both aesthetically pleasing literary artifacts and as avenues to spiritual wisdom. In addition to being a valuable historical source, the introduction’s representation of this early audience constructs an idealized readership for the work and thus plays an important role in its rhetorical positioning. Next, we turn to ‘Aṭṭār’s portrayal of his own texts’ homiletic purposes. Implicit in his discussion is the notion that they function as a form of spiritual therapy: according to ‘Aṭṭār, his works not only inform reader-listeners, but existentially transform them, instigating ethical change and ontologically elevating them towards God. Finally, we explore the pious, self-critical poetic persona found in all four of his *masnavis*. We approach this persona not as a window onto the historical ‘Aṭṭār, but as a rhetorically motivated performance designed to prove the poet’s sincerity and thereby legitimate his claims to utter spiritually transformative verse.

**Textual Community and the “Request from Friends”**

Besides a few oblique references in ‘Owfi, Ibn al-Fuwaṭī, and the *Miscellany of Tabriz* (*Safina-ye Tabriz*), we have no detailed third-party accounts of how ‘Aṭṭār’s poetry was composed, the manner in which it circulated, or the audiences whom it addressed.¹ ‘Aṭṭār himself, however, hints at the socio-literary processes through which his texts were produced and initially received, especially in his prose introduction to the *Choice Book*. In those same pages, ‘Aṭṭār also presents an idealized portrayal of both his initial audience and his wider intended

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1. On external sources for the life of ‘Aṭṭār, see Chapter 1, p. 30-57.
readership, all while seeking to rhetorically control his work’s reception. Thus, by carefully attending to the *Choice Book*’s introduction, we can better understand the social context and literary practices through which ‘Aṭṭār’s works were rendered meaningful to mystically-minded reader-listeners.

The *Choice Book* is an authorially curated collection of quatrains, containing approximately two thousand poems arranged into fifty thematic chapters. Approximately half of these chapters are devoted to ethical and theological themes common to sufi homiletics, including the universality of death, the virtue of silence, the ineffable origin of the soul, and the individual’s effacement in God. Most of the remaining chapters consist of études on conventional poetic tropes, such as descriptions of the beloved’s mouth, eyes, and waist. A testament to ‘Aṭṭār’s continual obsession with poetic disposition, the first three chapters of the *Choice Book* mirror the thematic arrangement common to the doxological exordiums that open most *masnavis*: the first chapter describes God’s oneness; the second praises the Prophet; and the third eulogizes the Prophet’s companions, including one quatrain each for Abu Bakr, ‘Omar, ‘Osmān, ‘Ali, Ḥasan, and Ḥosayn. The fiftieth and final chapter is even a sort of “account of the poet’s

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5. Ibid., 75-90. On the doxologies often found in longer *masnavis*, see De Bruijn, *Piety and Poetry*, 186-8; Ch.-H. de Fouhécour, “The Story of the Ascension (Mi’raj) in Nizami’s Work,” in *The Poetry of Nizami Ganjavi: Knowledge, Love, and Rhetoric*, ed. Kamran Talatof and Jerome Clinton (New York: Palgrave, 2000). The parallelism between these doxologies and the opening chapters of the *Choice Book* has been previously noted by Meneghini in her article in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Shafī’i-Kadkani, in his introduction to the text (54-55), points out that just as ‘Aṭṭār devotes a single quatrain to each of the four rightly guided caliphs (as well as Ḥasan and Ḥosayn) in the *Choice Book*, so too does he devote an equal number of verses (with a few minor
state” (hasb-e hâl), parallel to those found in the concluding sections of ʿAṭṭâr’s four maṣnâvis: its quatrains consist primarily of self-praise, exhortations to careful reading, as well as a few complaints of loneliness and misunderstanding.⁶

In itself, a thematic arrangement of individual poems is not unusual. Until the sixteenth century, when organization by rhyme and meter became the norm, most collections of lyric verse were organized in a loosely thematic fashion.⁷ Such collections, however, were usually governed only by a handful of vague thematic categories and lacked paratextual headings.⁸ The Choice Book, in contrast, is comprised of individually titled thematic chapters consisting solely of quatrains, which is unusual for the early thirteenth century. Ritter has identified only one thematically organized set of quatrains that precedes the Choice Book, a selection of primarily amatory poems from various poets compiled by Abu Ḥanifa b. Abi Bakr for the Seljuk Mohyî al-Din b. Qîlich Arslan; it exists only in an extracted form.⁹ Soon after ʿAṭṭâr’s death, however, such organizational structures became more common in quatrain collections. The Khayyamian corpus, for instance, was thematically arranged in the House of Joy (Ṭarab-khâna), and quatrains from a large number of poets were thematically ordered in the famous anthology Delight of Assemblies (Nozhat al-majâles).¹⁰

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⁶. ‘Aṭṭâr, Mokhtâr-nâma, 75-90.
⁸. The earliest manuscript of ʿAṭṭâr’s Divân (Majles 2600), for instance, is arranged into a series of thematic clusters, although they are not individually titled as such. See Miller, “Poetics of the Sufi Carnival,” 17-9.
In addition to its unusual thematic arrangement, the *Choice Book* is also noteworthy because it was authorially produced. Before the Timurid period, it was not standard practice for poets to compile exhaustive collections (*divâns*) of their own lyrical works (including *ghazals*, *qaṣidas*, the less-common stanzaic forms, and, sometimes, quatrains). This endeavor was usually left to the poet’s friends, disciples, or professional colleagues, often after the former’s death, as in the case of Moḥammad Golandām’s compilation of Ḥāfeẓ’s *ghazals*. During their own lifetimes, poets might gift friends or patrons smaller, non-standardized collections of poems (*daftar*) tailored to their specific interests or for special occasions; these usually consisted of *qaṣidas* and longer poems, while *ghazals* and quatrains were more likely to circulate orally. Individuals could also compile private copies of a poet’s poems for their own use, as in the previously mentioned case of Naṣir al-Din Ṭusi, who allegedly copied out four hundred of ‘Aṭṭār’s quatrains.

Contrary to standard practice, however, ‘Aṭṭār claims in the preface to the *Choice Book* to have compiled and disseminated not only his *maṣnavis*, but also his complete *divân*, which allegedly included a full set of quatrains. The preface opens with the following passage, allegedly spoken by “a group of friends,” which enumerates his works:

> The dominion of the Khosrow-nāma [lit. *Book of the King*] has appeared in the world, and the *Book of Secrets* has been published, and the language of the birds of the *Book of the Birds* (Ṭoyur-nāma) has transported rational souls to the site of unveiling, and the burn of the *Book of Affliction* has passed bounds and limits, and the register of the *Divân* has been made complete. And the *Book of Essences* (Javāher al-zât) and *Husking the Heart* (Sharḥ al-qalb), both of which were in

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verse, were left unfinished out of passion, surrendered to the flame, and washed away.

If we take this passage at face value, then the Choice Book was compiled after the four maṣnavis and the Divân had already been completed and disseminated in some form to this textual community. Nevertheless, ‘Aṭṭār seems to have retained control over the texts, even after their initial circulation, for the purposes of revision and alteration. As the passage continues, we learn that these friends complained that the Divân—in its then-current form—contained too many quatrains and lacked any sensible arrangement, so much so that they found the text difficult to use. They thus recommended curating a thematically organized selection of quatrains as an independent work, a request that ‘Aṭṭār was only too happy to oblige:

So, according to the command of the appeals of the brothers of religion, out of the quatrains that had been composed—which amounted to about six thousands verses—around one thousand which were not fit for this world were washed from the page and sent to that world, for, as they say, “Guard your secret, even from your button”—and one cannot go to that world without a washed face and having been purified. And from the five thousand that remained, I selected and ordered a number of them in this collection, and I left the rest in the Divân. Whoever seeks and strives, finds. And I titled this the Choice Book.

13. ‘Aṭṭār, Mokhtâr-nâma, 70. The Memorial is not mentioned, perhaps because it is a prose work. Nevertheless, it seems that the Memorial must have been completed in some form before the Choice Book, because the introduction to the Memorial references Husking the Heart (Sharh al-qalb) as if it were still extant, but the introduction to the Choice Book claims that it has been destroyed. See Tażkerat al-owlâyâ, 4, 466.

In short, even though the Divân’s text was circulating amongst this community in some fashion, Āṭṭâr was able to transfer two thousand quatrains to a new collection, and he states with confidence that he destroyed the textual traces of five hundred others: he “washed” them from the page, as he had previously done with the Book of Essences (Jâvâher-nâma) and Husking the Heart (Sharh al-qalb), and thereby “sent them to that world,” punning on the ritually mandated washing of the dead. The fact that Āṭṭâr was able to exert this degree of control over the textual transmission of his work, ensuring the destruction of five hundred poems that had been previously recorded and were circulating in some capacity, is perhaps an indication of the small size of this textual community; it may also reflect the authority that he was accorded as a spiritual leader.

The “request by friends” is a conventional trope in pre-modern Islamicate literatures, found in many prominent prose and poetic works. Given the ubiquity of the convention, we may naturally doubt the historicity of Āṭṭâr’s claim to have compiled the Choice Book in accordance with a request from a specific group of friends. Nevertheless, the persistence of this con-

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15. Āṭṭâr, Mokhtâr-nâma, 71. The Choice Book contains approximately two thousand quatrains, so according to Āṭṭâr’s own numbers, he must have left approximately five hundred in the Divân. Most manuscripts of the Divân, however, contain no quatrains. The earliest manuscript, Majles 2600, contains only six, a far cry from the five hundred that we would expect. One may speculate that Āṭṭâr tinkered further with the Divân after compiling the Choice Book, removing most or all of those that remained. Later scribes may also have chosen to drop the quatrains from the Divân, believing that the existence of the Choice Book rendered them redundant.

vention, and its continuing intelligibility to generations of pre-modern readers, testifies to the extent that textual production and dissemination was a fundamentally social activity during the manuscript age. An author’s or compiler’s text could only circulate if an audience had access to an authorial copy and was willing to accept the expense of copying and further dissemination; a successful author would thus be wise to ensure his or her work appealed to a known audience. A committed local readership would have been especially critical for a poet like Ṭṭār, since he did not write for a patron, and, as far as we know, never left Khorâsân. Ṭṭār therefore likely did have a specific group of local readers in mind when compiling the Choice Book, and he must have arranged it with their particular needs and expectations in mind.

Furthermore, Ṭṭār’s account of his friends’ request seems too specific and unusual to be explained away as the mere unthinking continuation of convention; rather, one suspects that the alleged request contains a kernel of historical truth or, at the very least, preserves Ṭṭār’s perception of his local audience’s needs. As Ṭṭār tells the story, this group of friends complained that the quatrains in the Divân lacked any sort of arrangement and were too numerous to be useful:

The quatrains in the Divân are great in number and memorizing them (žabţ-e ān) is difficult. They lack the ornament of arrangement, and they are empty of the essence of brevity. Although compiled, they are not arranged, and many of the seekers remain bereft of their lot and aspirants return without having reached their destination. If an abridgment were made and a selection were chosen on the basis of order and arrangement, their disposition and adornment would increase, and from the beauty of brevity, their brilliance would grow.

According to their request, the quatrains would gain a “brilliance” from this new brevity and disposition. At the same time, however, such an arrangement serves a practical purpose by making specific quatrains or types of quatrains easier to locate: as the friends explain in religiously charged terminology, “aspirants” (ṭâlebân) and “seekers” (juyandagân) are more likely to attain to their “goal” (maqṣud) when the poems are arranged according to an overarching structure. The Choice Book thus seems to have been envisioned as a sort of treasury, organized by theme so that its readers could easily retrieve verses on desired topics. Indeed, it has been suggested that its title—the Choice Book—refers neither to the quality of the poems nor to ‘Aṭṭâr’s authorial act of selection, but to the reader’s ability to quickly choose verses relevant to his or her particular interests. We should also keep in mind that the divâns of previous poets rarely contained more than a few hundred quatrains, and often many less. By placing the majority of his quatrains in a stand-alone work, ‘Aṭṭâr thus brought his divân into closer alignment with professional poetic norms.

In any case, according to the passage, this textual community would not only have read the quatrains but memorized them, presumably for later recitation. Indeed, a pithy, mnemonic form like the quatrain would have had very little attraction as a purely literary phenomenon. Quatrains were routinely sprinkled into both religious and secular discourse, serving to illustrate didactic points and cap completed discussions. We know that Abu Sa’îd-e Abu’l-Khayr,

20. Meneghini, “Mokhtâr-nâma.” As a form VIII Arabic participle, mokhtâr can be read as either active or passive. The title could thus also be translated as the Book of the Selector.
21. On the spiritual uses of quatrains, see J. T. P. de Bruijn, Persian Sufi Poetry: An Introduction to the Mystical Use of Classical Persian Poems (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 1997), 6-28; Franklin Lewis, “The Spirituality of Persian Is-
one of ʿAṭṭār’s spiritual heroes, routinely used quatrails in his sermons and assemblies (majāles); he also ordered them sung in his khânaqâh during samāʿ, a controversial ritual that involved music and ecstatic movement, and which gained popularity among certain sufi groups in eleventh-century Khorâsân.\(^ {22}\) As discussed in the previous chapter, ʿAṭṭār, like Abu Saʿid, is said to have used quatrails while preaching, and although we have no positive evidence that he engaged in samāʿ, the amatory and sufistic content of many of his poems would have rendered them ideal candidates for such performances. Indeed, one of ʿAṭṭār’s unspoken motivations for compiling the Choice Book may have been to facilitate the spread of his quatrails to khânaqâhs across the region, where they could be used in samâʿ sessions. Whatever various Sitze im Leben ʿAṭṭār may have had in mind, it is clear that he envisioned the quatrails being recited orally in a sufistic milieu, and that he compiled them thematically in order to aid in their memorization. As such, the Choice Book is emblematic of the complex interrelations between textuality and orality that characterizes much medieval literary production.

Finally, even if the alleged request is completely fictional, ʿAṭṭār’s description of these friends still functions as an idealization of his intended readership and thus sheds light on the sorts of audiences that he was targeting. Throughout the prologue, these idealized readers are imagined in terms that imply devotion to sufi forms of piety. For example, ʿAṭṭār opens the preface by praising them in the following way:

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A group of intimate companions, like-minded lovers, far-sighted confidants, and allied associates, who have hearts illuminated like the sun, breathe sincerity like the true dawn, and—like candles—smile as they burn . . .

The “friends” (asdeqâ) are endowed with pious traits that ‘Aṭṭâr promotes in his works: illuminated hearts, implying a close connection to the divine; sincerity, or an alignment between truth and self-presentation; and the ability to consider even pain and tragedy as a gift from God. The term “sufi” is never used, perhaps because of the negative connotations it had taken on over the course of the previous century, or perhaps because ‘Aṭṭâr was envisioning an audience broader than just those who had been formally initiated into the sufi tradition. Nonetheless, he repeatedly describes his ideal audience in terms that indicate an affinity for sufi approaches to piety, if not necessarily formal affiliation. Regarding those quatrains in the Choice Book that treat the features of the beloved and lack overt religious meanings, ‘Aṭṭâr expresses confidence that his reader-listeners will untangle their secret divine referents, an esoteric hermeneutical mode that was commonly avowed by mystically minded poets and audiences in response to religious anxiety over the amatory content of their poems. “The people of taste (zowq) and attributes (šefat),” he writes, “will move past form and towards meaning, to witness the holy spirit clothed in a variety of forms.” The epithet with which he refers to this ideal audience—“the people of taste and attributes”—is also redolent of mystical piety, alluding to the “tasting” of mystical intuition and a familiarity with the divine attributes.  

23. ‘Aṭṭâr, Mokhtâr-nâma, 70.
roduction’s final lines, where authors traditionally implore their readers to remember them in their prayers, ʿAṭṭār imagines a mystically minded audience engaging his work: he calls on the “possessors of taste (ashāb-e ẓowq)” to pray for the forgiveness of his sins.25 These ideal readers may be a literary fiction, deployed rhetorically in order to create a subject-position from which later readers might approach the text. But like all successful rhetorical maneuvers, these framings are specifically tooled to be amenable to their recipients. ʿAṭṭār’s characterization of his ideal readers can therefore tell us a good deal about his intended audiences’ values and aspirations, which he seeks to further shape and refine.

Of Drugs and Discourse
Besides gesturing towards the work’s mystically minded audience, the preface to the Choice Book also embodies and promotes certain understandings of poetry’s religious function. Namely, ʿAṭṭār suggests that poetry such as his not only informs its audience, but it existentially transforms them.26 When properly reflected upon, religious poetry does not simply transfer a set of dogmatic propositions gussied up in rhyme and meter, but it provides a literary experience that alters its reader-listeners on an affective, ethical, and even ontological level. Its religious “content” remains significant—according to ʿAṭṭār, comprehension is key to poetry’s transformative power—but speech’s total effect exceeds the transference of propositional meanings. ʿAṭṭār never systematically theorizes speech’s spiritual efficacy, but he alludes to this underlying conception of poetic function at key points in his texts, especially in introductory and concluding material—and not only in the Choice Book, but in the maṣnāvis and even

25. ʿAṭṭār, Mokhtār-nāma, 73.
the prose Memorial as well. These meta-discursive passages not only illuminate the poetic and rhetorical assumptions that subend ‘Aṭṭâr’s production, but in so far as they condition the texts’ reception, they also gesture towards a phenomenology of thirteenth century sufi homiletic literature. Through them, we can better understand how a mystically minded readership would have understood, experienced, and used these texts.

ʿAṭṭâr’s Therapeutic Verse

In the introduction and conclusion to the Choice Book, ʿAṭṭâr not only comments on the circumstances of its compilation, but also boasts of his poetic prowess. Such self-praise is common, especially in the concluding and introductory material of poetic texts, and it can be found not only in the Choice Book, but across ʿAṭṭâr’s oeuvre. In the conclusion to the Divine Book, for example, ʿAṭṭâr boasts—with self-conscious hyperbole—that his poems will be recited by houris in paradise. In the Book of Affliction, he claims to have exhausted all possible metaphorical tropes; he names himself the “Seal of the Poets,” the final and greatest poet of humankind, just as Muhammad, the “Seal of the Prophets,” was the final and greatest of God’s messengers. The final section of the Choice Book, too, contains a number of quatrains in which ʿAṭṭâr claims his superiority over all other poets:

Why bother with the poetry of others? This is poetry!
When the ocean appears, ablutions with sand (tayammom) come to an end.

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28. ʿAṭṭâr, Elâhi-nâma, 6352-3.
29. ʿAṭṭâr, Mosibat-nâma, 7098, 7104. The moniker “Seal of the Poets” is usually associated with Jâmi, to whom it was likely first applied during the nineteenth-century Revival movement (Bâz-gasht). See Franklin Lewis, “To Round and Rondeau the Canon: Jâmi and Fâni’s Reception of the Persian Lyrical Tradition,” in Jâmi and the Intellectual History of the Muslim World: The Trans-Regional Reception of Ḥāǧī Bânî Jâmi’s Works, c. 9th/15th-14th/20th, ed. Thibaut d’Hubert and Alexandre Papas (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).
Now that ‘Aṭṭâr’s poetry has appeared in the world, there is no need to bother with the verses of others, just as the appearance of the ocean after a desert journey signals the end of stop-gap ablutions performed with sand. Similar boasts, in prose, can also be found in the introduction to the Choice Book. ‘Aṭṭâr claims, for example, that his quatrain collection is completely unique, and that any possible competitors ought to be dismissed as mere imitators: “no poet has made anything like this,” he writes, “and even if one did, any mirror can reflect a face.” According to him, the quatrains also contain unprecedented subtleties and points of divine wisdom:

I know of no divân in which you can find the likes of these verses or obtain such subtleties, since this is a treasure of the holy meanings of “I was a hidden treasure and I wanted to be known” and a storehouse of the points of the unknown of “He has the keys of the unknown, and no one knows them but him.”

Throughout the Persian literary tradition, poets often speak of their poems as collections of jewels or pearls. In the above passage, this treasure imagery is coupled with the Quranic reference to God’s keys to the unseen (ghayb) and the famous “hidden treasure” hadîş qodsî (non-Quranic revelation said to have been uttered by Muhammad). ‘Aṭṭâr’s poetry is thus likened not just to ordinary jewels, but to an entire “treasury” of divine knowledge and self-manifestation.

30. ‘Aṭṭâr, Mokhtâr-nâma, 2069.
31. Ibid., 71.
32. Ibid.
34. Quran 6:59.
Over the course of such self-praise, ‘Aṭṭâr extols not only the purported beauty of his verses and their subtle contents, but also the spiritual benefits they provide to an attentive audience:

If the reader (khwânanda) comes to the secret of this treasure with contemplation and meditation (tadabbor va ta‘ammol) then in no case will his goal (maqṣud) not be achieved.

In other words, when readers or reciters (the Persian khwânanda could mean either) approach the Choice Book in a contemplative fashion and meditate on its meanings, they will, according to ‘Aṭṭâr, be sure to reach their “goal.” The exact nature of the goal is not specified, but for the mystically minded audience that ‘Aṭṭâr was targeting, such a term would immediately evoke the proximity to God that constitutes the aim of the sufi path; the quatrains of the Choice Book are endowed with a certain spiritual efficacy, propelling their reader-listeners towards that spiritual telos. Similarly, as we have already seen, ‘Aṭṭâr’s friends also draw on the semantic field of sufi progress when they first suggest that the poet should compile a selection of his quatrains into a separate book. Speaking of the unorganized quatrains in the Divân, they claim that “many of the seekers (juyanda) remain devoid of their lot and aspirants (ṭâlebân) return without having reached their goal (maqṣud).” Terms like “goal,” “seeker,” and “aspirant” all recall the notion of the sufi as traveller on a spiritual journey; the friends thus seem to be intimating that a more organized selection of the quatrains will not only help readers locate specific poems, but also aid their spiritual progress.

35. ‘Aṭṭâr, Mokhtâr-nâma, 71.
36. Ibid.
As the above passage makes clear, however, such spiritual benefits can only be reaped through particular hermeneutical processes; audiences must approach the text “with meditation and contemplation” (bā tadabbor va taʿammol) in order to reach their goal. Contemplation was a widespread spiritual exercise practiced by the piety-minded throughout the Islamic world, and it encompassed more than just close or careful reading. Although the exact nature of these exercises is not entirely clear—the sources are frustratingly low on detail, and specific practices would likely have changed from place to place and over time—contemplation usually seems to imply a repeated, introspective process of evaluation in the hopes of ethical transformation. In the Memorial, ʿAṭṭār recounts how various spiritual heroes would “sit in contemplation,” often over the course of an entire night. Shabestari, in his Rosebed of Secrets, also exhorts contemplation as a means of ascent towards the divine. The most detailed treatment, however, is found in Abū Ḥāmid Ghazzālī’s Revival of the Religious Sciences (Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn), a classic work of religious scholarship with which ʿAṭṭār was likely familiar. According to Ghazzālī, contemplation consists of repeated and consistent intention towards various signs, verbal or non-verbal, including Quranic verses, sayings of the Prophet, and natural phenomena. The spiritual significance of those signs is deduced and then used as the basis for self-appraisal in the hopes of altering one’s behavior and state of being. For example, a state of repen-

37. Sufi sources use a number of terms to refer to the activity of contemplation, including tafakkor, tadabbor, taʿammol, tazakkor, nazar, and eʿtebār; Abū Ḥāmid Ghazzālī draws some subtle distinctions between them, Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn (Cairo: Lajnat Nashr al-Thaqāfa al-Islāmiyya, 1356-57 [1937-38]), 15:2807.
39. Dāʿud-e Tāʿī, for instance, is reported to have meditated (tafakkori mi kard) on God’s domain (malakut) from the roof of his house one night; he became so overwhelmed that he lost consciousness and fell (229). Likewise, Hasan al-Ḥāshīṣī praises the previous generation, “who knew the Quran was a book sent to them from God; at night they meditated (taʿammol kardandi) upon it, and during the day they acted upon it” (39).
41. Ghazzālī, Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn, 15:2802-44. This section is partially translated by Waley in “Contemplative Disciplines.”
tance can be induced by dwelling on one’s sins in conjunction with the eschatological threats in the Quran and hadith. Likewise, a state of thankfulness can be fostered through contemplation of the many beautiful gifts and favors God has bestowed on humankind. Such contemplation, according to Ghazzālī, should be performed daily, ideally in both the morning and evening, as a consistent spiritual practice.

According to the Choice Book’s introduction, the quatrains should also be approached contemplatively, as sites of a self-reflective hermeneutical encounter aimed at spiritual transformation. Composed predominately in a hortatory mode, they do not usually state religious truths abstractly or systematically, but rather urge their reader-listeners to practical pious reform. For example, the following quatrain presents the universality of death in a few striking images, on the basis of which it exhorts the addressee to abstain from chasing material wealth:

Since the lion of the appointed hour lies in ambush for you,
Your final disintegration to dust is certain.
With the passing of time, don’t amass wealth, but consider—
Your final lot from fate will be two meters of earth.

The quatrain pithily expresses the long-standing notion, common not only to sufism but the broader Irano-Mediterranean wisdom tradition, that material possessions are rendered fundamentally worthless by human beings’ inherent mortality. The first two hemistichs explain that death is a certainty, not only in a general sense, but for you individually, the poem’s addressee: the lion of death waits in ambush for you, and your disintegration to dust is certain. The uni-

42. Ghazzālī, Iḥyāʾ `udūm al-dīn, 15:2814.
43. Ibid., 2814.
44. Ibid., 2817.
45. ʿAṭṭār, Mokhtār-nāma, 912.
versality of death is not permitted to mask the individual significance of its call. The third hemistich derives the moral significance of this fact: in light of the temporality of human existence, you ought to refrain from amassing material wealth and possessions, the utility of which is voided by the shortness of life. And the final distich as a whole presents a powerfully concrete *memento mori*, exhorting the addressee to consider (*bedân!*) the two meters of earth that will constitute his or her final resting place. The inevitability of death is thus not to be forgotten, but contemplated as a means of weakening greed and strengthening ascetic resolve. The recitation of the quatrain itself constitutes such a contemplative performance: it guides the audiences’s gaze towards forceful images of their own temporality, through which it aims to instigate ethical change. And because quatrains are short and easily memorizable, they can be held in the mind and contemplated throughout the day.46

The alleged spiritual efficacy of ‘Aṭṭār’s verse is frequently implied through comparisons with medicine. Near the end of the *Choice Book*’s prologue, for example, the reader encounters the following metaphor: “In truth, the words of ‘Aṭṭār are an antidote (taryāk)”—or, alternatively parsed, “‘Aṭṭār’s words are an antidote leading to Truth.”47 The “speech as medicine” metaphor was commonly used to conceptualize homiletic discourse in ‘Aṭṭār’s age: popular preachers, who aimed to instigate repentance and spiritual reform in their audiences, likened themselves to physicians who treated the spiritually ill through speech.48 Such

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46. Abu Sa’id, for example, allegedly memorized a quatrain from Bu’l-Qašem, his first spiritual teacher, and continuously recited it to himself whenever he was alone; he is said to have attributed his spiritual success to this practice. Ebn Monavvar, *Asrār al-towhid*, 1:19.

47. ‘Aṭṭār, *Mokhtār-nāma*, 71. In modern Persian, *taryāk* refers to opium; in ‘Aṭṭār’s day, the term would have likely referred to a variety of medicines and antidotes, including opium, but not exclusively so. *Loghat-nāma*ye Dehkhodā, s.v. “taryāk.”

48. Ibn al-Jawzi, the author of the most famous Islamic preaching manual, often represents homiletic speech through this medical metaphor. For example, in the following quotation, taken from an anecdote in the biographical portion of his work, an old man begs the preacher Abū ‘Āmir to “cure” him of his impiety through exhortations: “O Abū ‘Āmir! May God wash the stain of sins from your heart. I do not cease to long for you desiring to hear your exhortations, for I have a festering sore whose cure has resisted all the efforts of the
metaphors shift the emphasis from speech’s meaning to its effects; they suggest that a homily’s purpose is not first and foremost to inform, but to counteract irreligious influences and thereby bring its listeners back to a state of spiritually normative “health.” By using the metaphor in the Choice Book, ‘Aṭṭār highlights not only the quatrains’ thematic and sociological relationship to oral homiletics, but also their alleged influence over the spiritual states of their audiences. According to this model of poetic discourse, the quatrains do not simply transfer information on a cognitive level but, like a medicine, affect their reader-listeners’ bodies and emotions as well. They manipulate the audience’s valuations and temperament, leading to altered behavior and ethical reform, and thereby elevating them towards God.

The notion of therapeutic speech carries over into ‘Aṭṭār’s other works as well. Although the maṣnāvis lack the prose introduction of the Choice Book, they contain many metaphorical treatments of speech and poetry, especially in their concluding sections, where ‘Aṭṭār boasts of the transformative power of his verse, often in medical terms. For example, the conclusion to the Conference of the Birds contains the following boast:

Whoever suffers from the poison of religious deviation (zahr-e bed‘at),
These lofty words are antidote (taryāk) enough for him!
Although I am an ‘aṭṭār and a dispenser of anecdotes (taryāk-deh),
I have just burnt liver, like those who sell adulterated musk.

Preachers and the remedy of which even the physicians have found impossible. I heard of the effectiveness of your ointment for the treatment of wounds and pain. Therefore, I beg you not to neglect the application of the medicine (taryāq) even though its taste may be bitter, for I am one of those who patiently endures the pain of the remedy out of hope for the cure,” Quṣṣāṣ, 20/ trans. 142. The metaphor also informs the titles of many of Ibn al-Jawzī’s works, such as the Best of Vials (Ru‘ūs al-qawārīn), a collection of homiletic materials. This association recalls the Hellenistic conception of philosophy as a therapy for the soul. See Martha Nussbaum, The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Merlin Swartz, “Arabic Rhetoric and the Art of the Homily in Medieval Islam,” in Religion and Culture in Medieval Islam, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 56n26; Lois Anita Giffen, Theory of Profane Love among the Arabs: The Development of the Genre (New York: New York University Press, 1971), 28-9.

In terms that foreshadow the prologue to the *Choice Book*, the first verse casts ‘Aṭṭâr’s speech as an antidote to the “poison of religious deviation.” The poet immediately undercuts this boast in the next verse, however, by confessing his hypocrisy and comparing himself to those perfumists who fraudulently sell burnt liver instead of true musk. There is also something of a double entendre here, since to speak of one’s liver as “burnt” also suggests a high rank among the suffering lovers of God.\(^5\) We will attend to issues of sincerity and hypocrisy in the next section, in the context of ‘Aṭṭâr’s poetic persona; here I simply wish to point out that ‘Aṭṭâr plays on his pen-name in order to suggest his verse’s medicinal power. “‘Attâr” is usually translated as “perfumist,” and compounding and selling scents was certainly an important dimension of the craft of ‘aṭṭârî. But, as the above verses make clear, an ‘aṭṭâr was also a “dispenser of anecdotes,” and in this sense the term is perhaps better translated as “apothecary” or “druggist.” ‘Aṭṭâr here links this aspect of his pen-name to his poetic activity, claiming to cure spiritual illness through verbal concoctions. And after his death, the broader literary tradition continued to understand his poetry through the lens of his nom de plume and presumed profession. For instance, Nur-Allâh Shushtari, the sixteenth-century Shi‘i hagiographer, opens his chapter on ‘Aṭṭâr with the following verse, incorporating medical terms suggested by the latter’s pen-name in order to convey the spiritual efficacy of his poetry:

> The bearer of the drug (dâru) of effacement, ‘Aṭṭâr,  
> Whose verse (naẓm) cures afflicted lovers . . .

\(^5\) Musk was understood to be the congealed blood of the musk deer, and apparently it could be adulterated with burnt liver. See ‘Aṭṭâr, *Manteq al-tayr*, 776-7n4593; Loghat-nâma-ye Dehkhodâ, s.vv. “moshk,” “nâk.”

To ʿAṭṭār’s mind, and the minds of his later audiences, ʿAṭṭār’s most significant medicines were not the herbs of his shop, but the words of his poetry.

In fact, it is possible that ʿAṭṭār was not a druggist at all and that his pen-name was intended in an entirely metaphorical sense. Out of those works now accepted as authentic, there is only a single anecdote in the Book of Secrets that may suggest he was actually a practicing apothecary. In it, ʿAṭṭār explains how he was summoned to compound a syrup (sharbat) for a dying miser; he attempted to administer rosewater to ease the man’s pain, but the miser refused this treatment for fear of wasting the precious liquid. After his death, the miser’s rosewater stash was then poured on his grave, and it was of such a quantity to turn the area to mud; ʿAṭṭār wryly observes that since he could not bear to enjoy rose-water’s benefits in life, the miser must now wallow in mud in his death. The story does not necessarily mean that ʿAṭṭār was a professional apothecary, though, since it could also be read metaphorically: the miser refused to be “cured” by the “rose-water” of ʿAṭṭār’s stories and exhortations while he was alive, and after his death it was too late.⁵³

Such metaphors may seem to suggest that poetry can transform its audiences regardless of whether or not they understand its meaning, just as a medicine’s efficacy does not depend on its patients’ comprehension of its mechanisms. Although occasionally ʿAṭṭār seems to suggest that spiritual efficacy is somewhat independent of semantic signification, at other times he makes it clear that “correct” understanding is critical to poetry’s transformative force. We have already seen, for example, how ʿAṭṭār urges readers to approach the quatrains with “contemplation and meditation,” alluding to a spiritual practice that stresses deep, repeated hermeneutical engagement with various signs in the world, both textual and non-textual. And a number of

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⁵³. ʿAṭṭār, Asrār-nāma, 2858-75; Shaфи‘i-Kadkani, intro. to Mokhtâr-nāma, 28-9.
‘Aṭṭâr’s meta-poetic verses enjoin their addressees to uncover his poems’ meanings through intense interpretive labor, as in the following quatrains from the final chapter of the *Choice Book*:

We threaded one hundred pearls as allusions, then left.  
We picked one hundred roses as expressions, then left.  
If you are wise, don’t look to the verbal form (*lafz*), but contemplate (*bendish*)  
The secret that we said in symbols, then left.

Poetry is imbued with a secret meaning, accessible through various allusions and symbols, and the reader is invited to reflect on these deeper significations instead of merely basking in its verbal beauty. Another quatrain from the same chapter makes a similar point, urging readers to ruminate on the poems slowly and carefully:

I have strung many pearls of certainty for you,  
You should know that I am not sleeping like you.  
Don’t pass so quickly from this back to frivolity,  
But think a bit about what I have told you.

Similarly, the *mašnavi* also end with entreaties to read repeatedly and carefully in order to unlock their transformative potential. In the conclusion to the *Book of Affliction*, for example, ‘Aṭṭâr claims that if one of the “people of secrets”—a common epithet for those who practice sufistic piety—spends “a long life in this book,” then at every moment “it will bestow new light upon him.”

And at the end of the *Conference of the Birds*, ‘Aṭṭâr likens the book to a coquettish

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55. Ibid., 2078.  
bride that removes her veil only slowly, and urges his audience to read the poem multiple times, so that with each reading new secrets might be revealed to them.\textsuperscript{57}

In short, the poems’ spiritual efficacy—articulated in medical terms—must be read in conjunction with ‘Aṭṭār’s stress on the hermeneutic labor required to uncover their inner meanings, which reveal themselves only after extended contemplation and multiple literary encounters. The medicinal metaphor thus implies not so much a black-box instrumentality as a perlocutionary efficacy, in which poetry’s significance begins in the semantic realm but then expands to include the bodily, emotive, and even ontological changes that it aims to induce in its reader-listeners.\textsuperscript{58}

\textit{Saints’ Words and the Human Heart}

In comparison with the other works in ‘Aṭṭār’s oeuvre, the \textit{Memorial} is something of an outlier. The only work of prose, it recounts the spiritual feats and sayings of dozens of spiritual heroes claimed by the sufī tradition, from Ovays-e Qarani to Hallāj.\textsuperscript{59} Similar material, of course, can be found in the \textit{maṣnāvis} as well, along with beast fables, historical anecdotes, and stories of the prophets. But the \textit{Memorial} is exclusively focused on the feats and dicta of the saints, and ‘Aṭṭār’s own authorial voice is much more subdued. The anecdotes are sparse, conveying only the necessary narrative detail, and they lack the homiletic extrapolations that are so important

\textsuperscript{57} ‘Aṭṭār, \textit{Manṭeq al-tayr}, 4507-8.

\textsuperscript{58} I use “perlocutionary” in a sense close to that of John Austin, for whom “the perlocutionary act . . . is the achieving of certain effects by saying something.” But whereas Austin deals almost exclusively with oral utterances in “ordinary” language situations, ‘Aṭṭār’s homiletic perlocutions are carried out in a textual medium and rely on fiction and persona. \textit{How to Do Things with Words}, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 92-93, 121.

to the maṣnavis. All in all, ‘Aṭṭār’s presence in the Memorial is not so much that of a sermonizing story-teller as an editor and compiler.\(^{60}\)

Despite these formal differences, the prose Memorial is also cast as a spiritually transformative and therapeutic text, reminiscent of the Choice Book. The Memorial’s audience is enjoined to read carefully and contemplatively as part of a daily exercise of self-fashioning. They are instructed to approach the saints’ feats and dicta as yardsticks for evaluating their own selves, through which they can become aware of their own spiritual shortcomings and nurture an ethos of pious humility. And this transformative potential is again expressed in medicinal terms. The words of the saints, according to the Memorial’s introduction, are a sort of medicine for the heart, which alters the state of being of those who attend to them.

The Memorial is comprised of a general introduction and seventy-two hagiographical chapters, each one of which is devoted to the spiritual feats and dicta of an individual pious virtuoso.\(^{61}\) The saints are presented in a loosely chronological order, from the generation after the Prophet to the famous tenth-century sufi martyr Ḥallāj.\(^{62}\) Each chapter follows a standard structure: they begin with a bit of rhymed prose in praise of their subject, followed by accounts of his or her spiritual feats and a collection of spiritual sayings; they generally conclude with a few anecdotes related to the saint’s death and posthumous appearance in dreams. Much of this material is adapted from earlier biographical collections written in Arabic and dialectal Per-

\(^{60}\) It should be noted, however, that ‘Aṭṭār often alters the material in subtle but significant ways. See Paul Losensky, “The Creative Compiler: The Art of Rewriting in ‘Aṭṭār’s Taḵrīrat al-awliyā’,” in The Necklace of the Pleiades: Studies in Persian Literature Presented to Heshmat Moayyad on his 80th Birthday, ed. Franklin Lewis and Sunil Sharma (Leiden University Press: Leiden, 2010).

\(^{61}\) On the possible symbolic significance of the number of biographies, see Losensky, “Words and Deeds,” 78-9.

\(^{62}\) The first chapter is actually devoted to Jaʿfar-e Šādeq, a clear violation of the chronological structure maintained throughout the rest of the book. Nonetheless, ‘Aṭṭār begins with him “for the sake of spiritual blessings” (be sabāb-e tabarrok). Jaʿfar is also the only member of the Prophet’s family to be included in the Memorial. He seems to function as a synecdoche for that entire class of spiritually-privileged persons, and his presence at the beginning of the book demonstrates that spiritual authority is ultimately derived from the Prophet through them. ‘Aṭṭār, Taḵrīrat al-owleyā, 5, 11-12.
sian, such as the works of Sulamī, Anṣāri, and Hojviri. As ‘Aṭṭār explains in the introduction, he translated the Arabic and modernized the archaic Persian so that “all might be included” in the blessings of the saints; he thus seems to have understood the Memorial as a popularizing project. He elaborates other reasons for compiling the work as well, including his life-long devotion to the saints, his hope for their blessing and intercession, and his desire to reinvigorate the religion of an allegedly decaying age through accounts of their words and deeds.

But it is the text’s potential to existentially transform its reader-listeners that is arguably the dominant theme of the introduction. Among the dozen or so reasons that ‘Aṭṭār adduces for the compilation of the Memorial, a number of them specifically reference saintly speech’s alleged influence on the heart. For example, ‘Aṭṭār quotes a saying attributed to Jonayd, according to which saintly speech aids the “heart-broken”:

[Jonayd] said: “Their words are an army of the armies of the Lord—glory and majesty are his—and if a devotee (morid) is heart-broken (del-shekasta), he can find strength through them and gain aid from that army.” And the proof of these words is that God most high has said: “O Muhammad! We tell you stories of the those who have passed so that your heart may be calmed and strengthened through them.”

The words of the saints are sent by God to strengthen and calm “devotee[s]” (morid), a term which gestures towards the sufistic inclinations of the text’s intended audience. The site of
these words’ action is the heart—specifically the “broken” heart—which is justified through a Quranic proof text.\textsuperscript{67} Other passages throughout the introduction also affirm saintly speech’s influence over the heart, often in explicitly medicinal terms. For example, Ṭṭṭâr explains his love for the saints and their dicta as follows:

For no apparent reason, from childhood onwards, love for this clan has swelled in my soul, and their words were always a mofareh for my heart.

Mofarreh was a sweet-tasting drug composed of valuable ingredients that was thought to strengthen the heart and liver; Ṭṭṭâr here likens the saints’ dicta to a mofarreh for the heart, echoing some of the language from the previous quotation, where their speech was said to aid and strengthen heart-broken devotees.\textsuperscript{69}

According to sufi psychology, the heart is a spiritual faculty by means of which human beings can envisage and approach God, and through which divine blessings are in turn bestowed on the body. Thus, as Najm al-Din Râzi succinctly explains, the heart serves as the ontological link between the microcosm and the divine realms:

The human heart has one face turned towards the world of divinity and the other face towards the world of the bodily frame. It is for this reason that it is called qalb, since it contains the two worlds, corporal and spiritual, and it distributes [to the body] every sustaining grace that it receives from the spirit.

\textsuperscript{67} Ṭṭṭâr provides the prooftext, Quran 11:120, in Arabic as well as Persian, but I have rendered only the latter into English above. His translation of the Arabic is rather free, and he has manipulated the sense of text to more clearly support his claim. For instance, the original Arabic refers specifically to “the messages of the prophets” (anbâ’ al-rusul), which would seem to exclude stories of the saints, but Ṭṭṭâr’s Persian translation speaks more generally of “stories of those who have passed” (qeşṣa-y-e gozashtegân).

\textsuperscript{68} Ṭṭṭâr, Tażkerat al-owleyâ, 7-8.

\textsuperscript{69} Loghat-nâma-ye Dehkhodâ, s.v. “mofarreh.”
Here Râzi puns on the etymology of qalb, the Arabic term for “heart”—its triliteral root encompasses notions of turning, facing, and rotation—in order to highlight the heart’s ontological liminality, through which it mediates between the individual’s material body and the divine realm. Through ascetic practice the heart can be directed more and more towards the second of these two poles; then, according to Râzi, when “it reaches perfection through nurturing, purification, and intention towards God, it becomes the manifestation of the total attributes of divinity.” ʿAṭṭâr’s works encode a similar understanding of the heart as the intermediary between the physical and spiritual, and we will examine several anecdotes that elaborate on these themes in subsequent chapters. Here, however, we simply wish to stress that, for ʿAṭṭâr and his readers, the heart was not only the physiological organ that circulates blood or the metaphorical seat of affect, but the spiritual faculty through which the believer could envision and access God, and even become a conduit for his manifestation in the world. Thus, as Bausani points out, the “heart-broken devotees” who the Memorial aims to cure should not be understood as suffering from an affect disorder, but an ontological state of estrangement from the divine. Saintly speech, by “strengthening and calming the heart,” ontologically alters its recipients, providing them with a channel for the re-establishment of a pre-eternal proximity to God.

71. Lane, Lexicon, s.v. “q-l-b.”
73. See Chapter 4, p. 217-222.
This transformative potential is explicitly claimed by ‘Aṭṭār not just for the saints’ dicta in general, but for the Memorial in particular. Near the end of the introduction, he writes that after the Quran and hadith, “there is no better book in creation” than the Memorial. Its alchemical power is expressed in a gendered hierarchy, through which the book allegedly elevates its audience:

This is a book that changes effeminate (mokhannesân) into men, and men into lion-men, and lion-men into paragons, and paragons into passion itself; how can it fail to turn them into passion itself? Whoever recites this book and reflects upon it as is prescribed will become aware of what passion lay in the saints’ souls to bring forth such deeds and words like this from their hearts.

We will discuss the notion of spiritual “manhood” in more detail in a subsequent chapter; here it suffices to note that, according to ‘Aṭṭār, the Memorial not only provides its audience with ethical instruction but changes the very nature of their being. It transforms effeminate into men and men into lion-men and so forth, elevating its readers through the ranks of “manliness” until they realize the painful, passionate drive for God that dominates the souls of the saints and which gives rise to their words and deeds. To activate this transformative power, the reader must engage with the work in a specific way: he or she is to recite the saints’ words out loud (bar khwândan), attending to the them visually, aurally, and bodily thorough vocal production.

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75. ‘Aṭṭār, Tażkerat al-awleyâ, 8.
76. Ibid.
77. See Chapter 4, p. 242-260.
Even though the saints’ dicta are presented in medicinal, and sometimes even talismanic terms, the audience still must comprehend—and reflect upon—their meanings. The saints’ words, according to ‘Aṭṭâr, are similar to the Quran, which is like a medicine (dâru); it has an “effect” (aṣar) even if one does not understand what one is consuming. Nevertheless, ‘Aṭṭâr continues, the effect is much greater if one does understand.79 Readers are urged to contemplate the Memorial as part of a hermeneutics of the self, evaluating their own spiritual states against those of the pious heroes lionized within. According to ‘Aṭṭâr, neither he nor his contemporaries can fully live up to the ideals encoded in these dicta. Nevertheless, through them they can be made aware of their own failings and thereby cleansed of false pride:

Abu ‘Ali Daqqâq (God have mercy on him!) was asked: “Is there any use in listening to the words of the men when we cannot act on them?” He replied: “Yes, it has two uses. First, if the man is a seeker, his aspiration will be strengthened and his yearning increased. Second, if he sees any pride in himself, it will be broken. And he will drive pretension from his mind, and his good will seem bad, and if he is not blind, he will contemplate himself.” Just as Shaykh Mahfuz said: “Don’t weigh the people according to your scale; weigh yourself according to the scales of the men of the path, so that you may know their worth and your bankruptcy.”

After, the Shaykh were invited to share some of their knowledge. He had them present their words in their own language in Persian, which is the language of the audience. The audience responded with much joy and respect. They were very glad that the Shaykh did not wish to impose his knowledge on them, for they knew that knowledge is a gift from God and should be shared with others. They were also glad that the Shaykh respected their language and did not impose his knowledge on them in a language they did not understand.

