

The Symbolism of Birds and Flight in the Writings of Rūzbihān Baqlī

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The imagery of birds and flight has long been a universal symbol of the ascension of the human soul to a higher reality.¹ From the winged deities of the ancient Near East to the angels of the Bible and the winged souls of Plato's *Phaedrus*, poets and prophets have depicted the power of the wing to lift the soul through flight to paradise. Among non-scriptural peoples, it is especially in the complex of Central Asian and Siberian religious practices called 'shamanistic' that the symbolism of flight is powerfully displayed.² In the Islamic tradition, notable early explorations of the symbolism of birds and flight can be found in the writings of philosophers, Sufis, and poets such as Ibn Sinā (d. 428/1037), al-Ghazzālī (d. 504/1111), Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191), Khāqānī (d. 595/1199), and above all in the great mystical epic of Farid al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (d. ca. 617/1220), *Mantiq al-ṭayr* or *The Language of the Birds*.³ But if we think in terms of Persian Sufism, one author in particular claims our attention for his extensive use of the symbolism of birds and flight. This is Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 606/1209), the Sufi master of Shiraz, a prolific and powerful writer of works on Sufism in both Persian and Arabic. Rūzbihān's characteristically poetic style employs the full range of metaphors of birds and flight to express the different modes of mystical experience. Rūzbihān's concentration on the experiential dimension of Sufism makes his work especially valuable for revealing the mystical understanding of literary tropes.⁴ Although he frequently strains symbols to the breaking point, his constant clarification of their mystical significations makes him one of the most revealing authors in the Persian Sufi tradition.

1. Manabu Waida, 'Birds,' *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company 1987), 2:224-227; William K. Mahony, 'Flight,' *ibid.*, 5:349-353.
2. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series LXXVI (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1974), pp. 477-482. "Magical flight is the expression both of the soul's autonomy and of ecstasy" (*ibid.*, p. 479).
3. For Ibn Sinā, al-Ghazzālī, and the philosopher Suhrawardī, see Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series LXVI (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1960; reprint ed., Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, Inc. 1980), pp. 165-203, and Farid al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār Nishābūrī, *Mantiq al-ṭayr*, ed. Muḥammad Jawād Mashkūr (3rd ed., Tehran: Nāṣir-i Khusraw 1968), Introduction, pp. xxxi-xlii. The poem by Khāqānī called *Mantiq al-ṭayr* is found in *Divān-i Khāqānī-i Shīrwānī* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Arisṭū 1362), pp. 31-34; trans. Peter L. Wilson and Nasrollah Pourjavady, *The Drunken Universe: An Anthology of Persian Sufi Poetry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press 1988), pp. 119-129.
4. Similar analyses could yield useful insights into Rūzbihān's use of other prominent symbols and metaphors, such as desert, ocean, mirror, vision, tongue, bride, veil, light, mine, clothes, and sun.



The Conference of Birds. From a manuscript of 'Aṭṭār's *Manṭiq al-ṭayr*, dated 898/1493. MS. Elliott 246, fol. 25v (Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, Oxford)

Rūzbihān lived in Shiraz when it was a small island of prosperity and culture under the rule of the Salghurid atabegs, after the decline of the Seljuks and before the storm of the Mongol conquest.¹ He continued the line of Sufi tradition in Shiraz that went back to Ibn al-Khafif (d. 372/982) and through him to Baghdadian Sufis such as the martyr al-Ḥallāj (d. 310/922). One may ask, however, from a purely literary point of view, how significant the works of Rūzbihān are for the understanding of later Sufism through the fifteenth century