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According to ‘Aṭṭâr (via Daqqâq), one listens to the saints’ words not in the hopes of imitating them directly, but in order to develop a renewed appreciation of one’s own spiritual weakness.

80. Ibid., 6. Shaykh Mahfuz’s words are provided in both Arabic and Persian; I have translated only the Persian above, in which ‘Aṭṭâr renders al-mawqin (those who have firm knowledge of God) as mardân-e râh (the men of the path).
The dicta provoke pious listeners—or in the words of Daqqâq, those who “are not blind”—to turn inwards and evaluate their spiritual standing according to a new metric, one in which they are measured relative not to their contemporaries, but to the exemplars of the past. When reader-listeners realize their own spiritual bankruptcy, they may be motivated to reform: Abu ‘Ali explains that seekers’ aspiration will be heightened when they hear the saints’ words. But even more fundamentally, such a realization shatters the prideful delusions of spiritual achievement. In this sense, simply recognizing the extent of one’s spiritual weakness constitutes a step forward on the spiritual path.

In short, the Memorial is presented as a text that not only informs its readers, but existentially transforms their onto-ethical mode of being. And for a reader interested in maximizing these effects, ‘Aṭṭâr recommends a practice of daily reading. Consistent with the venerative ethos of the Memorial, he does not make this claim directly but instead relies on a quotation attributed to Yusof-e Hamadâni (d. 1140), a spiritual master from a previous generation:

Yusof-e Hamadâni (God have mercy on him!) was asked: “When this age passes, and this clan withdraws behind the veil of concealment, what will we do to remain in health? [be-salāmat bemânim]?” He said: “You will read eight pages of their sayings every day.” I therefore considered it an incumbent religious obligation to compose some daily readings [verd] for the ignorant.

امام يوسف همداني رحمة الله را يرسيدن ك: «جون اين روزگار يگذرد و اين طائفه روی در نقاب تواری آرند چه كنیم تا بسلامت بمانیم؟» گفت: «هر روز هشت ورق از سخن ايشان مي خوانيد.» پس وردي ساختن اهل غفلت را فرض عين ديدم.\footnote{“Aṭṭâr, Taṣkerat al-owleyâ, 7.}

Implicit in the question is the belief that the saints maintain the well-being of the world and those within it, and that they will vanish in accordance with the widely accepted model of generational societal decay. In response, Hamadâni explains that future generations will still have access to the saints’ blessings through textual accounts of their feats and sayings. He thus rec-
ommends a daily reading of eight pages of their utterances in order to maintain spiritual health. According to ʿAṭṭār, the *Memorial* was composed to serve just such a purpose, being a set of daily readings (*verd*) for those who would otherwise remained mired in the ignorance of the age. The term he employs here, *verd*, usually refers to litanies of Qur'anic verses and pious phrases that would be recited at specific hours, often late at night or early in the morning, as a form of supererogatory devotion. ʿAṭṭār’s application of the term to the *Memorial* may therefore suggest that he intended it to be read every day at prescribed times. The term also has theurgic overtones—it can refer to a verbal charm, especially one derived from the Quran—which also gestures towards saintly speech’s spiritual efficacy above and beyond its semantic content.

Given the paucity of external sources regarding their reception and interpretation, meta-discursive gestures such as these are invaluable in any attempt to reconstruct the practices and conceptualizations of reading that were current in the mystically minded communities whom ʿAṭṭār took as his primary audience. The *Memorial*, the *Choice Book*, and the *masnavis*, despite the vast generic gaps between them, all represent reading as a spiritually therapeutic activity. According to ʿAṭṭār’s framings of these works, they do not simply transfer knowledge, but rather act upon their reader-listeners’ hearts and souls, leading to ethical reform and elevation towards the divine. And like a medicine, the healing power of speech depends on its patients’ adherence to a particular course of treatment. More specifically, reader-listeners are urged towards an intense hermeneutical engagement with the works over time. Regarding the *Memorial*, readers are invited to read eight pages of saints’ dicta a day, a daily

practice through which they will internalize the saints’ wisdom and benefit from their spiritual power. Similarly, in the introduction to the *Choice Book*, the audience is urged to memorize and contemplate the quatrains so that they can embody the wisdom contained therein. Finally, in the *Conference of the Birds*, they are instructed to carefully recite the poem as often as possible, scanning for new “secrets” every time; this is not a book to be read once and then put away. In short, ‘Aṭṭār’s spiritual therapy is durational, and reader-listeners must be actively engaged in their own treatment. His works, like the sufi ritual practices to which they are compared (litanies and *zekr*, contemplation and mediation, and, as we shall see in Chapter 5, the forty-day retreat), not only reiterate a sufi worldview, but become sites in which sufi subjectivities are generated and performed.

**Speaker and Authority**

The rhetorical effect and spiritual efficacy of an utterance is not derived from its meaning alone, but is intimately tied to the religious authority and spiritual state of its speaker. According to a piece of proverbial wisdom current in ‘Aṭṭār’s time, one should not seek medical treatment from an ill physician; likewise, one should not accept the admonishments of a preacher who fails to conduct himself in a pious and God-fearing manner. The perlocutionary power of a homily depends on the sincerity of the preacher, whose own exercise of piety authorizes him to berate, exhort, and otherwise call his listeners to a more religiously valuable mode of being. In addition to the issue of persuasive force, something of the speaker’s own ethical and ontological state was thought to be captured in his speech and thereby made accessible to his listeners. In an oral environment, a preacher’s reputation for piety would likely already

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be known to his audience, or at least readily communicable through non-linguistic channels. ʿAṭṭâr, however, circulated his works in a textual form, and he clearly intended them to reach audiences outside of his own immediate social milieu. He therefore needed to find a way to textually convey his spiritual authority to an impersonal readership, all the more so because of the vague cloud of religious opprobrium that hung over poetic discourse throughout much of the pre-modern Islamic world. ʿAṭṭâr thus carefully constructs the personae he adopts to “speak” his texts, justifying his spiritual authority and alternately defending and apologizing for his use of the poetic form. In his verse works, in addition to the traditional literary self-encomium, ʿAṭṭâr boasts of his piety and passion for God while actively distancing himself from the panegyrists and their “irreligious” verse. Simultaneously, he fosters an aura of sincerity by confessing his spiritual shortcomings in connection with his practice of poetry. In the prose *Memorial*, on the other hand, ʿAṭṭâr attempts to recede into the background as a devoted editor and compiler who valorizes the spiritual states of the saints and transmits their sayings without contamination. In the present section, we will more closely examine how ʿAṭṭâr constructs these personae while attending to the ways in which they are used to justify his claims to produce—or, in the case of the *Memorial*, transmit—spiritually therapeutic speech.

*Miraculous Feats and Saintly Speech*

In twelfth-century sufism, the saints (owleyā) were those who, through some combination of divine grace and their own striving, had achieved a degree of proximity to God. They are, according to *Memorial*’s opening benediction, illuminated by divine light, freed from the creaturely aspects of their being, and effaced in the oneness of God. And by virtue of this privi-

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85. See the material collected by Ritter under the title “The Poet on Himself” in *Ocean of the Soul*, 151-64.
leged ontological position, they are endowed with authority over the rest of creation. They are God’s deputies on earth, channels through which his blessings—and his wrath—are made manifest in the world. Their mediatory status is, as several scholars have pointed out, encapsulated in the two possible vowelings of the term “velāyat/valāyat” (sainthood); while “valāyat” signifies intimacy between friends, and refers to the saints’ relationship with God, “velāyat” signifies delegated authority, and refers to their relationship with the rest of creation. Holy men were believed to wield very real supernatural powers, and they could thus attract huge followings and patronage from political authorities eager to secure their blessings. After their deaths, they were often thought to continue intervening in the world, and their shrines became major destinations for those seeking intercession. Stories of their miraculous feats were set down in writing by their followers and descendants: the well-known hagiographies devoted to Abu Sa’id-e Abu’l-Khayr, Aḥmad-e Jām, and Rumi are typical in this regard. ‘Aṭṭār does not seem to have been devoted to any single living saintly figure, but he regards himself as a follower of all the deceased spiritual heroes claimed by the mainstream Sufi tradition. As we have

seen, by collecting and disseminating their sayings and feats, he hoped to secure their blessings during his lifetime and their intercession on the day of judgement.\textsuperscript{91}

The sayings collected in the \textit{Memorial} are thus endowed with spiritual power not only because of their specific content, but because they were uttered by the saints, the friends of God and his deputies on earth. And the proof of the saints’ elevated rank in the cosmic hierarchy consists of, among other things, their miraculous performances and feats of superhuman asceticism.\textsuperscript{92} Although readers with even a rudimentary knowledge of sufism would likely have already been familiar with the figures treated in the \textit{Memorial}, ʿAṭṭâr activates and sustains the valorizing discourse surrounding them by reciting stories of their alleged miracles, and he thereby legitimates his venerative attitude towards their persons and words. Ultimately, ʿAṭṭâr is far more interested in the saints’ sayings than their feats: he mentions the former forty-two times in the introduction, but alludes to the latter only seven.\textsuperscript{93} Nevertheless, each saint’s dicta are authenticated and legitimated by the miracle narratives that introduce them. Their sayings are worth dwelling on because they were spoken by those who had achieved proximity with the divine, a spiritual rank evinced by their superhuman achievements.\textsuperscript{94}

Given the saints’ ontological proximity to the divine, their speech is not like that of other humans: it originates not through creaturely exertion, but is bestowed on them directly by God. This is made clear in the first Persian-language paragraph of the \textit{Memorial}’s prologue, which immediately follows the Arabic benediction:

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\textsuperscript{91} ʿAṭṭâr, \textit{Taẓkerat al-owleyâ}, 6, 9.
\textsuperscript{92} On saintly miracles as evidence of spiritual authority, see \textit{Friends of God}, 247-8, 267-75.
\textsuperscript{93} Anvar-Chenderoff, “Le genre hagiographique,” 41-4; Losensky, "Words and Deeds," 75-6.
\textsuperscript{94} Unlike traditional chains of transmission (\textit{esnâds}), the miracle narratives do not ensure that a particular dictum was transmitted correctly; rather, they confirm the speaker’s sainthood and thus guarantee the saying’s spiritual worth. Cf. J. A. Mojaddedi, \textit{The Biographical Tradition in Sufism: The Ţabaqât Genre from al-Sulamî to Ȧmî} (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2001), 107, 178.
\end{flushleft}
Besides the Quran and the traditions, there are no other words higher than the words of the shaykhs of the path—may God have mercy on them. Their words are the result of feats and states (kâr o ḥâl), and not the fruit of memorization and narration (hefž o qâl); and from clear revelation ('ayân), not from declaration (bayân); and from secrets (asrâr), not from repetition (takrâr); and from divine knowledge ('elm-e ladonnî), not acquired knowledge ('elm-e kasbî); and from boiling (jushidan), not from exertion (kushidan); and from the world of “My lord molded me,” not from the world of “My father taught me,” because they are the inheritors of the prophets—God’s prayers upon them all!

According to ‘Aṭṭâr, these dicta well up spontaneously in the souls of the saints, untainted by the normal human means of generating and transmitting knowledge. Their sayings are not produced through individual effort or acquired through memorization at the feet of human teachers. Instead of repeating the uncertain learning of previous generations, the saints are endowed with knowledge of divine secrets poured directly into their hearts by God. Their speech originates, as ‘Aṭṭâr succinctly puts it, from the world of “My lord molded me” and not “My father taught me.” Their dicta are thus both more significant and more epistemologically secure than normal human discourse: they are products of the “clear revelation” of divine knowledge, while human knowledge is the mere parroting of “declaration” across the generations.

Given its divine origin, saintly speech often takes on a revelatory character in ‘Aṭṭâr’s works and is even portrayed as a form of extra-Quranic inspiration. The saints are, as ‘Aṭṭâr explains in the above quotation, the “heirs to the prophets” and thus God’s delegates on earth in a post-prophetic age. Similarly, near the end of the Memorial’s introduction, the saints are said to be “in the likeness of the prophets,” a claim that is supported with the famous hadith, “The

95. ‘Aṭṭâr, Taṣkerat al-owleyâ, 4.
scholars among my community are like the prophets among the Tribe of Israel.”

Like the prophets, the saints function as exemplars and intercessors, and their sayings are a channel for the continuing divine presence in the world. Of course, the Quran still takes theoretical precedence. As ʿAṭṭār tirelessly reminds his readers, “there is no speech higher than the words of the saints, excepting the Quran and the hadith.”

Saintly dicta are also repeatedly described as a commentary (sharḥ) on the Quran, the assumption being that a commentary, in relation to its object, is ontologically derivative. At the same time, however, commentaries also render their objects accessible and intelligible to new audiences. Many people, ʿAṭṭār explains, are ignorant of Arabic morphology and syntax and thus lack access to the Quran and the hadith. He therefore collected saintly dicta and circulated the Memorial so that both the “elect” and the “masses” could access the spiritual benefits of the Quran and hadith by means of this “commentary.”

In other words, although theoretically subordinate to the holy book, saintly dicta not only provide access to its meanings, but also function as a more immediate and intelligible corpus of inspired speech for a wide swath of ʿAṭṭār’s popular Persian-speaking audience.

Throughout the Memorial’s introduction, ʿAttar casts himself as a careful transmitter, faithfully rendering the saints’ inspired dicta into contemporary Persian without any authorial “contamination.” Except when absolutely necessary “to ward off the misunderstanding of the uninitiated,” he refrains from adding his own commentary or annotations: “I did not think it would be proper (adab nadidam),” he writes, “to place my speech alongside theirs.” Such annotations are, according to ʿAṭṭār, in any case usually unnecessary, as the saints’ words speak

96. Ibid., 8-9.
97. Ibid., 4, 6.
98. Ibid., 4, 8, emphasis mine.
99. Ibid., 7.
100. Ibid., 5.
for themselves: “If anyone needs a commentary, he ought first to look at their words and interpret them again.”

In short, ʿAṭṭār is reluctant to inject his authorial voice into the material and thereby increase the distance between the audience and the text’s saintly subjects. On the contrary, he aims to minimize his own role, so that readers can focus on the words of the saints directly, as if they were seated in one of their preaching sessions or teaching circles. ʿAṭṭār even does away with the esnāds, or authenticating chains of transmission, that are typical of the earlier Arabic hagiographical compilations, including those of Qushayrī, Iṣfahānī, and Sulamī. This is not to suggest that historical accuracy was unimportant to ʿAṭṭār, or that he rejects esnāds on methodological grounds. On the contrary, the transformative power of the dicta depends on the authenticity of their saintly origin, and ʿAṭṭār thus claims to have “exercised utmost caution” to include only authentic sayings and narratives. The traditional scholarly apparatus documenting that process, however, was not included in the text so as to provide ʿAṭṭār’s readers with a more direct and seemingly unmediated encounter with the saints’ inspired words.

Of course, ʿAṭṭār is much more involved in his material than he initially lets on. His translations are often quite free and introduce rather significant shifts of emphasis. And although he disavows editorial commentary in the introduction, any reader will notice that, in fact, he tends to provide quite a bit of his own interpretation. Nevertheless, the establishment of this persona—who transmits without injecting his own voice—is crucial to the texts’ spiritual significance. For ʿAṭṭār and his readers, the saints’ speech is an extension of their persons, so

101. Ibid.
103. ʿAṭṭār, Taṣkerat al-owleyâ, 5.
104. Ibid.
105. Losensky, “Creative Compiler.” Also see p. 85n80.
by providing his reader-listeners with their “unmediated” dicta, he also grants them access to the channels through which God’s blessings continue to flow into the world in a post-prophetic age.

**Homiletic Sincerity and Poetic Persona**

By the nature of the genre, ‘Aṭṭâr is forced to adopt a very different sort of persona in his homiletic maṣnAVIS. In these works, instead of simply transmitting the dicta of spiritual heroes, he admonishes his readers in his own authorial voice. And if these homiletic endeavors are to bear fruit, he must convince his readers to accept him as a spiritual authority and submit to his exhortations. One of the central pillars of homiletic authority is the preacher’s sincerity (ekhlâṣ, ṣedq), which involves a certain alignment between actions, words, and “inner states.”

As Ibn al-Jawzî explains, to be effective a preacher must embody the state of piety to which he verbally calls others. Quite literally, he must practice what he preaches:

> It is necessary for the preacher to eschew the excesses of life and wear modest clothes so that others might imitate him. . . . When the physician himself abstains, his dietary prescriptions are effective, but when he partakes, his admonishments to others do no good. . . . How can the hearts of the people respond to a preacher who goes around in an obese condition and dressed in luxurious clothes so that he might associate with sultans?

Piety here serves a rhetorical purpose—according to Ibn al-Jawzî, exhortations carry more force with an audience when they see that the speaker himself lives in accordance with them. The preacher’s pious displays, however, must not be born out of dissimulation, as Ibn al-Jawzî goes on to explain, “but an expression of genuinely upright motives.” The preacher will then

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108. Ibid., 7/trans. 113.
become a model for emulation, steering his audience towards piety not only with his speech, but through his personal example.\textsuperscript{109}

This model of homiletic authority assumes an oral performance environment, where the audience could see the preacher and evaluate non-verbal signs of his piety; in smaller communities, audiences would also have been likely to know something of the preacher’s personal life and social habits, either directly or through his reputation, and thus be in a position to judge the sincerity of his speech. While ‘Aṭṭār does seem to have preached in Nishapur, and his closest followers likely recognized his religiosity first-hand, he also aspired to disseminate his texts to a wider readership that he could never meet face-to-face. And the maṣnāvis are not simply collections of homiletic material, but authorial literary works that attempt to “textualize” and versify the experience of attending a homiletic session; ‘Aṭṭār must therefore create an authoritative poetic persona capable of standing in for himself, the absent author, through whom he can perform the virtue of sincerity in the literary arena.

‘Aṭṭār’s unifying persona manifests itself in a variety of ways: as we will see in the following chapter, this persona converges with the various teacher-figures in the maṣnāvis’ frame-tales, and in this capacity it narrates anecdotes, interjects moralizing commentary, and delivers the attendant exhortations. The maṣnāvis’ introductory and concluding sections, however, represent especially fecund sites for explicit poetic self-fashioning. Here, ‘Aṭṭār reflexively comments on himself, his motivations, and his poetic project. Because of its overt authorial nature and key structural position, this sort of self-commentary exerts outsize influence on the readers’ hermeneutic processes, cuing their expectations and guiding their retrospective interpretations of the text.\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{109.} On para- and extra-linguistic channels for homiletic communication, see Chapter 3, p. 136-138.
\textsuperscript{110.} Gérard Genette, Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation, trans. Jane E. Lewin and Richard Macksey (Cambridge:
For example, after the conventional doxologies, many maṣnavis contain sections devoted to meta-reflections on the poetic art. In these sections, poets praise the power and value of speech, and, in a courtly context, thereby remind their patrons of their value and suitability for reward. Indeed, these sections often occur very near opening dedications and panegyric praise. ‘Aṭṭār’s Book of Affliction also contains an introductory discourse on speech, but it is devoted to an explicit critique of the patronage economy and associated genres.111 ‘Aṭṭār dismisses panegyre as aesthetically lacking and ethically problematic; at the same time, however, he defends poetry from those religious critics who would dismiss it wholesale.112 According to ‘Aṭṭār, poetry per se is not impious, although it has been misused by those who would make it a vehicle for the flattering of temporal rulers. What is needed is not a rejection of poetry all together, but to reclaim it for religious ends:113

Poetry has become reviled in our age,
Because the mature have left and only the raw remain.
No doubt speech is currently worthless;
Panegyre is abrogated, it is time for wisdom!

Cambridge University Press, 1997), 196-239. Also relevant here are the set of cognitive biases known as the “serial position effect”—the tendency to recall information presented near the beginning and the end of a list better than information presented in the middle. These biases may help explain the power of introductions and conclusions in shaping readers’ impressions. See Andrew M. Colman, A Dictionary of Psychology, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), s.vv. “Primacy Effect,” “Recency Effect,” “Serial Position Effect”; Meir Sternberg, Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 93-7.

111. Moṣibat-nāma, 715-883.
113. Also see Solṭān Valad and Jāmī’s positions on these issues, treated in Franklin Lewis, “The Unbearable Lightness of Rhyming Meter: Jāmī’s Confessions of a Versification Junkie,” in Jāmī and the Intellectual History of the Muslim World: The Trans-Regional Reception of Šāh al-Rahmān Jāmī’s Works, c. 9th/15th-14th/20th, ed. Thibaut d’Hubert and Alexandre Papas (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming); Lewis, Rumi, 174-5.
The poetry of panegyric (madḥ) and jest (hazl) is nothing, and the poetry of wisdom (hekmat) is best, for there is no defect in it.

‘Aṭṭār thus presents his own verse as an alternative to that of his courtly predecessors; his “poetry of wisdom” is aesthetically and ethically superior, and his refusal to associate with kings and compose such frivolous poetry is presented as evidence of his piety and sincerity of intention.

‘Aṭṭār alludes to several specific reasons for his rejection of court patronage, both religious and practical. From a practical standpoint, the position of court poet, like that of other courtiers, was not without personal risk. Princely favor was notoriously fickle, and poets could quickly fall from their patron’s good graces. Those who were suspected of disloyalty could even be executed or imprisoned: the classic example is the Ghaznavid poet Mas’ud-e Sa’d-e Salmān, who was imprisoned multiple times over the course of his career. Likewise, quality literary work could easily go unrewarded in the patronage economy—Sultan Mahmud is said to have given Ferdowsi only a few thousand dirhams for his Book of Kings, a paltry sum for a masterpiece thirty years in the making. Religiously, the more pious members of society have

115. Ibid., 793.
116. In the Conference of the Birds (957-68), the hoopoe delivers a whole discourse devoted to explaining the dangers of associating too closely with princes. Also see Lewis, “Reading, Writing, and Recitation,” 153-4; and Ibn al-Jawzi’s not-so-veiled allusions to the dangers of admonishing kings, Qeṣṣaṣ, 143/trans. 228-9.
117. The imprisonment of Mas’ud-e Sa’d-e Salmān, along with an exploration of the perils of being a court poet, is treated in Sunil Sharma, “Poetics of Court and Prison in the Divān of Mas’ud-e Sa’d-e Salmān” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1999), 14-25, 33-40. Also see Vali-Allāh Zafari, Ḥabsiya dar adab-e fārsi: Az āghāz-e she’r-e fārsi tā pāyān-e Zandiya (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1364 [1984-85]).
118. The standard treatment of the story can be found in Nezāmī-ye ʿArużī, Chahār Maqāla (The Four Discourses), trans. Edward G. Browne (London: E. J. W. Gibb Memorial, 1978), 77-81. In the Divine Book (6369-72), ‘Aṭṭār also criticizes Ferdowsi for his greed and lack of contentment, which led him to enter the patronage economy in the first place.
always been reluctant to accept money from the royal treasury out of concern that it was acquired through taxes that failed to comply with the shariah: ‘Aṭṭār’s Memorial is full of examples of such scrupulousness, often carried to a ridiculous extreme. And besides concerns over the legality of prinely monies, a vague aura of irreligiosity and immorality has always hovered over court life. Much poetic activity would have taken place in wine symposia in pleasure gardens, situations that piety-minded poets like ‘Aṭṭār would doubtlessly have found highly problematic.

Even more than licentious behavior and illegal monies, however, ‘Aṭṭār is concerned with the ethico-spiritual state of those who would accept patronage. The patronage relationship entails, for ‘Aṭṭār, submission to worldly authorities of questionable legitimacy, which places aesthetic and ethical constraints on poets who must then flatter their “unworthy” patrons in the highest terms. At its worst, according to ‘Aṭṭār, such hypocrisy may even constitute a form of hidden idolatry, as he explains in the conclusion to the Conference of the Birds:

Thank God that I am no courtier,
That I am unbound to any reprobate.
Why should I bind my heart to anyone,
And take the name of some degenerate as lord?
I have not eaten the victuals of a tyrant,
Nor have I closed my book with a patron’s name.
My high aspiration suffices for my patron,
Sustenance of body and power of spirit are enough for me.

119. For example, the sister of Beshr-e Ḥāfi is said to have been concerned about inadvertently benefiting from the light cast by the torches of the caliph’s men out on the street at night. ‘Aṭṭār, Taẓkerat al-owleyā, 117.
Subtending this condemnation is the notion that composing encomium for worldly rulers impinges on the rights of God, the ultimate object of praise. ‘Aṭṭâr thus gives thanks that he has not taken any “degenerate” as his “lord” (khodâvand), a term which was regularly applied to God, but which was also widely used in the panegyric verse of ‘Aṭṭâr’s day to refer to patrons in positions of political authority. ‘Aṭṭâr’s implication seems to be that only God is truly worthy of the title: it is borderline idolatrous to accept a human king as “lord” through the institutions of patronage. God furnishes ample sustenance for the body, so there is no need to resort to “the victuals of a tyrant.” He thus takes pride in the fact that the Conference of the Birds is not inscribed with a patron’s name, being instead motivated only by high spiritual aspiration.

Besides his direct condemnations of patronage, ‘Aṭṭâr also illustrates his position through edifying anecdotes. The Book of Affliction’s opening discourse includes a pair of illustrative narratives, formally similar to those found in the body of the maṣnawi, through which ‘Aṭṭâr attempts to conceptualize his own rejection of court patronage in terms of ethical paradigms set by ancient spiritual heroes. The first of these two narratives features Socrates, who is often remembered as a pious ascetic and even a sort of proto-Muslim in Islamicate literatures.¹²²

The wise Socrates, that pure man,
Was walking down the road, on foot, in pain.
A questioner asked him, “The kings of the age
Are all seeking you, but you are nowhere to be found;
You have many followers, demand a horse,
So that you don’t have to go on foot.”

¹²¹ ‘Aṭṭâr, Manṭeq al-ṭayr, 4601-4.
¹²² Ilai Alon, Socrates in Mediaeval Arabic Literature (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 87-96. Also see the anecdote of Socrates on his deathbed, Chapter 4, p. 240.
Socrates said, “The weight of my body on my feet
Is better than the weight of favor on my neck.”

The anecdote illustrates the logic of ‘Aṭṭār’s refusal in accordance with a paradigm of wise withdrawal from political life exemplified by a celebrated pre-Islamic ascetic. Although we may doubt whether all “the kings of the age” were actually seeking ‘Aṭṭār out as they were allegedly seeking Socrates, the story nevertheless constitutes a significant site in ‘Aṭṭār’s project of poetic self-fashioning and self-presentation. Through the example of Socrates, ‘Aṭṭār conceptualizes his rejection of court patronage in terms of an ethos in which freedom from obligation is valued above material wealth and comfort. Moreover, in explaining his actions with reference to Socrates’ paradigmatic asceticism, he appeals to a widely accepted ethical authority to justify his actions. This narrative of a past exemplar thus provides ‘Aṭṭār with a conceptual model for understanding—and persuasively communicating—the moral dimensions of his own life.

Throughout the poem, such anecdotes are almost always followed by short homiletic discourses in which ‘Aṭṭār clarifies their ethical or theological import and enjoins his reader-listeners to take heed and reform themselves accordingly. In this particular case, after the story of Socrates’ refusal to accept a mount, he urges reader-listeners to preserve their freedom and avoid obligations to others, but he also connects this general injunction to his own personal decision to eschew court patronage:

Whatever in the world has a claim on one,
It’s better to be free of it.
Although I might have some eloquence (balâghat),
I only have eloquence in my freedom (farâghat).

123. ‘Aṭṭār, Moṣḥbat-nâma, 815-8.
If I were to enter the orbit of some fool,
Neither eloquence nor fresh verse (she’r-e tar) would remain.
Although the king may be an Alexander,
Only an ass would make himself a slave.

The ethical import of Socrates’ action is thus generalized into a universal sententia, “Whatever in the world has a claim on one / It’s better to be free of it,” which ‘Aṭṭâr then applies to his own poetic situation. He explains that his eloquence is a product of his freedom from obligation, so if he were to participate in the patronage economy, he would have “neither eloquence nor fresh verse.” The passage closes with the assertion that “only an ass would make himself a slave,” a line with a proverbial ring that recalls the issue of Socrates’ mount while also foreshadowing the themes of self-enslavement and animality that run through the following anecdote.

This next anecdote features Hippocrates, or, as he was known in the Islamicate world, Boqrāṭ, who, in the anecdotal literature, is often portrayed as a pious, pre-Islamic ascetic and sage, more-or-less interchangeable with Socrates.125 According to this anecdote, Boqrāṭ inhabited a cave in the wilderness and subsisted solely on grass—“like an animal”—so that he could avoid an ethically problematic life at court:

A king went into the mountains for the hunt.
Boqrāṭ was at that moment in the corner of a cave.
Just like an animal he was eating grass,
Looking this way and that way absentmindedly.
One from among the royal retinue saw him from the road.
He said: “The king has been calling you for a whole lifetime,

124. Ibid., 819-22.
125. Most versions of this story, in fact, feature Socrates as the protagonist. At the same time, however, Hippocrates is said to have refused to join Ardashir-Bahman’s court, which perhaps lead ‘Aṭṭār to conflate the two here. See Shafi’i-Kadkani’s commentary (531n823) and Lutz Richter-Bernburg, “Hippocrates,” in Encyclopaedia Iranica, updated 22 March 2012, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hippocrates.
Socrates and Hippocrates, like the other wise-fool characters of whom 'Atṭār was so fond, engage in socially transgressive behavior for spiritual ends. In the medieval Islamic world, vegetarianism was not a mainstream spiritual practice; at best it was thought a little odd, and at worst heretical, since it denied the favors that God had bestowed on the world. In the beginning of this anecdote, Hippocrates’ vegetarianism seems to be associated with a sub-human, animalistic existence. Like a dumb beast, he inhabits a cave and glances this way and that as he contentedly munches grass. Once confronted by the courtier, however, Hippocrates inverts this animal-human binary: because he is content with an “animalistic” lifestyle, eating grass and sleeping in a cave, he has remained free (āzād) as is proper for a human. The courtier, on the


other hand, is “deluded by the king” and lacks the spiritual fortitude to practice contentment; thus, like an ass, he has willingly accepted the burden of slavery.

Following this anecdote is another self-reflective homily, in which ‘Aṭṭâr again uses the narrative to explicitly justify his rejection of court patronage on ethical grounds. Just as Boqrâṭ could avoid kings’ summons by subsisting on grass, so too ‘Aṭṭâr believes he should resist the patronage economy by practicing contentment and satisfaction:

When a soul is content with this small satisfaction,
What could a king do for him?
What would I do with a group of dissolutes?
How much trouble for one unfixed?
I have my provisions for this moment until my death,
Whatever I could want, I have more than that before me.
What would I do with gold, since I am not Qarun?
How long should I spin about, since I am not the sphere?

Besides justifying his amateurism and developing his pious persona, ‘Aṭṭâr also interprets the previous narrative in a self-reflective way, showing how the poem’s anecdotes can be used to triangulate and assess one’s spiritual standing. The stories of Socrates and Hippocrates do not differ substantially from the hundreds of anecdotes that populate the bulk of the text, but the homilies which follow the latter are almost always directed towards the audience and not applied by ‘Aṭṭâr to himself. Here, however, ‘Aṭṭâr uses the anecdotes to conceptualize and assess his own ethical state: he thus models how to interpret and apply these exempla. For ‘Aṭṭâr, pious heroes like Socrates and Hippocrates are not to be imitated exactly, but rather approached as hyperbolic, illustrative embodiments of pious principles and attitudes. Unlike Hippocrates,

128. ‘Aṭṭâr, Moṣibat-nâma, 830-3.
‘Aṭṭār does not eat grass. On the contrary, it seems that he had some amount of material wealth—in his own words, “I have my provisions for this moment until my death / Whatever I could want, I have more than that before me.” In fact, according to Foruzânfar, ‘Aṭṭār may have even been a landowner in Kadkan. Nevertheless, he still conceptualized the moral dynamics of his life in terms of a paradigm set by the grass-eating Hippocrates. He thus models a hermeneutical mode in which these exemplary figures become signposts for triangulating pious principles and attitudes, if not necessarily templates for direct imitation. Moreover, by using the material to evaluate and assess his own ethical and religious state, he demonstrates his sincerity to his audience. He not only practices what he preaches, but also strives to understand and shape himself through the text’s illustrative anecdotes, just as he expects his reader-listeners to do.

‘Aṭṭār’s most effective demonstrations of his sincerity, however, are to be found—paradoxically—in the proclamations of insincerity that conclude each of the four maṣnāvis. At a discrete point in each conclusion, ‘Aṭṭār shifts from literary self-praise to religious self-criticism in which he renounces his poetic-homiletic project as an inherently self-absorbed and sinful endeavor. He berates himself for merely “speaking” instead of “acting,” and suggests that his work is motivated by a pride in his own poetic talents rather than a sincere homiletic impulse.

The following quotation, taken from the Divine Book, is typical of this sort of discourse:

How long will you speak these subtle words,  
When you must eventually sleep in the dark?  
You are like Abraham in your speech,  
But like Nimrod in your actions!

129. He argues this on the basis of a reference in the Conference of the Birds to “our village” (deh-e mâ); it is not entirely clear to me, however, why this must signify possession and not simply origin. See Foruzânfar, Sharh-e ahvâl-e Ḥāfiz; ‘Aṭṭār, Manṭeq al-ṭayr, 3627.
If you can’t die like a man for the task,
It would be a shame to die a piece of carrion!
How long will you stumble around speech?
Stride forth in ecstasy, if you’re lion-man!
If your heart is eased by speech,
How can it take a name from the states of men?
In the end, this speech is nothing more than a husk,
Strive, like the men, for a state!
You have spent your sweet life
All in speaking, when will you act?
Even if poetry is at the degree of perfection,
If you look carefully, it is still just the menstruation of men.
If you had even a hair of awareness,
You wouldn’t have anything to do with story-telling!
Poetry has always been your idol,
You have no occupation other than idol-worshipping.

At issue is the alleged gap between speech and action, since speech, however lofty and pious it may be, is ultimately useless if not enacted and embodied. Ṭṭṭâr thus berates his heart for being content with speech, the husk of religiosity, at the expense of state (ḥâl) and action. There is even the suggestion that speech and action are mutually exclusive, and that true spiritual progress can only begin once speech has ceased. In condemnation of his excessive blabbering, Ṭṭṭâr goes so far as to proclaim his poetic practice a form of idolatry, an activity that distracts him from God even as it purports to be religiously motivated. Particularly eye-catching is the

131. Ṭṭṭâr, Elâhi-nâma, 6407-16.
132. Court poets who composed mystically minded verse, such as Sanâʾi and Jâmi, also voice varieties of such self-
image of poetry as the “menstruation of men.” The phrase, rooted in a discourse in which spiritual weakness is gendered feminine, was applied to the miracles of the saints—or “the men,” as they were often styled—by those who considered their supernatural acts to be prideful displays of ostentation. In using the term here, ʿAṭṭār suggests that his seemingly pious verse is rooted not in sincere love of God, but a “feminine” self-satisfaction in his own talent and desire for recognition.133

These passages of self-criticism have puzzled commentators, especially because they come on the heels of such fulsome self-praise. Some scholars have tried to reconcile these differences into a stable “attitude” or “philosophy” of poetry, while others have explained them away as cognitive dissonance or the product of an alleged tension between poetry and mysticism.134 All of these positions, however, miss the dynamic, homiletic performativity of ʿAṭṭār’s persona. Self-criticism is a common feature of Islamic popular preaching and reminiscent of Malāmati spirituality, a Khorāsānī movement that stressed the importance of sincerity and the dangers of hypocritical conceit, and encouraged its adherents to actively disavow any pious reputation they might have had. By the tenth century, the Malāmatiya had been subsumed into mainstream sufism—which retained the former’s emphasis on humility and self-accusation in a more tempered form—and from there it filtered into Islamic popular piety more generally.135

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133. Even though the term is clearly negative and intended in the first instance as a form of self-criticism, in this context it simultaneously contains a measure of self-praise since it gestures towards his poetry’s “miraculous” nature. For more on this gendering of spiritual weakness, see Chapter 4, p. 242-260.
the Memorial, Ṭṭṭâr speaks approvingly of various figures associated with the Malâmatiya and narrates stories and sayings that stress their sincerity and humble self-estimation. Similarly, popular preachers associated with Malâmati-style religiosity would often confess their impiety from the pulpit, weep before their audiences, and even refuse to preach on the basis of a self-asserted sinfulness. Such displays did not usually drive audiences away, however; on the contrary, these performances proved the preachers’ sincerity and truthfulness and could therefore inspire even greater devotion among their followers. For example, according to an anecdote found in Ibn al-Jawzi, Abu ʿOsmân al-Ḥiri (d. 910), a Nayshâburi preacher of Malâmati persuasions, one day refused to preach, instead reciting some verses regarding the inability of a sick doctor to cure his patients—the implication being that he considered himself too sinful to exhort others. With this rejection of his own pious reputation, however, the audience was thrown into a religious fervor, making it clear that they found his self-criticism to be proof of his elevated spiritual station and a powerful homiletic act in and of itself.

As we will see in more detail in the next chapter, Ṭṭṭâr adopts the material, tone, and rhetorical strategies of contemporary homiletic practice throughout the maṣnavis. Here it suffices to note that his concluding self-criticism constitutes one last homiletic maneuver, an attempt to demonstrate the sincerity of his poetic persona. By confessing that he fails to live in accordance with his words—and that the very act of speaking may preclude his spiritual progress—Ṭṭṭâr does not invalidate his earlier exhortations, but paradoxically confirms them:

criticism has been noted by Muhammad Isa Waley, “Didactic Style and Self-Criticism in Ṭṭṭâr,” in Lewisohn and Shackle, Spiritual Flight, 215-40.
136. See, for example, the biographies of Hamdun-e Qassâr, Abu Ḥafs Ḥaddâd, and Abu Ṭṭṭâr ʿOsmân al-Ḥiri, et al, 340-49, 350-53, 419-21.
137. For more on this anecdote, see Chapter 3, p. 136.
by recusing himself from the position of poet-preacher, he demonstrates that he is precisely the man for the job.

These concluding sections, like the introductions, allow ‘Atṭâr to reflect on—and thus represent—the poem and his persona in a literary space that exerts considerable influence on how reader-listeners conceptualize their experience. They are thus prime sites of authorial control, through which ‘Atṭâr can emphasize the religious value of his verse and cast himself as a pious, sincere speaker who is authorized to admonish and exhort his reader-listeners. Self-criticism, and the attendant call for silence, also functions to elegantly explain the cessation of the narratorial voice at the text’s end: ‘Atṭâr’s persona has “transitioned” from speaking to acting. In his silence, he thus becomes a model for his audience one last time, reminding them that after they have consumed his speech, they still must embody it in their lives.

Inspiration and Authenticity
Sincerity, as we have seen, entails a certain alignment between words, actions, and inner state, and ‘Atṭâr deploys a variety of rhetorical strategies to cultivate an ethos of sincerity around his poetic-homiletic persona. At times he ventures even further, suggesting that his speech not only aligns with a state of inner piety, but constitutes a direct, “unmediated” outpouring of subjective experience. According to ‘Atṭâr, truly sincere poetry—or perhaps we can speak of an “authentic” poetry here, adapting Trilling’s famous distinction—involves a certain Sturm und Drang.¹³⁸ Unlike the ostentatious and “artificial” encomiums of the court poets, ‘Atṭâr’s poetry is allegedly born out of an inner experience of religious passion, which is then verbally trans-

¹³⁸. Lionel Trilling, Sincerity and Authenticity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972). At the risk of inflicting some violence on Trilling’s nuanced discussion, sincerity is a social virtue whereas authenticity is a private one; sincerity entails an alignment between inner experience and social presence, whereas authenticity entails being “true to one self” without taking social presence into account.
mitted in a pure, transparent language uncontaminated by self-serving rhetorical concerns or social motivations. Such a poetics is problematic on a variety of levels—linguistic, philosophical, and literary—especially because pre-modern Persian verse is, to modern eyes, so obviously governed by a robust set of socially determined conventions. With what justification are spontaneous affective states privileged over carefully wrought rhetoric? Is it even possible that speech could transmit these mental states without “contamination” from the social realm? And how would it be possible to assess whether or not a piece of literary writing is truly authentic, lacking some extra-textual channel into the author’s mind? Such problems are serious indeed, and I have no intention of answering them here. Rather, I aim to explore the rhetorical role that the language of authenticity plays in ‘Aṭṭâr’s works, how it legitimates his speech and affirms its spiritual value. According to this particular strand of ‘Aṭṭâr’s poetic self-presentation, his verse originates in spontaneous religious passion that is immediately poured out onto the page in an unmannered, un-mediated way; thus, by consuming it, the audience might get a “taste” of this passionate state for themselves. At times, ‘Aṭṭâr even suggests that his work is borderline inspired, and he implies a certain convergence between his verse and saintly dicta. Although such a poetic self-assessment may seem, to us, rather naïve, it was a significant component of ‘Aṭṭâr’s authorial persona and by attending to its complexities we can better understand how mystical didactic poetry was consumed and interpreted in pre-modern Sufi communities.

Let us return one last time to the prologue of the Choice Book, where ‘Aṭṭâr boasts that his beautiful verses were born directly out of a subjective experience of painful religious passion:

These verses originate in the experience of passion (kâr-o-oftâdegî), not in artificiality (kâr-sâkhtegi), and they are free from affectation (takallof). I wrote them just as they came and entered my blood. If, one day, the vision (vâqe’a) of those who have experienced passion (kâr-o-oftâdegân) seizes the skirt of your soul, and for several nights you withdraw your head into the collar of
b wilderment, then you will know from which nest these sweet nightingales and sugar-eating parrots have flown: *Whoever doesn’t taste, doesn’t know.*

The quatrains allegedly came to him in the throes of some sort of intense experience, and he set them down in writing immediately without alteration or additional ornamentation. His poems are thus imbued with a simplicity and authenticity of feeling, free from the “artificiality” and “affectation” that contaminates other forms of verse. The implied target here is again the over-wrought, sycophantic poetry of the court poets, whom ‘Aṭṭār, as we have seen, criticizes in the sharpest terms. While their poetry is a mere semantic game, an exercise in rhetorical self-assertion and flattery, his poetry is born out of genuine experience, which he has committed to the page immediately so as to preserve something of that subjective state for his reader-listeners. Nevertheless, although the beautiful “birds” of his speech may provide an inkling of this experience—the “nest” from which they have flown—the painful intensity of ‘Aṭṭār’s passion can only ever be truly understood by those who have been “seized” by it themselves.

For ‘Aṭṭār and the larger tradition in which he worked, poetic ability was often conceived of as an inborn nature (*tab*): a potential innate to certain human beings, that could, through proper training, be activated, manipulated, and deployed as they saw fit. ¹⁴⁰ In contrast to this understanding of poetry as the product of innate talent, however, the quatrains of the *Choice Book* are described as coming to ‘Aṭṭār from outside himself, from a place beyond his

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control. There is, of course, a long tradition of conceptualizing poetry as mantic discourse, from Socrates, who considered poets to be afflicted with divine madness, to the Quran, which recognizes—and belittles—poetry’s supernatural origin in order to mark itself off as a higher form of revelation. In ʿAṭṭār’s poems, as well as those of other Persian poets with mystical inclinations, poetry is often associated with non-prophetic revelation (kashf) and the ecstatic spiritual “states” (ahvâl) bestowed on sufis by God. Likewise, in the above passage, the quatrains are said to “come” to ʿAṭṭār as part of a visionary experience (vâqe’a). They spring from a place known to those who, over the course of several nights, “withdraw [their] head[s] into the collar of bewilderment”: this suggests the practice of meditation (tafakkor), which, as we have seen, was associated with the revelation of divine secrets. Finally, the passage’s concluding proof text mentions “tasting” (zowq), a critical sufi term that refers to the acquisition of knowledge of God through personal experience instead of logical deduction or human transmission. The passage thus emphasizes poetry’s inspired status while recalling ʿAṭṭār’s description of saints’ dicta at the beginning of the Memorial: their speech, too, was said to be the fruit of a divinely bestowed “bubbling” in their souls instead of a product of their own learning.

While it may be difficult to reconcile the careful structure of ʿAṭṭār’s maṣnâvis with the image of an exuberant poet, he nonetheless claims that they, too, arose out of intense affective experiences. According to ʿAṭṭār, the ideal human state is a passionate, painful longing for


143. See p. 91.

the divine that exceeds even the dread of eschatological judgment. In his works’ conclusions, he seeks to demonstrate not only that his own internal state accords with this paradigm, but also that his poetic products were causally produced thereby. The following self-apostrophe, which begins the Book of Affliction’s conclusion, is representative:

What passion is this, O Farid, in the soul?
Wail, from a hundred tongues, “Is there yet more?”
When the grave grinds your body to atoms,
The passion of your soul will not diminish one iota.
If you aim towards the truth with this passion,
You will tear the shroud on the first night.
Since this passion of yours resides in the pure soul,
In this passion, you will bring your head out of the earth.

‘Aṭṭâr’s very being is allegedly infused with a passion for God, a passion that originates not in the physical body, but in the soul. It will thus subsist after death, propelling his soul towards reunion with the divine and animating his actions on the day of resurrection. This passion, however, is a heavy, painful burden. It prompts his body to “wail” in lamentation and ask, “Is there yet more?”—the phrase which, according to the Quran, will be uttered by hell personified on the day of judgement in response to God’s question, “Are you filled?” Furthermore, this painful passion afflicted ‘Aṭṭâr as he produced the poem, and is perhaps even responsible for its composition—thus the title:

Since every verse that I inscribed,
Was an occasion for lamentation,
In affliction (moṣibat) I constructed this assembly (hangâma),
So I gave it the name Book of Affliction.

145. ‘Aṭṭâr, Moṣibat-nâmâ, 7087-90.
146. Quran 50:30.
Be the companion of ‘Aṭṭâr’s pain,
And partake in a hundred thousand treasures.

This painful passion was encoded into the Book of Affliction, which ‘Aṭṭâr conceives of as a social project: an "assembly" in which he calls others to share in the spiritual benefits of his—previously private and individual—religious experience. Similar passages can be found in his other maṣnāvis as well, including the following example from the Conference of the Birds:

O man of the way, don’t look in my book
With an eye for poetry and pride.
With an eye for pain look in my cahier,
So that you might believe even one percent of my pain.

In rejecting the label of "poetry," which he associates with "pretension," ‘Aṭṭâr again has the professional panegyrists in mind. Unlike their insincere verse, devoted to flattery and empty ostentation, ‘Aṭṭâr’s amateur endeavor is allegedly born out of authentic religious pain. And according to him, a sympathetic, mystically minded reader should be able to recover a whiff of that experience through the text.

As was the case in the Choice Book, the maṣnāvis also suggest that ‘Aṭṭâr’s poetry may have an inspired origin. ‘Aṭṭâr, of course, is careful to distinguish between such inspiration and prophecy proper, which is the province of law-givers sent by God to specific communities and has been sealed by Muhammad’s final mission. Much of the introductory chapter on poetry in

147. Ibid., 7121-5.
the *Book of Affliction* is devoted to proving that verse is indeed a legitimate mode of religious discourse while simultaneously distinguishing it from—and maintaining its inferiority to—the speech of true prophets.\(^{149}\) Formally speaking, prophetic speech (and ʿAṭṭār clearly has the Quran in mind here) lacks the strict metrical requirements of verse, which ʿAṭṭār argues is actually a sign of its superiority; prophetic speech is endowed with such a density of signification that it cannot “fit” into a single metrical pattern.\(^{150}\) ʿAṭṭār devotes so much space to this issue precisely because he is eager to maintain prophecy’s superiority in the face of his frequent suggestions that saintly dicta, prophecy, and authentic religious verse all share certain essential characteristics. ʿAṭṭār often praises his own texts in prophetic terms, as when he extols his verse as the “Persian Psalms” (*zabur-e pārśi*), the Psalms being the revealed text that God bestowed on the prophet David.\(^{151}\) Similarly, in the conclusion to the *Book of Affliction*, he refers to the poem as “the most beautiful story” (*aḥsan al-qeṣṣa*), a phrase reminiscent of the Quranic epithet for the tale of Joseph.\(^{152}\) And in the introduction to the same work, he declares panegyric to be abrogated (*mansukh*) by his own “poetry of wisdom” (*sheʿr-e ḥekmat*) and thereby casts his literary-historical intervention in terms of prophetic procession.\(^{153}\) These metaphors carry multiple significations and their primary function is not necessarily to claim an inspired status. The comparison to the Psalms suggests beauty and lyricism, and the allusion to the Quranic tale of Joseph is intended as a rebuttal to those who would label ʿAṭṭār a mere storyteller (*qeṣṣa-gu*). Nonetheless, such metaphors rely on—and reinforce—a certain parallelism between ʿAṭṭār’s poetry and revealed texts. These intimations of an inspired origin were picked

\(^{150}\) Ibid., 746-73.
\(^{151}\) Ibid., 7144; ʿAṭṭār, *Divān-e ʿAṭṭār, ghazal* 39.
\(^{152}\) ʿAṭṭār, *Moṣibat-nāma*, 7107. The Quranic phrase is “*aḥsan al-qiṣṣa*” (12:3); ʿAṭṭār has changed it slightly for metrical reasons.
\(^{153}\) Ibid., 738, 793.
up by later interpreters, such as the fifteenth-century biographer and anthologist Dowlat-Shâh, who articulates ʿAṭṭâr’s ecstatic inspiration in less uncertain terms. “The poetic craft (shâ’eri) is not ʿAṭṭâr’s way,” he writes, “On the contrary, his speech is composed of inspirations from the unseen (vâredât-e ghayb).”

In any case, ʿAṭṭâr’s comparisons of his poems with sacred prophetic texts—whether intended as a boast of eloquence or an implied claim to divine inspiration—smacks of a certain egoism and self-assertion that seems to fly in the face of the Malâmati demand for a sincere humility and selflessness. In this sense, the comparisons recall the other forms of self-praise that we have identified as hallmarks of ʿAṭṭâr’s poetic self-presentation, including his reflections on the beauty of his verse, his pious rejection of panegyre, and his claims of spiritual efficacy. As we have seen, however, after indulging in such fulsome self-praise, ʿAṭṭâr forcefully rejects it as hypocritical and self-motivated, and yields to the call to silence. ʿAṭṭâr thus walks a thin line, promoting his verse as authentically inspired, but never too explicitly or without a subsequent display of sincere humility. These two discursive trends neither cancel each other out nor work completely in parallel, but intersect and interweave as sometimes complementary, sometimes competing dimensions of ʿAṭṭâr’s complex literary persona.

The presence of such a persona is one of the factors that unifies ʿAṭṭâr’s works into authorial literary artifacts instead of simply open collections of homiletic material. The audience is likely to sense a certain intentionality behind his words and to understand them as having been shaped by his personality—a personality that they will understand in large part on the basis of his own self-presentations. Not only is the text “spoken” by a particular persona, but it also encodes a specific subject position from which reader-listeners are summoned to the poem.

154. Samarqandi, Taḵkerat al-shoʿarâ, 323.
according to an implicit theory of homiletic communication. These all function as tools of authorial control, which allowed ʿAṭṭār to address a larger Sufi public outside of his immediate textual community in Nishapur with some confidence that his message would be delivered. His most ingenious strategy of authorial control, however, was the frame-tale structure itself, which, as we will see in the next chapter, portrays an idealized speaker and a group of recipients in an imagined oral performance setting, through which ʿAṭṭār can further manipulate his own constructed relationship with his readers.
Chapter III

Preaching Through Text

ʿAṭṭār’s didactic maṣnavis, like those of his predecessors Sanāʿi and Neẓâmi, contain hundreds of edifying anecdotes pointed with interpretive exhortations that explain and amplify their ethical and theological points. But unlike the works of his predecessors, three of ʿAṭṭār’s four didactic maṣnavis are structured around overarching frame-tales that feature fictional characters who narrate the anecdotes and deliver the exhortations typical of the genre. This results in an instance of what narratologists call “intra-diegetic narration”—that is, narration within narration.1 The most elaborate of ʿAṭṭār’s frame-tales belongs to the Conference of the Birds which recounts the non-liturgical, hortatory sermons of the hoopoe as he attempts to convince an audience of birds to journey towards their king, the Simorgh. The poem’s embedded, “hypo-diegetic” anecdotes are thus not spoken directly by ʿAṭṭār’s “extra-diegetic” poetic persona as they are in Sanāʿi and Neẓâmi’s maṣnavis, but represent the hoopoe’s “intra-diegetic” preaching.

The birds’ quest for the Simorgh can be easily read as an allegory of the sufi’s journey towards God, and scholarly discussions of the frame-tale have tended to focus on the various theological implications of such an allegorical reading.2 No sustained investigation has been made, however, into the poem’s representation of homiletic performance, even though the bulk

of its narration is devoted to the hoopoe’s sermonizing, and, as we shall see, such representations are key to the success of ʿAṭṭār’s poetic project. Implicit in his portrayal of these practices is an understanding of homiletic speech as powerfully perlocutionary, even therapeutic; it alters its recipients’ valuations and attitudes, setting them on the “straight path” and ideally transforming their entire mode of being.\(^3\) By affirming the perlocutionary effect of oral homiletic speech, ʿAṭṭār stakes a claim for the Conference of the Birds’ own transformative power, aided by the self-reflexive potential of the frame-tale structure.\(^4\) Through its nested representations of paraenetic speech-events, ʿAṭṭār reinforces the homiletic axis between his own narratorial persona and his readers, and thereby influences the terms of the work’s reception.

By constructing an imagined performance context for the embedded anecdotes, the frame-tale also helps to compensate for the abstracted nature of the literary text. A homily’s meaning is determined not by verbal signs alone, but also by gesture and situational context, neither of which can be easily captured in a textual medium. ʿAṭṭār’s frame-tales, however, partly offset this deficiency by creating an imagined performance situation, complete with a developed speaker and a responsive audience: readers are thereby invited to imagine themselves among the birds listening the hoopoe, and thus to approach the poem as a textual simulation of an aural homiletic experience. And this simulated orality paradoxically allows ʿAṭṭār more control over his text’s message: the work is no longer an open collection of anecdotes, but a structured literary experience regulated through the accompanying homilies and the

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3. For more on therapeutic speech and the medicinal metaphor, see Chapter 2, p. 68-88.
4. The frame-tale structure is often used as a vehicle for reflection on the act of narration and storytelling. Both the Seven Viziers (Sendbūd-nāma) and the One Thousand and One Nights (Alf layla wa-layla), for instance, deal with themes of entertainment and storytelling and their intersections with gender and power. In the Conference of the Birds, too, we find a meditation on homiletic storytelling as a particular mode of discourse.
hoopoe’s fictional performance. The frame-tale thus grants ‘Aṭṭār a new tool of authorial control while it simultaneously endows the work with increased perlocutionary force.

The present chapter will thus attend to the rhetorical implications of the frame-tale structure and explore the ways in which its representation of homiletic discourse shapes the poem’s didacticism. We will first survey the history of the homiletic maṣnawi and the frame-tale device, before overviewing contemporary practices of popular preaching. Next, we will show how these practices constitute the armature of the frame-tale, which assumes the transformative power of homiletic speech. We will then examine how the frame-tale controls the meanings that readers might derive from individual, hypo-diegetic anecdotes and how it reinforces the paraenetic rhetorical stance of the poem as a whole. Finally, the chapter will conclude with an analysis of the poem’s closing anecdote, in which the birds’ diegetic actions are reflected in, and perhaps determined by, an embedded, hypo-diegetic narrative featuring the prophet Joseph. Through this blending of narrative levels, ‘Aṭṭār meditates on the transformative power of edifying story-telling.

**Homiletic Maṣnavis and the Frame-Tale Structure**

The *Conference of the Birds* belongs to a class of texts often referred to as “didactic maṣnavis,” a well-developed genre by ‘Aṭṭār’s time. The maṣnawi form consists of rhyming couplets, which frees poets from the constraints of mono-rhyme and allows them to compose sprawling works reaching thousands of verses. Didactic maṣnavis make good use of the form’s potential for length: they often contain hundreds of edifying anecdotes, representing a wide variety of material, accompanied by direct exhortations to piety and virtue. The genre appears

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to have crystallized very early. Its main characteristics can already be recognized in extant fragments from a tenth-century mašnavi, Abu Shakur Balkhi’s Wondrous Book (Āfarin-nāma); the work seems to have consisted of gnomic observations on practical morality and exhortations to wisdom and virtue, as well as short narratives and animal fables.⁶ Being of such an early date, it unsurprisingly lacks the mystical outlook and Islamic sensibilities of its successors; nevertheless, it presages some of the thematic concerns and rhetorical techniques of later didactic mašnavis, such as those of Sanâ’i and Nezâmi, both of which display a decidedly more Islamic orientation. ʿAttār mentions Sanâ’i by name, so it seems reasonable to assume that he was familiar with the latter’s poetry, although this does not constitute definitive proof.⁷ And as we have already seen, even though he does not explicitly mention Nezâmi (d. 1209), several scholars have argued that ʿAttār’s works bear traces of his influence.⁸ One might even speculate the frame-tale structure represents an attempt to combine the narrative unity of Nezâmi’s romantic mašnavis with the didactic breadth of his Treasury of Secrets (Makzan al-asrâr) and Sanâ’i’s Garden of Truth (Ḥadiqat al-ḥaqiqa). In any case, ʿAttār’s didactic mašnavis follow the same general format as these earlier generic exemplars although he tends to devote more space to anecdotes and tales than Sanâ’i, further evidence of his personal predilection for narrative elements that is also manifest in his innovative use of the frame-tale.⁹ Reflective of broader po-

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7. ʿAttār explicitly references Sanâ’i three times in Moṣḥabat-nāma, 717, 4603, 7142.


etic trends, the sufiistic ethos, already latent in Sanâ‘i and Nezâmi, comes to the fore in ‘Aṭṭâr and his poetic successors, most obviously Rumi, whose Spiritual Couplets (Maṣnâvie ma’navi) was allegedly modeled on ‘Aṭṭâr’s Conference of the Birds.¹⁰

These texts participate in a broad current of didacticism that runs throughout the Persian literary tradition and across its traditionally defined genres and forms. This represents a continuation of the strong paraenetic orientation found in many Middle Persian texts, especially the andarz (testament) literature, which consists of the wise maxims of past sages and kings in the domains of practical morality, religion, and statecraft.¹¹ During the tenth century, this mode of discourse was quickly incorporated into the nascent New Persian literary tradition: the Wondrous Book (Âfarin-nâma), for example, is often described as a versified, New Persian andarz on the grounds that its surviving fragments enjoin wisdom and pious living, invoke the authority of wise predecessors, and display a penchant for generalizing sententiae.¹² Indeed, the extant corpus of tenth-century Persian poetry as a whole is often concerned with practical, secular wisdom, delivered with pith, wit, and grace: it represents a tradition of elegant truth-telling which exhorts its audience towards proper living.

In the ninth century, even before the New Persian literary tradition had begun, the legacy of Middle Persian andarz was already being incorporated into Arabic through the as-

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¹⁰ “Comparative Notes,” 372.
¹¹ Jâmi, Naθâν, 470.
¹² Safa, “Andarz in New Persian.”
cetic poetry (zohdiyât) of the Abbasid poets. This poetic genre, associated especially with Abû’l-‘Atâhiyya (d. c. 825), counsels detachment from worldly matters and remembrance of death, often in simple, direct language. Although many specimens of ascetic poetry are completely “secular” in a manner consistent with the andarz inheritance, others display an explicitly Islamic orientation; ascetic verses were often used by preachers, and some of the genre’s earliest practitioners’ were said to be preachers themselves. Arabic ascetic verse in turn fed back into the nascent New Persian literary tradition, where, in conjunction with indigenous Persian forms of moralizing verse, it gave rise to specifically Islamic forms of Persian exhortative poetry in the eleventh century; significant figures in this new, religious Persian poetry include Nâṣer-e Khosrow and, slightly later, Sanâ‘i. Much like the early wisdom poetry of the tenth century, their verse exhorts readers to attend to their own mortality and avoid excessive attachment to world, but within an explicitly Islamic ontology, ethics, and discursive tradition. Their exhortations and admonishments remain rooted in concrete analogy and imagistic description, capped by maxims and proverbs. Instead of creating new knowledge through logical deduction, they aim to present already agreed upon religious truths in a new, rhetorically more forceful light.

Such a stance has been labeled “homiletic” by de Bruijn, in the sense that the poet adopts the rhetorical position of a “preacher on his pulpit, addressing the people at his feet.”

15. Kennedy, “Zuhdiyya.”
17. De Bruijn, Piety and Poetry, 164-70; De Bruijn, “Preaching Poet,” 96. Also see Th. Emil Homerin, “Preaching
Like the preacher, the homiletic poet deals with topics of Islamic piety already familiar to his audience; his primary aim is not to instruct, but to persuade, in the hopes of convincing his listeners to adopt a more religiously valuable manner of being.¹⁸ De Bruijn’s notion of homiletic poetry can be productively applied to many different poetic forms, as he himself notes, but it is especially apt in the case of didactic maṣnāvis, whose use of illustrative narrative material finds its counterpart in contemporary preaching practices.

Soon after the Arab conquests, storytellers-cum-preachers (qoṣṣāṣ) began to play a critical role in the spread and formation of a distinct Islamic identity, interpreting the Quran and exhorting their listeners to piety through exemplary stories of Muhammad, his companions, and pre-Islamic prophets (the latter often derived from Christian or Jewish sources).¹⁹ The practice continued in ‘Aṭṭār’s time, when the terms “preaching” (vaʿz) and “story-telling” (qaṣaṣ) were used more-or-less interchangeably in reference to non-liturgical homiletic assemblies (as opposed to the liturgically mandated Friday khoṭba) conducted in semi-public spaces, like mosques and khânaqâhs, and directed towards a popular audience.²⁰ According to manuals of hortatory preaching, and corroborated by the few specimens that have been preserved, these


¹⁸ De Bruijn, ”Preaching Poet,” 87.


sermons usually included both direct exhortation and narrative exempla. The famous preacher Ibn al-Jawzī even compiled collections of anecdotes he deemed appropriate for preaching, including individual volumes devoted to the virtuous acts of ‘Omar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, ‘Omar b. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, Hasan al-Baṣrī, Fożayl b. ‘Eyāz, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, Ma’ruf al-Karkhi, Beshr al-Ḥāfi, Ebrâhīm b. Adham, and “other pious men” (ṣāliḥūn). And although such sermons could be delivered to huge crowds, this form of discourse scaled to more intimate settings as well. Sufi shaykhs, for example, would hold smaller sessions for their disciples, some of which have been recorded in works like Rumi’s For What It’s Worth (Fihi mā fihī) or Amir Ḥasan Sijzi’s Maxims of the Heart (Favâ’ed al-fo’âd). Although smaller mystical sessions were often softer in tone and would touch on more esoteric topics than a large public sermon, they nonetheless recall the material and presentation of their more public cousins, displaying the same pedagogical orien-

21. The term vaʾz can be used in several different senses. As a noun, it can refer to a sermon in general, and as a verbal-noun, the activity of sermonizing more broadly. It is in this latter sense that vaʾz is often be equated with qaṣṣa. Ibn al-Jawzī attempts to distinguish between the two (9-11/trans. 96-8), but his discussion seems more a scholastic exercise than reflection of actual use, and he himself admits (with some reluctance) that the terms have become more or less interchangeable; on this issue also see Berkey, Popular Preaching, 14. In a more narrow sense, vaʾz also refers to a specific, formally bounded section of the sermon. According to Swartz, Ibn al-Jawzī divided the sermon into four main sections: a benediction (khoṭba), a pious story or stories (qeṣṣa), and then the homily proper (vaʾz), which consists of exhortations and admonishments often thematically linked to the prior anecdotes. After the vaʾz the preacher would conclude with closing verses (khawātim). Certainly, not all sermons would follow Ibn al-Jawzī’s formula exactly; nevertheless, it shows that vaʾz, in addition to signifying the sermon as a whole, could refer to one of its specific sections (for more on this schema see Swartz, “Arabic Rhetoric”). Finally, the term vaʾz can also be used as a generic/modal term designating discourse that resembles that of the preachers; it is in this sense that medieval littérateurs speak of “homiletic poetry” (sheʾr-e vaʾz). Like the medieval sources, I use ‘homily’ and ‘homiletic’ to refer to sermons in general, the act of preaching, a specific exhortative section of the non-liturgical sermon, and a particular rhetorical stance. The intended sense is usually apparent from context, and if it is not I am careful to specify further.

22. Ibn al-Jawzī, Qusṣās, 145-46/trans. 231-33. In addition to these collections, Ibn al-Jawzī also mentions that he produced several compendia of exhortations and admonishments (vaʾz in the narrow sense of the sermon’s explicitly exhortative section), as well the Sifat al-safwa, a collection of hagiographical anecdotes that ‘Aṭṭār may have used as source for the Memorial and which Ibn al-Jawzī recommends to aspiring preachers as a book “that includes narratives concerning the ascetics and pious men from the time of our Prophet up to the present.” On the link between textual collections of exempla and the practice of preaching, see Talmon-Heller, Islamic Piety, 218.
tation and consisting largely of edifying narratives and similitudes, coupled with interpretive exhortations.

Such material also recalls the content of many didactic maṣnavis, which also contain exemplary stories about early pious heroes and similar figures, coupled with interpretive exhortations. This is not to claim that didactic maṣnavis are necessarily genetic descendants of popular sermons, but rather to suggest that the genre’s tone, rhetorical stance, and subject matter would, for most medieval audiences, evoke the sessions of hortatory preachers, and that these associations would inform their experience of the text. For the medieval reader-listener, the implied setting of a didactic maṣnavi like the Garden of Truth (Ḥadiqat al-haqīqa) or the Treasury of Secrets (Makhzan al-asrār) was a hortatory preaching session; the poet’s primary persona was that of a mystically minded preacher, sermonizing from atop a pulpit or at the head of a teaching circle, and his reader-listeners were invited to imagine themselves as members of the audience assembled around him.

Unlike previous poets, however, ʿAṭṭâr was not content to merely imply a homiletic setting for his didactic maṣnavis; instead, he depicted elaborate (fictional) homiletic settings within the poems themselves by means of the frame-tale device. The frame-tale, a literary technique possibly of Indian origin, was well established in Persian and Arabic literatures by ʿAṭṭâr’s time and often used to structure prose story collections. One of the earliest examples of the frame-tale structure in Islamicate letters is Kalila and Demna, a story cycle first recorded in Sanskrit and best known through Ebn al-Moqaffa’ś Arabic translation from a lost Middle

Persian version. It features two jackals who serve as courtiers in the court of the lion-king, where they narrate fabulistic stories on practical morality and the art of statecraft; it is often considered an example of “mirrors for princes” literature. Several New Persian versions were also produced, including a versification by Rudaki, but only a few scattered verses have survived. Indian origins have also been suggested for other Perso-Arabic collections unified by the frame-tale device, such as the Seven Viziers (Sendbād-nāma) and the Book of the Parrot (Ṭuṭi-nāma), both of which contain entertaining stories of an often ribald nature. The most famous Islamicate story collection is, of course, the One Thousand and One Nights, versions of which seem to have circulated in Arabic from at least the ninth century onwards. It features a frame-narrative of Indo-Persian origin, in which the protagonist, Shahrazād, repeatedly delays her own execution through the narration of entertaining tales; these embedded narratives include


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stories of Indian, Persian, and Arabic origin, likely incorporated into the collection at different points in its development. By the thirteenth century, the frame-tale device and many of these very same story cycles were also popular in Europe: both the Seven Viziers and Kalila and Demna were translated into Castilian in the 1250s, after which the frame-tale structure was used to great effect by Boccaccio and Chaucer.

ʿAṭṭâr’s innovation lies in his application of the frame-tale structure to the mystical didactic maṣnawi, through which he unifies its diverse anecdotes and homilies and situates them in an imagined performance context. Unlike the Garden of Truth (Ḥadiqat al-ḥaqiq) or Treasury of Secrets (Makhzan al-asrâr), the anecdotes and exhortations in the Conference of the Birds are cast as the intra-diegetic utterances of the hoopoe, the frame-tale’s fictional protagonist. In the style of a popular preacher delivering a large public sermon, the hoopoe exhorts an assembly of birds to undertake the arduous journey towards the Simorgh. The bulk of the poem is devoted to these homiletic performances, by means of which the hoopoe ultimately succeeds in prodding his listeners onto the spiritual path. The poem’s various hypo-diegetic anecdotes thus unfold in an imagined communicative situation, complete with a fictional speaker, setting, and a responsive audience.

The Performance of Preaching
In constructing this fictional homiletic situation, the Conference of the Birds does not exhaustively catalog every aspect of the hoopoe’s performance; instead, it relies on the prior knowledge and experience of its reader-listeners, who are required to fill in the necessary gaps. This would not have been a problem for ʿAṭṭâr’s medieval audiences, most of whom would have

likely attended homiletic assemblies (*majâles-e va’z*) themselves, but our own knowledge of such practices is much more limited. Oral performance events are temporarily bounded and inherently fleeting, and thus notoriously difficult to reconstruct, even for modern ethnographers equipped with advanced recording equipment and sophisticated notation systems. And for those of us studying medieval phenomena, we must rely on pre-modern texts whose primary aim was certainly not the accurate description of ephemeral “happenings.”

Only a few homiletic assemblies were ever committed to text, and while they may include the sermon’s verbal message (or a reconstruction thereof), they do not often indicate the larger situational context, the preacher’s gestures and style of delivery, or the reaction of the audience. Besides individual sermon-texts, a number of works were compiled that functioned as treasuries of material for preachers to memorize and use in their sessions; these sources can help clarify a typical sermon’s content, but they too have little to say regarding performance and reception. Historical and hagiographical anecdotes, however, and especially travelers’ accounts, often furnish contextualizing information and performance details not found in the sermon-texts or homiletic treasuries. Preachers also wrote manuals for their craft, most notably Ibn al-Jawzi’s *Story-tellers and Preachers* (*Kitâb al-quṣṣâṣ wa’l-mudhakkirîn*), which provide a rare glimpse into how they approached and conceptualized their art. Through these sources we can begin to reconstruct, however tentatively, the central characteristics of Islamic homiletic performance in the eastern Islamic lands during ‘Aṭṭâr’s age.


Public homiletic assemblies took place in a variety of settings: in mosques, madrasahs, and khânaqâhs, or their attached courtyards; in shrines and cemeteries; or when the session was sponsored by a private donor, in the courtyard of a palace or residence.\(^{33}\) Popular preachers like Ibn al-Jawzî and Aḥmad-e Ghazzâli could attract huge crowds, and the hoopoe’s assembly is hyperbolically described as consisting of one hundred thousand attendees.\(^{34}\) The preacher would usually ascend a pulpit, especially in these larger gatherings, increasing his visibility and marking him as a spiritual authority. According to Ibn al-Jawzî, immediately after mounting the pulpit, the preacher should open the session with praise of God and Quranic recitation, performed either by himself or a professional reciter (moqri). The traveller Ibn Jubayr, who witnessed three of Ibn al-Jawzî’s sermons in Baghdad, describes twenty reciters seated before the famous preacher, chanting in rounds.\(^{35}\) The recitation is followed by eulogy of the prophet (sanâ), a prayer for the reigning caliph and his subjects (do‘ā), and what Ibn al-Jawzî calls a “khoṭba” (pl. “khoṭob”), a benediction of rhymed prose in praise of God, usually climaxing in a Quranic verse or phrase; if the preacher does not have the skills to compose one himself, Ibn al-Jawzî suggests memorizing one (he even circulated collections of his own khoṭob appropriate for memorization in works like the Best of the Vials [Ru‘ūs al-qawārîr]).\(^{36}\) The Quranic recitation and rhyming khoṭba endow the performance with a ritual quality and cultivate a sense of pious awe and wonder, encouraging audience attention and receptivity to the sermon proper.

\(^{33}\) The sponsored sessions were often held in or near the residence of the patron but would be open to the public. For example, Ibn al-Jawzî often preached for the caliph al-Mostażî in a palace courtyard near Bâb Badr; the gates would be opened and mats would be spread on the ground for the people to sit on, while the caliph would watch from a belvedere above. See Ibn Jubayr, Riḥlat Ibn Jubayr (Beirut: Dâr Ṣâdir, 1964), 198; Swartz, “Rules of Popular Preaching,” 226, 234, 236n10.

\(^{34}\) ‘Attâr, Manteq al-tayr, 1659.


(vaʿz), which tends to be more discursive and didactic than the opening material; it usually consists of Qur’anic exegesis along with related exhortations to pious behavior and “stories of pious men” (ḥikāyat al-ṣāliḥin).

Throughout the course of the performance, the preacher seeks to cajole, entice, browbeat, and generally prod the audience towards a more pious way of life. Invoking God’s wrath and punishment was considered an especially effective means of inducing pious behavior and constraining the “natural human disposition” that tends towards “corroding pleasures and frivolous preoccupations.” The audience, for their part, would often respond to the preacher’s discourse with displays of intense affect and proclamations of repentance, thereby registering its salubrious effect on their own souls. During particularly intense moments, some listeners would raise their hands upwards signaling their engagement and approval of the material. Others would demonstrate their repentance by publicly cutting their forelocks, or having the preacher do it for them, recalling Jewish, Christian, and Greek traditions of initiation, penance, and sacrifice. Ibn al-Jawzī himself boasts of having “cut off the hair of more than ten thousand lax young men” over the course of his career, a number which seems hyperbolic. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that Ibn al-Jawzī engaged in the practice. Ibn Jubayr, the famed traveller, describes a sermon that Ibn al-Jawzī delivered in Baghdad, after which he snipped the forelocks of repentant young men who then fainted out of the intensity of the experience.

39. The motion of ‘raising the hands’ (rafiʿ al-yadayn) can be traced back to pre-Islamic practices of prayer and supplication, but it also evokes the gestures of Islamic ritual prayer. Its use in in hortatory assemblies, like weeping and ecstatic movements, was sometimes contested, but Ibn al-Jawzī seems to have approved. See Swartz’s long note on the subject in his translation of Ibn al-Jawzī’s Quṣṣāṣ, 120-21n5.
42. Ibn Jubayr, Rihla, 198.
Such displays of extreme affect, including weeping, fainting, and ecstatic movements seem to have been common, if contested, modes of audience response. Judging from the extant anecdotes and treatises, weeping was nearly ubiquitous in the assemblies, especially when preachers admonished listeners to consider their own sins and reminded them of the terrible fate in store for those who violate God’s law.\(^43\) Crying has a long history as a spiritual practice in late antique and medieval religiosity—a whole class of early Muslim ascetics were known as “the weepers” (bakkāʿun)—so its appearance in hortatory assemblies is unsurprising.\(^44\) Ecstatic behavior (vajd) is also reported, similar to that which occurred in sufi samāʿ ceremonies; attendees would allegedly flail about, striking each other and themselves, and sometimes even ripping off their clothing.\(^45\) Some were said to fall down in swoons and even die.\(^46\) These intense displays of affect were a focus of much scholarly debate: in general, Ibn al-Jawzī did not approve of them, not because he thought the audience should remain unmoved by the preacher, but because he worried that these particular practices were often feigned and insincere, and that ecstatic movements could lead to a potentially lascivious mingling of the sexes. He does not condemn them outright, but suggests that, in most cases, they are to be discouraged.\(^47\) On the question of crying, Abū Ḥāmid Ghazzālī is more permissive, allowing it on the part of both the preacher and the audience.\(^48\) Sībṭ b. al-Jawzī (d. 1256) even considered the audience’s weep-

\(^{43}\) Jones, Power of Oratory, 243-4; Talmon-Heller, Islamic Piety, 141-4.


\(^{45}\) Ibn al-Jawzī, Quṣṣāṣ, 95/trans. 174-75. We should keep in mind that Ibn al-Jawzī opposed these practices as we read his descriptions.


\(^{48}\) Pedersen, “The Islamic Preacher: Wāʿīz, Mudhakkir, Qāṣṣ,” 247.
ing to be the sign of a sermon’s efficacy, and he boasts of his own ability to reduce great men to tears.\textsuperscript{49} In any case, despite scholarly debates over their legitimacy, these practices appear to have been widespread. Indeed, as the accounts of Ibn Jubayr show, the assemblies of Ibn al-Jawzī were full of weeping and ecstatic displays, even though he opposes them in his writings.

Various rhetorical devices were used to embellish the sermon and increase its persuasive power and affective force; at the same time, however, there was some anxiety that excessive ornamentation—especially rhyming prose—could devolve into frivolous ostentation and distract the audience from the intended meaning.\textsuperscript{50} According to Ibn al-Jawzī, simple, unadorned statements like “Praise be to God” and “Fear God” were unlikely to carry much emotive weight—some embellishment was needed, especially in the kḥoṭba, to shock listeners into a more visceral understanding.\textsuperscript{51} “Those who have studied the Quran and its allusions (kināya), metaphors (tajawwuz), and figurative speech (istiʿāra),” he writes, “know what an impact eloquent speech can have on the hearts of people.”\textsuperscript{52} Thus, preachers should strive for eloquence in their own kḥoṭbas, including the use of rhyme, in order to maximize their efficacy.\textsuperscript{53} At the same time, however, he discourages rhyme in the prayer (doʿā) that precedes the kḥoṭba, which is intended to be a spontaneous outpouring of an “inner burning desire” and thus incompatible

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\textsuperscript{49} Tsalmon-Heller, \textit{Islamic Piety}, 141-2.
\textsuperscript{50} Jones, \textit{Power of Oratory}, 94-8.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibn Jubayr comments explicitly on the quality of Ibn al-Jawzī’s rhyming prose kḥoṭbas in the \textit{Rihla}, 198.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibn al-Jawzī, \textit{Quṣṣāṣ}, 138/trans. 222. Throughout this chapter, translations from Ibn al-Jawzī’s \textit{Quṣṣāṣ} are adapted from Swartz.
\textsuperscript{53} Many of Rumi’s sermons also begin with Arabic kḥoṭbas in rhymed prose. The practice has clear parallels in textual prose discourse; books of all genres usually begin with opening benedictions, often rhyming, which can subtly shape readers’ expectations. See Baki Tezcan, “The Multiple Faces of the One: The Invocation Sections of Ottoman Literary Introductions as a Locus for the Central Argument of the Text,” \textit{Middle Eastern Literatures} 12, no. 1 (April 2009): 27-41; Aziz K. Qutbuddin, “A Literary Analysis of Tahmīd: A Relational Approach for Studying the Arabic-Islamic Laudatory Preamble,” in \textit{Reflections on Knowledge and Language in Middle Eastern Societies}, ed. Bruno De Nicola, Yonatan Mendel, and Husain Qutbuddin (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010).
\end{flushright}
with the artificiality of rhyming prose.\textsuperscript{54} According to Abū Ḥāmid Ghazzālī, preachers should limit the amount of rhyming prose in each homily to a mere two sentences, since the Prophet himself considered it an “affectation” (\textit{takallof}) and an example of “mannerism” (\textit{taṣanno}).\textsuperscript{55} Ghazzālī is more permissive regarding the use of metered verse in sermons, however, which by all accounts was very widespread. Well-timed verses could function as proof texts, concluding the discussion at hand while endowing it with the ring of proverbially-accepted truth. According to Ghazzālī, there is nothing objectionable in the occasional use of poetry in this way, as either “evidence” (\textit{esteshhād}) or “epimythium” (\textit{este’nās}) for a particular moral or piece of wisdom.\textsuperscript{56} But amatory verses, which sufistic preachers often used to illustrate a mystical longing for God, were likely to be misunderstood by the common people and thus best restricted to more controlled settings. Ibn al-Jawzī, similarly, commends the use of “ascetic poetry,” but councils against the recitation of verses containing erotic or wine-themes, which were likely to be misinterpreted and incite lust in the hearts of simple-minded listeners.\textsuperscript{57} Nevertheless, at times he himself recited such poetry, and to great emotive effect: according to Ibn Jubayr, Ibn al-Jawzī declaimed both ascetic and amatory verses (\textit{ashʿār min al-nasīb}) in a sermon delivered at the caliphal palace, which “ignited hearts in ecstasy (\textit{wajd}).”\textsuperscript{58}

In addition to its formal rhetorical features, a homily derived a great part of its meaning and persuasive power from the extra- and paralinguistic aspects of the preacher’s perfor-

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\item \textsuperscript{54} Ibn al-Jawzī, \textit{Quṣṣāṣ}, 138/trans. 222.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Ghazzālī, \textit{Iḥyāʾ uṭūm al-dīn}, 1:59.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 1:60.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Ibid.; Ibn al-Jawzī, \textit{Quṣṣāṣ}, 115, 140/trans. 199-200, 224. Regarding these issues also see Homerin, “Preaching Poetry,” 87-90. Abu Šaʿīd, the famous eleventh-century mystical preacher, also seems to have been criticized for his use of verses on the pulpit; see Ebn Monavvar, \textit{Asrār al-towḥīd}, 1:68-69.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Ibn Jubayr, \textit{Rihla}, 199. Homerin (89-90) points out that the verses quoted by Ibn Jubayr, although amatory, are not explicitly sexual.
\end{itemize}
These more fleeting channels of communication were naturally less likely to be recorded than the sermon’s verbal message, but the sources nevertheless provide some clues regarding these dimensions of homiletic delivery. Ibn al-Jawzī was keenly aware that a preacher’s authority derived in large part from his reputation for piety, and that he therefore had to carefully manage his image, both on the pulpit and off. To be effective, the preacher must embody his discourse in his appearance and daily life: eating little to maintain an emaciated body, eschewing luxurious clothes for a woolen cloak, and holding himself apart from frivolous socializing with both people of power and the masses:

How can the hearts of the people respond to [the preacher] who goes around in an obese condition and dressed in luxurious clothes and in order that he might associate with sultans? He is listened to only by those people who pursue amusements such as evening stories told by entertainers. Now figures and external forms frequently exert greater influence over people than words. Someone has said: “If a man’s appearance does not profit you, neither will his exhortations.” It is thus imperative for the preacher that he keep himself apart from the masses in order that his words might have a wholesome effect because of the awe in which he is held.60

Just as patients cannot be expected to follow medical advice that the physician himself neglects, homiletic audiences cannot be expected to follow pious principles that the preacher fails to uphold.61 The preacher’s own piety thus validates and legitimizes his speech, as well as rendering him an “example for others to follow.”62 Concern for a pious appearance must not, however, devolve into dissimulation or putting on airs, as Ibn al-Jawzī is quick to note. The preacher’s cultivation of this ethos must be “an expression of genuinely upright motives.”63

59. Franklin Lewis comments on the importance of performance context to the meaning of the ghazal, and his observations are also apropos to our discussion of homily. See “Reading, Writing, and Recitation,” 108-10.
61. Ibid., 136/trans. 219.
62. Ibid., 26/trans. 112.
63. Ibid., 27/trans. 113.
As for specific vocal and bodily techniques, the preacher might emphasize certain points by striking the pulpit with a sword or staff, his traditional accoutrements; such an action helps “arouse the hearts of the people and prepares them to snatch up the exhortations avidly.” Tone and modulation were important as well; Ibn al-Jawzī recommends “raising the voice and displaying zeal in warning and exhortation,” and he adduces a hadith in support of this position, according to which the Prophet would visibly display his excitement while preaching and his eyes would become bloodshot. According to Ibn Jubayr’s accounts, Ibn al-Jawzī reacted visibly and emotionally to his own material in a way that increased its rhetorical effect, especially when reciting poetry:

Emotion visibly overtook him and tears prevented him from speaking so that we feared lest he would choke. Then suddenly he got up from his seat and descended from the minbar [pulpit], and having instilled fear into the hearts of those present, he left them as though on burning coals. They followed him with tears of agitation, some weeping profusely, and some rolling in the dust. Some preachers would even allegedly apply a salve of mustard seed and vinegar under their eyes to produce tears on demand. Such behavior is harshly criticized on the grounds of its insincerity, but it nevertheless demonstrates how a preacher could trigger affective responses in the audience through his own non-verbal emotional displays.

Silence, too, could be used to manipulate audiences and provoke certain reactions. Particularly striking in this regard is an anecdote featuring the ninth-century Malāmati Abu

ʿOsmân al-Hiri, briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, which is found in Ibn al-Jawzi’s manual.⁶⁷

[Abu ʿOsmân al-Hiri] left his house and came and sat in the place where he usually did when he gave public exhortations. But this time he was silent, and his silence drew out for some time. So a man called to him: “You appear to be saying something in your silence.” Then he recited the following verse:

The people are commanded to be pious
by those who are impious
And they are treated by physicians who
are infected by disease.

Thereupon the people began to cry out and weep.⁶⁸

With these verses al-Ḥiri invokes the metaphorical identification of preacher with physician, along with the proverbial notion that a diseased doctor cannot successfully treat patients, to imply his own impiety and thus inability to “cure” his audience. He thus implies, through the poem, that his silence results from a recognition of his own inadequacy as a preacher. But the audience’s reaction suggests something more complicated is going on here: they weep and cry out, as audiences are wont to do at the most climatic portions of the homily. Al-Ḥiri’s silent self-criticism, is, in fact, itself a successful homiletic act; by confessing his own spiritual laxity, he paradoxically proves his humility and fear of God, and calls on the audience to evaluate their own lives in comparison.

In short, a whole host of somatic and para-linguistic techniques were deployed by homiletic preachers, such as the striking of the pulpit, weeping, raising the voice, and the rhetorical use of silence. There were undoubtedly many others, of which preachers and audi-

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⁶⁷. There is also a chapter devoted to Abu Ṭāhir ibn al-Salām in ʿAtṭār’s Memorial (414), which specifically mentions his homilies (vaʿz) and “measured and effective speech” (sokhan-e mowzün va moʿaṣšer). For other examples of the rhetorical use of silence in preaching, see Berkey, Popular Preaching, 53.

⁶⁸. Ibn al-Jawzi, Quṣṣāṣ, 80/trans. 158.
ences may have been only vaguely aware, but nevertheless contributed greatly to the homily’s meaning and persuasive force.

By its very nature, oral homily demands a “circumambient actuality” in which the audience and preacher are present in the same space over the course of the performance. The audience can therefore influence how that performance unfolds, either directly by posing questions and voicing objections, or more indirectly through subtle changes in body posture and mood. Most preaching events were semi-improvised, so a skilled preacher could pick up on the audience’s expectations and adjust his performance accordingly. This dynamic has been well documented by ethnographers in modern oral performance settings, and while our own medieval sources are much more reticent on such matters, they do hint at the extent to which audience reaction shaped the course of a homiletic assembly. For example, Abu Sa‘id is said to have been able to intuitively sense when a listener was struggling with a particular concept and immediately clarify his position with an apt verse or anecdote:

The shaykh would speak at an assembly every day, and whenever a concern would pass through someone’s heart, he would turn to him or her in the middle of his discourse and respond to whatever was in their heart with an allusion (ramz), a verse (bayt), or a narrative (ḥekāyat) in such a way that they would understand.

The above quotation is taken from Ebn Monavvar’s hagiographical work, which often ascribes the shaykh’s perceptiveness in such matters to a miraculous, preternatural intuition (ferâsat). But these legendary abilities can also be interpreted in a more mundane light, as the knack of an expert orator and teacher for identifying resistant or confused listeners on the basis of bodily cues and adjusting the performance accordingly. Audiences could also control the direction

69. The term is Ong’s: see “The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction,” PMLA 90, no. 1 (Jan. 1975), 10.
of the homily in a more direct fashion by asking questions. Numerous anecdotes attest to the medieval homily’s interactive, semi-dialogical character, and in some of the sermons that have been preserved one can even detect traces of how audience questions may have driven the discussion. Ibn al-Jawzī, for his part, seems to have taken audience questions very seriously; according to Ibn Jubayr, the majority of his meetings could be spent answering audience questions, which were both posed verbally and passed to him in the form of notes (reqâ’). And to bring the discussion back to the Conference of the Birds, the vast majority of the hoopoe’s homiletic utterances are cast as responses to specific questions posed by his flock.

Of course, ʿAṭṭâr’s poem does not completely or accurately describe a real-world homiletic performance; rather, it presents a stylized, literary portrayal. Nevertheless, the poem draws on actual homiletic practices in its depiction, including such details as the hoopoe’s stance on the pulpit, the preliminary recitation of Quranic verses, and the audience’s affective and verbal responses. By constructing this imagined, but entirely familiar, performance setting, the Conference of the Birds provides an interpretive context for its didactic exhortations and edifying narratives while simultaneously exploring the nature of the homiletic project itself. As we will see in the next section, ʿAṭṭâr is especially concerned to demonstrate—and simulate—the perlocutionary power of homiletic speech. If the birds ultimately attain to the Simorgh, it is only by virtue of the hoopoe’s homilies, which not only convinced them to set out, but also rendered them fit for the journey.

71. See, for instance, Berkey’s discussion of British Library Or. 7528 in Popular Preaching, 54-5.
Narrating the Hoopoe’s Homilies

The Conference of the Birds, it is often said, recounts the birds’ allegorical journey through seven valleys towards the Simorgh. It is important to note, however, that its narration focuses less on the journey itself than on the homiletic performances that precede the journey. In fact, the vast majority of the poem is devoted to the intra-diegetic discourses of the hoopoe, in which he exhorts his audience to adopt a pious manner of being and enjoins them to set out towards the Simorgh. Through his speech, the hoopoe not only informs his audience, but also prepares them for the mystical path, instigating a series of cognitive, ethical, and psychological transformations that ultimately conclude in their reunion with the divine. The poem thus presents homiletic discourse as powerfully perlocutionary, serving as both a cause and a vehicle for spiritual progress. Here we will trace the narrative of the hoopoe and the birds, paying special attention to those moments when the former uses performative speech as a tool to effect the latter’s spiritual transformation.

The Feather of the Simorgh

Even before reading a single verse, the poem’s title hints at the importance it attaches to speech and discourse. Titles were notoriously fluid in the medieval period, and the poem circulated under several names in the manuscript tradition, including the Conference of the Birds (Maṭeq al-ṭayr), the Stages of the Birds (Maqâmât-e ṭoyur), and the Book of the Birds (Ṭoyur-nâmâ). All of them, however, can be traced back to either ‘Aṭṭâr or the poem itself, and they are all somehow related to language. For example, a verse from the conclusion seems to refer to the poem, or perhaps to the events of the frame-tale more generally, as both the “speech of the birds” (maṭeq al-ṭayr) and the “stages of the birds” (maqâmât-e ṭoyur):

The conference of birds and the stages of the birds
Have found their completion in you [O ‘Aṭṭâr], like light in the sun.
Regarding the former, the Arabic root n-ṭ-q encompasses a semantic field related to language and meaning: “manṭeq” is usually translated as “speech,” “language,” or “logic,” but also “oration,” whence the poem’s common English title, Conference of the Birds. The phrase also alludes to Solomon, who, according to the Quran, was able to speak “the language of the birds” (manṭeq al-ṭayr), perceiving the significance in what others mistakenly believe to be meaningless chirping; he was thus able to command an avian host and dispatch the hoopoe to the Queen of Sheeba as a messenger. The second expression from the above-quoted verse, maqâmât-e ṭoyur, is usually translated as the Stages of the Birds, and ‘Aṭṭār uses this as one of the poem’s proper titles in his introduction to the Choice Book. In technical Sufi terminology, a “stage” (maqâm) refers to one of the psycho-ethical waypoints along the Sufi path towards the divine, and the seven valleys traversed by the birds can easily be read allegorically as such a sequence of mystical stages. Yet there is a significant polysemy here: maqâmât is also the plural of maqâma, which signifies the place in which one stands to deliver a discourse, especially a homiletic one, and by way of metonymy, the homily itself. It is used in this sense in the picaresque maqâmât genre, collections of stories in which eloquent, rogue heroes repeatedly daz-

73. ‘Aṭṭār, Manṭeq al-ṭayr, 4487.
74. Lane, Lexicon, s.v. “n-ṭ-q”; Loghat-nâma–ye Dehkhodâ, s.v. “manṭeq.”
75. Quran 27:15-27.
76. ‘Aṭṭār, Mokhtâr-nâma, 72. Peter Avery suggests that the two titles refer to two distinct sections of the poem; the Conference of the Birds (or as he renders it the Speech of the Birds) would refer to the hoopoe’s homilies about the way, and the Stages of the Birds would refer to their traversal of the stages. See Farid al-Din ‘Aṭṭār, The Speech of the Birds: Concerning Migration to the Real, trans. Peter Avery (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1998), 397, 539n458.
zele audiences with their oratory in a variety of locales. The *Maqâmât-e ṭoyur*, then, could also be translated as the *Homilies of the Birds*, with a nod to the hoopoe’s episodic preaching on the sufi path. Finally, yet another title is suggested in the prologue to the *Choice Book*, where ʿAṭṭâr names (and praises) his previous works. The title is rather generic—the *Book of the Birds* (*Ṭoyur-nâma*)—but in his subsequent self-praise, ʿAṭṭâr again draws from the conceptual field of language and even includes a Persian calque of the Arabic “*manṭeq al-ṭayr*”: “the language of the birds (*zabân-e morghân*) of the *Book of the Birds* has transported rational souls to the site of unveiling (*kashf*).”

The work thus constitutes a kind of language, a language which transports rational—that is speaking (*nâteqa*)—souls to a place in which they can receive inspiration directly from the divine.

After the customary doxologies, the frame-tale begins with ʿAṭṭâr’s narratorial voice welcoming various birds one-by-one onto the field of action, including a parrot, peacock, eagle, pheasant, and falcon, among others. The various fowl, once they have assembled themselves into a group (*jamʿ, majmaʿ*), resolve that since every other “clime” in the world has a king, they ought to seek one out, too. At this point the hoopoe introduces himself, recounting his bona fides as Solomon’s companion and explaining that, in fact, the birds already have a king: the fabled Simorgh.

This fabulous bird played a central role in pre-Islamic Iranian mythology, and it remained a resonant cultural symbol even after the Islamization of Iran. In the Avesta, the bird Saēna is said to inhabit an “all-healing” tree that contains the seeds of all other plants and rises

78. ʿAṭṭâr, *Mokhtâr-nâma*, 70.
79. For a list of all the birds named by ʿAṭṭâr and a discussion of their poetic characteristics, see Shafīʿi-Kadkani, intro. to *Manṭeq al-ṭayr*, 169-80.
81. Ibid., 691-735.
from the middle of Lake Vurukasha at the edge of the world. In Middle Persian sources the bird is known as the Sēnmurw, and it is associated with the scattering of seeds and bringing of rain. Among early New Persian literature, the Simorgh is most famously found in the Book of Kings (Shāh-nāma). After the infant Zāl is abandoned by his father, the Simorgh brings him to its perch on Mt. Alborz where it raises him to adolescence; it continues to provide the hero and his family with magical assistance (especially healing) throughout the poem. The bird also appears in other epics, and its description can be found in various bestiaries. In the following centuries the Simorgh was incorporated into Islamic mystical writings, where it was often associated with Gabriel, the Holy Spirit, and the Active Intellect. It appears, for example, in Sohravardi’s Scarlet Intellect (‘Aql-e sorkh) and Simorgh’s Whistle (Ṣafir-e simorgh); in the latter treatise it calls a hoopoe upwards towards unification with itself. Similarly, Avicenna’s Treatise of the Birds (Resālat al-ṭoyur) features a bird that escapes from terrestrial hunters and subsequently journeys across seven mountains to the summit of an eighth, the residence of the supreme king; although not explicitly identified as the Simorgh, the king’s mountainous perch certainly recalls that of the mythological fowl. Ahmad-e Ghazzâli later composed his own rendition of the Treatise of the Birds, in which a group of birds journey to the seventh and final

84. Throughout the history of Islamic philosophy there has been a tendency to interpret the angels as allegorical references to the various cosmic intellects; among philosophers of the Illuminationist (eshrâqi) school, the Simorgh is often added into this mix as well. See Corbin, Visionary Recital, 46-122; Purnamdâriân, “Simorgh va Jebra’il,” 81-93; Gerd-Farâmarzi, Simorgh, 193-229.
86. Ebn Sinâ’s treatise was translated into Persian by Sohravardi. See the commentary and translation in Corbin, Visionary Recital, 183-95. Also see Taqi Purnamdâriân, “Āṭṭâr va resâla-hâ-ye ‘erfâni-ye Ebn Sinâ,” in Didâr bâ simorgh (Tehran: Pazhuhesheh-gâh-e ‘Olum-e Ensâni va Motâla’at-e Farhangi, 1374 [1995-6]).
island in the western ocean and the home of their avian king, the phoenix (‘anqâ), who exhibits clear parallels with the Simorgh.87

‘Aṭṭâr likely drew on Aḥmad-e Ghazzâlî’s work as the main source for the frame-tale of Conference of the Birds, but he characterizes the legendary Simorgh in even more explicitly sufi terms.88 The hoopoe’s opening speech begins by focusing on the Simorgh’s transcendence and ineffability. According to the hoopoe, the Simorgh is not to be found in the terrestrial world, but is located behind Mt. Qâf, the mountainous limit that, in Irano-Islamicate cosmology, rings the Earth and is often associated withMt. Alborz.89 The hoopoe informs the birds that the Simorgh “is close to us, but we are far, far from it,” an allusion to the well known Qur’anic verse, “we [God] are closer to him [humankind] than his jugular vein.”90 He continues to explain that the Simorgh is the “absolute king” who resides in the “harem of glory.”91 The world’s share of beauty (jamâl) and majesty (jalâl), is, in comparison with the Simorgh’s attributes, nothing but an illusion.92 The Simorgh cannot be contained in speech, vision, intellect, or knowledge: “no wisdom has seen his perfection, and no sight has envisioned his beauty.”93 When attempting to describe its attributes, both soul and intellect are “stupefied” and “resemble clouded eyes.”94 The hoopoe’s discussion immediately recalls Islamic discussions of God’s

88. Ritter, Ocean of the Soul, 8-10; Foruzânfar, Sharh-e aḥvâl-e ‘Aṭṭâr, 256-63.
90. Quran 50:15. Also see the notes to Avery’s translation, 471n37.
91. ‘Aṭṭâr, Manṭeq al-tayr, 715, 718.
92. Ibid., 725.
93. Ibid., 723.
94. Ibid., 722. This line seems to imply that God’s attributes are unknowable, which was not a common position. The standard Asharite view is that the attributes are knowable, but somehow incomparable to their human analogues. See Nader El-Bizri, “God: Essence and Attributes,” in The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic
ineffability, according to which he (or at least his essence) cannot be made the object of any human faculty, since this would relate him to his creation and thus violate his perfect oneness; most readers would pick up on this connection immediately, and have no difficulty interpreting the Simorgh as a symbol for the divine.  

Although the Simorgh transcends the created realm, it remains visible through various traces and signs that somehow gesture back towards it without violating its transcendence, a common theme in Islamic mysticism. To explain this paradoxical situation, the hoopoe launches into his first edifying anecdote, the mythic account of the Simorgh’s feather and the origins of artistic activity:

The beginning of the matter of the Simorgh—how wondrous!—
Manifest, it crossed over China at midnight.
In the middle of China a feather fell,
And consequently every province was thrown into a tumult.
They all made tracings of the feather,
And all who saw them were much affected.
That feather is now in China’s icon-house,
From whence “Seek out knowledge even unto China.”

If the image of its feather were never revealed,
There wouldn’t be all this uproar in the world.
All of these works of creation (son’) are from its grandeur;
They are all manifestations (anmudâr) of the image (naqsh) of its feather.
Because no beginning is apparent, and no end to its description,
It is not appropriate to say more than this.
Now, whoever among you is a man of action,
Turn your face to the road, and march your feet forward!

95. On the basis of the philosophical tradition’s tendency to allegorically conflate the Simorgh, angels, and the intellects, some scholars argue that the Simorgh is not a symbol for God himself, but for the Active Intellect. See Corbin, Visionary Recital, 182-3; Purnâmdâriân, “Simorgh va Jebri’il,” 89-90; Meier, “Ismailiten und Mystik im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert,” 17.

96. A well-known hadith of the Prophet.
Through the feather, the Simorgh’s otherwise ungraspable beauty is made “manifest” (jelvagar) in the created world, but in such a way that does not bind or constrain the transcendence of its source. In the Book of Kings (Shâh-nâma), the feather is a magical object through which the Simorgh can be summoned, and while that legend would certainly be present in readers’ minds, the relationship between the feather and Simorgh here goes beyond sympathetic magic; it is the concrete manifestation of the un-manifestable (tajallī).98 This mediated revelation is mirrored by a parallel process in which those who gaze on the feather are “thrown into a tumult,” gripped by a desire to anagogically re-ascend towards the divine signified. Perhaps most intriguingly, the myth suggests a link between the process of divine self-disclosure and human artistic activity. After the feather fell to earth, people began to make tracings (naqsh) of it for themselves, and those representations continued to partake in the signifying and affective power of their exemplar. The hoopoe then explains that “all these works of creation” are all products of—and symbols for—the Simorgh’s glory; he is undoubtedly referring to the natural world as evidence of God’s handiwork—a standard use of the phrase—but ‘creation’ (son) can also indicate the human crafts, and in light of the repeated references to drawing and images, such a connotation here comes to the fore.99 Like the created objects of the natural world, works of human artistic production point back to the divine source of their aesthetic power, and they thereby constitute another route of symbolic access to the Simorgh: they are “imita-

97. ʿAṭṭār, Manṭeq al-tayr, 737-44.
99. Lane, Lexicon, s.v. “ṣun”; Loghat-nâma-ye Dehkhodâ, s.v. “son”
tions” (anmudâr) of the “image” (naqsh) of the feather, itself an icon onto the Simorgh’s otherwise unobservable “grandeur” (farr).

As noted by Bürgel, the terminology is primarily visual. China is associated in Islamicate culture with idols and painting, and the feather is stored in China’s fabled “icon-house,” where the Persian literary tradition imagines the world’s most beautiful artistic representations to be housed; visuality thus seems to be key to the signifying properties of both the feather and the human crafts it engenders.\(^{100}\) But there is also the tantalizing suggestion that verbal discourse and poetry, which are themselves often compared to the plastic arts, could also impasion their reader-listeners through an anagogic taste of the divine.\(^{101}\) That this is indeed the case seems to be affirmed by the birds’ reaction to the hoopoe’s intra-diegetic narration, which is impressive to say the least:

All the birds there became
Restless from the glory of this king.
Passion (showq) for him had gone to work in their souls
They all became quite impatient.
They resolved to set out and went forward:
In love of him, enemies to themselves.

The myth thus not only explains the manner of the Simorgh’s continuing presence in the world, but it also affects the birds on a profoundly emotive level. According to the hoopoe,


\(^{101}\) Jerome Clinton, “Esthetics by Implication: What Metaphors of Craft Tell us about the ‘Unity’ of the Persian *Qasida*,” *Edebiyat* 4, no. 1 (1979): 73-97; K. Abu Deeb, *al-Junjâni’s Theory of Poetic Imagery* (Warminster, UK: Aris and Phillips, 1979), 316-7. Sa’di, for example, describes his prosimetrion *Rose-Garden* (Golestân) in visual terms as “China’s icon-house” in a verse that simultaneously praises both his own skill and the taste of his patron: “When you bring your lordly glance to it, it is a Chinese icon-house, a painting of the *Artang* [Mâni’s fabled illustrated book],” *Golestân-e Sa’âdi*, 55.

those who gazed upon the feather in China (or upon images derived from it) were stricken with desire for the Simorgh, and his own audience, too, loses their composure after hearing his recitation. They are instilled with a “passion” (showq) for their king, whom they resolve to seek out “in love” as “enemies of themselves.” In classical Persian poetics, lovers are conventionally portrayed as denying their own bodily needs—wasting away in separation from the beloved—but the notion of becoming an “enemy to oneself” is also a central pillar of sufi psychological ethics, which enjoins individuals to counteract the influence of the lower, concupiscent self—often figured as a recalcitrant dog, snake, or noxious animal—through interior and ascetic struggle. Only after the lower, concupiscent self has been subdued can the heart and soul flourish, which are the faculties through which the believer attains to proximity with God. The hoopoe’s recitation of this myth, then, seems to have produced its desired effect: it has instilled a passion for the Simorgh in the birds, who resolve to journey towards him by means of an ethical purification of the self.

The Hoopoe on the Pulpit

But then several of the birds begin to balk. The first to object is the nightingale, who informs the hoopoe that the rose is the sole object of his desire.103 Why search for the Simorgh, he asks, when the rose suffices? Why endure ascetic deprivations (bi-bargi), when he could dally with his beloved, adorned with a hundred petals (barg)? The hoopoe responds critically, accusing the nightingale of falling prey to the superficial charms of an inappropriate beloved:

The hoopoe said to him, “O you who are mired in form,
Don’t boast of your love for a flirt!
Love for a rose-face has given you many thorns;
She has really done a number on you!
Although the rose is lovely,

103. Ibid., 753-71.
In only a week her beauty begins to fade.
Love of a something that decays
Repulses those who are wise.
Although the rose’s smile gets you going,
She throws you into plaintive singing, day and night.
Pass the rose by, for every new spring the rose
Laughs at you, not for you! Have some shame!

Although the rose is beautiful, her beauty is temporarily bounded. Born of contingency, she is destined to wither within a week, and it is the height of folly to love something so ephemeral.

According to the hoopoe, her smile is in fact a mocking grin as she laughs at the nightingale’s foolishness. For all these reasons, the hoopoe castigates the nightingale, asking whether he has any shame and exhorting him to “pass by the rose” and towards the Simorgh, who is the only object worthy of such a love. He then transitions into an illustrative narrative that concretizes this point: it tells the story of a dervish who falls in love with a princess who smiles at him, and the dervish faces execution for this breach of decorum—but before he is killed, he learns that the princess’ smile (like that of the rose) was one of mockery, and all his love-pains have all been for naught.

The hoopoe’s excoriating tone in the above passage reflects the rough-and-tumble nature of homiletic rhetoric, as well as the power imbalance between the preacher and his audience. His address opens with the disparaging epithet, “O you who are mired in form,” and he admonishes the nightingale to “have some shame.” Although harsh and seemingly contemptu-

104. Ibid., 772-7.
ous, such a tone is in fact pedagogically motivated. The nightingale, like many of his avian fellows, resists a transformation that would ultimately be to his own benefit; therefore, he must be made to see the precariousness of his current spiritual situation, and a belittling, cajoling address is, according to contemporary homiletic norms, one way to do this. Ibn al-Jawzī, for example, addresses his listeners with vocatives such as “O you who forget,” and “O you who are banished from the company of the pious.” Likewise, homiletic poets such as ʿĀṭṭâr and Rumi routinely chastise their reader-listeners for their weakness or ignorance. These homiletic reproaches are often gendered on the basis of an assumed association between masculinity and spiritual strength and effeminacy and spiritual weakness; thus, the wayward individual is often derided in ʿĀṭṭâr’s poems as a “woman” (zan) or a “sissy” (mokhannās), while the spiritual hero is praised as a “man” (mard). One of the most common epithets applied to the addressee in homiletic poetry, and especially in the works of Nāṣer-e Khosrow, is “son/boy” (pesar), which figures the poem’s addressee as male, but not quite a man; it entails a measure of dismissal but also hints at the responsibility that the speaker feels for his interlocutor’s spiritual development, suggesting that he is an older father-figure, perhaps a sage or spiritual director. The hoopoe, likewise, adopts a rhetorical stance vis-à-vis his audience that is at once pedagogical and agonistic. He aims to bring the birds towards the truth even if they resist, at times goading them forwards through sharp language. His activity thus has a touch of violence about it, a fact that was not lost on medieval readers: according to Dowlat-Shâh, the fifteenth-century anthologist and biographer, ʿĀṭṭâr’s poetry was “known as ‘the whip of the people of the path.’”

105. See some of the examples collected in Swartz, “Arabic Rhetoric,” 44, 60n59.
108. Samarqandi, Taṣkerat al-shoʿarāʾ, 323.
The hoopoe thus adopts the preacher’s conventional language of rebuke in an effort to disabuse the nightingale of his foolish attachment to terrestrial beauty. He repeats the same formula to counter the objections of nine other birds: for each of them, he begins a cajoling admonishment with a dismissive epithet and then narrates an illustrative anecdote. Each of these dissenters embodies a particular spiritual fault on the basis of its species’ conventionally understood appearance and behavior. The duck is thus portrayed as a fastidious ascetic, constantly performing ablutions; he is too concerned with purity to seek the Simorgh. The owl, known to haunt ruins associated with buried treasure, is a miser so myopically obsessed with gold that he sees no profit in the long journey. The falcon proudly serves temporal kings, and because they have restricted his sight with blinders and hood, he cannot see their deficiencies in comparison with the Simorgh. The hoopoe lambasts each of them for their spiritual weaknesses and exhorts them to move past such short-sighted objections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bird</th>
<th>Objection</th>
<th>Hoopoe’s response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nightingale</td>
<td>Loves only the rose</td>
<td>The rose passes away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parrot</td>
<td>Desires only eternal life</td>
<td>Life must be sacrificed for the beloved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peacock</td>
<td>Desires only to return to paradise</td>
<td>Seek the whole, not the part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duck</td>
<td>Pridefully content with his own asceticism and purity</td>
<td>Purity is for the unclean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partridge</td>
<td>Desires only gems</td>
<td>Don’t be dazzled by color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homâ</td>
<td>Sees no reason to seek out the Simorgh because he himself makes kings</td>
<td>Don’t take so much pride in yourself</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

109. For a discussion of the birds’ conventional traits, see Shafi’i-Kadkani, intro. to Manṭeq al-ṭayr, 169-80. For an extensive summary of this section, including the embedded tales, see Stone, “Blessed Perplexity,” 79-96.

Table 2, Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Falcon</th>
<th>Proudly serves human kings</th>
<th>The Simorgh is the ultimate king; human kings are fickle and dangerous</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heron</td>
<td>Content to sit mournfully beside the sea</td>
<td>Unlike the Simorgh, the sea is inconstant and unstable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owl</td>
<td>Desires only treasure</td>
<td>Love of treasure is idolatry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sparrow</td>
<td>Considers himself, like Jacob, too weak to travel to the Simorgh.</td>
<td>This is hypocrisy; Set out on the path!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The birds next ask several questions as a group, including how “weak ones” such as themselves could ever soar to the the great heights of the Simorgh. The hoopoe responds with a discourse on love and the transformative power of pain, which constitutes the homiletic context for his recital of the tale of Shaykh Ṣanʿān, the longest and most well-known narrative in the *Conference of the Birds.*

It recounts the story of an accomplished shaykh, who, after witnessing a disturbing dream foreshadowing his future apostasy, travels from Mecca to Byzantium where he falls hopelessly in love with a Christian girl. In an attempt to win her affections, he renounces his faith and, at her bidding, performs a series of un-Islamic, sacrilegious, and humiliating tasks, including drinking wine, worshipping an idol (presumably an icon), and serving as a swineherd for a year. Although he follows her instructions to the letter, she does not return his affections. Eventually, through the intervention of the Prophet in a dream, the shaykh is cured of his love-affliction and sets out to return to Mecca; the Christian girl only then realizes her own love for the shaykh and hurries after him into the desert. She finally catches up to him and his disciples and converts to Islam, but exhausted from the journey

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and the intensity of her affect, she promptly dies. The story is somewhat enigmatic, and several different analyses have been offered; our focus here, however, is on how the narration is keyed as an oral story-telling event in a homiletic mode with particular perlocutionary effects. The hoopoe controls the narrative flow through standard story-telling formulae, such as “by chance . . .”, “it so happened . . .”, and “in the end . . .”; he also comments on the narrated material through exclamations (“Ah, the pity!”) and rhetorical questions (“With his beloved present, how could he have resisted?”). Perhaps most significantly, he breaks into the narrative at several points to harangue his audience directly, reaffirming the pedagogical and homiletic goals of the narration. For example, after the shaykh has defiled himself by becoming a swineherd, the hoopoe admonishes the birds to not reproach the shaykh, but to scrutinize their own souls for “swine” lurking within:

Inside everyone’s being a hundred swine lie,
Either burn those swine, or tie on the Christian girdle!
Do you assume, O you nobody,
That such a danger threatened this spiritual director (pir), and no one else?
Inside everyone this danger lies,
It raises its head once the journey begins.
If you aren’t aware of your own swine,
You’re excused, since you’re no man of the way!
But if you set foot on the way, like a man of action,
Of idols and swine, hundreds of thousands you’ll see.
Kill the swine! burn the idols! on the field of love,
Or become disgraced in love, like the shaykh.


113. ‘Attâr, Manteq al-tayr, 1386, 1594. The immediate narrator here would seem to be the hoopoe, behind whom stands ‘Attâr’s persona as the root narrator of the entire poem. Oftentimes, however, these two preacher-figures converge, and it is difficult to determine which narrator takes precedence, or who is speaking on which narrative level. See p. 185-194.
The exhortative interlude includes the now-familiar cajoling address (“O you nobody!”), again calling attention to the spiritual authority of the hoopoe vis-à-vis his audience. He provides an allegorical and moralizing interpretation, not of the tale as a whole, but of the previously narrated scene—the pigs and idols are internal spiritual weaknesses present in everyone, and the audience is exhorted to “kill the swine and burn the idols” that lie within.\(^\text{115}\) The recognition of such faults is itself spiritually praiseworthy and necessary self-knowledge for the “man of the way” (again gendering spiritual achievement in masculine terms). The hoopoe’s rebuke of his audience, however disparaging, is predicated on his belief that they can rise to the challenge, and become “men of action”; otherwise, they would not be harangued or admonished, but simply excused. The homiletic intervention points this section of the story with a particular didactic moral, but it also re-indexes the tale as an oral utterance of the hoopoe delivered to a fictive audience.

When the hoopoe completes the narrative of Shaykh Ṣan’ān, the birds are once again overcome with desire for the Simorgh and resolve to set out on their journey. They draw lots to select a leader from amongst themselves, a duty which, appropriately enough, falls to the hoopoe. Although they have committed themselves to the journey, they do not actually set out at this point. Instead, as they gaze on the endless road in front of them, they recoil in terror.


\(^{115}\) Such an allegorical interpretation, interjected into the narrative, recalls the didacticism of the Akvân Div episode in Ferdowsi’s *Shah-nāma*.
Confessing that they remain mired in confusion, and that “this path cannot be trod in ignorance,” they gather around the hoopoe as their “imam of tightening and loosening”—an authoritative religious leader—and entreat him to ascend the pulpit and instruct them in the dangers of the way and the customs of Simorgh’s court so that they might be prepared for the quest:

It is our wish that, for our immediate benefit,
Since you are our imam of tightening and loosening,\(^{116}\)
That you ascend the pulpit (menbar) here,
And make your tribe worthy of the road.
Explain the customs and manners of kings,
Since this path can’t be trod in ignorance.
Everyone has a troubled heart,
But this road demands that hearts be emptied.
First loosen the problems in our hearts,
So that we may, after that, make proper resolutions.
We’ll question you regarding our hearts’ difficulties,
So that we may extract from our hearts these doubts,
Since we know that this long path,
Gives no light in the midst of doubt.
When the heart is emptied, we will give the body to the road;
Without heart or body, we will head for that court.

For the birds, the hoopoe’s instruction is intimately bound up with spiritual progress. It not only provides them with information necessary for spiritual wayfaring, but is itself a cause of

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116. In classical Islamic political theory, the “people of tightening and loosening” (ahl al-ḥall wa’l-ʿaqd), were the scholars and religious elites who were theoretically responsible for the selection of the caliph.

117. ʿAṭṭār, Manṭeq al-tayr, 1649-56.
psychological and existential transformation: through his speech, their hearts are emptied of earthly attachments and they are rendered worthy of the way.

The hoopoe complies with their request and ascends the pulpit to conduct the homiletic assembly. ‘Aṭṭâr’s description is stylized to be sure, but it is also rooted in contemporary homiletic practices:

Then the hoopoe made the preliminaries for his speech, He ascended the pulpit (korsi) and began. The crowned hoopoe sat on his throne, Whoever saw his face found high fortune. The troop of birds formed ranks, shoulder to shoulder, More than a hundred thousand before the hoopoe. The nightingale and turtle dove came forward together, That they might together serve as Quran-reciters (moqri). They drew forth such intonations (alḥân) at that moment, The world was thrown by them into a tumult. As for those whose ears were struck by their melody— Agitated (bi-qarâr) they came and stupefied (madhush) they left. An ecstatic state (ḥâlat) came over everyone, None were with themselves, nor without. Then the hoopoe began his homily, He withdrew the veil from the face of meaning.

The passage describes the hoopoe carrying out the the activities of a hortatory preacher as he opens his assembly. He ascends the pulpit and sits, where he performs the “preliminaries” for the homily: presumably the invocation, praise of the Prophet, and perhaps the khoṭba. By

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118. Ibid., 1657-64.  
119. Hortatory sermons were usually delivered sitting, as opposed the liturgical khoṭba, which was delivered
virtue of the crown of feathers lining his head, he is cast as a king on his throne \((takht)\), bestowing fortune on those who approach him—it is useful here to recall Becker’s argument that at the dawn of Islam, the pulpit \((menbar)\) functioned not only as a platform for oratory, but as a “throne” for the Prophet.\(^{120}\) Before the hoopoe begins the homily proper, the nightingale and the turtle dove, both renowned for their beautiful voices, play the role of Quran-reciter \((moqrō)\). According to preaching manuals, an opening Quranic recitation was a key component of the hortatory assembly, and it was often delivered by a professional reciter other than the preacher himself; for larger orations, multiple reciters could be used, as Ibn Jubayr attests.\(^{121}\) Here the turtle dove and nightingale are said to draw forth “melody” \((lahn)\) and “intonations” \((alḥān)\) with the Quran, a particular style of recitation that was criticized for being too close to secular singing. Ibn al-Jawzi, for instance, fiercely attacks it, writing that melodious recitation “pleases and stirs human nature” and thereby “diverts the people from contemplating the Quran itself.”\(^{122}\) As discussed above, Quranic recitation could also sometimes trigger ecstatic states in its listeners, which was a source of religious anxiety for more sober critics, who worried that these behaviors were insincere affectations. According to some accounts, audience members would, under the influence of Quranic recitation or an especially effective homily, rend their garments, weep and cry, or flail about erratically and violently: bodily practices that recall the equally fraught sufi \(samā‘\) ceremony. The birds behave in precisely this way; the melodious recitations of the nightingale and the turtle dove throw them into an ecstatic “tumult.”

\(^{120}\) Becker, “Die Kanzel,” 335-44.
\(^{121}\) Ibn Jubayr, \(Riḥla\), 197.
After these preliminaries, the hoopoe resumes his discourse, proceeding in the style already established in the earlier portions of the poem—edifying narratives buttressed by interpretive homilies in response to questions from the audience. Such audience involvement was a major component of contemporary homiletic assemblies, often taking up the majority of the event, as we have already discussed. Likewise, this particular round of question-and-answer constitutes the largest section of the *Conference of the Birds*, comprising approximately 1500 lines, or forty percent of the narrative.¹²³ Unlike the hoopoe’s initial discourses, which he delivered in response to the objections of specific birds, the questioners here are left anonymous. He responds to around twenty inquiries, and each one is introduced by the formula “another said to him” (*degari goftash*) or “another asked of him” (*degari porsid az u*). Approximately the first ten questions involve specific spiritual weaknesses. One bird admits that he is scared of death, another that he is enmeshed in earthly love, and another that he suffers from excessive pride; the hoopoe castigates them for their failings, and attempts to guide them to the straight path. After this group, other birds inquire of the specific mystical virtues that they have already begun to develop, such as love of justice, submission to the divine will, and high mystical “aspiration” (*hemmat*): these birds meet with the hoopoe’s praise.¹²⁴ Still others ask the hoopoe what they ought to bring to the Simorgh as a gift, or boast of their exclusive focus on the divine. The hoopoe answers each of these interlocutors with some mixture of praise or admonishment, fol-

¹²³ These exchanges run from verse 1665 to 3240 in Shafi’i-Kadkani’s edition.
¹²⁴ Davis divides the questions into two groups of ten, the first of which focuses on negative spiritual attributes, and the second on positive. This is part of his effort to show that a total of thirty birds pose questions (twenty anonymous questioners in this section along with the ten objectors from the beginning of the poem), who together represent the thirty birds who complete the journey. As Davis himself admits however, this division requires a little “juggling.” In actuality more than thirty questions are asked—I count a total of thirty-three, excluding two questions that the birds ask as a group. It seems to me that such methodologies can easily fall into the trap of numerological confirmation bias. See Davis, “Journey as Paradigm,” 174, 181-82n4. Cf. Julian Baldick, “Medieval Šufi Literature in Persian Prose,” in *History of Persian Literature: From the Beginning of the Islamic Period to the Present Day*, ed. G. Morrison (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 120-2.
followed by a series of illustrative anecdotes coupled with explanatory homilies; generally speaking, each of his responses contains around four or five anecdote-homily pairs. His responses thus recall the material and formal features of contemporary homilies, as well as the perlocutionary, transformative aims of homiletic discourse: through his performance, the hoopoe aims to effect psychological and ethical reform, and thereby prepare the birds for their spiritual journey towards the Simorgh.

Table 3: The Birds’ Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interlocutor’s Question/Topic</th>
<th>Hoopoe’s Response</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is our relation to the Simorgh?</td>
<td>We are connected to the Simorgh through the heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can we, being so weak, travel this way?</td>
<td>Tale of Shaykh Ṣan‘ān</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why is the way empty?</td>
<td>Because of the glory of the king</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you [i.e, the hoopoe] take precedence over us?</td>
<td>Divine grace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What if I die on the journey?</td>
<td>We all must die anyways; better to try and fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What if I am sinful?</td>
<td>The door of repentance is open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effeminacy/fickleness</td>
<td>Such is the human condition; work to constrain the lower soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power of the lower soul</td>
<td>The lower soul will never be worthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power of the devil</td>
<td>Withdraw from the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love of gold</td>
<td>Look to inner meaning, not external form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love of possessions/worldly entanglement</td>
<td>The world is a trash pit and death is coming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love of a beautiful human beloved</td>
<td>The human form is grossly material and contingent; true beauty belongs to the unseen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of death</td>
<td>Death is inevitable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worldly sorrows</td>
<td>These will pass away with the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obedience to God’s command</td>
<td>We are all his slaves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Going “all in” (<em>pāk-bāzī</em>)</th>
<th>To travel this way, you must lose all you have</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Ambition</td>
<td>High spiritual ambition propels us forward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>Justice is desirable; it is best performed in secret to minimize the threat of hypocritical egoism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can one speak frankly with God?</td>
<td>Only those intimates who have lost their reason to love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I love God, and it is time for union</td>
<td>You cannot attain to the Simorgh by vain boasts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What if I have already reached perfection through ascetic practice?</td>
<td>You are deluded by your self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What will bring me happiness on the way?</td>
<td>Happiness is through him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What reward should I ask of him at the end of the way?</td>
<td>Ask him for nothing but himself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What gift should I bring?</td>
<td>The burning of your soul and the pain of your heart</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Seven Valleys and Effacement in the Simorgh**

After these discourses on mystical ethics, one of the birds asks how long the upcoming journey to the Simorgh will be. In reply, the hoopoe names the seven valleys that they will have to traverse on their journey; this psycho-spiritual geography is one of the best-known aspects of the *Conference of the Birds* and represents an allegorization of the various mystical “stages” that, according to the Sufi manuals, populate the mystical path. It is worth stressing yet again, however, that the birds do not actually undertake the journey at this point. Rather, the hoopoe speaks *about* the journey in the context of his ongoing hortatory assembly: discourse and homily again take precedence over narrative action. The hoopoe replies to his questioner that the route consists of seven valleys: desirous seeking (*talab*), love (*ʿeshq*), gnosis (*maʿrefat*), independence (*esteghnā*), unification (*towhid*), bewilderment (*hayrat*), and, finally, spiritual poverty.
and effacement (*faqr o fanā*).*126* He then launches into a homiletic explanation of each of these valleys, telling the birds what will befall them therein and exhorting them to the specific psycho-ethical mode of being associated with each stage.

In technical Sufi parlance, the “stages” (*maqâm*, pl. *maqâmât*) are a series of ethical and psychological modalities through which the spiritual wayfarer must pass by means of his or her own spiritual effort, as opposed to the mystical “states” (*hâl*, pl. *ahvâl*), which are bestowed on him or her solely by the grace of God.*127* The distinction can only be carried so far, however; because God is the ultimate agent in the world, the stages are in a very real sense the product of his will and the wayfarer’s effort is only an intermediary cause. Nevertheless, the distinction remained heuristically significant for most Sufi thinkers and practitioners. Various sequences of stages were proposed by different mystical thinkers, and there is no consensus regarding their order or number: some thinkers posited only four stages, while others enumerated seven, forty, or even one hundred.*128* From a heuristic perspective, a more abridged ordering, like that presented in *Conference of the Birds*, would be easier to memorize and thus likely more useful for novices and the popular audience that 'Aṭṭār was targeting.

According to the hoopoe, the first valley that the birds will encounter is that of desirous seeking (*ṭalab*); it is characterized by the wayfarer’s continuous struggle to approach God in the face of adversity and pain. It thus presupposes, like the system of stages more broadly, that the spiritual wayfarer exercises some sort of individual agency within the context of mystical

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127. A classic treatment of this distinction can be found in Hojviri, *Kashf al-maḥjub*, 274-6. Also see Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, 303-6.

longing and spiritual progress, even though his or her motivation is ultimately buttressed and augmented by the divine:

When you come to the valley of desirous seeking,
A hundred fevers afflict you at every moment.
There’s a hundred catastrophes here for every breath,
The sphere’s parrot is here just a fly.\textsuperscript{129}
Years of effort and exertion are required of you here,
Since here affairs are inverted.
Here you must cast off your dominion,
Here you must wager your property.
You must wade in your own blood,
And you must move outside of everything.
When no wherewithal remains,
You must purify the heart of everything that is.
When your heart is purified of attributes,
Light of the essence will begin to shine from the presence.
When that light shines on the heart,
Your heart’s desirous seeking (\textit{talab}) will increase a thousand-fold.
If fire springs up in his way,
And if before him lie a hundred inhospitable valleys,
Out of frenzied passion, he will throw himself,
Moth-like, upon the flame.

... The dry-lipped, drowning man,
Seeks the beloved’s secret with his soul.
He desires to know the secret such,
He fears not the soul-stealing denizens of the deep.

\textsuperscript{129} “The sphere’s parrot” is a metaphor for the sky, which, in the Perso-Arabic literary imagination, is often understood to be green.
According to the hoopoe, wayfarers in this stage are characterized by a particular set of attitudes and cognitive states in which they are gripped by an unquenchable desire and struggle to approach the divine regardless of suffering and hardship. As the the hoopoe elaborates, “years of effort and exertion” are required from wayfarers in this valley. They must “come in blood,” indications of their pain and struggle, leaving aside their possessions and belongings and moving outside of the familiar. He enjoins his listeners to purify their hearts, invoking the old sufi metaphor of the heart as a metal mirror covered with the rust of humanly attributes and worldly attachment. Once polished through ascetic exercise, the mirror’s sheen returns; its own surface disappears as it reflects the light of God. In the valley of desirous seeking, however, the appearance of divine light in the heart does not mark the fulfillment of the wayfarer’s desire or the end of his or her struggle, but its thousand-fold intensification. The wayfarer should press onwards, even over one thousand inhospitable valleys, but now this movement seems less driven by his or her own agency and more an inevitable result of God’s magnetic pull; even if fires should leap up before him or her, explains the hoopoe, he or she will plunge into them straight away like a frenzied moth. One of ʿAṭṭār’s favorite images appears next, the drowning man who continuously thirsts; although submerged, he remains “dry-lipped” and desirous, and in his yearning to know the secret of the beloved, he does not fear the dangerous monsters that lurk in the shadows of the deep.131 Although the hoopoe concerns himself here mostly with the spiritual attitudes and emotions associated with desirous seeking, he also alludes to specific spiritual practices through which such attitudes may be produced and intensi-

130. ʿAṭṭār, Maṣṭeq al-tayr, 3257-70.
131. Similar imagery can be found at the conclusion of the Mosibat-nāma, 6901-6.
fied. For example, the birds are admonished to jettison their belongings and relinquish the familiar; these exhortations are reminiscent of Qushayri’s recommendation to novices that they abandon their possessions and cut social ties during the first stage of the mystical path (which he calls repentance [tawba]), so that they may more completely intend towards God.132

After this introductory homily, the hoopoe launches into a series of anecdotes related to themes of striving and exertion, which are amplified through further direct exhortations. This pattern repeats itself with the other six valleys: for each of them, the hoopoe delivers an introductory homily, followed by anecdotes and further exhortations, for a total of almost 800 verses regarding the upcoming journey and its stages.

Very near the end of the poem, the hoopoe finally ends these preparatory, homiletic discourses and the birds at last embark upon their journey. This is one of the longest sections of extra-diegetic narration in the Conference of the Birds, but it still contains no more than a few dozen verses. In his frame-tales, ʿAṭṭār is far more interested in homiletic discourse, which instigates and culminates in spiritual development, than in narrative accounts of spiritual development itself. According to the brief narrative passage at issue here, the hoopoe’s performance succeeds in impassioning the birds and convincing them to embark on the perilous journey. The affective power of his speech is so great that many of them die on the spot, still lacking the strength to bear the truth. Among those who survive this shock and actually set out on the path, many succumb to dangers along the way, so that out of the thousands of birds who initially accompanied the hoopoe, only a handful reach the destination:

Their souls became restless from these words,
And many died right in that staging area.

And all of the birds left in that place,
Headed out on the road in longing.
For years, they travelled high and low,
A long lifetime exhausted on their way.

In the end, from among that host,
Few were those who followed the path to that court.
From among all those birds, only a few arrived there;
Only one out of every thousand arrived there.
And some of them drowned in the sea,
And some of them were effaced and disappeared,
And some of them, from the tops of high mountains,
Gave up their souls in thirst, pain, and suffering.

And some, from the heat of the sun,
Had their feathers burnt and their hearts roasted,
And some, at the hands of leopards and panthers on the way,
Were pitifully destroyed in a single moment,
And some just disappeared,
Having fallen into the talons of fearsome raptors,
And some, dry-lipped in the desert,
Thirsty, died of fever in the heat,
And some, for the sake of a single grain,
Killed themselves like lunatics,
And some, exhausted and pained,
Fell behind and lost their way,
And some, from the wonders of the route,
Stood transfixed in place,
And some, in pleasure and mirth,
Eased their bodies and lost their desire.

Finally, only one out of every hundred thousand—
No more than a small group—reached the goal.
A world of birds had set out,
But only thirty arrived there.
The sufistic notion of spiritual development is informed by the metaphor of the journey, so the hazards and dangers of travel—more acute in the pre-modern era than today—were quite naturally mapped onto the sufi way. The pilgrimage to Mecca, of course, was the paradigmatic journey for pre-modern Muslims, and the predominantly desert imagery used by ʿAṭṭār here evokes the dangers of that route, which would be foolhardy to attempt alone without a knowledgable guide. Likewise, those who desired to travel down the mystical path needed to attach themselves to a spiritual guide who had already traversed the way and knew its potential pitfalls. Sufi manuals continuously reiterate the dangers of the path: the novice can be seduced by visions, waylaid by the devil, or blinded by arrogance and pride, and while a trusted guide can mitigate some of these risks, the sufi path can never be completely safe. 134 Although guided by the hoopoe, most of the birds succumb to various dangers along the road, which can be allegorically mapped onto the hazards that threaten sufi novices: some are bewitched by arresting visions and myopically abandon the ultimate goal; 135 others are destroyed by leopards and pan-

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133. ʿAṭṭār, Manteq al-tayr, 4161-70.
134. For example, see Dāya, Merṣād al-‘ebād, 226-35; Qushayri, al-Risāla al-qushayriyya, 2:735-43.
135. Many authors warn that novices can be seduced by visions and unveilings that they may witness, especially during the forty-day sufi retreat (chella); see Chapter 5, p. 284-286.
thers, often understood as symbols of the concupiscent soul;⁵³⁶ and some, lacking the necessary strength, perish in the unforgiving terrain.

Out of the thousands who had set out, only thirty birds survive these dangers and arrive at the court of the Simorgh, consistent with the sufi notion that proximity with God is a privilege only afforded to an elect few. But the birds’ travails are not quite at an end; just as they believe they have reached their goal, they are turned away by the Simorgh’s chamberlain, who informs them that the Simorgh, in his perfect transcendence, has no use for them. But when they turn away dejected and resigned, he suddenly calls them back, presents them with a scrap of paper, and commands them to read it. Written on the paper is the tale of Joseph’s reunion with his brothers, which they interpret as an allegory for their own relationship to the Simorgh. The birds are then admitted to “the light of proximity” and, much to their surprise, they see their own faces reflected in the visage of Simorgh. ʿAṭṭār playfully explores this mystical merging of identities through the famous pun on Simorgh and “thirty birds” (si morgh):

The light of proximity shone from ahead,
All their souls were dazzled by that beam.
And reflected in their faces, the thirty birds of the world,
Saw the visage of the Simorgh.
When those thirty birds (si morgh) looked closer,
Without a doubt, these thirty birds (si morgh) were that Simorgh!
In confusion all were bewildered,
These didn’t know how they’d become that.
They saw themselves as the complete Simorgh,
And the Simorgh itself was thirty birds (si morgh) perpetually.
When they looked towards the Simorgh,
That Simorgh was these over here.
And when they glanced at themselves,

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₁³⁶ Such an interpretation is especially prominent among the Kobravis, who believed that the concupiscent soul, or “the soul that commands to evil” (al-nafs al-ammāra beʾl-suʾ), appears to the novice in dreams and visions in the form of various beasts: see Dāya, Mersâd al-ʾebād, 304-5; Jamal Elias, The Throne Carrier of God: The Life and Thought of ʿAlāʾ al-Dawla as-Simnānī (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 140-1. Cf. Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, Fawāʾīḥ al-jamāl wa fawāʾīḥ al-jalāl, ed. Fritz Meier (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1957), 25-6, where the animal imagery seems to be metaphorical and the actual visionary experience is limited to abstract forms and colors.
These Simorgh, they were that one there.  
And when they glanced at both at once,  
Both were one Simorgh, more or less.  
This one was that and that one this,  
No one in all the world has heard such a thing!

The pun is an example of “compounded paronomasia” (tajnis-e morakkab), a rhetorical device in which a word is juxtaposed with a phrase of an identical or similar pronunciation and spelling: in this case, “Simorgh” and “si morgh” (thirty birds).  

The two terms are repeated twelve times in only seven verses, the sheer weight of the anaphora serving to emphasize their linguistic and ontological near-equivalence. In most contexts, “thirty birds” would be written as two words—“si morgh”—and the term generally appears that way in the first half of the passage presented here. But by the second half only “simorgh” remains, even when “thirty birds” seems to be the common-sense signification, as in the line, “When they glanced at themselves / These ‘simorgh’ were that one there.”  

The thirty birds’ supposed ontological identification with the Simorgh is thus performed not only meta-linguistically, but even orthographically. They have attained to their destination, and they have found therein a version of themselves.

139. Here I follow the orthography of the early Konya manuscripts. See Gowharin’s edition, 4235-41; cf. Shafi‘i-Kadkani’s edition, 4261-68. Some manuscripts use “simorgh” throughout the whole passage; this is the case in University of Michigan Islamic Manuscripts 290.
The conclusion suggests that humans are ontologically rooted in the divine, but that this truth must be actualized through external action. The birds realize that they themselves are reflections of the Simorgh, and that the goal of their quest was never an external destination, but their true selves. Nevertheless, the external quest was necessary for them to comprehend this internal truth; only through the transformation of the self through spiritual wayfaring—motivated by the hoopoe’s homiletic instruction—could they become aware of their inherent “Simorgh-ness.” The birds in the story can thus be allegorically mapped onto the mystical transformation of the human soul; once the sufì purifies his or her lower self (nafs) through ascetic striving and passage through the mystical stages, he or she can actualize the inherent participation of the spirit (ruh) in God.

And yet, the birds’ identification with the Simorgh is never complete. Even as the birds see themselves in the Simorgh and the Simorgh in themselves, an unbridgeable gap remains. In their perplexity, the birds call on the Simorgh to explain the secret of this “you-ness and I-ness,” and a non-verbal “voice” responds:

Since you came here as thirty birds (si morgh),
You appeared as thirty in this mirror.
If you were to return as forty or fifty,
You would still remove the veil from yourselves.
Far have you roamed, but
You see and have seen only yourselves.
How could anyone’s vision reach us?
How could an ant catch sight of the Pleiades?
Have you seen an ant carry an anvil?
Or a fly grab an elephant in its teeth?
Whatever you know or see—it’s not that!
Whatever you say or hear—it’s not that!

... You remain thirty birds (si morgh), perplexed,
Heart-broken, patience-tried, soul-stripped,
But we in our “simorgh-ness” are so much greater,
Since we are the essence of the true Simorgh.
Their experience of co-identity is born out of their own limited perspective; whoever reaches this court witnesses not the Simorgh itself, but some reflected aspect of his or her own being. The Simorgh remains the “true Simorgh,” elevated far above the thirty ragged, exhausted birds. The melding of their identities occurs only from the perspective of the birds, who have gazed into a mirror—it does not reflect any “objective” equivalence. The ontological gap between them and the Simorgh remains irreducible: how could an ant lift an anvil, or a fly grab an elephant in its teeth? And yet, after the Simorgh has castigated them for their delusion, they are invited to lose—and find—themselves within its being yet again. The result is a dynamic vacillation between identification and differentiation: the thirty birds see themselves in the Simorgh, even as they are reminded of the infinite gap between them.141

After the birds attain to the Simorgh and enter into the fluctuating states of annihilation and subsistence (fanā vo baqā), their journey is complete and the frame-narrative ends. As a whole, however, the poem’s focus lies less on the journey’s end-point than its beginning, and the spoken discourse by means of which the birds are initially prodded onto the way. It is their

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140. ʿAṭṭâr, Manṭeq al-tayr, 4275-85.
141. See Corbin’s eloquent analysis of this final scene in Visionary Recital, 201-3.
receptivity to the hoopoe’s speech and their active participation in his assemblies that inaugurates the spiritual transformation that ultimately leads them to the Simorgh. Homiletic speech, as portrayed in the frame-tale, is powerfully perlocutionary: it inculcates a sufiistic ethos in its recipients and thereby instigates the cognitive, ethical, and psychological transformations of the sufi path, ultimately leading to the realization of a new form of being in-and-through God.

**Framing the Anecdotes**

Besides encoding a particular conception of homiletic speech, the frame-tale also influences the meaning of the embedded anecdotes and their relation to the poem as a whole. Frame-narratives are often said to perform a unifying function, especially in the case of large, generically diverse story collections like the *Canterbury Tales* and *One Thousand and One Nights*. Although somewhat more consistent, the anecdotes of the *Conference of the Birds* are also quite diverse: the hoopoe narrates stories featuring early ascetics, the companions of Muhammad, and pre-Islamic prophets, as well as historical kings, various mythological beings, and personified animals and objects. The majority of the anecdotes are usually quite short, featuring only a couple of characters and minimal action (mostly dialogue), but he occasionally narrates long, extended tales as well, including the stories of Shaykh Ṣanʿān, Sarpâtak, and Marḥuma, which recall more elaborate popular romances and folk tales.

The overarching frame-tale smooths out these generic and formal differences and justifies the inclusion of such diverse narratives in a single text. The *Conference of the Birds* is par-

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143. For a few of the animal fables found in ʿAṭṭār, see Boyle, “Popular Literature,” 60-1.

ticularly successful in this regard because its frame-tale is relatively robust in comparison with its “framed” content. After every cluster of anecdotes, the frame-tale resurfaces as the birds react to the hoopoe’s discourse, pose a question, or voice an objection. Within each of these clusters, many anecdotes are explicitly marked as quoted speech, often beginning with “goft” (he said). And after most of his narrations, the hoopoe highlights their moral significance in a direct exhortative address, sometimes with explicit references to the Simorgh and the birds’ upcoming journey. By means of this continuously renewed, fictional oral performance setting, the Conference of the Birds is endowed with a certain coherence that non-frame-tale masnavis lack.

The frame-tale not only unifies the work, but it also generates a sense of sequentiality. The anecdotes themselves, considered without reference to their position in the frame-tale, do not seem to display any sort of development in their manner of meaning-making, nor do their didactic points seem to become more difficult or complicated. When considered in the context of the frame-tale, however, they are endowed with a certain direction: they are tied to specific themes in the hoopoe’s discourse, and the frame-tale suggests those themes ought to be considered sequentially as part of the birds’ progressive journey towards the Simorgh. By virtue of the frame-tale, the poem’s anecdotes are thus presented as more than a collection of edifying tales and exhortations; rather, they constitute a sequential program, that, like the sufi path, must be tread in order.

The frame-tale also seeds certain themes and structures that are then reiterated in the hypo-diegetic material. Davis, for instance, argues that the story of Shaykh Ṣanʿān—which, as we have seen, is the longest tale in the poem and occupies a critical juncture in the birds’ narrative—mirrors the overall structure of the birds’ journey through the seven valleys. According to his reading, this structure is also repeated, in a somewhat different form, in one of the very last anecdotes of the poem; the arc of the frame-narrative is thus distilled and reproduced at
key points within the embedded material. Somewhat more simply, I would also argue that the vast majority of anecdotes mirror the frame-tale in their depiction of paraenetic speech-events. Most of them feature a teacher-figure who instructs or exhorts a wayward interlocutor, recalling the hoopoe’s rhetorical stance vis-à-vis the birds as well as that of ‘Aṭṭār’s extra-diegetic persona vis-à-vis his audience. The rhetorical implications of these recursively reiterated communicative patterns will be explored in more detail in the next section; here it suffices to note that paraenetic discourse and homiletic speech-situations can be found throughout the poem on all of its diegetic levels, which helps it read as a coherent whole.

Besides these global effects, the frame-tale structure also influences how particular anecdotes are understood and interpreted. When considered in isolation, many of the poem’s embedded narratives support multiple divergent interpretations, but by elaborating a fictional performance context for their delivery, ‘Aṭṭār acquires another tool for controlling his reader-listeners’ hermeneutic activity. First, individual anecdotes are narrated in response to specific questions from the hoopoe’s audience, which forms a horizon for their interpretation. Second, each anecdote is usually followed by a direct address in which the hoopoe reveals his homiletic motives and urges his audience to attend the story’s didactic point. The narratives are thus effectively sandwiched between two mechanisms of interpretive control.

As a short example, let us take a closer look at the tale of the Qoqnos, one of the more popular anecdotes in ‘Aṭṭār’s oeuvre, and also one of the more unusual. It describes the strange life and death of the phoenix-like Qoqnos, a “wondrous bird” (torfa morghi) that lives

145. Davis, “Journey as Paradigm,” 175.
146. Interpretive homilies, of course, are also found in didactic maṣnavīs that lack the frame-tale structure—they are one of the defining characteristics of the genre.
somewhere in India.\textsuperscript{148} There can be only one Qoqnos in existence at a time, and it lives for nearly a thousand years. Among its many fabulous characteristics is its perforated beak, by means of which it produces mournful music in the manner of a reed flute. The human science of music even owes its origins to the Qoqnos; the bird was observed by a “philosopher” (perhaps we can read Pythagoras?) who thereby learned the secrets of melody. The affective power of its music is so great that all the other animals lose their composure whenever they hear it:

\begin{quote}
In every hole, another note,
Beneath every note, another mystery.
Through those holes, when it mournfully wails,
The birds and fish all lose their composure.
\end{quote}

More strange still is the Qoqnos’ process of dying. When it has reached the end of its allotted life-span, it gathers brushwood around itself while emitting a mournful dirge from every hole in its beak. All the animals gather around, attracted by this lament; many of them die from the sheer intensity of Qoqnos’ self-threnody. It then trembles and flaps its wings, producing sparks and igniting the fuel piled at its feet. When its self-immolation is complete, and the fire has been reduced to embers and then to ashes, a fledgling Qoqnos emerges from the pyre.

Prior to ʿAtṭār, a few references to the Qoqnos and similar beasts can be found in the scientific and “wonders of creation” literature (ʿajāʿeb al-makhluqât). The philosopher Abuʾl-Barakât Baghdādi, in his collection of Aristotelian wisdom, names the Qoqnos as the sole example of asexual animal reproduction, and he describes its music and death ritual much as ʿAtṭār does.\textsuperscript{150} A peculiar animal is also mentioned in an early wonders work, the \textit{Offering of

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 2334.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 2337-8.
\textsuperscript{150} See Shafīʿi-Kadkani’s commentary, 649-51n2334; Ṣanʿatiniā, \textit{Maʿākhez}, 148-9; ʿAbd al-Ḥosayn Zarrinkub, \textit{Bā kārvān-e andisha: Maqālāt va eshārāt dar zamina-ye andisha va akhlāq} (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1363 [1984]).
Oddities (Tohfat al-gharâ’eb), which displays many of the characteristics of ʿAṭṭâr’s Qoqnos but remains unnamed. According to the Offering, this creature resembles a deer with a perforated horn; when the wind blows, the horn produces music that attracts the other animals and throws them into ecstasy, and the philosopher Plato allegedly removed this horn and used it as a musical instrument.  

Whatever ʿAṭṭâr’s sources may have been (and they could have just as easily been oral legends as texts), his version of the story, when taken in isolation, recalls not a preacher’s exemplum so much as the wonders of creation literature. The continued invocation of terms like “wonder” (ʿajab), “wonders” (ʿajâʾeb), and “wondrous” (ṭorfa) may constitute a wink towards these generic origins and suggests that the anecdote’s purpose is not to admonish its reader-listeners but to dazzle them with a description of this unusual bird and its behaviors. Several other thematic and rhetorical strands can also be isolated from the narrative. As an origins story for the human practice and science of music, it explains the affective power of song, especially the lament. The Qoqnos’ power to attract other beasts and throw them into a potentially fatal ecstasy recalls the sufi samâʾ ceremony as well as the stories of the prophet David. One could also read the Qoqnos as a symbol of rebirth and resurrection. There is perhaps even a hint of metempsychosis here: at one point, the narrator rhetorically questions, “Has this ever come to pass, for anyone else? / That after death he emerges, un-born?” suggesting that the fledgling Qoqnos may be more than just a new member of the same species, but a new incarnation of the same individual.

234-5. It should be noted, however, that the Qoqnos does not appear in the most popular examples of the wonders genre, such as those by Qazvini and Ṭusi, nor does it appear in the bestiary of Jāhiz.


152. ʿAṭṭâr, Manṭeq al-ṭayr, 2358.
All of these latent themes contribute to the anecdote’s total effect, but within the wider context of the hoopoe’s discourse, the story is deployed primarily to illustrate the universality of death and the pain of the mortal situation. It is narrated by the hoopoe in response to a bird’s confession that he fears death too much to undertake the journey to the Simorgh:

... I am frightened of death;
This is a wide valley, and I am without provisions or supplies.
My heart is terrified of death such that
My soul would emerge at the first stage.

The hoopoe rebukes this bird from atop his pulpit, castigating him not for fearing death, but for allowing that fear to stand in the way of spiritual progress. You are nothing more than a sack of bones, the hoopoe tells the bird, and a lifetime lasts only a moment or two; all the more reason, then, to purify the self now in preparation for the inevitable end. He then recites the story of the Qoqnos, followed by an explanatory homily in which he articulates the narrative’s “point,” which, for the hoopoe, is not the promise of resurrection, but the inevitability of death:

every creature, even the singular Qoqnos, must ultimately die:

In the end, death got its due,
It came and scattered its [the Qoqnos’] ashes on the wind,
So that you might know that from death’s claws
None escapes alive. How long with these stratagems?!
In all the world, there is no one without death,
And behold this wonder, that no one can stand this fact!
Although death is a harsh tyrant,
All must submit their necks to him.

153. Ibid., 2319-20.
In other words, the tale of the Qoqnos functions as a sort of illustrative limit case, by means of which the hoopoe demonstrates the universality of death to his avian audience and impresses upon them the seriousness of this condition. If the Qoqnos, a bird who lives a thousand years, is mournfully preoccupied with his own death, then how much more so ought these regular birds—whose lifetimes only last “two breaths” in comparison—attend to their own mortality? The Qoqnos thus becomes an emblem of life’s inherent transitoriness; it dies, according to the hoopoe, “So that you might know that from death’s claws / None escapes alive.” The story is narrated to force the audience to confront the reality of their own mortality and give up their “stratagems” for maintaining a happy ignorance. The true wonder, according to the hoopoe, is not the fabulous Qoqnos, with its thousand-year lifespan and perforated beak, but the fact that no one has the strength to confront their own mortal nature.

In short, the anecdote’s didactic point emerges against the background of this imagined homiletic context. By virtue of the frame-tale structure, the polysemous anecdote is positioned as an utterance in a hortatory assembly narrated with a clear didactic intent in response to a specific individual’s stated fear of death. And within this imagined communicative setting, the Qoqnos serves not as an astonishing example of the wonders of creation, but as a pointed lesson on the inevitable transience of human life.

**Framing the Textual Encounter**

Even as the frame-tale recasts and repackages the poem’s framed content, it also creates certain subject-positions from which reader-listeners are invited to experience the poem and

154. Ibid., 2363-6.
conceptualize their relationship to it. The frame-tale is thus not limited to formal or semiotic significance; it also plays a fundamental role in the work’s rhetorical positioning vis-à-vis its reader-listeners. In the following pages, we identify and explore three areas in which the frame-tale calls on its audience to adopt the stance of receptive subjects of the hoopoe’s homiletic discourse. First, we show how the frame-tale cultivates a specific form of narratorial illusion, in which readers are invited to imagine their encounter with the text as an aural experience. Next, we argue that the hoopoe and the birds function, respectively, as an idealized speaker-teacher and a group of listener-students, and that they thereby model the rhetorical relationship that Ṭṭār seeks to establish with his audience. Finally, we consider the embedded Joseph anecdote that the birds read together at the conclusion of their quest, through which Ṭṭār diegetically demonstrates the poem’s intended transformative power.

Reading and Listening
In a medieval context, knowledge was not a set of vehicle-neutral propositions, but its validity depended on its mode of transmission and the authority of the transmitter. Generally speaking, oral discourse with a reputable spiritual master, and not the reading of books, was the preferred mode of religious education and spiritual direction.\textsuperscript{155} This book-master dichotomy, however, is problematized by texts like the Conference of the Birds, in which the frame-tale structure imaginatively frames the textual encounter as an aural, interpersonal experience. Readers are

re-centered among the birds as attendees at a fictional, oral preaching session, and the textual poem is thereby legitimized as an independent source of spiritual guidance.¹⁵⁶

One of the more intriguing problems in the phenomenology of reading is that of “aesthetic illusion,” defined by Werner Wolf as the “feeling, with variable intensity, of being imaginatively and emotionally immersed in a represented world and of experiencing this world in a way similar (but not identical) to real life.”¹⁵⁷ Such an immersion is never totally complete since most readers remain conscious of its illusive, representational quality; nevertheless, immersive texts can produce a powerful simulated reality.¹⁵⁸ We are concerned here with a specific form of aesthetic illusion, identified by Ansgar Nünning as “narratorial illusion,” which involves the reader’s sense that he or she is “being addressed by a personalized voice or teller.”¹⁵⁹ This simulated orality can be cultivated in a number of ways, but Nünning focuses on meta-narrative comments, in which the narrator repeatedly references his or her own (imagined) act of oral narration and thereby “evoke[s] the impression of a speaking voice or fictional orality . . . calling up a cognitive schema of an oral communication situation of a storytelling frame.”¹⁶⁰

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¹⁵⁸ Ibid.


¹⁶⁰ Nünning, “Metanarrative,” 33.
ʿAṭṭâr’s masnavis, like the vast majority of medieval Persian verse, contain many such meta-narrative comments, especially in the prefatory and concluding material, in which ʿAṭṭâr’s poetic persona routinely characterizes his own narration as oral discourse. He does not write poetry, but sings it (goftan); his poems are described as speech (sokhan) and utterances (gofta). Through such meta-narrative comments, the poem is cast as an aural experience, which helps legitimize its didactic force. Nevertheless, even though an oral framing arguably dominates, sometimes ʿAṭṭâr also invokes a textual schema. At these points the poem’s textual materiality is emphasized, and the recipient’s experience is cast as primarily visual, rather than aural:

O man of the way, don’t look (negâh makon) in my book (ketâb),
With an eye for poetry and pride.
With an eye for pain look (negâh kon) in my cahier (daftar),
So that you might believe even one percent of my pain.

These meta-narrative comments call attention to the poem as written; it is inscribed in a “book” or “cahier,” and the audience is instructed to “look” therein, not listen. Sometimes a single verse will rely on both textual and oral framings, as in ʿAṭṭâr’s opening to the Book of Affliction:

Become an ear (gush), head to foot, without a veil,
So that I may set out for you the basis of this book (ketâb)

The first hemistich names three body parts—ear, head, and foot—an instance of a common rhetorical device known as “observance of the similarity” (morâʿât al-nażîr) in which the poet aims to fluidly mention several objects of the same genus within a single distich or

162. ʿAṭṭâr, Moṣibat-nâma, 884.
hemistich. But even if ʿAṭṭâr’s inclusion of the word “ear” is motivated by ornamental concerns, the resulting metaphor relies for its coherence on the notion that the act of reading involves a vicarious listening; a narrator “speaks,” and the textual audience “listens.” By calling on the audience, by way of hyperbolic synecdoche, to become the organ of aural perception, ‘Aṭṭâr requests his readers’ attention and receptivity to the following material. The second hemistich then refers to the poem in textual terms as a “book” (ketāb), but it is a book about which—and through which—the poet orally addresses his audience. The aural and the textual are thus mutually intertwined, and the text becomes a site from which an imaginary orality emerges.

The frame-tale device extends this narratorial illusion even further, as Wolf perceptively observes. When cultivated by extra-diegetic narrators, narratorial illusion usually remains secondary to the primary illusion of the audience’s immersion in the diegetic world. But a frame-tale makes the act of narration itself an object of narration, and thereby elaborates the narratorial situation in greater detail than is usually possible using only extra-diegetic, meta-narrative comments; the frame-tale structure can thus intensify a work’s illusionist potential to “permit the recipient to imagine him- or herself being present in an oral storytelling (or storyreading) situation.” In the Conference of the Birds, nearly every anecdote is explicitly cued as an oral narration of the hoopoe, who comments on their significance in a hortatory style reminiscent of oral preachers. In the longer tales, such as Shaykh Ṣan‘ān, the hoopoe will even interrupt his narration to deliver a direct homiletic address. Although hardly a full-

165. Ibid., 189-90.
166. In this capacity the hoopoe’s voice sometimes elides with that of ʿAṭṭâr’s own extra-diegetic persona, as we will see in the subsequent subsection.
fledged character in a modern sense, the hoopoe’s motivations and spiritual bonafides are explained in some detail, as is the communicative situation of his speech. The poem thus repeatedly frames its hypo-diegetic material as an oral discourse delivered by a specific preacher-figure to a listening audience, and it thereby offers its readers the opportunity to imagine themselves among those fictive auditors.

The notion of aesthetic illusion was developed with the modern novel in mind, and there are questions as to how well the concept transfers across historic and generic boundaries. Didactic maṣnāvis are not informed by the same mimetic approach to representation, and it follows that readers would not value them for their immersive qualities in the same way. Nevertheless, Nünning’s notion of narratorial illusion—that a text can simulate an aural experience—remains germane for a work like Conference of the Birds, not only because this imagined performance situation is so deeply encoded in the work, but also because the act of reading was, for medieval audiences, existentially bound up with aural apprehension in many ways. In the first place, the Conference of the Birds likely would have been read out loud in a group setting. Although we have no direct accounts of how ʿAṭṭār’s works were performed, we know that other maṣnāvis, like Ferdowsi’s Book of Kings (Shāh-nāma) and Rumi’s Spiritual Couplets (Maṣnawi-yē maʿnāvī), were routinely read out loud or recited from memory to larger audiences. Even when a poem was read alone, medieval readers accustomed to oral performance and the robust metrical system of Persian prosody would likely not have perused the words silently, but mouthed or enunciated them, adding an additional layer of bodily entanglement

167. Wolf, “Framing Borders in Frame Stories.”
168. Nezāmī-yē ʿArużī, Chahār Maqāla, 79-80; Aflāki, Manâqeb al-ʿārefīn, 2:777. According to Nezâmī-yē ʿArużī, Ferdowsī employed a reciter, Bu Dolaf, to perform the Book of Kings. The position of “maṣnawi-reciter” (maṣnawi-khwān) is mentioned in Aflāki’s fourteenth-century hagiography as if it were already an institutionalized post during the leadership of ʿHosâm al-Dīn Chalabī (d. 1284).
and aural apprehension to the textual encounter. Some of ‘Atṭâr’s verses explicitly suggest that he may have had such a mode of reading in mind. For example, in the following line he uses the verb “bar khwândan” (to read out loud, to recite) to describe how spiritual benefits accrue to those who read his work:

Whoever recited (bar khwând) this became a man of action;  
Whoever understood this, reaped its benefit.

One must also keep in mind that many of the edifying anecdotes narrated by the hoopoe likely circulated orally. ‘Atṭâr may have relied on some textual sources when compiling his maṣnâvis, but the oral tradition could never have been too far afield. A number of his anecdotes draw on common folk-motifs or consist of hagiographical legends that, in addition to any possible textual vectors, were likely to have been retold in mystically minded assemblies in Khorâsân. His reader-listeners, too, would likely have already heard many of these stories, and those prior aural encounters would have influenced how they received and experienced ‘Atṭâr’s text. In short, in the medieval world, texts were often informed by oral sources, mimicked forms of oral discourse, and preformed in oral contexts, which helps to legitimate ‘Atṭâr’s framing of the former in terms of the latter.

But there is also an important rhetorical motivation behind this framing: by evoking an oral homiletic environment, the poem legitimizes itself as a source of spiritual guidance and lays claim to greater didactic force. Even though orality and textuality intersected in complicated ways in medieval Islamdom, knowledge was generally considered epistemologically more sound and didactically more effective when transmitted orally within specific social settings.170

169. ‘Atṭâr, Manṣeq al-tayr, 4502.  
Hadith science is perhaps the most obvious example; it places great emphasis on the unbroken chain of oral transmission from the Prophet. In most varieties of sufism, a novice’s training also depends on a personal master-disciple relationship; the former, who has already reached the goal, must not only instruct the latter, but personally show him or her the way. (It ought to be noted, however, that the reading of texts would, for many novices, have likely figured into this personal training relationship). Likewise, hortatory preaching relies to a great extent on the circumambient actuality of oral performance for its perlocutionary effect: in such an environment, audience members could assess a preacher’s trustworthiness on the basis of his ethos and appearance, and the preacher could dynamically react to the audience, not only verbally but through extra- and para-lingual channels as well. *The Conference of the Birds*, as a text, can never totally reduplicate these aspects of oral homiletic communication for its readers. Nevertheless, by continuously casting itself as speech and constructing a fictional performance situation, it activates an aural cognitive scheme and invites readers to participate in an imaginary, but nonetheless very real, simulation of such a homiletic speech-event. With the frame-tale structure, ṢʿAṭṭār shows his readers how to approach the reading of a static text as an extension of the auditory experience, and he thereby validates his work as an independent source of spiritual guidance:

As your leader (*rahbar*), my utterances (*gofta*) suffice,
Since this speech (*sokhan*) is a guide on the path (*pir-e rah*) for everyone.

171. Irwin’s comments (35) are apropos here: “By depicting an oral composition and performance and drawing from traditional sources, the frame tale provides the medieval audience with a continuity of reception between the act of listening and that of reading.” Also see Ong, “Writer’s Audience,” 16; Belcher, “Framed Tales,” 19.

Even when textualized—and therefore abstracted from the shared interpersonal context of homiletic performance—ʿAṭṭār’s speech guides its recipients down the spiritual path. Indeed, it is precisely the power of text to capture and prolong inherently fleeting homiletic speech-events that allows ʿAṭṭār to reach a broader readership that far exceeds the bounds of his immediate friends, family, and spiritual devotees.

Slippage of Speaker and Address
Besides strengthening narratorial illusion, the frame-tale structure also guides reader-listeners towards a specific reception-stance through its recursive depiction of paraenetic speech-events. The poem’s diverse anecdotes and multiple levels of narration are linked by their joint interest in a common rhetorical situation, in which a wise speaker seeks to instigate spiritual change in his or her audience through verbal exhortation. On the diegetic level, the hoopoe prepares the birds for their journey to the Simorgh through his homilies, and a similar pattern repeats itself in many of the embedded, hypo-diegetic anecdotes, which feature various teacher-figures urging their addressees to reform themselves and lead more pious lives. These repeatedly portrayed communicative situations gesture towards the poem’s own didactic aims and reflexively characterize its rhetorical stance. The hoopoe serves as an avatar for ʿAṭṭār’s extra-diegetic persona, whose role as preacher and spiritual teacher is thereby clarified, while the birds function as model reception figures, guiding the readers’ approach to the poem.173

The birds participate in the hoopoe’s assemblies not only to acquire knowledge, but to be cognitively and psychologically transformed, and thereby guided towards the Simorgh.174 And this promise of spiritual transformation is also extended to ʿAṭṭār’s reader-listeners, for

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174. ʿAṭṭār, Manṭeq al-ṭayr, 1651-6.
whom the hoopoe’s homilies are reproduced verbatim by ʿAṭṭār’s poetic persona, the root-level narrator of the entire poem. In the extensive epilogue, the poem’s transformative powers are touted by ʿAṭṭār in propria persona. There, as we have seen, the work is personified as a spiritual director: according to ʿAṭṭār, it is a “guide on the path for everyone,” and whoever reads it “becomes a man of the way”; if one who is “frozen like ice” sees the book, “he comes out dancing from behind the veil like fire.” Its homiletic discourse is likened to a medicine, in that it effects a fundamental change in existential state: “Whoever suffers from the poison of religious deviation / These lofty words are antidote enough for him.” In other words, the Conference of the Birds claims a spiritually transformative power over its audiences, and this claim is corroborated by the birds’ reaction to the material; they listen to the same narratives and discourses as ʿAṭṭār’s human readers, and their narrated transformations confirm the material’s potential to spiritually re-shape its recipients.

Like the frame-tale, the embedded hypo-diegetic anecdotes also depict paraenetic speech-events. Usually these are not hortatory assemblies in the strict sense of the term, but informal situations in which one character verbally urges another to evaluate and reform his or her actions, attitudes, or way of life. These anecdotes, and the hoopoe’s accompanying homilies, are the primary means by which the poem inculcates a sufi habitus in its readers, and they will be the subject of an in-depth analysis in the following chapter. Here we will limit ourselves to an examination of a rather typical anecdote to show how it mirrors the frame-tale in its portrayal of paraenetic speech. The anecdote in question features a king who has expended a hundred thousand dinars to construct an elaborate, paradisiacal palace, full of carpets and ornaments. Onlookers from across the land come to gaze on the building, and the king has gold

175. Ibid., 4502, 4505.
176. Ibid., 4592.
and jewels scattered before them. He then summons his boon companions and wise men, seats them on thrones, and asks them whether they have ever seen so magnificent of a palace anywhere else on earth; predictably enough, they all reply in the negative. Suddenly, an ascetic leaps up and proclaims that the palace has one fundamental flaw: a crack in the wall. The king rebukes him and angrily demands to know why he is “stirring up strife”; the ascetic replies:

... O you who are proud in kingship,
That crack is the crack open for 'Azrâ’il.
If only you could have fastened that breach—
Otherwise, what’s the use of a palace, a crown, and a throne?
Although this palace is delightful like paradise,
Death will render it ugly to your eye.
Nothing lasts; life is here and now,
It does not last—there’s no stratagem to extend it.
Don’t take so much comfort in your domain and palace!
Don’t spur on this mount of pride and rebellion!

177. Ibid., 2179-84.

The ascetic wittily harangued the king, calling on him to reevaluate his attachment to material objects and temporal power; however paradisiacal his palace may seem, it cannot, unlike the eschatological gardens, protect its inhabitants from the constant march of time. Although the ascetic speaks from a position of spiritual authority, such a rebuke was clearly a breach of courtly decorum with potentially deadly consequences; none of the “wise men” whom the king had summoned to his palace had dared to point out this fatal flaw themselves. The king himself suggests the political implications of the ascetic’s criticism when he accuses him of fomenting “strife” (*fetna*), a term that conjures up images of political collapse. The ascetic delegitimizes...
the structures of kingship by publicly pointing out the “flaw” in the king’s palace and dismissing the symbols of secular rule as foolish vanities in the face of death.

We do not know if the king heeds the ascetic’s advice or what becomes of him; like most of the anecdotes in the *Conference of the Birds*, this one ends with its protagonist’s verbal calls to reform. Nevertheless, in its depiction of this hortatory speech-event, the anecdote echoes the frame-tale’s larger thematic focus on paraenetic discourse. There are, of course, significant differences: the hoopoe addresses a collective audience according to the accepted conventions of the hortatory assembly, whereas the ascetic rebukes a single recipient (the king) without the benefit of such formal legitimating structures. Nevertheless, they both speak in a paraenetic mode, exhorting their respective audiences from self-assured (if not uncontested) positions of spiritual authority.

Variations on this pattern recur hundreds of times throughout the *Conference of the Birds* (as well as ‘Aṭṭār’s other *maṣnāvis*), and the poem derives a great measure of its coherence from the repeated portrayal of paraenetic speech within its various narrative levels. Moreover, these various levels are not hermetically sealed, but mutually elaborate and reinforce each other. Each hypo-diegetic exhortation implies a series of higher-level exhortations: when the ascetic harangues the king, those exhortations are also spoken by the hoopoe for his own avian audience, whom he aims to thereby educate and transform; and ‘Aṭṭār’s persona, the root-level narrator of the entire poem, also “speaks” these anecdotes and homilies, and thereby urges his reader-listeners to a more pious form of life. In short, at each narrative level, the same basic didactic pattern is repeated and re-intensified. The role of disciple-addressee is jointly played by

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178. Ibn al-Jawzī advises aspiring preachers to tread carefully when sermonizing to sultans; one should soften one’s admonishments and speak generally, so as to not offend the ruler or call his authority into question. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Quṣṣāṣ*, 143/trans. 228-29.
ʿAṭṭār’s addressees, the hoopoe’s avian audience, and the various recipients of didactic harangues within the embedded anecdotes, while the position of teacher-speaker is shared by ʿAṭṭār’s extra-diegetic narratorial persona, the hoopoe, and corresponding figures within the embedded material.

For a premodern audience, these various teacher- and student-figures represent tokens of fundamental types, and thus remain, to a certain extent, interchangeable. Indeed, the narrative levels of the poem often bleed together, and it can be difficult to determine whether a specific exhortation is to be understood primarily as an utterance of a hypo-diegetic character to his or her addressee, the hoopoe to the birds, or ʿAṭṭār’s extra-diegetic persona to his audience. This ambiguity is not part of a modern project of defamiliarization, but rather a result of the tendency to elide the inhabitants of the various narrative levels depending upon the role they play within this overarching didactic schema. As previously mentioned, most of the hypo-diegetic anecdotes end with a verbal exhortation uttered by one of the characters, which is followed by the hoopoe’s own homiletic commentary. But ʿAṭṭār does not explicitly mark the transition between these speakers, and due to the similarity of their subject matter and rhetorical stance, the narratological boundary between them often remains ambiguous.

For example, let us take a look at an anecdote in which Ḥasan al-BAṣāri asks Rabe’a how she managed to achieve such an elevated spiritual state without any formal study in the religious sciences. She chalks it up to her scrupulousness, and explains how she once refused to hold two coins in a single hand out of fear that it might arouse her greed.

Rabe’a said to him: O Shaykh of the age,
I had woven a few strands of rope,
I took them and sold them, and was glad of heart,
Two coins of silver were my profit.
But I wouldn’t take both in one hand at one time,
I took this one in this hand, that one in that.
Because I was terrified that if they joined forces,
They would waylay me on the path and I wouldn’t be able to resist. 
The worldly man puts his heart and soul in blood, 
And falls in a hundred thousand other snares. 
If he takes even one bit of gold from an illegal source, 
Once he’s obtained it and dies, that’s it; 
And his heir, for whom that gold is legal inheritance, 
Well, he too is mired in the sorrow and burden of sin 
O you who have sold the Simorgh for gold, 
You’ve lit your heart like a candle in love of gold. 
Since there is no room in this way for a single hair, 
No one can have both a store of treasure and a sallow face.

Rabe’a is explicitly cued as the speaker at the beginning of this passage, but at some point the 
speaker shifts: the line “O you who have sold the Simorgh for gold,” is clearly spoken not by 
Rabe’a to Ḥasan al- Баşri, but by the hoopoe to the other birds (and also by ʿAṭṭār’s persona to 
his own audience). But where exactly does this shift occur? It is difficult to say, and this ambi-
guity is likely intentional: ʿAṭṭār could have easily marked a change of speaker with a phrase 
like “the hoopoe said” or even “ke” (the medieval Persian equivalent of the quotation-introduc-
ing colon) but none of these are present. Premodern Persian lacks quotation marks, but Shafi’i-
Kadkani includes them in his editions, so he is forced to explicitly mark the ending of Rabe’a’s 
speech in a way that the manuscript sources do not. According to his reading, Rābe’a’s utter-
ance ends with her explanation of why she refused to carry both coins in one hand; he places

179. ʿAṭṭār, Manṭeq al-tayr, 2136-44.
the closing quotation mark after the line, “Because I was terrified that if they joined forces /
They would waylay me on the path and I wouldn’t be able to resist.” Such a reading is certainly
defensible; the passage at this point shifts from an example of Rabe’a’s scrupulousness, narrat-
ed in the first-person, to general observations on the spiritual dangers of wealth and material
attachment, narrated in the third. But other readings are possible as well. We could easily un-
derstand these general observations on the dangers of wealth to be a continuation of Rabe’a’s
speech, her didactic extrapolation from her own personal situation. The only reason Shafi’i-
Kadkani must give a definitive answer to this question one way or another is because he uses
modern grammatical markings; ‘Aṭṭār himself is under no such obligation, and there is no indi-
cation that he or his readers were troubled by the resulting narratological ambiguity: the
hoopoe and Rabe’a both function as teacher-figures who urge their addressees to a life a piety,
and their particular voices easily merge.

Just as hypo-diegetic exhortations bleed into the hoopoe’s intra-diegetic homilies, the
latter often converge with ‘Aṭṭār’s own extra-diegetic admonishments to his readers.\(^{180}\) A par-
ticularly interesting example of such a melding occurs after an anecdote during the hoopoe’s
discussion of the valley of oneness (\textit{tawḥīd}), the fifth stage that the birds will traverse on their
way towards the Simorgh, in which God’s unity embraces and effaces all difference:

\begin{quote}
As long as you are, there is good and evil,
But when you lose yourself, all is passion.
\end{quote}

\(^{180}\) Porousness between levels of narration is often considered a powerful defamiliarizing device; in many post-
modern works, metaleptic transgressions are used to draw attention to the work’s fictionality and construct-
edness. In the \textit{Conference of the Birds}, however, the effect is quite the opposite. The narrators from different
levels do not \textit{intrude} into each other’s domains so much as they \textit{merge} by virtue of their shared rhetorical
stance, and instead of drawing attention to the narrated world’s fictionality, this convergence stresses the
poem’s edifying function and the reader’s role as listener-student. See John Pier, “Metalepsis,” in Hühn et al.,
\textit{Living Handbook of Narratology}, updated 13 July 2016, http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/metalepsis-re-
vised-version-uploaded-13-july-2016; Genette, \textit{Narrative Discourse}, 235. Also relevant are Wolf and Nünning’s
comments on how frame-stories and metanarration can be used to both break and intensify a literary work’s
If you remain in your own existence,  
You’ll see much good and evil, and the road is long.  
Ever since you’ve emerged from nothingness,  
You’ve been entangled in the bonds of self.  
If only you could be now like you were in the beginning—  
That is to say, divorced from being.  
Become completely purified of your negative attributes,  
And then become dirt, blown from the hand by the wind.

The difference between good and evil has meaning only from a human perspective rooted in earthly existence; in the divine realm, all is unified. Human beings can participate in this divine unity by relinquishing their misplaced, egotistical claims to independent agency and existence, a transformation that is at once psychological, ontological, and ethical. One must realize one’s fundamental non-existence in the face of God, and individuals who have attained to this state can no longer be said to exist in a normal way; instead, they have re-entered into that proximity with God that they enjoyed in pre-eternity, before their own creation. But this ontological transformation is bound up with an ethical reform; it is attainable only through a purging of “negative attributes.” At this point, the passage moves into a homiletic digression in which these negative attributes are cast as noxious animals that must be extirpated from within the self.

Don’t you know, inside your body,  
What impurities and rubbish heaps you have!  
Snakes and scorpions are inside you, under a veil,  
They’re sleeping, having hidden themselves away.  
If you excite them with the tip of a single hair,  
You’ll transform each of them into a hundred dragons!

181. Ṣattār, Maṭeq al-ṭayr, 3745-9.
Everyone has a hell-pit full of serpents,  
Until you empty out that pit, it continues thus.  
If you escape from each one of them pure,  
Soundly will you will sleep in the earth.  
But if not, beneath the earth, snakes and scorpions,  
Will sting you until the day of reckoning.

The addressee is urged to uproot and drive out the vermin of his or her own self, and the eschatological punishments that await those destined for hell are interpreted as external manifestations of inner ethical failings.

Most interesting, however, is the following narratorial intervention, in which ʿAṭṭâr reveals himself to be the speaker of the above lines:

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How much of this metaphorical language, O ʿAṭṭâr?  
Come back to the secret of the secrets of oneness (towḥid).  
When the wayfaring man arrives at this place,  
The place where he stands is effaced from the road . . .

ʿAṭṭâr calls on himself to leave aside these “metaphorical” musings—meaning the allegorization of negative attributes as inner vermin—and return to the topic of unity. Self-exhortation is a standard feature of homiletic address, since preachers would often want to show that they too, like their audiences, must strive to make spiritual progress. Apostrophes to the self are also a common technique for facilitating poetic transitions. For our purposes, however, the most in-

182. Ibid., 3750-5.  
183. Ibid., 3757-8.
teresting aspect of this particular self-apostrophe is that these verses would have otherwise seemed to have been uttered by the hoopoe, who has, up to this point, been describing the valleys, narrating the anecdotes, and delivering the homilies to the other birds in preparation of the upcoming journey. Nevertheless, here they are revealed to be the utterances of ʿAṭṭâr in propria persona. This metalepsis, even if it is an unintentional “slip,” nonetheless reinforces the notion that there is a certain equivalence between ʿAṭṭâr’s persona and the hoopoe, and this equivalence is rooted in their shared rhetorical stance: they both aim to inculcate a pious ethos in their respective audiences as part of a project of spiritual transformation.¹⁸⁴ And parallel to this convergence of speaker is an implied convergence of addressee: just as the hoopoe functions as the alter-ego of ʿAṭṭâr’s persona, the birds function as a model audience, with whom ʿAṭṭâr’s reader-listeners are encouraged to identify as ideal recipients of homiletic discourse and subjects of spiritual progress. The poem thus blurs the seemingly hard-and-fast ontological boundaries between the hoopoe’s homilies, narrated within a fictional story-world, and its own didactic work.

The Readers in the Text
The self-reflexive potential of the frame-tale structure is most consciously exploited in the final hypo-diegetic anecdote before the thirty surviving birds attain to the presence of the Simorgh. It is at this point that the Simorgh’s chamberlain, who had initially rebuked the birds and sent them away, calls them back, gives them a scrap of paper (roqʿa) with writing on it, and instructs them to “read it through to the end.”¹⁸⁵ The text on this scrap, explains ʿAṭṭâr in an aside,

clarifies the birds’ situation “by way of allegory” (az ῥāh-e mešāl).\textsuperscript{186} The anecdote is thus marked as unusual and significant before it even begins: it occupies a key structural position in the poem, and whereas the previous embedded anecdotes were all framed as oral narrations of the hoopoe, this one is cast as a text that the birds read together as a group. Moreover, it is the only anecdote to be specifically introduced by ‘Aṭṭār as an allegorical explanation of the birds’ spiritual states.

This mysterious text contains a scene from the story of Joseph’s reunion with his brothers; the tale seems to have been a favorite of ‘Aṭṭār’s, as another episode from the same story appears earlier in the poem.\textsuperscript{187} The outlines of the story, of course, are found in the Quran, but they were retold in more elaborate detail in the “stories of the prophets” literature, which ‘Aṭṭār likely relied on here.\textsuperscript{188} According to this version, the brothers wrote out a bill-of-sale when they first sold Joseph into slavery, and this document played a critical role in their reunion many years later:

Joseph, for whom the stars burnt rue,
Was sold by his ten brothers,
And purchased by Mâlek-e Zo’r,
Who wanted a receipt (khatt), since he had bought him cheap.
He requested a receipt from them right there,

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 4229-30.
\textsuperscript{187} The earlier anecdote narrates the incident of the goblet during brothers’ second visit to Egypt. According to most accounts, after Joseph became ruler of Egypt and Canaan was struck by famine, his brothers visited him three times. The first time, they came to buy grain, a request with which Joseph complied. However, he kept their brother Simeon as a hostage and told them to return with Benjamin (who was Joseph’s younger full brother). On their second visit, they returned with Benjamin, to whom Joseph revealed his true identity; neither of them could bear to be separated from one another, however, so Joseph hid his goblet in Benjamin’s saddle bags, so that he could accuse Benjamin of theft and have him detained. After the alleged theft was discovered, Joseph struck the goblet and claimed he could interpret the resonances produced thereby, and that they testified to the brothers’ guilt. The brothers then returned a third time, at it was at this point that Joseph revealed himself to them; the episode recounted at the end of the Conference of the Birds deals with this final revelation. ‘Aṭṭār, Manteq al-tayr, 2726-59; Ritter, Ocean of the Soul, 327; Abū Ishâq Tha’labī, ‘Arā’is al-majālīs fi qiṣṣa al-anbiyā’; or, Lives of the Prophets, trans. William M. Brinner (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 214-28. Cf. Quran 12:58-92; Genesis 42-45.

\textsuperscript{188} Out of the standard collections of stories of the prophets, this particular version of the episode is found only in Maybudi. See Şan‘atini, Ma‘ākhèg, 169-71.
And received from those ten brothers their testimony.
When the ʿAziz of Egypt bought Joseph,
That perfidious note came into Joseph’s hands.

Joseph kept the receipt over the course of his rise to power until he became the king’s advisor and managed Egypt’s preparations for the coming famine (according to ʿAṭṭâr’s text, Joseph actually became the the king [pâdashâh] himself). While Egypt enjoyed plenty thanks to Joseph’s foresight, Canaan was stricken with a shortage of food. Joseph’s brothers came to Egypt in search of aid and threw themselves at the king’s feet as supplicants without realizing his true identity. Joseph then promised them bread if they would read a Hebrew manuscript for him, a request to which they readily agreed. The manuscript, of course, proves to be none other than the bill-of-sale that they themselves had written:

In the end, when Joseph became king,
The ten brothers came there,
Not recognizing Joseph’s face,
They threw themselves before him.
They begged sustenance for their souls,
They made themselves piteous, pleading for bread.
Said truthful Joseph, “O people,
I have a note (khāṭṭ) in the Hebrew alphabet.¹⁹⁰
No one from my retinue can read it,
If you would recite it for me, I will give you much bread.”
They were all fluent in Hebrew and more than willing; They gladly said, “O king, bring the note!”
—Let him be blind-hearted, who, in this state (ḥâl) from the presence (ḥoẓur),
Does not hear his own story—how much with this pride!—
Joseph handed them the note they had written,
And a trembling fell upon their limbs.
They couldn’t bring themselves to read a single line of it,

¹⁸⁹. ʿAṭṭâr, Manṭeq al-tayr, 4231-4.
¹⁹⁰. Khāṭṭ must be read as khat for metrical reasons.
They didn’t know how to explain.  
They were all mired in regret and sadness,  
They remained afflicted by the matter of Joseph.  
All of their tongues became drunk at once,  
They were mortified by this difficult affair.  
Joseph said: “It is as if you were unconscious,  
When you read the note, why did you fall silent?”  
They all said to him, “We choose silence,  
Because it is better than reading and losing our heads.”

Before proceeding further with this analysis, we should note that this episode involves a parallel series of recursively nested textual encounters and hermeneutic acts that constitute a *mise en abyme*, or the mirroring of a narrative within the narrated world. More specifically, the birds are given a text by the Simorgh’s chamberlain, who commands them to read it, and that text in turn tells how Joseph gave a text to his brothers and commanded them to read it. These repeated textual encounters, moreover, bring to mind the reader’s own encounter with the *Conference of the Birds*, and, as we shall see, imply something significant about the poem’s transformative force.

Despite these repeated acts of reading, the episode does not necessarily oppose the ethos of orality that imbues the *Conference of the Birds*. Indeed, even as the birds read their manuscript, ʿAṭṭâr’s narratorial persona intervenes, turning to his audience in a manner reminiscent of oral delivery. He calls on his reader-listeners to “hear” in the story of the brothers’ encounter with Joseph an allegory for their own spiritual “state[s]” (ḥâl) in relation to the divine “presence” (hożur). The narrative thus not only clarifies the birds’ journey by way of allegory, as was promised at the beginning of the narration, but is also presented as an explication of the reader’s condition. Significantly, the poem’s earlier anecdote adapted from the Joseph story is framed in exactly the same way:

He’s blind who hears this story (*qeṣṣa*),
And doesn’t take from it his own portion!
Don’t look so hard into the story;
It’s all your story, you ignoramus!

These repeated calls to consider and interpret recall some aspects of the Quranic treatment of the same material. Joseph, of course, is the hermeneut par excellence of Islamic myth, capable of interpreting all sorts of dreams and signs. And the Joseph narrative is itself proffered by the Quran to its audience as an interpretable sign: “In their stories,” reads the last verse of the chapter, “is a lesson (*ʿibra*) for those with discernment.” The lesson that the Quran suggests, however, is primarily a message of God’s power and involvement in human affairs; ʿAṭṭâr, on the other hand, presents the story as an allegory of the soul’s internal relation to the divine.

193. The term *qessa* here is likely motivated by Quran 12:3, the famous opening to the Joseph chapter: “We narrate (*naqṣṣu*) to you the most beautiful of stories (*ahsan al-qasas*).”
The birds themselves model what such a reflexive, internalizing interpretation of the tale might look like. In reading the bill-of-sale, Joseph’s brothers were confronted with an indexical sign of their own treachery; in reading the story of Joseph, the birds see an allegorical icon of their self-imposed exile from the divine:

When those thirty, miserable birds looked Into the writing (khat) of that credible manuscript (roq’a-ye por ‘etebâr), Whatever they had done, all of that, Was inscribed therein, until the end. It was hard for them— When those captives looked closely, They saw that they had gone and made their own way, Thrown their own Joseph into the well, Burned their Joseph-souls in debasement, And then sold him for a pittance.

In mystically minded Persian literature, the beautiful Joseph is often used as a symbol for the soul. Not the concupiscent self (nafš), which spurs the individual to evil and ‘Aṭṭâr often likens to a noxious creature, but the soul (ruḥ) that enjoyed proximity to God during pre-eternity on the day of the covenant.197 Through the soul, which is intimately connected to the divine world, the individual can even transcend death; and yet, the birds have sold this most valuable part of themselves—their own “Joseph-souls”—for a pittance, just as Joseph’s brothers sold their own kin. In other words, by letting their lower, carnal selves dominate their lives, the birds are cut off from their true selves, which subsists in and through the divine. This ethical failing is thus

197. Corbin, Visionary Recital, 200; Ritter, Ocean of the Soul, 348, 374-5, 526.
bound up with a larger ontological deficiency, in which individual earthly existence implies an inherent distance from God that must be overcome.

For both the brothers and the birds, the textual encounter instigates a two-staged reaction: first shame and regret, followed by transformation and reunion. In reading the text of the receipt, Joseph’s brothers are confronted with their own written testimony of their crimes, and they react with pain, regret, and fear of execution. ‘Aṭṭār’s version ends there, but pre-modern Muslim readers would certainly be familiar with the rest of the story and know that the brothers are ultimately forgiven and reconciled with Joseph. This pattern of reading, recognition, and reconciliation is then re-enacted on a higher narrative level by the birds. After reading the story and finding inscribed there “all that they had done,” the birds are “captives” at the Simorgh’s court, and, much like the brothers, are afflicted by shame (tashvir) and regret (hayā) such that their bodies turn to tutty (tutiā). Nevertheless, the revelation of their own guilt ultimately paves the way for their subsequent elevation to “proximity” with the Simorgh:

Again from the beginning, they became fresh servants of God;
Again they were bewildered, but in a different way.
All that they had previously done or not done,
Was erased and purified from their breasts
The light of proximity (qorbat) shone from ahead;
All their souls were dazzled by that beam.

Through their allegorical reading of the tale, they are, like the brothers, confronted with evidence of their moral failings. But the resulting self-awareness also presages their subsequent

198. Joseph’s forgiveness is, according to some exegetes, the reason why the story is the described as “the most beautiful,” Tha’labi, Lives of the Prophets, 181-2.
199. ‘Aṭṭār, Manṭeq al-tayr, 4257.
200. Ibid., 4259-61.
effacement and subsistence in the unity of the Simorgh, just as the brothers’ recognition of their sins also leads to a reconciliation with Joseph. All their failings, “all that they had previously done or not done,” are erased; they are rendered servants of the divine anew, and ushered into a state of proximity in which they recognize their simultaneous identity and difference with the the divine.

This internalizing interpretation of the Joseph anecdote is also urged onto ‘Attâr’s flesh-and-blood readers. The poet castigates his addressees in the same terms that he used to criticize the birds: the have sold their “Joseph-souls,” resulting in their own separation from the God:

Don’t you know, you worthless beggar,
That you sell a Joseph at every moment?
When your Joseph becomes the king,
He will be the leader at the court.
In the end, hungry and begging,
Naked will you go before him.
Since your affair will be illuminated by him,
Why did you have to sell him lightly?

But ‘Attâr’s reproaches do not foreclose all hope; his reader-listeners, like the birds, can look forward to a transformation and reunion with their true selves at some future point. “In the end, hungry and begging / Naked will you go before him,” ‘Attâr informs them with the certainty of the future indicative, “[And] your affair will be illuminated by him.” This may be understood as an eschatological redemption, but such a reunion may also occur in this life, a result of the spiritual wayfaring urged by ‘Attâr on his readers and demonstrated by the birds in their journey towards the Simorgh.

201. Ibid., 4253-6.
In this climatic episode of the text, the line between narration and “actuality” is thus blurred and obscured. On the hypo-diegetic level, Joseph’s brothers are faced with a text, written in their own hand (khāṭṭ), that testifies to the terrible treachery that they have committed. Although this textual proof triggers mute terror and regret, it also presages their forgiveness and reunion with their wronged brother. The birds who peruse this story, written on the scrap given to them by the Simorgh’s chamberlain, likewise find therein proof of their own ontological deficiencies and moral failings; the story illuminates, “by means of allegory,” how they have sold their “Joseph-souls,” that part of themselves that participates in the divine, for a pittance. But in addition to revealing their divorced state, the story also presages their eventual reunion with the Simorgh. The tale of Joseph’s brothers, allegorically interpreted, becomes a script enacted by the the birds in their own world; the hypo-diegetic thus foreshadows and directs the events of the frame-tale. Likewise, ‘Aṭṭâr’s reader-listeners find in the story of Joseph—and in its interpretation by the birds—an allegorical explanation for their own relationship to the divine, as well as a script of their own encounter with the *Conference of the Birds*. The poem as a whole, like the manuscript given to the birds by the herald, aims to not only explain the nature of human beings’ relationship to God, but to instigate a spiritual transformation, propelling its reader-listeners along the sufi path and towards the final goal of reunion and effacement. By virtue of these malleable narrative levels, ‘Aṭṭâr’s audience is placed into the story and interpellated into its narrative of spiritual progress.

There is thus a sense in which the reader-listener’s progression through the frame-narrative itself constitutes a symbolic traversal of the sufi path, a phenomenon that we will discuss with reference to the *Book of Affliction* in the final chapter. But this spiritual transformation is also born out of the ethical teachings presented in the embedded anecdotes, which, in the *Conference of the Birds*, prepare the fowl for their journey and promise to do likewise for ‘Aṭṭâr’s
reader-listeners. These embedded stories and sermons inculcate a sufi ethos and thereby shape the audience’s behavior and mode of being in the “real world” outside of the textual encounter. It is to these embedded anecdotes and their heuristic homiletics that we now turn.
Chapter IV

Sermons, Stories, and the Sufi Ethos

The bulk of the Conference of the Birds is comprised not of the frame-tale, but the embedded anecdotes and homilies through which the hoopoe exhorts his audience towards the Simorgh. These anecdotes’ themes and mystical implications have been the focus of several studies, foremost among them Ritter’s Ocean of the Soul, which aims at nothing less than the elucidation of the twelfth-century sufi thought-world. In this encyclopedic work, Ritter extracts hypo-diegetic anecdotes from across ‘Aṭṭār’s four maṣnavis, translates them and clarifies their didactic points, and then rearranges them into a thematic rubric of his own design. As he himself recognizes, his method presumes that each anecdote can be approached in isolation, without reference to those that surround it, the accompanying exhortations, or even its position within the overarching frame-tale.¹ A similar methodology was adopted by Navid Kermani in his Terror of God, but with a somewhat more limited aim: he mines the maṣnavis for anecdotes that may shed light on ‘Aṭṭār’s theodicy and attitudes regarding divine culpability for human suffering.² Like Ritter, he assumes the anecdotes are self-contained carriers of independent meaning, and that they can therefore be productively examined without reference to their larger literary context.

Although the importance of their work should not be understated, ‘Aṭṭār’s edifying narratives are perhaps not as modular as these scholars have assumed. A close analysis of his maṣnavis shows that adjoining anecdotes are usually formally and conceptually linked, and that the intervening exhortations facilitate the transitions between them. These linked anecdotes

¹. Ritter, Ocean of the Soul, 32.
². Kermani, Terror of God.
then form larger thematic clusters—sometimes containing up to a dozen anecdotes—which are often cued as unitary discourses delivered by characters in the frame-tales. By rearranging the anecdotes, however, Ritter dismantles these clusters and thus obscures the key themes around which ʿAṭṭār organized his poems. For example, one of the hoopoe’s major topics in the Conference of the Birds is the virtue of “spiritual manliness,” to which ʿAṭṭār devotes a complete discourse. Only a handful of spiritual virtues receive such extended treatment in the Conference of the Birds, so this topic was clearly a critical point in ʿAṭṭār’s homiletics. Nevertheless, it does not appear in Ritter’s typology, where the stories that comprise this cluster are categorized according to other, subsidiary themes; the importance of this virtue in ʿAṭṭār’s mysticism is thereby effaced.3 Ritter’s atomizing approach also ignores the admonishments and exhortations that form the connective tissue between the anecdotes; such material, although often unappealing to modern aesthetic sensibilities, is critical for understanding how ʿAṭṭār wanted his reader-listeners to understand these stories, and for elucidating the poem’s larger perlocutionary function.

This atomistic tendency may be considered the narrative analogue of the “orient pearls” approach to poetic structure that dominated scholarship on the Perso-Arabic lyric until the last half of the twentieth century, according to which each distich is a completely self-contained semiotic unit.4 In many ways such an approach represents a continuation of medieval exegetical practices, which focused on verse-by-verse glosses; it may have also been encouraged by the scarcity of enjambment in classical Persian and Arabic verse. In any case, in recent

decades most scholars have come to accept that lyric ghazals and qaṣidas cannot be reduced to a collection of completely independent lines, but that they usually participate in some larger disposition that is key to the poem’s overall meaning. Most work on didactic maṣnavis, however, continues to implicitly draw from this atomistic model and to understand edifying anecdotes as the self-contained, modular building-blocks of the genre, just as the distich was formerly assumed to be the fundamental unit of the ghazal.5

In the present chapter we challenge this approach by examining some of the hoopoe’s discourses in toto, paying special attention to how they are bound together formally and conceptually, how they illustrate particular aspects of a specific mystical ethos, and how they urge reader-listeners to spiritual reform. After an introductory exploration of the general rhythm of the didactic maṣnavi, we turn to three specific discourses, all of which bear on the sufi notion of the self as a barrier that must be transcended: first, we will consider a series of allegorical parables that clarify the nature of the Simorgh’s ontological proximity to the birds and explore its ethical ramifications; next, we will treat a cluster of anecdotes that dwell on the inevitability of death and its implications for how life should be lived; finally, we will examine the hoopoe’s discourse on the aforementioned virtue of “spiritual manliness.” Our aim is not only to reconstruct ‘Aṭṭār’s ethical and theological teachings on these issues, but also to examine the rhetorical strategies through which he seeks to motivate his reader-listeners to spiritual reform.

5. There are some exceptions, most notably the work of Safavi and Weightman, who argue that Rumi’s maṣnavi displays an elaborate chiastic structure such that the entire six-volume work must have been composed according to a careful, pre-existing plan. This conclusion, however, is somewhat difficult to square with what we know of the oral, semi-improvised composition of the work. Seyed Ghahreman Safavi and Simon Weightman, Rūmī’s Mystical Design: Reading the “Mathnawi,” Book One (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009); Simon Weightman, “Spiritual Progression in Books One and Two of the Mathnawi,” in The Philosophy of Ecstasy: Rumi and the Sufi Tradition, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2014).
Rhythm of a Maṣnawi

The structural foundation of ‘Atṭār’s didactic maṣnavis is to be found in their continuous alternation of edifying anecdotes and interpretive exhortations. The vast majority of these anecdotes are constructed according to a simple pattern: they narrate a brief encounter between two characters in the past tense, in which one of them admonishes or instructs the other. This admonishment is then amplified in a direct address that generalizes the story’s religious significance and enjoins reader-listeners to act accordingly. For example, a rather typical example from the Conference of the Birds is the story Shaykh Abu Bakr-e Nayshâburi, who one day rode his donkey out of his khānaqâh accompanied by his numerous disciples. Suddenly, his mount let out a giant fart; the shaykh, in turn, cried out and fell into a violent ecstatic state. When he came to, his confused disciples asked why the donkey’s fart had had such an effect on him: the shaykh explains that he had been vainly thinking of his great numbers of disciples and the extent of his spiritual station, such that he had even dared to compare himself to the great Bâyazid Beštâmi, when the donkey had suddenly broke wind. He understood this as a re-buke of his spiritual vanity and sums up the lesson for his disciples thusly: “Whoever boasts falsely like this / The donkey gives him the answer; how much of this foolish posing!” The anecdote then dissolves into a direct homiletic address; as discussed in the previous chapter, the exact point of transition is not always immediately obvious, nor is the speaker of these exhortations always entirely clear—there is some slippage between the speaker in the anecdote (in this case Shaykh Abu Bakr), the hoopoe, and ‘Atṭār’s narratorial voice. In any case, the ad-

6. ‘Atṭār’s maṣnavis also includes longer tales, such as the stories of Shaykh Ṣanʿân and Marhuma, as well as shorter similitudes, often drawn from the natural world or activities of daily life and narrated in the present tense.

7. ‘Atṭār, Manṭeq al-ṭayr, 2943.
dress continues for a number of lines, admonishing the addressee to root out pride and self-satisfaction:

As long as you are stuck in pride and vainglory,
You remain far, far away from the truth!
Strike down your vainglory, burn your pride!
You are present to your carnal soul—burn your presence!

If you would be safe from I-ness,
You must take up enmity for the two worlds.
If, one day, you set out to efface your body—
If, every night, you are illuminated in darkness—
Don’t say “I,” you who are mired in a hundred catastrophes of I-ness,
Lest you be afflicted by the demonic.

Although such moralizing passages are not usually very appealing to modern sensibilities, this alternation of anecdote and interpretative exhortation is a common feature of didactic literature throughout the classical and medieval periods. For example, one finds this pattern in several instantiations of the Aesop corpus, in which the animal fables are followed by explanations of the intended moral. Some New Testament parables also accord with this structure, providing allegorical interpretations after the parable proper. Likewise, the Aggadah Midrash combines narrative with exegetical commentary under the rubric of mashal and nimshal, and medieval European preachers also illustrated moral points with exempla. Although some
modern critics complain that these interpretative sections constrain the narratives and instrumentize them into “mere” teaching tools, they clearly fulfilled some need for medieval audiences. For ‘Atţâr and his reader-listeners, neither the narrative nor the interpretive homily renders the other dispensable; rather, their joint interaction gives rise to the poem’s meaning and rhetorical force. The narrative validates and “concretizes” the homily by rooting it in the world of lived human action, while the homily generalizes the narrative’s significance and translates it into a present ethical injunction.

Many manuscripts of the Conference of the Birds, including the earliest ones, label each one of these anecdote-homily pairs “a story and illustration” (hekāyat va tamsīl). Although set off from each other paratextually, most of these anecdote-homily pairs maintain thematic and linguistic links to those that precede and follow them. For example, to return to the story of Shaykh Abu Bakr and the donkey’s fart, the accompanying homily ends with the warning to not say “I” lest you be “afflicted by the demonic (eblisi).” This closing line foreshadows the sub-

12. This has been a central issue in the scholarship on Jesus’ parables. Traditional exegetes tended to understand the parables as simple teaching allegories, in which their narrative elements corresponded, on a one-to-one basis, with specific conceptual referents. According to critics of the model, this renders the narratives themselves dispensable, mere stepping-stones to a more discursive mode of understanding. Scholars like Crossan, Funk, Via, and Ricoeur have argued that parables are not “mere” teaching tools to be discarded once their didactic point has been grasped, but that the narratives themselves constitute their message. Instead of allegories, these scholars discuss parables as “metaphors,” which they understand as an open-ended form of signification, irreducible to discursive statements, that gestures towards a meaning rather than presupposing it. John Dominic Crossan, In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 7-22; Paul Ricoeur, “Listening to the Parables of Jesus,” Criterion 13 (Spring 1974): 18-22; Robert W. Funk, Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God: The Problem of Language in New Testament and Contemporary Theology (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 133-62.


14. In classical Persian, the term ḥekāyat is applied to narrations of all sorts, whether entertaining, edifying, fictional, or historical. Tamsīl, on the other hand, is derived from the Arabic root m-th-l, the semantic field of which involves notions of likeness and similarity, and usually refers to allegories or other illustrative stories. In this sense, both ḥekāyat and tamsīl may refer to the narrative portion of the anecdote-homily pair. As a verbal noun, however, tamsīl also indicates the action of using allegories and parables within a discourse. It is thus possible to read ḥekāyat as referring to the narratives themselves, and tamsīl to the total package—the act of illustrating a homily with a story. Farhang-e sokhan, s.v. "tamsīl"; Loghat-nāma-ye Dehhodā, s.v. "tamsīl."
sequent anecdote, in which the devil (Eblis) confers his secret wisdom on Moses: “Don’t say ‘I’ lest you become like me.” Such transitions are typical: most of ‘Aṭṭâr’s homilies close with some sort of thematic or lexical foreshadowing of the subsequent anecdote-homily pair. These linkages, in turn, produce chains or clusters of anecdotes and homilies related to specific themes. In most didactic masnavis, these thematic clusters correspond to paratextually marked thematic chapters (maqāla), and in Atar’s maṣnavis these chapters usually represent discourses delivered by characters in the frame-tale. For example, the anecdote of Shaykh Abu Bakr is narrated by the hoopoe as part of a larger discourse on spiritual vainglory. The anecdote is followed by other narratives that exemplify this theme from divergent perspectives and with slightly different points of emphasis. They are not tightly linked building blocks in a logical argument leading to a decisive conclusion, but neither are they completely separable units to be read and interpreted individually. The cluster’s multiple illustrative anecdotes and exhortations amplify and nuance each other in order to present the reader with a flexible sufi heuristic on spiritual pride and vainglory.

In the Conference of the Birds, and to a lesser extent in ‘Aṭṭâr’s other frame-tale masnavis, these discourses represent stages on the spiritual journey, and they are thus arranged in a specific sequential order. In the previous chapter, for instance, we saw how the ordering of the seven valleys encodes a particular conception of the seven stages of the sufi path. In the present chapter, however, instead of examining the structures that underlie the arrangement of these discourses relative to each other, we are interested in how the anecdotes and exhortations within each discourse interface to illustrate particular mystical topics and call reader-listeners to pious reform. We begin with a discourse devoted to the nature of the ontological relationship between God and human beings; we will see how the hoopoe presents a variety of interlocking anecdotes that variously explain the human heart as a special route of access to
the divine, and examine how he uses these anecdotes to calls on his audience to turn inwards to activate that internal connection to God.

**King Parables and the Divine-Human Relationship**

Throughout Near Eastern religious literature, God is often metaphorically presented as a king; like his earthly counterparts, he judges and protects, ensures justice and order, and is characterized by glory and power while simultaneously displaying mercy and compassion. By the time the Hebrew Bible was written, the king-metaphor was well entrenched. Early Christian writings are also rife with the association, perhaps conditioned by the Roman imperial cult against which both Judaism and Christianity defined themselves, as are the parables of the Midrash. In general, Abrahamic cosmology is based on the notion of a divine court in heaven that mirrors the institutions and characters of terrestrial kingship in the ancient Near East: God sits on his throne in an inner court, often veiled by curtains, and surrounded by ranks of angels. Naturally, such associations permeate ʿAṭṭār’s works as well, where he presents stories of earthly kings and other courtly figures as allegorical parables that illustrate certain theological and metaphysical issues. In some anecdotes these kings remain unnamed, and their narratives have a generic or fictional quality. Others feature identifiable royal figures ranging from the distant past to only a few generations before ʿAṭṭār, and they likely would have been understood as laying some claim to historical truth. Such narratives enliven the the hoopoe’s teachings as well as endowing them with a certain concreteness, rooting them in the social dynamics of the terrestrial world.

Near the beginning of the *Conference of the Birds*, the hoopoe delivers a discourse that contains three such king-parables, two that feature historical kings—Alexander and Sultan Maḥmud—and one that centers on an unnamed king and is more mythological in tone. This discourse is formally unified by the fact that all three of its anecdotes rely on the same metaphorical association, but they are consistent on a more conceptual level as well, in that they all suggest God is somehow present within his creation. Two of the anecdotes specify further that God manifests himself through the human heart, the organ of spiritual sight; the exact manner in which God is present in the heart, however, is explained differently by each of them—in one the heart is a mirror, reflecting the image of God’s otherwise unbearable beauty, and in the other the heart is like a “secret passage” through which a royal lover arrives at his beloved’s bedchamber. The two anecdotes thus capture rather different valences of the divine-human relationship—one is more intimate, the other more distant and mediated—but they both suggest that God is, in some fashion, internally present to human beings. Moreover, this is not presented as an abstract fact, but as the basis for ethical action: the accompanying homilies urge listeners to cultivate this connection through an inward turn, to cleanse the heart of base attributes, and to seek out the traces of the divine manifest therein.

The hoopoe delivers this discourse just before the Shaykh Ṣanʿân tale, after a group of birds confess that they consider themselves too weak to possibly reach the elevated heights of the Simorgh:

We’re all a weak (ṣaʿif) and powerless (nâ-tavân) lot,
No feathers, no wings, no body, no strength.
How could we ever arrive at the exalted Simorgh?
If any one of use were to arrive there, it would be a wonder!
The birds then proceed to question the hoopoe regarding the nature of their relationship (nes-bat) to the Simorgh. They are skeptical that the kingly Simorgh would have anything to do with beggars such as themselves; the Simorgh is Solomon, and they are mere ants, trapped in a well like Joseph:

He is Solomon and we are beggar ants.
Look where he is, and where we are!
He has trapped an ant in the depths of a well—
How could it ever approach the lofty Simorgh?

With their allusions to the legend of Solomon and the story of Joseph, however, the birds simultaneously undercut the surface meaning of their own rhetorical questioning. They doubt that “ants” such as themselves could reach the “Solomon” of the Simorgh—but of course, according to stories of the prophets, Solomon did receive an ant and accept her gift, and attuned readers will likewise suspect that the Simorgh will also receive the birds. Similarly, Joseph does travel from the bottom of the well to the heights of kingship. Thus, even as the birds question their ability to attain to the Simorgh, ‘Aṭṭār couches their objections in terms that subtly foreshadow their success.

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18. Ibid., 1077-8.
In reply to these concerns, the hoopoe explains that there is a peculiar ontological connection between the Simorgh and the world: the latter and everything in it, including all the birds, are shadows cast by the former when he first “revealed his shining face”:\textsuperscript{20}

He scattered his own shadows on the world,
And multitudes of birds emerged at every moment.
The forms of all the world’s birds, every one,
Are his shadow—know this, you heedless one!
Consider this, and once you know it,
You’ll establish a firm connection with that presence.

The image of the world as the shadow of God suggests the ephemerality and insubstantiality of the world vis-à-vis the permanence of God, upon whom it depends for its existence. At the same time however, the world—as God’s shadow—is a natural extension of his being and a manifestation of his presence. This conceptualization of the world’s relationship to the divine carries clear resonances to the neoplatonic doctrine of emanation: shadows are not created through any particular willed action, but are natural “emanations” from an illuminated object, with which they are neither completely separable nor entirely coextensive. Like shadow from light, the world emanates from God, and it remains ontologically rooted in—and yet simultaneously differentiated from—its source.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{ʿAṭṭâr, Manteq al-tayr}, 1083.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 1085-7.
\textsuperscript{22} The metaphor of the world as the shadow of God also poses certain problems. For example, is God to be understood as light itself or the illuminated objects that produce the shadow? Or both at once? Ibn ʿArabi and those who follow him tend to understand the world as a collection of shadows cast by the archetypal forms (\textit{al-aʾyān al-sābeta}) when they are illuminated by the “light” of God’s creative ontological power. See the discussion in Toshihiko Izutsu, \\textit{Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 89-98.
This metaphysics is not a disinterested set of objective facts, but is intimately bound up with human ethical and interpretive action. As the final verse of the above quotation makes clear, the birds must paradoxically “consider” their ontological connection to the Simorgh in order to “establish a firm connection with that presence.” The hoopoe demands a certain ethical posture from his audience in which they simultaneously interpret and perform their proximity to the divine. They are urged to “see” the Simorgh behind the shadows of the world:

Every guise that appears in this field of existence,  
Is a shadow of the beautiful Simorgh.  
When the Simorgh shows you his beauty,  
You see the Simorgh through the shadow, without illusion.

Since the shadow cannot be divided from the Simorgh,  
It’s not permitted to say they’re separate.  
Since they are both found together, seek out both;  
Having found the shadow, go beyond it to the source!

The Simorgh casts the shadows of the world, and the birds are exhorted to “go beyond” each shadow back to its divine source rather than remaining lost in its illusory surface. By correctly interpreting existence as a signifier pointing back towards God, the birds can anagogically secure their own relationship to the divine. The intertwining nature of hermeneutics, ontology, and experiential knowledge is encapsulated in a concluding summation from this section, “When you have understood (bedānasti), see (bebîn), then be (bebāsh)!”; metaphysical knowl-

23. ʿAṭṭâr, Manṭeq al-ṭayr, 1124-8.
edge is not acquired for its own sake but as a route for activating a new mode of being, and it is this onto-ethical transformation to which the reader-listener is enjoined.\textsuperscript{24}

The hoopoe then illustrates and elaborates on this relationship through the aforementioned cluster of king-parables. The first one we will treat here (which is in fact the second anecdote of the cluster), recounts how Alexander would travel throughout his realm in disguise; the narrative is presented as an allegorical explanation of how the Simorgh might remain present in the world even if he may not be immediately visible therein:\textsuperscript{25}

He [the hoopoe] said: "When Alexander, that legitimate king, Wanted to send a messenger somewhere, That king of the world would, in the manner of a messenger, Don a disguise and go himself in secret. He would utter what no one had yet heard, He would say ‘Alexander has ordered such and such.’ In the whole world, no one knew That the messenger there was Alexander himself. Since no one was expecting Alexander, Even if he had said ‘I’m Alexander,’ no one would have believed it.”

The story of Alexander posing as his own envoy is attested in a number of sources, part of a trope in which just kings are portrayed as being personally active in the running of affairs throughout their realms so that they can prevent corruption and root out injustice perpetrated by subordinates in their name.\textsuperscript{27} Here, however, this historical anecdote allegorically illustrates

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 1088.
\item \textsuperscript{25} This anecdote is discussed by Sirus Shamisâ as an example of an “explanatory allegory” (\textit{tam\textsuperscript{b}il}), Sirus Shamisâ, \textit{Anvâ'-e adabi} (Tehran: Bâgh-e Âina, 1370 [1991-92]), 292-4.
\item \textsuperscript{26} ‘Aṭṭâr, \textit{Manteq al-tayr}, 1132-6.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Şan’atiniâ, \textit{Ma’ākhez}, 136-7.
\end{itemize}
God’s ontological relationship to the world; God, the king of the universe, is hidden behind the facade of creation just as Alexander himself poses in the clothes of his messenger. A common trope is thus used to make a theological point; the historic and folkloric imaginary, with which ʿAṭṭâr assumes his readers would have been familiar, helps illustrate an abstract metaphysical concept in a concrete and readily accessible way. According to the hoopoe, Alexander is not recognized because no one expects to see him (literally, “they have not an eye for him”); even if Alexander directly revealed his identity to his interlocutors, they would not believe it. ʿAṭṭâr’s audience, by contrast, is enjoined to develop an eye for God: to “see” not just the shadows of the world, but the divine source from which they spring.

The Alexander parable suggests that God suffuses the entire universe, but it is preceded by another narrative that focuses on God’s unique presence in the human heart. This narrative tells of a beautiful king, “without equal or likeness,” who, like Alexander, symbolically stands in for God. All of this kings’ subjects were afflicted by love for him and longed to gaze on his face. But to do so meant certain death, since no ordinary human could bear the sight of his excessive beauty: “If anyone would see his beauty manifest / He would give up his soul, pitifully.”28 When the king went out into the streets, he would cover his face with a burka, but to no avail—all those who saw him, even when veiled, would still give up the ghost:

> Sometimes he would ride a night-black charger in the alleyways,  
> He would hang a rose-colored burka over his face.  
> Whoever cast a glance at that burka,  
> Would, although innocent, lose his head at once.  
> And whoever uttered his name,  
> His tongue would be ripped out in an instant.  
> And if anyone thought of union with him,  
> They would surrender reason and soul to the wind for the impossible.

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The violent imagery of beheading and ripping out tongues is clearly grounded in the realm of imperial justice. But a passive construction is used here, and there is no mention of the king himself ordering these killings; on the contrary, his subjects’ deaths seems to be an unintentional consequence of the king’s excessive beauty and their relative weakness. Their inability to gaze on him also recalls the Quran’s account of Moses on Mount Sinai, when the prophet begged God to reveal himself to him. According to the exegetes, God revealed only “something like the tip of his little finger,” but the mountain was utterly obliterated, and Moses fainted from the force of the event without ever seeing God’s face. The king’s subjects are likewise placed in an impossible position; they burn to see the king’s face, but cannot withstand his beauty. Trapped in an intermediate state, they “have no repose, neither with him nor without him.”

To solve this conundrum, the king orders a mirror to be built, through which the population might safely gaze upon his reflection:

The king ordered that a mirror be built,
So that they could gaze therein.
A fine palace was decorated for the king,
And the mirror was set opposite it.
The king would ascend to the top of the palace,
And then look into the mirror.
His visage was reflected in the mirror,
And everyone found a trace (neshâni) of his countenance.

29. Ibid., 1104-7.
31. ʿAtṭār, Manṭeq al-ṭayr, 1113.
The parable hangs on the unusual signifying properties of the mirror and the peculiar ontological status of images. From one perspective, the mirror shows nothing other than the face of the king, manifest in all his glory. And yet from another perspective, the mirror presents not “the thing itself” but an iconic, imaginal representation that is necessarily other than the original. It is this peculiar mixture of mediation and revelation that allows the people to see the king’s beauty while paradoxically maintaining a distance that protects both their lives and the king’s transcendent incommensurability. As the final verse explains, the people of the city, by looking into the mirror, see neither the king’s face itself, nor a mere “likeness” (mašal), but a peculiarly signifying “trace” (neshân).33

This anecdote-homily pair, like most in the poem, is independently labelled as a “story and its application,” but its main themes and didactic point were seeded before it began, in the closing lines of the hoopoe’s opening address. There, the hoopoe summarizes the coming narrative and makes the terms of its allegorical significance explicit—specifically, that the mirror stands for the human heart—although most literarily competent reader-listeners would have likely been able to map that identification on their own:

Because no one has an eye for that beauty,  
And it’s impossible to patiently bear “No!” before it;  
Because love can’t be devoted to his beauty,  
Out of the perfection of his generosity, he built a mirror.  
That mirror is the heart, look into it;  
So that you might see his face in the the heart!

32. Ibid., 1116-9.  
33. Cf. the story of the Simorgh’s feather, Chapter 3, p. 145.
Form at least the twelfth-century onwards, the heart was often cast as a mirror for envisaging the divine, and ‘Aṭṭār’s audiences would certainly have been aware of this common sufi trope. Mirrors in the medieval world were constructed from polished metal, which would easily oxidize; to maintain their reflective properties, they had to be routinely polished. The heart, according to the standard elaboration of this metaphor, must also be “polished” of the rust of sin through repentance, remembrance of God (zekr), and other forms of ethical work (mojâhadat), so that God’s light might be reflected therein. Furthermore, the surface of the mirror itself becomes “invisible” when polished, replaced by the image of the reflected object that appears within its frame. Likewise, by polishing the heart, the sufi aims to burnish away all traces of egotistical selhhood and become a conduit for the manifestation of divine light. ‘Aṭṭār is careful to clarify that God’s manifestation in the human heart is not a form of divine incarnation (holul), which was roundly considered a heretical belief in Islam. Rather, it is an “immersion” (esteghrâq) of the human in the divine:

Whoever is transformed in this way, is immersed (mostaghraq).
God forbid that you say he has become God!
If you’re transformed as I have described, you’re not God,
But in God you’re forever immersed (mostaghraq).

34. Ibid., 1097-9.
37. ‘Aṭṭâr, Manṭeq al-ṭayr, 1089-90.
This transformation, according to ‘Aṭṭâr, is not the union of human and divine, but the effacement of the former in the latter. Such an immersion is experienced by the birds at the poem’s climax when they are effaced in the Simorgh, who remains transcendent and incommensurable.\(^{38}\)

An extensive homily follows the mirror anecdote and attends to its subjective ramifications, enjoining the audience to turn inwards and contemplate not themselves, but the vision of God within:

If you value the beauty of the friend,
Consider the heart the mirror of his visage.
Bring your heart into your hand, and see his beauty;
Make your spirit a mirror, and see his majesty.
Your king is on the palace of majesty,
The palace is illuminated by the sun of that beauty.
See your king in the heart!
See the throne in an atom!

Reader-listeners are enjoined to understand their hearts as “the mirror of his visage” and to gaze upon God’s beauty and majesty therein. Exactly what this might look like in practical terms is left unspecified, but other anecdotes in the poem suggest that it involves avoidance of pride, cutting attachments to the world, and consideration of one’s own sins. Here, however, the emphasis is placed not on specific ethical practices with which the reader would have likely already been familiar, but on a pithy epitome of a general mode of sufi subjectivity: namely, that human beings ought to relate to their inner selves as sites for the manifestation of an oth-

\(^{38}\) See the discussion in Chapter 3, p. 167-171; Ritter, *Ocean of the Soul*, 608-10.

otherwise inaccessible God. Such a conception of the self privileges the individual as a conduit for the divine encounter, while paradoxically requiring the relinquishment of selfhood through “immersion” in the divine.

These metaphysical beliefs and subjective attitudes are validated by a well known hadith, referenced in the last verse of the homily as a proof text. The addressee is enjoined to see the “king in the heart,” and “the throne in an atom,” recalling the famous pseudo-prophetic saying, “The heart of the believer is the throne of God.” Although considered inauthentic by hadith critics, it was widely quoted by mystically minded theorists and preachers, for whom it carried great weight.40 The hoopoe’s homily and narrative are thereby grounded in an (albeit contested) authoritative religious dictum, which they in turn interpret and explain: the heart functions as the link between microcosm and macrocosm and the site of divine manifestation in the world, and believing subjects should thus turn their intention inwards.41 Allusions to the Quran and hadith—and even quotations when metrically possible—are common in ʿAtţâr’s writings and highlight the broader hermeneutic and exegetical function of his works. His narratives and homilies offer a specific interpretation of a particular slice of Quranic and prophetic material, and thus represent one route for a Persian-speaking audience to access—and understand—the Arabic scriptures.

This internal connection to God is allegorically explained in a slightly different fashion by the cluster’s final anecdote, which tells of how Sultan Maḥmud would travel by a secret passageway to the bedchambers of his beloved, Ayâz.42 According to this particular narrative, Ayâz

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40. Ibid., 558n1123.
was once afflicted with a sickness and remained confined to his chambers. When word came to
Maḥmud regarding his beloved’s condition, he became extremely distraught and immediately
ordered a servant to deliver the following message to Ayâz:

As long as you are ill, I’m so affected,
I don’t know if it’s you who are ill or me!
Although, in body, I may be far from my soul-mate,
My desiring soul is exceedingly near.
For you, my soul remains passionately desirous,
Not for a moment am I absent from you.

Maḥmud commanded the courier to deliver this message to Ayâz posthaste, under the threat of
death if he should tarry along the road. Despite his best efforts, however, when the messenger
finally reached Ayâz’s chambers, he found that Maḥmud had arrived there before him. With
terror he swore that he carried out the king’s orders as fast as he could and had no idea how
Maḥmud could have possibly passed him on the road. In response, Maḥmud reassures the
courier that his life is secure and explains the secret of his mysterious appearance in his
beloved’s chambers:

. . . You are not at fault in this,
O servant; how could you win the race in this matter?
I have a secret way to him,
Since I cannot bear a moment without his face.
I often come to him in secret by this route,
So that no one in the world might know.
The secret ways between us are many;
The secrets contained in our souls are many.
Although I might want for news of him externally,
Within the curtain, I am aware of him.
Although I conceal the secret from outsiders,
Inside I am with him through my soul.

43. ʿAṭṭâr, Manṭeq al-ṭayr, 1144-6.
The king’s explanation of his “secret way” to Ayâz allegorically illustrates a larger issue of Sufi metaphysics: namely, God’s continued “contact” with humankind through the heart. The allegorical function of the anecdote is plainly indicated by its opening homiletic preamble, which exhorts the audience to take comfort in their interior relationship to God, if they are believers:

There is a way for the king towards every heart,
But there is no way for the wayward heart.
If outside of the chamber, the king is a stranger,
Don’t despair; inside he’s an intimate companion.

The anecdote is thus presented to the audience as a tool for conceptualizing their own relationship to the God, and a reason to remain hopeful even when the divine seems distant and inaccessible.

This specific allegorical parable is particularly noteworthy because it metaphorically casts the relationship between God and his creatures as that of a lover to a beloved, with the promise of an intimate encounter between them. An erotic idiom is common in much Sufi literature, but it is usually God who is figured as beloved, and the human servant who is cast as lover. The allegory of the king and the mirror, for example, follows this standard asymmetrical pattern. The king is portrayed in that narrative using tropes commonly associated with the

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44. Ibid., 1158-63.
45. Ibid., 1137-8.
figure of the beloved in the ghazal tradition: he is an inaccessible “heart-caresser” (del-navâz), who has thrown the whole world into a tumult (ghowghâ) with his beauty.47 His subjects, on the other hand, play the role of pining lovers: they are afflicted with passion (sowdâ), suffer daily from “the sorrows of love” (gham-e ‘eshq) and are robbed of patience (ṣabr) in their desire for union.48 The king himself, however, remains serenely unaffected. He cares for his subjects, and mercifully constructs a mirror through which they can gaze upon his face, but he does not love them, remaining ensconced in his impenetrable palace. By contrast, in the final anecdote it is Maḥmud, the king, who plays the lover’s role: his soul is “passionately desirous” (moshtâq) for Ayâz, and he confess that he cannot “bear a moment without his face.” Indeed, when Ayâz falls ill, Maḥmud claims to feel the pain so immediately that it were as if he himself were stricken: “As long as you are ill, I’m so affected / I don’t know if it’s you who are ill or me!” Allegorically elaborated, a very different picture of the divine-human relationship emerges from this narrative than from the parable of the king and the mirror. Here God is not only loved by his creatures, but he loves them in turn (Quran 5:54: “He loves them as they love him”): he feels their pains, desires to be with them, and moves towards them though the “hidden passages” of the heart.

When approaching the anecdotes’ seeming contradictions, it is important to keep in mind that the Conference of the Birds was never intended to transmit a formal theology, ethics, or metaphysics, but to reinforce a broad set of sufi beliefs and attitudes on the divine-human relationship. The Alexander anecdote explains how God is ontologically connected to his creation; the parable of the king and the mirror suggests that it is through the heart that humans can gaze upon the divine; and the story of the Maḥmud and Ayâz figures the heart as the site

47. ʿAṭṭâr, Maṭeq al-tayr, 1103, 1110.
48. Ibid., 1103, 1108, 1111.
of an intimate encounter, accessible to God through “hidden” avenues. None of these anecdotes “cancels out” the others; rather, they work together to present a more nuanced and elaborated picture of God’s relationship to the world and humankind. Together, the stories explain how a transcendent God is immanent to this world and maintains a particularly special relationship with human beings, to whom he relates as both an intimate lover and a distant ruler. Although these are all common sufi attitudes, uniting them in a coherent formal theology would be a difficult task; through a set of illustrative stories, however, ʿAṭṭār provides an interlocking set of quick, flexible heuristics for conceptualizing these points. They function as nodes in what Ricoeur, in reference to Jesus’ parables, called a “network of inter-signification”; they are not to be read in isolation, but as a set, and through their multiple perspectives, a more nuanced portrayal of the topic at hand emerges.49 Together, they triangulate a particularly sufi conception of God’s ontological connection to humankind and derive its ethical implications.

**Death and Mortality**

A second critical component of ʿAṭṭār’s mystically minded ethos is an acute sense of human mortality. Attention to the coming end figured prominently not only in sufi piety, but also in Islamic religiosity more broadly, from a very early period. A tendency towards pious fear and introspection dominated among many early Muslim ascetics, attitudes which were rooted in the Quran’s emphasis on impending judgement and eschatological reward and punishment. Meditation on mortality was emphasized by proto-sufi writers like Muḥāṣibī, who advocated a probing of conscience for hidden hypocrisy, motivated by a pious fear of death and the final judgement.50 In later periods, the remembrance of death and the afterlife was com-

49. “Listening to the Parables of Jesus,” 20.
monly extolled by preachers and religious scholars, who argued that a keen understanding of life’s brevity coupled with a visceral appreciation of eschatological consequences would motivate piety and spiritual reform. The final section of Ghazzālī’s Revival (Iḥyāʾ), for instance—with which ʿAṭṭār was likely familiar—is devoted to the cultivation of such an ethos, and Ibn al-Jawzī writes that the preacher’s main duty is to direct his audience’s attention to death and the subsequent judgement.⁵¹ Although these figures’ eschatological concerns are specifically Islamic, exhortations to attend to one’s own mortality can also be found in the “secular” tradition of wisdom literature that infuses much Persian literary writing. An inheritor of the Middle Persian and Hellenistic wisdom traditions, such poetry often advocates contemplation of mortality as an impetus to virtuous living, which it aims to actively encourage.⁵²

In the Conference of the Birds, numerous anecdotes and homilies touch on themes of death and eschatology. They embody a diverse array of attitudes towards human mortality, but they nevertheless exhibit certain family resemblances. Generally speaking, ʿAṭṭār can be said to display an attitude of fear and extreme distress in relation to the coming end, regarding both the moment of expiration itself and the potential eschatological torment that will follow.⁵³ Given this morbidity, ʿAṭṭār is often compared to his predecessor Khayyām, who so finely captured the temporality of human life in his quatrains. But whereas the threat of death provokes an epicurean response in the Khayyām corpus, ʿAṭṭār understands the mortal condition as a powerful motivation for pious living and spiritual transformation.⁵⁴ For ʿAṭṭār, mortality casts its shadow over the entirety of life, undercutting the validity of commonplace worldly valuations.

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52. See Chapter 3, p. 122.
and desires, especially political power and material wealth. Its terror, however, can perhaps be partly transcended through the transformation described in the previous section; through immersion in God and the relinquishment of one’s human attributes, one can rediscover a mode of being that exists beyond the mortal plane. But given the brevity of life and looming threat of death, there is a palpable urgency to ʿAṭṭâr’s calls for onto-ethical metamorphosis; he enjoins his reader-listeners to sever their attachments to the material world now and follow the Prophet’s maxim to “die before you die” before it is too late.

Such themes are interwoven throughout the totality of the Conference of the Birds. They are treated most directly, however, in a cluster of anecdotes and homilies delivered in response to a bird whose fear of death prevents him from setting out on the dangerous quest for the Simorgh (and whom we have already encountered in the previous chapter).

... I am frightened of death;
This is a wide valley, and I am without provisions or supplies.
My heart is terrified of death such that,
My soul would depart at the first stage.

The objecting bird is, quite naturally, “frightened of death,” and he invokes his fear in an attempt to recuse himself from the quest. The hoopoe, in response, excoriates him for his weakness and short-sightedness. A fear of death is not blameworthy in itself—on the contrary, it is the proper reaction of reflective, pious people to the human situation—but this fear should strengthen one’s desire for spiritual progress, not weaken it. Death is inevitable, whether one embarks upon the spiritual path or not, but it is precisely through a journey towards the divine

55. See Chapter 3, p. 176.
56. ʿAṭṭâr, Manṭeq al-ṭayr, 2319-20.
that one can, perhaps, mitigate death’s terrors. An honest assessment of the mortal condition
should, according to the hoopoe, motivate the journey, not prevent it:

The hoopoe said to him “O feeble weakling,
How long can a bag of bones last,
A handful of bones, propped together,
Their marrow melted in the bone.
Don’t you know that of your life, give or take,
Only two breaths remain? how long with this pride?
Don’t you know that whoever’s been born has died?
He’s turned to earth, and the wind’s taken whatever he was.
You’ve been reared to die,
And you’ve been brought here only to be taken away.

... Whether you’re pure or sullied,
You’re only only a drop of water mixed with dust.
A drop of water, in pain from head to toe—
How could it ever do battle with the ocean?”

To impress on his avian audience a sense of their own contingency, the hoopoe repeatedly
highlights the materiality and temporality of the body. He reminds the objecting bird that he is
just a “handful of bones propped together,” fused with marrow and flesh: “how long,” he point-
edly asks, can such a “bag of bones last?” This skeletal imagery then gives way to a pair of ver-
ses that comment on the ubiquity of death and the ephemerality of life, both of which are in-
troduced by the rhetorical question, “Don’t you know?” thereby casting the verses’ thematic
observations as generally accepted truths that the addressee is urged to appreciate anew. Life is

57. Ibid., 2324-32.
short—at any given moment, it is as if only two breaths remain—and death is inevitable, a terror to be faced by all. The harangue concludes with the image of the body as a “drop of water mixed with dust,” a formulation that echoes various Quranic descriptions of Adam’s creation, but which also underscores the contingency and fundamentally insignificant nature of individual existence.\(^{58}\) A drop of water cannot resist the ocean, the hoopoe explains, just as every bird/human being—pious or impious—will eventually be overtaken by death. At the same time, however, this final image of the dissolving drop gestures towards another, more positive outcome. Specifically, the drop dissolving in the sea is also a common metaphor for the individual’s aforementioned effacement or immersion in God, both in ‘Atṭār’s works and those of other mystically inclined poets.\(^{59}\) The harangue can thus be read as concluding on a potentially hopeful note, in which physical death is preempted by a “spiritual death” in which worldly attachments are severed, individual agency is relinquished to the will of God, and a new existence emerges that subsists in and through the divine.

Following this introductory harangue, the hoopoe launches into a cluster of narratives and homilies that amplify, elaborate, and illustrate themes of mortality. We can distinguish these from the king-parables discussed above in that they consist of illustrative exempla that signify through synecdoche and extrapolation instead of allegorical mappings across domains. In other words, they do not seek to explain theological issues through allegorical narratives (in which, for example, Sultan Maḥmud might stand for God and his slave-beloved for humanity), but rather to provide specific examples of death and dying—often featuring spiritual heroes of past eras—to shape reader-listeners’ attitudes and affective responses towards human mortality

\(^{58}\) See, inter alia, Quran 26:15 and 35:11.
\(^{59}\) ‘Atṭār, Moṣibat-nāma, 6906-26.
more generally. But like the king-parables, the didactic “point” of the anecdote is then interpreted, generalized, and cast as a direct exhortation by the accompanying homilies. The discourse contains five anecdotes, three of which will be treated here: the anecdotes of the grieving son, Jesus and the water jug, and Socrates on his deathbed. Besides their thematic similarities, these anecdotes share a simple, yet significant dramatic structure: a scene is set, two characters meet, and one of them rebukes the other for his or her superficial understanding of death. Their rebukes, moreover, are often humorous or hyperbolic and can be read almost as didactic jokes. Nevertheless, they are far from frivolous; through their arresting, punning language, ‘Aṭṭār confronts reader-listeners with unexpected emblems of their own mortality and thereby invites them to reassess their subjective relationship to death.

For example, in the first anecdote to be examined here, a grieving young man is castigated by a sufi against the backdrop of a funeral procession. The young man’s father has died, and he is walking in front of the coffin, likely leading the way to the burial site:

In front of the coffin went the son,
He was raining tears, and crying out: “O Father,
A day like this, wounding my soul,
Has never befallen me before, in all my life.

Many of ‘Aṭṭār’s anecdotes open in a similar fashion, with a single character behaving in a more or less expected manner in a specific setting taken from the rhythms of pre-modern life. The father of the young man has died, and he naturally laments his loss as he leads the funeral

61. It begins with the tale of the Qoqnos, which we have examined in Chapter 3, p. 173-177.
procession. After this scene has been set, however, a second character appears—introduced only as “a sufi”—who disrupts this common-sense state of affairs by calling the validity of the son’s exclamations into question:

A sufi said: “That which has befallen your father, Has never befallen him before, either. What’s happened to the son is not much— The really difficult thing has happened to the father.”

The sufi rebukes the son for claiming unprecedented pain and grief when it is the father who has died, an event that, the sufi humorously points out, “has never befallen him before, either.” Not only is the moment of death itself terrible, but for Muslim audiences it is not the final end—then there is the ordeal of the Monker and Nâker, the questioning angels, and the threat of eschatological torment. In a homily delivered soon after this anecdote, Ṭṭṭâr first describes the deceased as “sleeping,” but then immediately corrects himself, recalling their torment:

They are now all sleeping beneath the earth— No, not sleeping, they are all in turmoil! Look at death, see what a difficult path it is, Since the grave is only the first step.

In other words, the father’s condition is far worse than the son’s; although the latter may feel bereaved, the former faces the terror of the grave and divine judgement.

Through the sufi’s unexpected and arresting rebuke, the anecdote disrupts standard, common-sense reactions to death in order to elicit a revitalized appreciation for the terrors of

63. Ibid., 2370-1.
64. Ibid., 2381-2.
the grave. The disruptive power of the sufi’s utterance is intensified by his sudden narrative appearance and the social alterity of the character. During this period “sufi” was an ambiguous term, referring not only to practitioners of mystical piety, but also to charlatans and vagabonds, who, like ‘Aṭṭār’s famous “wise fools” (‘oqalâ-yé majânin), nonetheless transmitted unconventional—and perhaps unintended—wise sayings.65 Given his ambiguity as a character and the potential for hidden wisdom, readers are invited to scrutinize the sufi’s seemingly inappropriate admonishment more carefully. His actual message—namely, that the condition of the dead is much worse than the condition of the living—is the standard fare of Islamic preachers, but through his “correction” of the young man’s utterance, the sufi draws renewed attention to the terror of death in a particularly uncompromising and unexpected manner. The grieving son, who is more focused on his bereavement in the worldly present than the eschatological terrors that await both him and his father, exemplifies how the “fact” of eschatological turmoil is routinely veiled by more short-sighted concerns. The sufi’s interjection, in this sense, can be read as an attempt to disrupt the social norms and rhythms of quotidian life that have obscured the terror of the grave, and thereby clear a space for a revitalized and intensified contemplation of death.66

The anecdote’s confrontational aims motivate its dramatic structure, which lacks any clear resolution; instead of a narrative denouement, its resolution lies in the spiritual change elicited from its audience. In the previous chapter, we discussed how ‘Aṭṭār’s anecdotes often


end with quoted paraenetic speech, which slowly and almost imperceptibly gives way to a direct homiletic address to the reader-listener; we have argued that this curious metalepsis suggests a continuity between the anecdotes’ fictional addressees and ʿAṭṭâr’s real-world audience as the targets of paraenetic discourse. In the anecdote of the grieving son, for instance, reader-listeners never learn how the young man reacts to the sufi’s disruptive intervention: we do not know if he yields to the latter’s advice, contemplates his own death, or just ignores the offending spiritual vagabond. Instead of continuing the narration, ʿAṭṭâr addresses his readers directly, urging them to remember their own temporality and the concomitant vanity of material possessions and political power:

O You who’ve come to the world to bumble about,
You’ve come for nothing but dust on your head, and to weigh the wind.
Even if you sit on the throne of the kingdom,
You’ll leave with nothing but wind in your hands.

The lack of a narrative conclusion, which is replaced by a shift to direct homiletic exhortation, suggests ʿAṭṭâr’s broader rhetorical concern to “translate” narrative exempla into spiritual action among his flesh and blood reader-listeners. Once the sufi has made his paraenetic intervention at the climax of the anecdote, ʿAṭṭâr is more interested in amplifying its significance for his audience than tracing its effects in a fictional story-world; ultimately, the narrative’s conclusion lies in the “real-world,” in the spiritual change ʿAṭṭâr demands of his reader-listeners. This homiletic amplification, in particular the closing image of “wind in your hands” also serves to introduce the subsequent anecdote-homily pair, which features a flute player (nâʾi) on

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67. See Chapter 3, p. 185-194
68. ʿAṭṭâr, Manṭeq al-ṭayr, 2372-3.
his death-bed; in his commentary, Ṭṭṭâr plays with the opposition between the “wind” of the flute and the “earth” of the body. Such transitions bind almost every anecdote-homily pair, and they serve to formally unify the discourse.

Like the anecdote of the grieving young man, the other narratives in this discourse also feature unexpected paraenetic interventions, but they hinge more on humor and paronomasia for their disruptive effect. The second anecdote that we will examine in depth, located in the middle of the cluster, is adapted from the “stories of the prophets” genre: it narrates how the prophet Jesus was reminded of the “bitterness of death” (talkhi-ye marg) by a miraculously speaking water-jug.69 According to Ṭṭṭâr’s version of the story, Jesus came before a stream and drank some of its water, presumably from his own cupped hands, and found it “sweeter than rosewater.” After quenching his thirst, Jesus filled a jug with water from the sweet-tasting stream and continued on his way. But when he drank from the jug, he was surprised to find the water’s taste had changed: it had become quite bitter. Confused, he wondered out loud how this could be:

O Lord, the water in this jug and the water of the stream
Are the same water; explain this mystery.
Why is the water in the jug so bitter,
While the other is sweeter than honey?

گفت یا رب آب این خم و آب جوی
وین دگر شیرینتر است از انگیز
تا چرا تلخ است آب خم چنین

In response, the jug itself miraculously began to speak:

... O Jesus, I am an ancient man.
Beneath these nine domes, over a thousand times,
I have been fashioned into flasks, urns, and vessels.
And if I am reworked a thousand times more,

69. ᵃⁿᵃᵗⁱⁿⁱᵃ, Ṭᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃⁿ⁻ᵃ
There will still be nothing but the bitterness of death.  
For me, the bitterness of death is always so— 
That’s why my water will never be sweet.

As the jug explains, it was fashioned from the clay of a once living human being, thus the bitter water: no matter how many times the clay is refashioned into a new vessel, the bitterness of death does not diminish, and it continues to pollute any water it holds.

The anecdote thus recounts Jesus’ education in the “bitterness” of human mortality through the memento mori of the water-jug. The metaphorical association between water- or wine-jugs and human material remains is a longstanding poetic trope in Persian. It was especially well used by Khayyâm, who enjoins his addressees to hold the wine-jug tenderly and consider how its inanimate clay was once a human being who, like them, loved and drank; often these jugs are brought to speech through the poetic device of “language of state” (zabân-e ḥâl), in which inanimate objects are personified and reveal the secret of their essential being or emotional state. 72 ʿAṭṭâr deploys a similar poetic logic in his quatrains, including one in which wine jugs are said to whisper “I was once like you” to those who drink from them, echoing the address to Jesus in the above narrative. 73 In all these instances, the jug functions as an emblem of the materiality of the human body and the temporality of life, which lasts only a brief moment against the aeons of the “nine domes,” the slowly turning spheres. Lifeless clay, brought miraculously to speech, calls attention to the temporal mismatch between individual human

71. Ibid., 2389-92.  
73. ʿAṭṭâr, Mokhtâr-nâma, 936.
existence and the cosmos—including the elemental constituents of the body—highlighting the brevity of the former against the persistence of the latter. And as this anecdote demonstrates, even Jesus, who is known by the sobriquet “Breath of God” *(Ruh-Allah)* and is associated with spirit and life, is subject to death’s bitter taste: although he animated clay pigeons and brought the deceased back from the grave, he remains a temporal being and subject to death’s pain.74

Although the themes are serious, the anecdote also has the metalinguistic hallmarks of a good joke. In essence, the short narrative is driven by an imaginative, overly-literal interpretation of the cliched observation that “death is bitter.” In normal language, we understand death’s bitterness to mean that it is unpleasant and undesirable; not to suggest that death induces an actual gustatory sensation. The anecdote, however, explains the phenomenon of the mysterious bitter water by means of just such a category mistake, which is conveyed in the “punch line” spoken by the jug at its conclusion: “For me, the bitterness of death is always so—/ That’s why my water will never be sweet.” Whether or not ‘Aṭṭār’s readers would have understood the anecdote as recounting a historical truth is open for debate, but certainly they would have recognized that death’s bitterness cannot be transferred to a physical object as an actual taste sensation under normal conditions. By presenting death’s bitterness as an actual taste, however, the anecdote calls attention to the metaphorical nature of a common cliche, and thus clears a space for its revitalization. It invites reader-listeners to deduce where interpretation has, from a natural language perspective, “gone wrong,” which also involves a reconsideration of the manner in which such an identification is metaphorically valid. The metalinguistic humor is thus not only the spoonful of sugar that helps the bitter medicine of *memento mori* go down, but it is also key to the anecdote’s overall didactic effect. It provokes reader-listeners

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74. Also see ‘Aṭṭār, *Moṣibat-nāma*, 1639-41, in which Jesus confesses the terror he feels when he thinks of death.
towards a more conscious consideration of ways in which bitterness, as a concrete gustatory experience, metaphorically maps onto death, and it thereby guides them towards a contemplation of its lingering effects, its power to contaminate sweetness and joy, and its lurking presence as the after-taste of life. Such humor also renders the anecdote more memorable; whenever one of ʿAṭṭār reader-listeners hears this phrase, he or she will likely recall the anecdote and its lesson.

The narrative’s function as a teaching tool is made explicit in the accompanying homily, in which ʿAṭṭār adds a touch of levity to his characteristic rebuke:75

In the end, you ignorant one, drink the secret from a jug!
Leave off filling yourself with ignorance, like a jug!

‘Aṭṭār’s narratorial persona directly addresses his reader-listeners, urging them to attend to the “secret” spoken by the jug and to leave off making themselves “jugs” for ignorance. The story is thus cast as a tool for spiritual guidance. Although his audience, unlike Jesus, probably has never had the good fortune to receive spiritual wisdom directly from miraculous speaking jugs, they are nevertheless privy to edifying narrative accounts of such happenings, and ʿAṭṭār urges them to seize this opportunity. Through humorous chastisement, the audience is called upon to heed the narrative’s lesson and approach the anecdote as a transformative parable of death’s bitterness and universality.

The remainder of this homily, however, refers not to the narrative of Jesus and the jug but to the following anecdote, the final anecdote of the discourse, in which Socrates, on his

75. Whichever “stories of the prophets” collection ʿAṭṭār used as his source would presumably have lacked such a homily; adding a homiletic interpolation is part of the creative adaptation necessary to integrate the anecdote into the didactic maṣnawi form.
76. ʿAṭṭār, Manṭeq al-ṭayr, 2393.
deathbed, confesses his failure to “find himself.” The homily urges readers to “know themselves” while they are still alive, since they will have no opportunity to do so after they die:

You have lost yourself, you secret-seeker;
Before your soul is taken, seek the secret!
If you don’t find yourself while you are alive,
When you are dead, how will you find the secret?
When you are alive, you don’t know anything about yourself,
When you are dead there is no trace of your being!
Alive, having not walked the path, dead he’s lost;
Born as a man, but became not-a-man.

These verses display a gnostic sensibility, suggesting that a secret salvational knowledge must be acquired during one’s lifetime to avoid annihilation after death. The secret in question, as in most varieties of gnosticism, is related to the nature of selfhood: Ṭṭṭār exhorts his readers to “find” and “know” themselves, and thereby become true “men.” Such themes recall the Delphic injunction to “know thyself,” and themes of self-knowledge and self-care are also closely associated with Socrates, the protagonist of the subsequent anecdote. In an Islamic context, a concern for self-knowledge is famously evinced in the hadith “whoever knows himself knows his lord,” as well as in the frame-tales of Ṭṭṭār’s Conference of the Birds and Book of Affliction. For Ṭṭṭār and like-minded mystical thinkers, this self-knowledge is the intellectual and experiential realization of one’s inseparable ontological link to the creator-God, often coupled with an experience of effacement, as illustrated in the poem’s frame-tale when the thirty birds finally encounter the Simorgh. Time, however, is limited: one can only come to “know oneself” during one’s lifetime. Ṭṭṭār thus urges his audience to “find themselves” now, before it is too late:

they must “realize” their secret connection to the divine before they die, not only in the sense of understanding an abstract proposition, but also in the sense of activating a latent potentiality and thereby bringing about its reality.

These exhortations are concretized and amplified in the subsequent account of Socrates’s deathbed exchange with a disciple. The disciple speaks first, inquiring of Socrates’ wishes regarding his burial:

... O Teacher,
When we have prepared the shroud and washed your body,
Where shall we inter you in the ground?

The question is an eminently reasonable one, aligning with readers’ exceptions of a deathbed scene between a spiritual master and his disciple. Socrates’ response, however, completely disrupts the logic of the disciple’s request; according to Socrates, the disciple likely will not be able to “find him” after his death, much less bury him, since Socrates was not even able to find himself when he was alive:

If you can find me, boy,
Bury me wherever you like!
Since, while I was living a long life, I did not myself Discover, how could you find me when I’m dead?

As readers, we do not learn how the disciple responds to this humorous proclamation. Consistent with the structure found in the majority of ‘Aṭṭâr’s anecdotes, it ends with the teacher-figure’s utterance.

78. Ibid., 2399-400.
79. Ibid., 2401-3.
This utterance, much like that attributed to the miraculous speaking jug, hinges on an overly literal understanding of the metaphorical injunction to “find oneself.” As discussed above, in this context the injunction to self-knowledge constitutes a call to activate the divine spark within the human soul, that ontological connection between the individual and God. Success or failure in “knowing oneself” in this sense obviously has nothing to do with the location of the physical body. Nevertheless, Socrates commits—perhaps intentionally—just such a category error, discussing “finding oneself” in terms of finding a physical object. Readers will quickly locate the root of this linguistic confusion, and they will likely take some humorous pleasure in it. Nevertheless, the anecdote does not offer Socrates as a target of derision or mockery. In the Islamic context, he is an exemplar of pre-Islamic wisdom and religiosity, so his “misunderstanding” is likely to be understood as a intentional didactic intervention. Given the tradition of fool-speech in Ḥār’s works, the audience expects to find wisdom articulated in unconventional forms; overly literal, unexpected, and seemingly simple-minded interpretations and dicta serve to engage readers, who are invited to contemplate odd paraenetic utterances for double meanings and hidden wisdom. Thus, in a general sense, the anecdote can be considered an attempt to indirectly draw readers into reflecting on the proper meaning of self-knowledge. More specifically, however, the anecdote provides a useful heuristic by concretizing the stakes of failure. According to Socrates, since he could not “find himself” in life, his body would not be found after death, and thus funeral arrangements are inconsequential. Although this logic is rooted in misunderstanding, there is a sense in which the ultimate conclusion is correct: if a connection to the divine is not activated during life, then a proper burial is of little

80. Alon, Socrates in Mediaeval Arabic Literature, 87-96.
importance. Socrates’ odd response thus creatively guides readers towards reflection on the seriousness of the endeavor and its fleeting window of opportunity.

The anecdotes of this discourse all seek to convey the terror of death and thus impress upon the audience the importance of spiritual transformation in a rhetorically forceful manner. These would not have been unfamiliar themes for sufi reader-listeners; ‘Aṭṭâr is not aiming to teach new concepts or inculcate novel attitudes, but rather to remind them of that which they already know, and thereby provoke the audience into renewing their commitment to a mystical mode of piety. ‘Aṭṭâr’s characters, bucking social norms with unexpected and uncompromising proclamations of piety, gesture towards the disruptive power of his own narratives, which likewise seek to break through the stagnant consciousness of his audience to clear a space for pious renewal. Their meta-linguistic and paronomastic plays, although humorous and entertaining, serve a didactic purpose, creatively transgressing ossified metaphors so as to re-energize them. They work together to guide their reader-listeners towards a revitalized cognizance of death and its ethical ramifications, and seek to thereby precipitate a “reconversion” to the sufi path.

**Spiritual Manliness**

For ‘Aṭṭâr and other mystically minded poets, virtuous behavior and spiritual progress were highly gendered; broadly speaking, advanced spiritual rank and religious achievement were seen as somehow intrinsically masculine, whereas spiritual laxity was associated with femininity. For example, throughout ‘Aṭṭâr’s œuvre, he repeatedly enjoins his addressee to “be a man” by moving forward on the spiritual path; this is a common refrain not only in the homiletic masnavis, but also in the *Choice Book* and the *Divân*, as in the following distich from one of his ghazals:
If you are of a feminine disposition, dally in the alley;
But if you are a man of the path, get to work!

The true man acts, setting out on the spiritual path with single-minded purpose. The woman, by contrast, dallies and delays, being fickle by nature and prone to distraction from the ultimate goal:

Take up the sword and don armor like the men;
You are not, after all, like a woman—leave aside the baubles!

The man plunges onwards with his sword, willing to sacrifice his life in martial activity, whereas the woman, given to self-satisfaction, is distracted by the instruments of her own beautification. To be sure, these verse are rhetorically motivated—ʿAttār seeks to cajole his readers (assumed to be male) to piety by underhandedly questioning their manhood—but the strategy nonetheless derives its rhetorical force from pre-existing cultural associations between masculinity, piety, strength, and commitment. These associations are pervasive throughout ʿAttār’s works and Persian mystical literature more generally. In his Memorial, for example, the exemplars of the sufi path are collectively referred to as “the men of the path” (mardān-e rāh) or just “the men.” This masculine gendering extends even to Rābeʿa, the sole woman to receive a biography in ʿAttār’s Memorial; according to the preamble to her vita, she “cannot be considered a woman” because of her obvious spiritual gifts.83

Our discussion here focuses on a discourse delivered by the hoopoe in response to an interlocutor who confesses his “effeminacy” in spiritual matters. More specifically, he confesses

81. ʿAttār, Divān-e ʿAttār, ghazal 398.
82. Ibid., ghazal 395.
83. ʿAttār, Taṣkerat al-owleyā, 61. Also see the masculine gendering of Marhuma, the spiritual heroine and protagonist of the longest tale in the Elāhi-nāma, 482-83.
that he cannot consistently maintain a pious mode of life; in his words, he suffers from the disposition of a *mokhanna*š. Biologically, the term *mokhanna*š refers to intersex individuals—those who possess ambiguous sex organs—but it was also metaphorically applied to men whose behavior was perceived as “weak” or “effeminate,” especially those who allowed themselves to be penetrated sexually.\(^8^4\) In mystical works, the appellation usually denotes a person who is too weak, lazy, or distracted to progress along the spiritual path, as the fickle bird elaborates:\(^8^5\)

\[
\ldots \text{I am of an effeminate disposition (} mokhannaš gowhar-am); Every moment I’m a bird of a different branch. Sometimes a *rend*, sometimes an ascetic, sometimes a drunk, Sometimes this and not that, sometimes that and not this, Sometimes my *nafs* drags me into the tavern, Sometimes my spirit (*jân*) draws me into prayer. Sometimes a demon waylays me in a single moment, Sometimes an angel suddenly returns me to the path. I am trapped in between, confused; What should I do, captive in this pit and prison?
\]

The bird vacillates between competing ways of life: occasionally an ascetic, other times an antinomian *rend*, and sometimes a drunk. He is unproductively and inextricably “caught in the middle.” He confesses that he is sometimes dragged to the tavern by his lower soul (*nafs*), other times propelled to supererogatory orisons by his spirit (*jân*). In other words, his person is torn between two competing aspects of human psychology, the lower soul that entices to evil and the higher spirit that represents the individual’s ontological connection to—and route of ascent-

\(^{8^4}\) Loghat-nâma-ye Dehkhodâ, s.v. “*mokhanna*š.”

\(^{8^5}\) Lewis, “Sexual Occidentation,” 694-5.

sion towards—God. Sometimes waylaid by a demon, other times rescued by an angel, the bird is afflicted by constantly fluctuating inclinations towards impiety and differing modes of piety; he lacks focus and constancy in his effort to progress along the spiritual path.

In response, the hoopoe explains that this inconstancy is due to the overwhelming power of the *nafs*. This is a rather common problem, he reassures his interlocutor—a feminine disposition can be found to some extent in everyone—and there is hope for reform. Specifically, one must subdue the *nafs* and reduce its power in order to maintain a single-minded devotion towards God and pious life:

. . . This is a problem for everyone,  
Since there are not many single-minded (*yek sefat*) men.  
If everyone were pure from the beginning,  
What would be the purpose of the prophets’ mission?  
Since you are devoted to obedience (*ṭāʿat*),  
You will eventually come to righteousness, even if slowly.  
Until the colt has spent its defiance,  
It won’t easily or calmly submit,  
Your place is in the bakery of ignorance:  
All you desire is a round of bread!  
Cinnabar tears are the secrets of the heart;  
A full stomach is the rust of the heart.  
Since you continuously feed the dog of the soul,  
It produces nothing less than an effeminate disposition.

This spiritual inconstancy results from the prodding of the *nafs*, embodied here in animal imagery. The reform of the *nafs* is likened to the breaking a colt: although the colt may resist—

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87. Ibid., 1927-33.
this is to be expected—eventually, with time, its energy will wane, and it will then allow itself to be mounted. Likewise, if one persists in obedience (tā‘at) to the shariah, even if the nafs repeatedly leads one astray, its power will eventually weaken. The most effective means to subdue the nafs, however, seems to be supererogatory ascetic practice—particularly fasting. As we have seen, the heart is a mirror through which the light of God is manifested in the individual, and to function properly it must be burnished of rust through ascetic action. When one eats beyond the bare minimum, according to ‘Aţţâr, the mirror of the heart is obscured—“a full stomach is the rust of the heart,”—nourishing the nafs and leading to feminine fickleness, inconstancy, and self-pride. The hoopoe thus rebukes his addressee for setting his ambition solely on bread and residing in the “bakery of ignorance.” In addition to fasting, the reference to “cinnabar tears” also suggests the efficacy of weeping as a spiritual practice for subduing the nafs.

The hoopoe then launches into a series of parables and homilies that enjoin single-minded commitment to spiritual progress untainted by egoism or feminine self-pride. The cluster is composed of three stories: the first recounts how Shebli, a famous sufi of tenth-century Baghdad, took up residence in a “den of iniquity” (mokhannaš-khâna), despairing of any claim to be a “man.” The second anecdote relates how two sufis brought a dispute before a judge, who rebuked them for their “womanly” behavior. And the third tells of a dervish who boasts of being a lover, but whose love was less than total; he loses his head for his “feminine” posing. Together, the stories and their accompanying homilies illustrate some of the varied ways that the injunction to single-minded spiritual manliness can be elaborated and enacted.

88. The metaphor implies that the nafs is not to be destroyed, but contained and trained. See the discourse on this subject in Dâya, Merşâd al-‘ebâd, 178-83.
The first story centers on Shebli, a well-known sufi hero who figures prominently in ‘Aṭṭâr’s oeuvre. According to this particular anecdote, one day Shebli disappears from his usual Baghdad haunts—presumably the mosque—and no one knows where he has gone. The people search for him, and someone eventually finds him weeping in a mokhanna-khâna—likely a house of male prostitution. A surprised questioner asks Shebli what could possibly have brought him, “the enlightened seeker of secrets,” to such a place. In response, Shebli confesses his own spiritual laxity. Because he is a mokhanna on the path of God, he claims, his rightful place is in the mokhanna-khâna:

This is a debauched group.
In the way of the world, they are neither men nor women.
And I am like them, except in the way of religion.
Neither a man nor a woman in religion; how much of this!
I am lost in my own lack of manly chivalry (nâ-javâmardi),
And I am ashamed of my manliness.

This anecdote, like many others, builds towards a climactic destabilization that clears a space for rethinking well-worn spiritual attitudes. Shebli, of course, is the very definition of a “man of the path,” not only in the minds of his students and disciples, but also for ‘Aṭṭâr and his readers. Yet, according to this anecdote, he was so ashamed of his own piety, or lack thereof, that he took up residence in a mokhanna-khâna, among those who are “neither man nor woman in the way of the world.” As Shebli explains in the Memorial’s prose version of the story,

90. Richard Gramlich, Alte Vorbilder des Suﬁtums (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1995), 1:513-665. Shebli features in a number of stories in ‘Aṭṭâr’s maṣnavīs; for a list, see Ritter, Ocean of the Soul, 810. The chapter devoted to Shebli in ‘Aṭṭâr’s Memorial, however, may be spurious. See Este’lami, intro. to Taẓkerat al-owleyâ, xxxvi-xxxvii.
This is where I belong, since just as they [the inhabitants of the mokhannašt-khâna] are neither men nor women in the ways of the world, I am neither a man nor a woman in religion; thus, this is my place.

This is a rhetorically motivated performance, meant to shock his disciples; a definite Malâmâti streak informs Shebli’s actions. Paradoxically, Shebli proves his spiritual worth by proclaiming his own spiritual bankruptcy. Because he eschewed the praise of others and was cognizant of his own spiritual inconstancy, ‘Aţţâr presents him as a pious exemplar worthy of veneration. He is a true “man” precisely because he is ashamed of his own “manliness.”

In the Memorial, the anecdote stands on its own as a testament to Shebli’s sincerity and freedom from hypocritical pride. In the Conference of the Birds, however, Shebli is explicitly presented as a paradigmatic model for emulation. Not that ‘Aţţâr’s audience ought to take up residency in a mokhannašt-khâna, of course, but they should remain watchful for any sign of feminine self-aggrandizement or egotistical hypocrisy in their piety. The homily that follows the anecdote opens with an exhortation to dispose of any egotistical attachment to one’s beard—that dual sign of masculinity and religiosity:

Whoever realized his own soul,
Used his beard for a napkin at the feast of the way.
Like the men (mardân), he chose his own debasement;
He has has scattered his honor on the masters.
If you see yourself, even a hair’s breadth,
You are worse for yourself than an idol.
If praise and blame make any difference to you,
Then you are an idolator who fashions idols.

94. Although this anecdote puts a Malâmâti spin on Shebli’s actions, he was not associated with the historical Malâmâtiya in Khorâsân. See the discussion in Chapter 2, p. 107.
95. Cf. the story of al-Hiri, who claims to be too spiritually wayward to effectively preach, Chapter 3, p. 136.
According to the homily, true men attend to their own “debasement” in Malâmati fashion, scattering any pretense of honour before the “masters”—the exemplary men of the path like Shebli, to whom ‘Atţâr is wont to compare himself and find himself wanting. Any consideration of the self in pious action constitutes a form of idolatry, as when religious practice is motivated by the approbation or opprobrium of others. Shebli, by contrast, is presented as a paragon of selfless, manly spirituality: he rejected his contemporaries’ praise and demonstrated his own low opinion of himself by taking up residence in a mokhannyaş-khana, where he confessed himself to be a “neither a man nor a woman in the way of religion.” Because he refused to acknowledge his own manliness, he became a model of sincerity, and ‘Atţâr’s reader-listeners are invited to scrutinize their own motivations and self-idolizations against his pious example: if Shebli, the universally venerated spiritual hero, believed that his place was in a mokhan-naş-khana, then where might ordinary believers belong?

In light of the above, it should be clear that ‘Atţâr was not calling for tolerance or diversity for its own sake, as has occasionally been suggested. Shebli does not enter the mokhan-naş-khana to elevate its residents but to debase himself, thereby demonstrating his piety’s freedom from hypocrisy. The narrative’s didacticism therefore depends upon—and re-inscribes—a particularly negative understanding of those who are “neither men nor women in the way of the world.” The anecdote’s function is to celebrate Shebli’s Malâmati tendencies and admonish

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96. ‘Atţâr, Manteq al-tayr, 1941-4.
reader-listeners against taking pride in piety, not to suggest that the residents of the mokhannas-khâna are intrinsically worthy of respect.

The imagery of idolatry continues in the second half of the homily where it is contrasted with servanthood, which is presented as a critical component of spiritual manliness:

If you are a servant (banda) of God, don’t be a fashioner of idols!
If you are a man of the divine, don’t be an Āzar!\(^98\)
It’s not possible, among either the elect or the masses,
To attain a higher station than that of servanthood (bandegi).
Be a servant (bandegi kon) and don’t seek conflict (daʼvá),
Become a man of the truth, don’t seek glory from ʿOzzá!\(^99\)
Since you have a hundred idols under your cloak (dalq),
How can you present yourself to the people as a sufi?

The homily is structured around a set of oppositions in which servanthood and submission are associated with manliness, while conflict, self-assertion, and idolatry are associated with effeminacy. Significantly, the addressee is castigated not just for being an idol-worshipper, but a fashioner of idols, and thus compared to Āzar, Abraham’s father and a sculptor of graven images. More specifically, the addressee is rebuked for fashioning an idol out of the self—when piety is motivated by pride and self-aggrandizement, instead of sincere devotion to God, then “you are worse for yourself than an idol,” and “a hundred idols [are] under your [sufi] cloak.”

For ʿAṭṭâr, an idolatry of self is also associated with conflict or strife (daʼvá), which he admonishes his readers to avoid; the term also carries the specific meaning of “lawsuit,” which alludes

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98. According to Quran 6:74, Āzar was the father of Abraham and an idol worshipper—later tradition makes him a sculptor of idols as well.
99. ʿOzzá was one of the chief goddesses of pre-Islamic Arabian paganism.
100. ʿAṭṭâr, Manṭeq al-ṭayr, 1945-8.
to the subsequent anecdote and may explain its rather forced presence here. Nevertheless, ʿAṭṭâr’s point seems to be that an aggressive posture involves a measure of self-assertion, and thus constitutes a form of self-idolatry. In contrast to such self-assertion, he exhorts his audience to relinquish their agency, and even their very selves, to the divine. Servanthood (bandegi) is the mark of the true men who are worthy of the sufi cloak; those who aggrandize themselves are idolators, worshippers of the false goddess ʿOzzá, and spiritual mokhannâš.

The homily easily transitions into the discourse’s next anecdote, which also emphasizes themes of hypocrisy and manliness, along with the signifying power of clothing. It recounts how two sufis, “wearers of patched frocks” (moraqqaʿ-push), brought a dispute before a judge. Like many of ʿAṭṭâr’s anecdotes, it narrates what would presumably have been a common situation, although the exact nature of the sufis’ dispute is never specified. Instead of issuing a ruling, however, the judge excoriates the sufis for their animosity and spiritual weakness. Bringing a legal claim, according to his rebuke, is antithetical to the spiritual ethos to which these so-called sufis pretend:

The judge pulled them aside.  
He said: "Sufis ought not to stir up conflict.  
You have taken your cloak of submission (jâma-ye taslim),  
So why have you taken up this antagonism (khoṣumât)?  
If you are people of conflict and rancor,  
Take these clothes (lebâs) off at once!  
And if you are people of these cloaks (jâmâ),  
Then you have entered into enmity (khoṣumât) out of ignorance.  
I am a judge, and not a man of meaning,  
But I have shame before those cloaks (moraqqaʾ)!  
For both of you, wearing women’s veils (megnaʾ),  
Would be better than wearing wearing patched frocks (moraqqaʾ) like this!"

گفت صوفی خوش نبایش جنگساز
این خصوصت از چه در سر کردیده‌اند
این لباس از سر برندازیده‌اند
در خصوصت از سر جهل آمید

قاضی ایشان را به چنچی برده باند
جاپم تسلیم در بر کرده‌اند
گر شما هستید اهل جنگ و کین
ور شما این جامه‌ را اهل آمید
The anecdote opposes the “submission” (taslim) expected of sufis with the acrimonious behavior of these two, described in a network of terms including “antagonism” (khoşumat), “treachery” (jafā), “conflict” (jang), and “rancor” (kin). Aggressive posturing, when motivated by selfish desires, is incompatible with the sufistic goal of complete submission to the divine will; the judge thus rebukes these two sufis for failing to live up to their ideals. His critique focuses especially on the hypocritical discrepancy between their actions and their mode of dress, through which they insincerely claim to be practitioners of sufism. Their patched frocks mark them as individuals who eschew self-aggrandizement as servants of God, an ethos belied by their dispute. The judge’s emphasis on dress and clothing is, in turn, highly gendered. The sufi cloak (moraqqa’) is, according to him, a “robe of submission” and thus the provenance of the “men of meaning.” Because the sufis fail to live up to the ideals it signifies, he calls on them to remove their cloaks; to add further sting, he suggests headscarfs (meqna’) would more accurately reflect their shamefully effeminate behavior.

The insult is didactically calculated to instigate spiritual reform—not only in the two sufis, whose reaction to this dressing-down is left un-narrated—but in ʿAṭṭâr’s reader-listeners, who must be considered the didactic targets of the anecdote as a whole. Most reader-listeners probably identified with these sufis, not only because they too likely aspired to sufistic forms of piety, but also because they occupy an analogous position on the receiving end of ʿAṭṭâr’s own paraenetic discourse. Indeed, as I have argued in the previous chapter, there is a sense in which the text’s reader-listeners, the hoopoe’s audience, and the recipients of myriad harangues in

101. Ibid., 1951-6.
the various anecdotes—like these two would-be sufis—all elide as targets of didactic speech.\footnote{102}{Chapter 3, 185-194.}

And in the transitionary line at the close of the previous homily, ʿAṭṭār foreshadows the judge’s rebuke by directly castigating his reader-listeners for spiritual laxity in similar terms:

\begin{quote}
O mokhannaš, don’t wear the clothes (jāma) of men; Don’t confuse yourself more than this.
\end{quote}

\footnote{103}{ʿAṭṭār, Manteq al-tayr, 1949.}

ʿAṭṭār assumes his audience to be male and resistant to any effort to undermine that privileged position; the charge of effeminacy is intended to sting, and thus spur reader-listeners to reaffirm their masculinity by rededicating themselves to the sufi path.\footnote{104}{Lewis, “Sexual Occidentation,” 694-5.} Didacticism proceeds not only through rational argumentation, but also appeals to emotion and pride, and gendered insults were apparently understood as a particularly effective paraenetic tactic.


As sufi corporate groups coalesced over the course of the eleventh century, such attributes were highly encouraged. At Abu Saʿid’s khānaqāh, for instance, all meals were to be taken in common, and food was to be shared among the resident dervishes and any poor or needy who would join them.\footnote{106}{Ebn Monavvar, Asrâr al-towhid, 1:317.}

Hojviri relates how he received a poor reception at a khānaqāh while traveling despite wearing
a sufi cloak; he makes it clear that he considered this a grave violation of social norms.  

According to Abû Najib Suhrawardi, the novice is obliged to “serve his brothers and companions, secure provisions for them, bear their abuse, and refrain from rebuking them unless they transgress the law.” Qushayrî writes that “if the aspirant’s duty is service to the dervishes, he should bear their harshness with patience.” The judge’s condemnation of the two sufis’ antagonism echoes such attitudes; those who choose the sufi path are expected to be generous and selfless, especially with each other.

Following the anecdote of the two litigious sufis, reader-listeners encounter one final anecdote-homily pair, which extends the notion of manly sincerity to the love of God. The introductory homily again focuses on daʿvâ/daʿvi, which here signifies not conflict or lawsuit, but pretension, insincerity, and vain boast. Love, according to the homily, demands a full commitment: the true man welcomes love’s pains and travails, and gladly lays down his life for his beloved. Those who love insincerely or inconstantly, however, will perish; such pretenders cannot be reckoned true men:

Because you are neither man nor woman in the work of love,
How can you ever solve love’s secrets?
If you are afflicted with the secret of the way of love,
Out of affliction, remove the horse-barding (bargostovân).
If you go onto this battlefield (maydân) in pretension (daʿvi),
You will lose your head and your soul.
Don’t raise your head up so much in pretension (daʿvi),
Lest you be cast down in ignominy.

107. Hojviri, Kashf al-mahjub, 94.
110. Şâremî, Moştalahât, s.v. “daʿvi.”
The sermon is infused with martial imagery and continues the gendered opposition between masculine spiritual strength and effeminate spiritual weakness. It opens with the familiar re-buke of the addressee as one who is “neither man nor woman in the work of love.” The charge of effeminacy again carries notions of waffling, insincerity, and half-hearted commitment. The manly lover removes the barding from his mount before entering onto the love’s battlefield; he welcomes catastrophe and pain in love’s way, expecting death. Despite his willingness to die, it is not the true lover who perishes on love’s battlefield, but the false lover who enters the arena with specious boasts and pretensions.

This conception of sincere love is not only illustrated in the following anecdote, but concretized in a such a way to show its radical demands, upending readers’ previous understandings of sincerity and demonstrating the inadequacy of their love of God. The anecdote opens by explaining that a pauper (mofles) once fell in love with the king of Egypt; for any competent reader, this already suggests a specific allegorical mapping, in which the king stands in for God, and the pauper for the human mystic. As discussed previously, God is often represented as a king on the basis of his complete power over the universe; the beggar, on the other hand, is marked by impoverishment and impotence, and represents human dependency and weakness vis-à-vis the divine. The anecdote reinscribes these well known associations—as well as the trope of the beggar falling in love with the king—but its real conceptual work lies in its abbreviated but dramatically charged allegorical plot.

In short, when the king learns of the pauper’s passion for him, he summons that “mis-led lover” (’āsheq-e gomrâh) and delivers the following ultimatum:

111. ‘Aṭṭâr, Maṇṭeq al-ṭayr, 1957-60.
Since you are a lover of the sovereign,
You now must choose between two options.
Either commit to leave this city and this country,
Or, out of love for me, choose to lose your head!
I’ve told you what’s in store, now quickly,
What will it be, death or exile?

Faced with this choice, the pauper chooses exile over death, since he was not, according to ʿAṭṭâr, “a man for the task” (mard-e kâr). When the pauper begins to depart, however, the king suddenly orders his head to be struck off. A chamberlain, who, like the audience, seeks to make sense of this seemingly capricious reversal, gives voice to our surprise:

A chamberlain said, “he is innocent;
Why would the king order his destruction?”

Indeed, the poor pauper seems to have committed no transgression beyond loving the king, and the latter had offered him exile instead of death: what then is the reason for this brutal treatment? In response to the inquiring chamberlain, the king explains that the beggar was an insincere pretender to love:

. . . “Because he was no lover;
He was not sincere (ṣâdeq) in the path of loving me.
If he really were a man for the task (mard-e kâr),
Certainly he would have chosen to have his head cut off.
For whoever values his head more than his beloved,
Is deficient in his loving.
If he had chosen to lose his head,
He would have risen up the sovereign of a kingdom.”
(If he would have girded his loins in front of him,
The Caesar of the World would have become his beggar.)
“But because he was a poser (daʿvi-dâr) in love,
He certainly deserved his speedy decapitation.  
Whoever, in separation from me, minds his own head,  
Is a pretender (modda’ī) and sullied.  
I’ve commanded this so those who lack illumination,  
Might not boast so much of false love.”

By choosing his own life, the pauper demonstrated that he was no lover. His love was not sincere (ṣādeq): he was a pretender (modda’ī), a poser (da’vi-dâr), and boasted of a false love (lâf-e dorugh). But if the pauper had willingly chosen death, “girded his loins” for love (again with the martial/masculine terminology) and chosen to lose his head, he would have become “sovereign of the kingdom” and the king his “beggar.” A true, sincere love demands submission to death at the hands of the beloved.

The anecdote concretizes the homily, demonstrating what a “man for the task of love” might look like—and what the consequences of insincerity might be—on the field of human action. The generalities of the homily thus take on an immediacy that was not previously felt. Its final injunction, “Don’t raise your head up so much in pretension / Lest you be cast down in ignominy,” takes on new meaning in the context of the pauper’s beheading, as does the verse “If you go onto this battlefield in pretension / You will lose your head and your soul.” Given that a virtue like sincerity only exists in the context of human attitude and action, a concrete—albeit mythological and allegorized—exemplum is perhaps phenomenologically more appropriate

114. Ibid., 1969-76.
than a generalized homily; in any case, the story certainly clarifies the radical demands of such a love.115 Indeed, the anecdote sets the reader-listener up to be surprised by the king’s sudden reversal, and thus proves that he or she has not “gotten the point” of the previous homily. Like the surprised chamberlain, the audience is cued to be shocked and mystified, and it is only when the king explains his actions that the implications of the previous homily fall into place. The anecdote thus disrupts the audience’s previous understandings of sincerity and love, suggesting they are inadequate, self motivated, and fundamentally hypocritical. It not only cautions the audience—don’t boast lightly of love!—but upends their spiritual paradigms and notions of self-worth, thereby opening a space for a new or renewed commitment to a manly, selfless love of God.

The three discourses discussed in this chapter are only a small portion of the poem’s total content, but they are typical of the heuristic homiletics that ʿAṭṭār deploys throughout his maṣnaŭvis. Although often approached in isolation, the anecdotes and accompanying exhortations comprise larger structures linked by thematic concerns, formal parallelisms, and explicit transitions, as well as their narratological status as unitary homilies delivered by the hoopoe. Their structuring is not particularly tight—they retain the paratactic, degressive quality of an oral discourse—but analyzing them in toto is critical for understanding ʿAṭṭār’s thematics and homiletics. These are not systematic treatises of dogma or comprehensive rules for praxis, but collections of illustrative models and heuristic rules of thumb. By approaching the anecdotes and exhortations as a set of mutual informing signposts to the pious life—none of which can claim unqualified precedence over the others—the reader-listener can triangulate his or her own spiritual state and guide future action. Given their flexible, ad hoc nature, these discourses

can comfortably encompass a wide variety of sufi attitudes and beliefs on particular topics, and these attitudes and beliefs are not only presented to the audience, but urged upon them. The *Conference of the Birds* is more than a source of information: it is a perlocutionary attempt to elicit a recommitment to mystical piety.
Chapter V

Reading Allegory as Symbolic Ascent

In the previous chapter, we saw how the *Conference of the Birds*’ anecdotes and exhortations perform a perlocutionary function, calling the poem’s reader-listeners to a life of piety. According to this understanding of homiletic communication, illustrative stories and direct admonishments manipulate the audience’s values and aspirations, so that repeated encounters with the text result in altered attitudes and behaviors, ideally leading to a more pious way of life. In this respect, the poem fulfills a larger religious aim outside of the aesthetic experience of the literary encounter. In the present chapter, by contrast, we will examine how the literary encounter itself constitutes a meaningful spiritual performance. More specifically, we will show how a committed reader’s forward progress through the *Book of Affliction* is conceptualized as a symbolic traversal of the sufī path.

Like the frame-tales of the *Divine Book* and the *Conference of the Birds*, the frame-tale of the *Book of Affliction* is a mystical allegory: its characters and plot points are mapped onto an archetypal spiritual journey, and ‘Aṭṭār thereby expicates certain aspects of sufī praxis, ontology, and psychology.¹ The poem recounts the cosmic journey of a sufī adept (šâlek) who, seeking a cure for his spiritual pain, travels from the outer reaches of the cosmos into his own soul where he is effaced in God. This visionary journey is reminiscent of the Prophet’s own ascent (meʿrâj), but instead of traveling externally upward and outward, the adept moves down-

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wards and into himself. The narrative thus encodes certain metaphysical and psychological theories according to which human beings are internally linked to the divine through the soul or heart. The adept’s forty-part journey is also mapped onto the sufi practice of a forty-day ritual retreat (chella), which itself functions as a sort of synecdoche of the sufi path (tariqa): the frame-tale thus presents a paradigm of sufi spiritual progress, conceived of as a progressive, inward journey towards God. The little work that has been done on the Book of Affliction tends to be concerned primarily with these aspects of the poem: it aims to elucidate allegorical mappings and thereby explicate the poem’s underlying metaphysics and psychology.2

But in addition to being mapped onto the archetypal sufi journey, the adept’s quest is also reflexively projected onto an imagined reader-listener’s progress through the text. In an authorial commentary at the beginning of the work, ‘Aṭṭâr suggests that his audience’s experience of the poem, if not exactly identical with that of the poem’s protagonist, parallels it in important ways. If this is so, then the poem not only informs its audience, but becomes what Kenneth Burke would call a form of “symbolic action.”3 It provides its readers with a script so that they can enact, through the literary encounter, a particular vision of mystical piety. This may help guide them in the future, but the performance is also valuable in and of itself—the literary text, in Burke’s estimation, provides audiences a way to work through inner attitudes in the “symbolic” realm of linguistic signification. By reading, they vicariously tread the archetypal sufi path and participate in the adept’s transformation, reaffirming their own commitment to spiritual progress and shaping themselves in his image.

2. Purnâmdâriân, “Negâhi be dâstân-pardâzi-ye ‘Aṭṭâr”; Baldick, “Medieval Ṣūfī Literature,” 121-3. Also see Kermani’s Terror of God, which focuses more on the embedded anecdotes than the allegorical frame-tale.

In the present chapter, we will first examine how the poem allegorically encodes its particular conception of spiritual progress; then, drawing on authorial commentary, implied metaphorical mappings, and the unique formal features of the frame-tale, we will show how this conception of spiritual progress is symbolically enacted by committed reader-listeners as they work their way through the poem. In doing so, we hope to show that the Book of Affliction functions as a site of spiritual transformation not only by virtue of its perlocutionary power, but also because of the symbolic significance accorded to the literary encounter itself.

The Adept’s Ascent

The poem’s protagonist is a Sufi adept afflicted by an acute psychic pain, brought on by his cognizance of ontological separation from the divine. The narrative commences with a description of his gestation and birth in which special attention is paid to the raw biological materials of the body as emblems of mortality, suffering, and moral failing. This description is intended as an allegorical comment on the spiritual situation of all human beings, and its significance is not limited to the adept as a specific individual:

In three darknesses, a drop—no heart, no religion—
Emerged from the muck and the polluted fluid (mâ’-e mahin).\(^4\)
First, it became round, like a ball,
So it could spin in confusion.
In the middle of blood, for nine whole months,
It made the blood of the womb its food.
Finally something shined on it—don’t ask!
This is the body I’ve told you about; don’t ask about the soul (jân)!
Head first, it tumbled from the womb,
Landing like a clod of earth in a pool of blood.
Polluted fluid began this affair,
Meaning don’t hope for much purity!
In three darknesses it moved and sat,
Meaning the light will not reach you!

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4. Allusions to Quran 39:6, “He creates you in the wombs of your mothers, one after another, in three darknesses,” and 77:20, “Did we not create you out of a polluted fluid?”
It grew accustomed to being round, like a ball,  
Meaning spin your head, like a ball, in confusion!  
Over nine months its body formed from blood,  
Meaning everything starts with affliction [lit. eating blood]!  
It came head first into the world, drenched in blood,  
Meaning make a foot of your head, inverted!  

...  
After that, unstable, it entered childhood,  
Meaning don’t expect anything from children!  
He entered youth as a stranger,  
Meaning this is just a type of madness!  
After that, his intellect was destroyed by old age,  
Meaning don’t seek fortune from a dotard!  
After that, ignorant, he went below the ground,  
Meaning he didn’t catch a whiff of the pure soul (jân)!  
Whoever, in such twisted bonds,  
Doesn’t find the soul again, dies into nothing!

The passage traces the various stages of human life from birth through old age and death, each one of which is characterized as a further elaboration of suffering, misunderstanding, and pain.

Suffering is thus an essential characteristic of human existence, found in every stage of life.

5. ‘Aṭṭār, Moṣḥbat-nâma, 922-38.
from the moment of conception onwards. Life begins with pollution, a mingling of blood and seminal fluid that gives rise to the undifferentiated fleshly mass of the human embryo. The materiality and pain of gestation and birth are emblematic of life as a whole: the fetus is generated from polluted fluid, rendering true purity unreachable; the darkness of the womb presages the darkness of human life; and the newborn emerges from the womb bloody and inverted, inaugurating an existence of confusion and pain. Such poetic syllogisms are not just creative descriptions of a specific individual’s state, but prescriptive “proof” of, and injunctions for, certain attitudes towards human life, and they therefore often conclude not just with indicative statements, but direct, second-person admonishments to ʿAṭṭār’s addressee.

The situation is not entirely hopeless, however; the soul (jân), which according to ʿAṭṭār “shined” on the embryo during gestation, provides a potential route of salvation. ʿAṭṭār seems almost reluctant to speak about the soul at first (“Don’t ask about the soul!”), as if the glimmer of hope it presents might be a mirage and the resulting disappointment too much to bear. Nevertheless, after overviewing the stages of human development, he suggests that attaining to the soul is the solution to the adept’s archetypal existential suffering, but he cautions that this is itself a painful, difficult path:

If you haven’t found the far-thinking soul,
How can you call yourself a man (mardom)?
A man is not a drop of dirt and water,
A man is a holy secret and pure soul (jân).
Why would a hundred worlds full of angels,
Ever prostrate before a drop?
Doesn’t the desire tear at you, you clump of dirt,
That your clump of dirt would become pure soul?
But for one to find proximity of the soul from a drop,
One must experience much pain, without a cure.
Confusion is the way out of this difficulty,
The incurable is the medicine for this pain.
From the beginnings of a drop to this stage,
Look how much road lies ahead!
Any heart that fulfills this quest (ṭalab),
Will be knocked-out drunk until the resurrection.

According to ʿAṭṭâr, the angels would have never bowed down to Adam if he were really nothing more than a drop of sperm: the essence of a human being is not to be found in the physical body, but in the pure soul that transcends the material. While everyone “has” a soul—it is the organizing principle and animating force of the body—it nevertheless remains deficient in most individuals, with its promise of transcendence only a latent possibility. In this sense, the soul is not just a metaphysical fact, but a state of being that must be achieved. Anyone who does not “catch a whiff” of the soul, ʿAṭṭâr explains, “dies into nothing.” Attaining to the soul is a long road full of pain and suffering, but it represents the final cause of human existence: “If you haven’t found the far-thinking soul / How can you call yourself a man (mardom)?”

Thus begins the adept’s cosmic journey, undertaken beneath the watchful eye of his spiritual guide, to “reconnect” with the transcendent soul—even though he does not yet seem to consciously realize that this is his ultimate destination. Seeking a cure for his pain, he implores forty beings from different levels of creation for help, but they all turn him away empty-handed. After each encounter, he returns to his guide who briefly comments on that particular interlocutor’s metaphorical station and launches into a homiletic discourse on a related theme, much like the hoopoe in the Conference of the Birds.

6. Ibid., 939-46.
Table 4: *The Adept’s Itinerary and the Guide’s Discourses*

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<th>Topic</th>
<th>Interlocutor</th>
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His first interlocutors are the archangels—Gabriel, Michael, Esrâfil, and ‘Azrâ’îl—often identified with the intelligences of neoplatonic ontology;\(^8\) he then journeys to other metaphysically elevated entities, like the throne, pen, and tablet; from there the adept passes by paradise and hell, before visiting the sun, moon, and heavens; and he then descends to the individual elements that comprise the sub-lunar world. His itinerary thus retraces the ontological hierarchy of beings as ranked by the Neoplatonism of the day, according to which ontological power flows from a series of higher hypostases down through the spheres to the individual elements that form the building blocks of the material world.

The adept then turns upwards, visiting realms of compound beings in order of increasing complexity and ontological rank: he first speaks with the mountains and the sea, then inanimate objects and plants, followed by the wild beasts, birds, and domesticated animals. Following this, the adept meets and converses with the devil, the jinn, and an archetypal human (âdami), who, like all his previous interlocutors, fails to provide him with any relief. The next leg of his journey consists of a series of prophets arranged in chronological order: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and Muhammad. The first six of these prophets are unable to cure the adept’s pain themselves, but they urge him onward through their ranks and towards Muhammad; their cognizance of their relative positions in the prophetic (and cosmic) hierarchy underscores Muhammad’s role as prophetic telos.

As foretold by his forerunners, Muhammad is able to finally provide the adept with some solid guidance. Although he cannot directly cure his pain, the Prophet explains that the adept must turn inwards and pass through various inner faculties of his own self. According to Muhammad, the adept’s journey will end once he reaches the soul (jân):

\(^8\) Corbin, *Visionary Recital*, 46-56.
You have five stages in your being,
Truly a difficult route, full of swerves and curves.
The first is sense, and its second is imagination,
Third is the intellect, the site of disputation.
Its fourth station is the place of the heart,
And the fifth is the soul (jân)—the route there is difficult.

So go now, and take the path of self;
Set out through the five valleys within.

This leg of the quest is clearly informed by an Avicennian psychological paradigm, which identifies five internal senses corresponding with the five external ones. But whereas Avicenna’s enumeration of the internal senses is intended to explain the abstraction of knowledge from the external senses, ‘Aṭṭâr’s is noticeably less technical and traffics in broader terms, including such general faculties such as the intellect, the heart, and the soul. And by ranking the soul and heart higher than the intellect, ‘Aṭṭār sets himself off from the philosopher and marks this as a particularly sufiistic psychology.

Following the path laid out by the Prophet, the adept travels through sense, imagination, intellect, and the heart before finally arriving at the “ocean of the soul.” The adept praises the soul in the highest terms; he eulogizes it as the first created being, eternal, free from essence and attribute, and “the breath of the merciful” (dam-e raḥmân). In return, the ocean of

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10. Ibid., 6047.
the soul enjoins the adept to “dive in” and lose himself in its depths.\textsuperscript{15} Perhaps we can see in this dialogical exchange a sign of the soul’s alterity, which, in this ontological scheme, is not coextensive with the individual self but extends far beyond it. Although the soul is, in a sense, the adept’s “own,” it transcends his being and individuality, similar to the hypostatic Universal Soul of the neoplatonic philosophers. In ʿAṭṭâr’s striking image, the soul is a boundless, unitary ocean, but one which nonetheless somehow has “inlets” penetrating into individual beings.\textsuperscript{16} By submerging himself in its waters, the adept thus renounces individual existence and attains a supra-personal proximity to God; as ʿAṭṭâr puts it, “he wash[es] his hands of self.”\textsuperscript{17} Through individual effacement, the adept becomes the pinnacle of the metaphysical order and a pure servant of God:

He found the two worlds to be a reflection of his soul,  
And he found his own soul to be greater than them.  
When he became sighted with the secret of his own soul,  
He was brought to life, and became a servant of the Lord.  
Now, after this, lies the true foundation of servanthood—  
Every breath, a hundred lives in life.

This existential dissolution of the individual is the most exalted position in the cosmos: the soul, as effaced servant of God, transcends and exceeds all other created beings. It is at this point that ʿAṭṭâr tells us he can narrate no more; he has described the adept’s “journey to God” but now begins the latter’s “journey in God,” which he cannot reveal without divine consent.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 6903.  
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 6893, 6902.  
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 6946.  
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 7075-7.  
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 7078-86.
The adept’s story ends here, and after some brief concluding material, including passages of poetic self-praise and self-abasement, as well as an enumeration of the virtues of silence, the poem comes to a close as well.

_Saintly Ascent and the Inward Turn_

The adept’s quest recalls other narratives of heavenly journeys that circulated throughout the Irano-Mediterranean region from late antiquity onwards. In an Islamic context, the ascent par excellence is, of course, that of the prophet Muhammad, who was brought from Mecca to Jerusalem on a miraculous “night journey” (esrâ) before undertaking an ascent (me’râj) through the spheres, visiting heaven and hell, and finally attaining to the divine presence and speaking directly with God. Versions of this me’râj narrative are found in hadith collections, histories, Quranic exegeses, as well as independent monographs devoted to the topic, all of which were informed by (and reacting to) the lively oral preaching tradition in which this miraculous journey figured heavily. Nor are such ascents limited to the Prophet; saintly figures, such as the ninth-century Bestâmi, were reported to have ascended as well, although their journeys are usually said to have been made in spirit only, whereas the Prophet’s ascension was bodily.

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For a mystically minded audience, the *Book of Affliction* would immediately recall the ascensions of the Prophet and Bestâmi, both of which were well known and treated by ‘Aṭṭâr at length in other contexts. Most of his *maṣnavis*, including the *Book of Affliction*, recount the Prophet’s ascension in their doxological openings, and the *Memorial* also contains an extended section devoted to the ascent of the famous saint of Bestâm.²³ But even without any knowledge of ‘Aṭṭâr’s personal propensity for these stories, the adept’s quest shares so many narremes with the standard version of the Prophet’s ascent (and those of his saintly imitators) that such a comparison would be difficult for any competent Muslim reader *not* to make: both the Prophet and the adept undertake visionary, cosmic journeys; they are both guided by a third party (Gabriel in the Prophet’s case, the spiritual guide in the adept’s); they both converse with prophets and angels; and they both experience a transformative encounter with God at the conclusion of the quest.

But the adept’s quest also diverges from Muhammad’s ascent in significant ways, reworking the story so it encodes a particularly sufi understanding of human beings’ relationship to God. Visionary ascent, as the *Book of Affliction* tells it, is not restricted to the Prophet or even saintly figures like Bestâmi. The adept, an allegorical everyman, is also capable of ascent, at least in a metaphorical sense—he must make such a journey to cure his pain, rediscover the soul, and arrive at the final cause of human existence. The narrative thus entails a democratization of the intimacy that the Prophet enjoyed with God at the apex of his *meʿrâj*: mystically minded individuals are subject to analogous, if not exactly identical, experiences. Whereas the Prophet was led upwards through the heavens, however, the adept’s visionary journey begins at the outer reaches of the universe before moving downwards and inwards into the soul. For

ʿAṭṭâr, God is not to be encountered in the far-away celestial heights, but internally, within the self. Every ensouled individual can theoretically enjoy direct proximity with the divine, even though most people will never reach this exalted state. The interior connection to the divine becomes apparent after the travails of an external quest: only after passing through all the realms of creation could the adept perform his “inward turn” and contemplate the soul as the divinely infused source of the external world.

This is not to imply that the adept’s journey in any way supersedes the Prophet’s *meʿrāj*; on the contrary, the adept’s visionary quest and subsequent inward turn are always presented as derivative of the Prophet’s ascent, which sets the basic paradigm for all other Islamic heavenly journeys. According to most sufis, non-prophetic individuals could journey through the heavens, even in a post-prophetic age. Certain spiritual heroes, most especially the aforementioned Bestâmi, were celebrated for ascensions of their own, and by the thirteenth century specific spiritual techniques (like the forty-day retreat) were used to induce visionary ascents.  

According to most interpretations, however, these ascents did not encroach upon Prophetic exceptionalism because they were made in spirit only, whereas the Prophet’s *meʿrāj* was made in body. According to Hojviri,

> The ascension of the prophets is made externally, in body and person, whereas that of saints is made inwardly and in spirit. The bodies of the prophets resemble the hearts and souls of the saints in purity and proximity. This is a clear superiority. . . . There is a great difference between the one who is brought there in person and the one who is brought there only in thought.

Whereas saints ascend in spirit only, the Prophet ascended in body as well—for him the duality between body and spirit was wiped away. The adept’s quest, like a saintly ascension, is explic-

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25. Hojviri, *Kashf al-maḥjub*, 355. Some others claim, however, on the basis of a hadith from Aisha, that the Prophet’s ascent was also made only in spirit, Vuckovic, *Heavenly Journeys*, 79.
itly visionary and spiritual, and not an actual bodily journey; as we discuss below, it is described by ‘Aṭṭâr as an apocalyptic vision (kashf) experienced over the course of a forty-day retreat. According to Hojviri’s criteria, then, it should be considered inferior to Muhammad’s bodily ascent.

But even without Hojviri’s theoretical treatment of the matter, the poem makes it clear that the adept in no way bests the Prophet. As is typical in sufi literature, an ethos of prophetic veneration pervades the entire text, and it is especially apparent in the doxology and the adept’s eulogy of Muhammad.26 Significantly, the adept turns inwards towards the soul only after he encounters the Prophet and receives his guidance. Muhammad already knows the way: he has completed his own meʾrâj and achieved an exemplary state of spiritual poverty (faqr)—mystically understood as the effacement of individual self—so he can direct the adept on the proper course. Although the adept must pass by Muhammad and continue his journey to the soul on his own, he follows a path that has been blazed by the Prophet. His inward turn is only possible because the Prophet, through his own ascension and effacement in the divine, has set a paradigm that can be imitated and creatively reworked by later mystics.27

Nor does the inward direction of the adept’s quest imply that ‘Aṭṭâr’s sufism was a private, anti-social mode of piety; on the contrary, the adept’s journey to the soul depends on various ethical practices and social relations, the most important of which is that of master and disciple. The adept can only make spiritual progress within the confines of this relationship; he cannot even begin his quest until he has identified a suitable guide, who then accompanies him on the entirety of his journey. This spiritual master interprets all of his visions—even his final dissolution into the ocean of the soul—demonstrating the institution’s significance and the

inextricably social nature of sufi mystical experience. It also reflects the historical practice of spiritual guides during their disciples’ forty-day ritual retreats, which ‘Aṭṭar allusively suggests to be the setting of the adept’s visions. Ritual retreat and its implications for the Book of Affliction will be discussed in more detail below, but here it suffices to note that the poem, taken as an entirety, presents the adept’s inward turn not as a private affair, but as a transformative process that plays out within the master-disciple relationship. The final experience of annihilation (fanâ), as related in the fortieth chapter of the Book of Affliction, ought not to be interpreted in phenomenological isolation: the events that lead up to that point, including their social and ethical dimensions, are inseparable aspects of the narrative’s total significance.

The poem thus presents a particular vision of normative spiritual development; the adept’s visionary ascent allegorically elucidates the contours and conditions of the spiritual path writ large. According to its portrayal, spiritual progress consists of an inward journey, into the self, in order to rediscover and activate the soul’s latent internal connection to the divine. This is, in fact, the only means to escape from the pain and suffering that infuses human existence. Although the path leads inwards, this is not an anti-social piety; the support of a spiritual guide is a prerequisite to success. Nor is this a journey to uncover one’s hidden personal self; the ultimate goal is effacement of the individual in the divine, which clears a space for a new form of being that transcends the material world.

**The Reader’s Ascent**

Not only is this allegorical narrative a tool for the audience to conceptualize their own spiritual development, but the process of moving through the narrative is itself presented as a spiritually transformative experience. Through their identification with the adept, the text becomes a symbolic performance in which the audience ritualistically activates their internal
connection to God. ʿAṭṭâr explicitly seeds this identification in the final passage of the introductory doxology:

Forty stages (maqâm) will come before you,
And they will also come within you.
If you undertake this retreat (chela)28 according to the way (ṭariqat),
And complete it in truth (ḥaqiqat), then peace will come.
When you search for yourself in forty stages,
You will be, in the end, everything.

As we saw in Chapter Two, introductions are effective spaces for authorial control; they often contain meta-poetic reflections that presume and promote certain understandings of poetics and language, and they guide the audience towards a specific reception stance for the work. In this case, ʿAṭṭâr urges his readers to understand their own encounter with the text as the symbolic, linguistic analogue of the adept’s quest. The forty chapters of the work constitute an internal journey for the readers, who, like the adept, will move through those stages seeking themselves, until, at the end of the reading process, they realize that they internally contain and transcends the macrocosm. The text is not an explanation but a structured experience through which the audience symbolically participates in a version of the protagonist’s transformation. In the sections that follow, we will explore some of the vectors of identification between the reader and the adept—including the poem’s visionary nature and its structural similarities to the practice of ritual retreat and the sufi way—through which the Book of Affliction becomes as a site for symbolic action.

28. Here we must read chela instead of chella for the meter.
ʿAṭṭāʾ’s Apologia: Vision, Symbol, and Language

According to ʿAṭṭāʾ’s opening apologia, found immediately after the above quotation, the poem itself is composed of a particular kind of symbolic speech reminiscent of the adept’s visionary experience. Several dozen verses are devoted to explaining “the basis of this book” (asās-e in ketāb); they lay out hermeneutical principles for the proper interpretation of the poem and seek to preempt readers’ possible objections. This explicit authorial instruction is motivated by anxiety over the fantastic nature of the adept’s journey, which ʿAṭṭāʾ worries may lead some readers to dismiss it as a product of his individual poetic fancy and thus judge it “a lie” (kazb).

To preclude this potential criticism, ʿAṭṭāʾ calls on his readers to understand the poem symbolically as a veridical dream or inspired vision, and not as an account of an actual cosmic journey. The passage is rather long and dense, so rather than quoting it in its entirety, we will analyze it in sections: first, we will see how the poem is cast as a divine unveiling; next, we will explore ʿAṭṭāʾ’s distinction between exoteric and esoteric meaning; and, finally, we will examine his use of the concept of the “language of state” (zabân-e ḥâl).

At the core of ʿAṭṭāʾ’s apologia is the claim that the poem represents not an actual bodily journey, but a visionary experience of unveiling (kashf). This explains its fantastic nature, differentiates it from the bodily journey of the Prophet, and provides reader-listeners with a way to think of the journey as an event that could actually take place, albeit of an imaginary and psychic nature. Its status as an inspired vision, as we shall see, also entails certain epistemological privileges:

Since it is permitted to see anything in dreams,
Don’t turn your head if someone sees something in unveiling (kashf).
Although there are satanic unveilings along the way,

30. Ibid., 884-915.
31. Ibid., 884.
32. Ibid., 905.
There are also those of God’s dominion and spiritual beings. Taste and piety are needed, and passion for God, To separate these two paths. If, one day, you are brought in to this arena, If you are fated to be one of the men, Then one hundred thousand of these sorts of meanings, You will see, know, and believe.

...I’m establishing this ground for you first, I’m laying this firm foundation for you, So that when you see this type of speech, You will not sit in denial. Since this beautiful book, for the elite and the masses, Is this sort of speech that I have described.

‘Aṭṭâr points out that visions seen in sleep are commonly accepted as meaningful, and he enjoins the reader to not turn away from visions seen while awake—“unveilings” (kashf) in technical sufi terminology. The implication, of course, is that the adept’s journey ought to be understood as just such an unveiling: a waking, visionary experience, similar to the saintly ascent of Bešâmi. Granted, such visions can sometimes be demonic in origin, but as ‘Aṭṭâr explains above, the pious can, through their passion for God, distinguish the satanic from the divine. In contrast to the modern notion of visions as mental images that exist only “inside one’s head,” unveilings (and dreams for that matter) are understood in philosophical Islamicate cosmology to have a real existence outside of the mind in a realm known as “the imaginal world” (‘ālam-e

\[\text{33. Ibid., 895-908.}\]
This plane functions as a liminal space between the intelligible and the sensible, where significations are clothed in concrete forms so that they can be seen, heard, and grasped. The spiritually exalted “men” of the path perceive veridical dreams and divinely inspired visions in this realm through the faculty of imagination (takhayyol), and it is here, according to ‘Aṭṭâr, that the adept’s quest also takes place. According to medieval Persian and Arabic philosophy, poetic speech also acts through the imaginative faculty to create pleasing or distressing forms, so in this respect the poetic experience is not unlike a dream or vision. The Book of Affliction, as the site of such an imaginative literary experience, is thus not unrelated to the visionary experience it describes.

The text does not just describe the content of the adept’s purported unveiling, but offers itself to its reader-listeners as a related form of visionary experience. This is never stated directly by ‘Aṭṭâr, but there are certain slippages throughout the passage that conflate the worlds of the story and the text. For example, although it seems logical that the adept is the subject of this much-discussed unveiling, it is the reader who is consistently described as “seeing” and “encountering” visionary significations. ‘Aṭṭâr explains that piety and passion are needed to distinguish between divine and satanic inspirations, but this seems less a description of the adept’s qualifications than an imperative to his own addressee. According to ‘Aṭṭâr, readers will “see” in the poem “this kind of speech.” More than a mere account of a fictitious vision, the Book of Affliction itself simulates the authority and signifying mode of a visionary experience.

Visions require interpretation, and ʿAṭṭâr suggests that the *Book of Affliction*, too, must be interpreted; a reader-listener should move from its exoteric surface (*zâher*) to its esoteric core (*bâṭen*):

If someone opines, based on appearances,
That these words run crooked like a bow,
He sees only the exoteric (*zâher*), but,
In the esoteric (*bâṭen*), they are exceedingly excellent.

Those who would criticize the narrative, according to ʿAṭṭâr, have only considered its exterior aspect and thus fundamentally misunderstand its message. The poem is not a mimetic representation of a bodily journey, but a symbol—the outer expression of an experiential spiritual truth conveyed through divine unveiling. The audience should seek that inner meaning instead of remaining fixated on the surface narrative of the text. This does not mean, however, that the exoteric aspect of the poem is an expendable shell to be decoded and discarded. For ʿAṭṭâr and other mystical allegorists, the exoteric is the concrete manifestation of the esoteric—the two are inextricably and ontologically intertwined. Symbols therefore provide access to esoteric meaning in a more total, immediate, and experiential way than direct discursive treatments ever could. By suggesting that the *Book of Affliction* be read for its esoteric meaning, ʿAṭṭâr does not imply that the surface level of the narrative is expendable; on the contrary, the audience is led to the poem’s esoteric truth all the more effectively by virtue of the poem’s concrete exoteric dimension.


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Finally, the passage draws a distinction between two modes of communication: the ordinary “language of speech” (zafān-e qâl) and the more esoteric “language of state” (zafān-e ḥâl).38 Whereas “language of speech” represents routine, referential, verbal communication, the “language of state” is miraculous, literary, often symbolic, and paradoxically non-verbal:

... If the adept speaks with the angels,
And seeks out discourse with the earth and the sky,
Or passes by the throne and the footstool,
Or asks questions of this and that,
Seeks assistance from the prophets,
Listens to the happenings of the atoms,
That is all the “language of state,”
None of it is the “language of speech.”
In the “language of speech,” it’s a lie (każb), but
In the “language of state,” it’s sincere and excellent.
If you don’t recognize “language of state,”
Just call it “language of intellect.”
Because he spoke all of this in “state” and not “speech,”
Believe it, and don’t call it clap-trap.

My goal from this explanation is just this:
That if I speak with you about the adept,
Saying he went before Gabriel and above the throne,
Or from above the throne, descended to the carpet,
Or went above the spheres before the angels,
Or descended below the earth to the Fish,
That you won’t count this all a lie (każb); listen:
Take it not as “speech” but as “state.”

38. For a history of the concept, see Pourjavady, Zabân-e ḥâl.
The “language of state” is a form of personification in which inanimate objects are endowed with speech. Many poets explicitly use the term in their verses, thereby authorizing imaginative dialogue and acknowledging the fantasy, as in the following quatrain of Khayyâm:

Yesterday, I saw a potter in the market,  
Wedges a bit of clay beneath his feet.  
That clay was speaking to him in the “language of state”:  
“I was once like you—treat me gently.”

But more is at work here than just a fanciful literary device. The “language of state” is reserved for the disclosure of essential truths regarding the speaker’s—or recipient’s—experiential “state.” The poet, by making inanimate objects speak, reveals something essential and significant that is otherwise hidden: in Khayyâm’s case, this is the clay’s status as the material remains of a living creature, by virtue of which it functions as a symbol for the universality of death. Nor is this mode of speech confined to the literary realm. The “language of state” also refers to miraculous, telepathic communication that was believed to occur between inanimate objects, animals, and human beings, as in the famous story of Bestâmî and the dog.41 Likewise, in many sufi stories God communicates with human beings non-verbally in manner that recalls the language of state.42 In these senses, the term also suggests the sufi’s mystical states (ḥâl), or moments of ecstatic inspiration.

39. ʿAṭṭâr, Mosâbat-nâmâ, 888-905.  
40. Quoted in Pourjavady, Zabân-e ḫâl, 117.  
41. Ibid., 235-7; ʿAṭṭâr, Taẓkerat al-owleyâ, 148.  
The literary and miraculous valences of the term are both operative in the above-quoted passage, in which ‘Aṭṭār suggests that the adept’s “conversations” with the earth, sky, throne, footstool, etc., are all conducted via the “language of state.” Although these beings do not speak in routine, everyday situations, most reader-listeners would allow that they might be endowed with speech in certain visionary contexts, and that the poet is therefore justified in personifying them. Much like the explanation of the poem as an unveiling, ‘Aṭṭār’s characterization of the poem as “language of state” helps explain its fantastic nature for an audience that was not accustomed to fictionality in the modern sense; it allows them to think the adept’s journey as an event that could possibly take place given certain extraordinary, miraculous circumstances.

The term also bestows a certain revelatory quality on the poem and endows it with a special claim to truth. Once the adept’s discourses are cued as examples of the “language of state” and not as routine conversations, reader-listeners will expect them to be imbued with some sort of inner spiritual meaning—which, ‘Aṭṭār assures them, is not only present, but “sincere” and “excellent.” They are invited to “take it all as state, not as speech,” and thus approach the poem as an instance of a peculiarly truthful, inspired, and symbolic mode of discourse.

*Textual Encounter as Ritual Retreat*

After emphasizing the symbolic nature of the adept’s ascent, ‘Aṭṭār elaborates on its setting and non-intellectual origin, stressing the superiority of the heart and the adept’s practice of *ẓekr*:

The adept’s traveller is his thought;  
A thought that’s produced by *ẓekr.*  
*Ẓekr* must be repeated until it brings forth thought—  
Brings forth one hundred thousand fresh meanings.  
A thought that arises from the delusions of intellect,  
Arrives not from the unseen realm (*ghayb*), but from human speech (*naql*).  
Intellectual thought is for infidels,  
Heart-thought is for men of action.
When thought’s traveller comes into play,
It appears not from the intellect, but from the heart.

The adept makes his journey in thought: not “thought of the intellect,” but the “thought of the heart.” By privileging the heart over the intellect, ʿAtṭār distinguishes himself from the philosophers, many of whom were also interested in allegorical narratives of ascent but would characterize them as intellectual in nature. For ʿAtṭār, however, the intellect was bound by human weakness and the pre-existing assumptions upon which syllogistic procedures rely. New knowledge cannot be intellectually generated; the products of the mind are just elaborations of what has been previously transmitted (naqīl). The heart, on the other hand, is capable of receiving visions from outside of itself in the divine realm of the unseen (ghayb); it can therefore perceive “fresh meanings” endowed with a certainty that intellectual knowledge lacks.

The adept’s heart perceives these visions only after it has been purified through ẓekr, a procedure that involves the repetition of a single word or phrase in order to direct one’s attention towards God. Although this Quranic term is found in early sufi sources, detailed accounts of ẓekr as a spiritual practice do not appear until the sufi manuals of the thirteenth century, such as those by Abū Ḥāfṣ Suhrawardī and Najm al-Din Dāya. According to both of these writers, the most efficacious ẓekr is the first part of the testament of faith, “There is no god but God” (lā elāha ellā allāh). It is to be repeated with an intentionality that involves the entire body, provoking a total existential reorientation towards the divine. ⁴⁴ “When the tree of ẓekr is

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43. ʿAtṭār, Moṣḥbat-nāma, 909-13.
continually nurtured,” writes Dâya, “Its roots reach out from the heart to all the members and limbs of the body, in such a manner that from the crown of the head to the toenails, not a particle remains untouched by the roots of the tree of zebr.”

Zebr is the engine of the adept’s visionary experience: through it, he brings forth the “thought of the heart” and “one hundred thousand fresh meanings.” In sufi praxis zebr is often associated with visions and unveilings, especially in the context of the forty-day ritual retreat (chella), which seems to be the implied setting of the adept’s visions in the Book of Affliction. Ritual retreat became a discrete, rule-based practice during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, around the time ʿAṭṭār was writing; it was especially important within the increasingly institutionalized Kobra and Sohravardi circles, with whom ʿAṭṭār displays some intellectual affinity. According to these traditions’ manuals, the retreat should be performed in a small, darkened room; the outer senses must be deprived, they explain, so that the inner senses might be activated. While in seclusion, the practitioner is to perform a variety of ascetic activities, the most important of which is zebr: “Until the mirror of the heart has been cleansed and purified of all impressions [through zebr],” writes Najm al-Din Dâya, “It cannot receive the impressions of the unseen or God-given knowledge, or the lights of spiritual witnessing and unveiling.”

That zebr performed in seclusion may produce visions has been long noted: some authorities stress the danger of these visions, and some present them in a more favorable light, but there is near universal agreement that they ought to be referred to a spiritual guide for in-

45. Dâya, Mersâd al-ʿebâd, 277; translation from Bondsmen, 276.
48. Ibid., 283-4; translation from Bondsmen, 281.
terpretation. For example, according to the relatively early manual of Qushayrī, visual and au-
ditory phenomena are an ever present danger in retreat, since they may distract the novice
from God. The best means of countering their temptations is to disclose them to one’s shaykh.\textsuperscript{49}
Najm al-Din Dāya also urges the novice wayfarer “to take refuge in the authority of the
shaykh” whenever he sees any terrifying visions—which may be of satanic, human, or divine
origin—“and to inwardly seek help from the shaykh’s heart, so that the succor of his zeal and
the gaze of his authority might repel any misfortune.”\textsuperscript{50} Even though such visions are potential-
ly dangerous, they can also convey valuable information regarding one’s spiritual state and
provide a sense of spiritual joy.\textsuperscript{51} Dāya sets out some general principles for their interpretation,
but ultimate hermeneutical authority rests with the spiritual guide, who is to periodically visit
his disciples in seclusion to discuss any problems or spiritual unveilings.\textsuperscript{52} These practices help
elucidate the interaction between the adept and his spiritual guide in the Book of Affliction:
their conversations, repeated after every visionary encounter, conform to the normative pro-
dures of the ritual retreat.

Although personal accounts are rare, instructional sufi treatises from this period often
characterize the visions witnessed in retreat as ascent experiences. According to Ibn ʿArabi’s
Treatise of Lights (Risālat al-anwār), for instance, over the course of a retreat a practitioner can
expect to ascend through the realms of mineral, vegetable, and animal life; pass through vari-
ous celestial and divine realms; gaze on paradise, hell, the throne, and the pen; and finally ex-
erience effacement and subsistence in the divine.\textsuperscript{53} This stylized account of a visionary ascent

\textsuperscript{49} Quṣḥayrī, al-Risāla al-qushayriyya, 2:741-42.
\textsuperscript{50} Dāya, Merṣād al-ʿebād, 285.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 294-8.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 294-96, 375-78; Suhrawardī, ʿAwārīf al-maʿārif, 217; Elias, Throne Carrier of God, 137; Waley, “‘Aziz al-
Din Nasafi on Spiritual Retreat,” 7.
\textsuperscript{53} Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ʿArabī, Risālat al-anwār, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Mārdīnī (Damascus: Dār al Maḥābbā, 2003).
witnessed in retreat maps very well onto the adept’s cosmic itinerary in the *Book of Affliction*. It seems no large leap to suppose that mystically inclined readers, familiar with these sorts of representations, would easily make sense of the adept’s forty-fold ascent as a vision witnessed over the course of a *chella*.

This setting, however, is never explicitly stated. Numerous hints are dropped that the adept’s quest indeed takes place in a ritual retreat—its forty-fold division and cosmic nature, the importance of *zekr* and the role of the shaykh—but the term *chella* is never directly applied to the context of the adept’s visions. As we have already seen, however, the term does appear in the doxology’s meta-poetic address, where it characterizes the reader’s encounter with the poem:

Forty stages (*maqâm*) will come before you,  
And they will also come within you.  
If you undertake this retreat (*chela*) according to the way (*ṭariqat*),  
And complete it in truth (*ḥaqiqat*), then peace will come.  
When you search for yourself in forty stages,  
You will be, in the end, everything.

We have seen how this passage suggests a convergence between the experiences of the reader-listener and the adept, casting the textual encounter as an internal journey that parallels the protagonist’s ascent. The reference to the *chella* adds another layer to this identification as the experience of the text’s consumption is metaphorically elided with the presumed setting of the adept’s visions. This elision is formally justified by the forty chapters of the text, which map onto the forty days of the adept’s *chella*, but this metaphorical identification is more than a for-

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mal, rhetorical flourish: it also carries significant implications for how the text should be read. When the Book of Affliction is understood metaphorically as a retreat, it becomes an experiential process instead of a static vessel, and its transformative potential is heightened and endowed with ritual force: an encounter with the poem becomes a symbolic performance aimed at recovery of the supra-personal soul.

Of course, this passage is not a description of an actual reader’s experience, but a prescriptive tool of authorial control. Nonetheless, committed reader-listeners would likely allow themselves to be guided by such strategically placed authorial commentary, and attending to these metaphors helps us understand how ʿAṭṭār imagined his audience would have read, understood, and reacted to the poem.

One especially intriguing possibility is that ʿAṭṭār may have intended the Book of Affliction to be read liturgically over a forty-day period. Its forty chapters are all approximately the same length (usually around 150 distichs), a feature that would lend itself to a consistent reading practice. The manuscript tradition labels each chapter (maqāla) with a number, and the opening line of each chapter begins with the same formulaic phrase (“the adept came. . .” [sâlek āmad . . . ]), which further emphasizes the poem’s episodic structure. ʿAṭṭār’s textual community never coalesced institutionally, so we have no record of any sort of scheduled, liturgical reading, but the preface’s characterization of the text as a ritual retreat tantalizingly suggests such a possibility. Over the course of forty days, the audience would perform a symbolic chella as they worked through the text, accompanying the adept in his visionary quest for the divine presence.
Walking the Path

By using terms like “path” (tariqat), “stage” (maqâm), and “truth” (haqiqat), this meta-poetic passage also likens the reader’s progress through the poem to a sufi’s movement along the spiritual path, illuminating another vector for the reader’s identification with the adept. At the root of this metaphorical mapping is the poem’s frame-tale structure, which lends itself to an episodic, sequential mode of consumption that recalls the temporal rhythm of sufi conceptions of spiritual progress.

For ʿÂṭṭâr and others inclined to sufi spirituality, religious life is most often conceptualized as a journey along a road or path. The prominent features of sufi praxis are all conceptualized through this metaphor, and sufism’s technical terminology is derived from it. For example, the most common term for sufi praxis is ʿtariqat, which refers to a route or way, both in the concrete sense of a physical path and more abstractly as a particular method or way of doing something.55 Likewise, a sufi adept is often referred to as a sâlek, or wayfarer; this is the term used to refer to the adept in the Book of Affliction.56 The shaykh is also fitted into the metaphor of the journey: he is the guide (râh-nomâ) who, having already travelled the path himself, leads the spiritual wayfarer to his or her destination.

Such terms are intended metaphorically, of course, but like all living metaphors, they have not lost their connection to their source domain, through which they emphasize certain characteristics of the target;57 in this case, they characterize sufism as a concrete, embodied, and most importantly directional movement. Movement along the path begins when a sufi

novice undertakes a “conversion” (towba) before an experienced spiritual guide, a term that, as classic sufi authorities point out, connotes a bodily turning towards a new direction. The sufi then journeys, under the direction of the shaykh, towards a specific goal (hadaf) or destination (maqsud). This goal is often referred to as “truth” (haqiqat), which, along with tarīqat and shar-i’at, forms a frequently invoked triad; the exact nature of this “truth,” however, is rarely defined. The ambiguity surrounding the path’s endpoint, and the diversity of opinions regarding it, is nicely summed up by Ghazzâli:

On the whole, it [i.e., the sufi path] concludes with a kind of proximity to God, which one group represents imaginatively almost as a transfiguration, while another group represents it as union, and yet a third group as attainment. But all of these are erroneous representations . . .

Ghazzâli goes on to offer his own views on the inherent ineffability of this proximity, but underneath these disagreements lies a consensus that the sufi way does indeed lead towards some sort of final goal. This destination is not necessarily fixed or static, however; many mystics have written of the dynamic interplay between God and the seeker at the end of the path. According to the Kobravis, for example, the sufi path is a “journey to God” that terminates in an endless “journey in God,” and this terminology is also adopted by ‘Atṭâr at the conclusion of the Book of Affliction:

The confused, bewildered adept made
Such a “journey to God.”
After this comes his “journey in God”;
All that I’ve said befell him again, more than before.

58. Qushayri, al-Risâla al-qushayriyya, 1:253-54.
But despite its dynamic nature, the “journey in God” still functions as a demarcated destination: the adept has arrived, and his journey in the world outside of God has ended.

This purposeful directionality is further manifested in the sequential “stages” (maqâmât) or “way-points” (manâzel) that populate the sufi path; these are the ethical modalities through which the sufi wayfarer must pass on his or her way towards that final goal of proximity with God. They are traversed by virtue of the wayfarer’s own ethical exertion, and they are therefore often contrasted with the temporary “states” (ahvâl) that are said to issue from God unbidden and unexpected. In keeping with the journey metaphor, the stages must be traversed in sequence. Spiritual movement is measured between stages and not within the stages themselves: they are the “stopping-points” that together mark the course and direction of the way. Sufi authorities do not agree on the number of stages or their exact order: Hojviri names seven, Qushayri a few dozen, and Anšâri one hundred; variant sequences can even be found in different works by the same author. What is never disputed, however, is that a sufi must pass through the stages sequentially, even if there is little agreement about what the correct sequence might be. Hojviri’s explanation is typical:

“Stage” (maqâm) means the servant’s resting place on the path of God, and his obedience and fulfillment of it until he attains its perfection, in so far as it can be imprinted on a human being. It is not permitted that he should leave a stage without fulfilling it. In this way the beginning of the stages is conversion (towba), then penitence (inâbat), then renunciation (zohd), then trust in God (tavakkol), and so on. It is not permissible for him to pretend to penitence


without conversion, or renunciation without penitence, or trust in God without renunciation.\textsuperscript{63}

Similar statements can be found in the works of other theorists. They rarely take each other to task regarding the exact ordering of the stages, allowing for a plurality of sequences as long as the notion of sequentiality itself is maintained. The adept must reside in each particular stage until it has been perfected; only then is he or she free to progress onwards.

ʿAṭṭâr, who wishes to comment on the nature of the sufi spirituality, naturally chooses the figure of the journey as the armature for his allegory and thus exploits metaphorical mappings that are already present within the tradition. His writings are not particularly difficult to decode—a mystically minded audience, accustomed to conceptualizing spirituality as a journey, would easily understand the adept’s cosmic ascent as an allegorization of the path. Each of the adept’s forty interlocutors represents a mystical stage, and together they form a sequence that the adept must traverse in order to attain a state of proximity with God. The themes associated with each interlocutor, elaborated by the spiritual guide in his corresponding discourses, do not, as far as I have been able to determine, correspond with any preexisting sequence of mystical stages. Some of them also focus more on points of belief than the ethical modalities one expects in such a scheme. Nevertheless, when considered in the context of the adept’s journey, where they are embedded in a clear neoplatonic hierarchy, these thematic discourses exhibit a directionality and sequentiality that immediately evokes the temporal dynamics of the sufi path.

It is through his innovative use of the frame-tale device that ʿAṭṭâr cultivates this unique rhythm. Whereas the frame-tales of the One Thousand and One Nights and Canterbury Tales remain incomplete in most manuscripts, ʿAṭṭâr’s frame-tales are always directed towards a

\textsuperscript{63} Hojviri, Kashf al-mahjub, 274.
final allegorical conclusion; they always reach for a discernible “destination.” This forward motion is powered not by a complex plot, but by a hierarchical sequence of intra-diegetic discourses that are themselves marked by an internal atemporality. Although these discourses, as a group, are arranged in a carefully ordered sequence, each individual discourse is composed of loosely linked anecdotes and exhortations that are paratactic and digressive, not argumentative or tightly structured. Unlike the frame-tale, these didactic interludes remain open and unbounded, and they could be easily expanded or contracted without violating any sort of internal structure. Yet, like the stages of the way, these internally static units are fitted together into a clearly progressive, sequential whole. The abstracted form of the ‘Aṭṭârian frame-tale thereby evokes the temporal characteristics of sufi spirituality: a goal-oriented, progressive motion through a sequence of discrete stopping-points.

With their closed, progressive frame-narratives, ‘Aṭṭâr’s maṣnavis lend themselves to a course of reading in which the text is consumed sequentially and in its entirety. Such a style of text-consumption is taken for granted in modern phenomenologies of reading, but medieval texts were likely approached in a more non-linear fashion.64 Mystical maṣnavis that lack frame-tales (including ‘Aṭṭâr’s Book of Secrets) often exhibit the same atemporal quality as the individual intra-diegetic discourses in the Book of Affliction. Although they may contain chapters devoted to specific themes, these are not usually arranged according to any immediately obvious hierarchy, and the poems therefore do not demand a sequential course of reading in the same way as the Book of Affliction or the Conference of the Birds. The freedom with which readers likely approached most didactic maṣnavis is evidenced in scribal practices. For example, later manuscripts of Sanā’ī’s Garden of Truth (Ḥadiqat al-haqīqa), in many ways the archetypal di-

dactic *maṣnawi*, often deviate in significant ways from earlier versions. The proportion of narrative to homiletic material is much greater, and their contents have often been significantly rearranged; this instability suggests that scribes felt a measure of flexibility in their copying and reworking of the text, a flexibility that non-scribal readers would have likely shared in their own reading practices, choosing to consume those sections that interested them in the order they felt appropriate. In contrast to Sanā’ī’s rather malleable *maṣnawi*, however, the manuscripts of ‘Aṭṭâr’s works display a striking stability, a phenomenon which may be attributed to the controlling influence of the sequential frame-tale structure. In any case, the *Book of Affliction’s* frame-narrative endows the poem with a structural progression and unity that most other didactic *maṣnavis* lack. This shapes and constrains the reader’s encounter with the work, encouraging a purposefully linear mode of reading that reduplicates the iterative progressivity of the sufi path.

We have examined a number of ways in which the reader’s literary encounter is reflexively characterized in terms of the adept’s allegorical quest: the text is cast as a forty-part, internal journey, leading to the discovery of a supra-personal self; its forty chapters recall the forty days of the adept’s *chella* and carry ritualistic overtones; and the temporal rhythm of the reading process, conditioned by the frame-tale, mimics the flow of the sufi path. Such similarities, explicitly highlighted by ‘Aṭṭâr at the beginning of the poem, suggest an imaginative affinity, if not exact equivalence, between the experience of the reader and that of the adept. The poem is not just a source of information, but—in the hands of a committed reader—a performative enactment of the ideal course of sufi progress. One might never be subject to a visionary experience like the adept, nor attain to that ambiguous goal to which sufis direct their spiritual

energies, but at least the *Book of Affliction* offers a chance to imaginatively and ritualistically insert oneself into such a narrative. By indwelling within it, committed readers vicariously perform the sufi journey, fulfilling—and thereby maintaining and supporting—the narrative frameworks that buttress sufistic conceptions of self and modes of life.
Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation we have attempted to show, through a multi-pronged investigation, how ʿAṭṭār’s speech is self-consciously perlocutionary, performative, and audience directed. He was not a mystic recluse, as he has sometimes been imagined, but a preacher and informal teacher, and his poetry incorporates this social orientation. Implicit in his verse is a model of speech as something that affects and changes its recipients, bringing about their ethical and ontological purification. ʿAṭṭār did not invent these ideas—his audiences were likely already familiar with them—but he rhetorically activates these conceptualizations through meta-poetic statements and the self-reflexive potential of the frame-tale structure. His ultimate aim, like that of a preacher, is not to deliver dogmatic information in a coherent or systematic manner, but to provoke his audience to pious reform. In ʿAṭṭār’s case, however, this call is delivered through poetic text, and the textual encounter becomes a spiritual exercise through which readers can symbolically tread the sufi path.

Armed with this understanding of ʿAṭṭār’s poetics, we can see that the relationship between religious life and literary texts is much more complicated than has often been assumed. Persian mystical literature has generally been viewed as a sort of mirror—with varying degrees of distortion—for sufi beliefs, practices, and experiences. For example, homiletic mašnāvis have most often been approached as encyclopedias of sufi dogma. Likewise, hagiographical texts have been used as sources for popular spiritual practices and social life. And particularly effusive passages in mystical poems are often assumed by a brand of phenomenological scholarship to reflect their authors’ personal ecstatic experiences. In all of these cases, literary texts are used as sources to illuminate some aspect of the religious, social, or experiential world. We, on the other hand, have seen how poetry, at least in the mind of ʿAṭṭār and his imagined audi-
ence, not only reflects social and spiritual realities but forms them. Through the perlocutionary and symbolic power of his verse, ‘Aṭṭār aims to affect people’s souls; by reading his poems, they can symbolically progress along the sufi path and mold their ethical selves. Poetry does not just reflect spiritual life from a distance, but is an active constituent of it.

Because ‘Aṭṭār places so much emphasis on the transformative effects of the textual encounter, we have carefully attended to the act of reading as a temporal and embodied act. The scholarship on ‘Aṭṭār has generally surveyed his didactic mašnāvis from a bird’s-eye view, all at once, instead of considering how readers (or listeners) would have wound their way through the poem in time. Didactic mašnāvis, to be sure, may not have always been read in a completely linear fashion—but individual chapters would likely have been read as complete units, and ‘Aṭṭār’s mašnāvis possess an unusual progressive unity by virtue of the frame-tale structure. When scholars like Ritter dissect these individual chapters and then rearrange the anecdotes into more systematic forms, they obscure the poem’s thematics as they would have been understood by premodern reader-listeners. They also disrupt the fluid interplay between the anecdotes, such that the mašnāvis become a collection of trite, often contradictory observations instead of a progression of multi-perspectival treatments of particular mystical themes. Such atemporal analyses also miss the performativity of the frame-tale, itself the site of a temporal experience in which the reader-listeners vicariously tread the sufi path.

These conclusions open up a number of avenues for the further study of not just ‘Aṭṭār, but the Persian poetic tradition more generally. For example, our analysis of the Conference of the Birds’ evocation of contemporary preaching practices could be fruitfully expanded to include later poets: Sa’di would be an especially interesting case because he wrote several sermons, presenting the possibility of a rhetorical comparison between those texts and his Orchard (Bustān). Rumi, too, has a set of sermons in addition to a collection of more informal
mystical sessions, an exploration of which, in conjunction with a rhetorical study of his *masnawi*, could further nuance our understanding of the divergences and convergences between different forms of homiletic speech. Such analyses could incorporate other discursive practices as well, such as the influence of philosophical or theological disputation on the form and rhetoric on Nāṣer-e Khosrow’s homiletic poetry.¹

ʿAṭṭār’s works presume a certain model of poetic-homiletic communication, which we partially reconstructed on the basis of the poet’s many meta-poetic statements. Such statements—really a form of self-commentary—are an invaluable source for thinking about how this mode of speech was conceived, experienced, and approached by mystical poets and their readers. They are especially crucial for anyone interested in the rhetorical functioning of longer poems, since Perso-Arabic rhetorical manuals do not generally concern themselves with structures larger than the distich; any attempt to reconstruct a narratology, a homiletics, or a poetics that considers larger literary structures must, therefore, take into account how practitioners themselves obliquely described their art. Such a method, exemplified in Chapter Two of this dissertation, could be easily adapted for a wider-ranging exploration of sufi attitudes towards poetry and their changes over time.

For ʿAṭṭār, and certainly for other poets as well, this implied poetic-homiletics does real rhetorical work: through it, ʿAṭṭār calls his imagined audiences to a certain subject position from which to consume and interpret his verse. His perlocutionary poetry posits a receptive, mystically minded reader-listener, whom it seeks to shape, guide, and actively engage. This has significant implications for how we read ʿAṭṭār, and it suggests that we need to reassess how we read the didactic *maṣnavis* of later poets as well. Further studies of their rhetorical strate-

1. This topic of inquiry has been proposed in Meisami, “Nāṣir-i Khusraw: A Poet Lost in Thought?,” 251.
gies, assumed audiences, and sociological contexts will bring us closer to an audience-centered history of Persian mystical literature, which will help illuminate the rise of Persian as a vehicle for Islamic thought, the spread of mysticism as a dominant mode of piety in Persianate lands, and the role of literary practices in the formation of religious subjectivities.


Hühn, Peter, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier, and Wolf Schmid, eds. The Living Handbook of Narratology. Hamburg University, 2009-. http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de.


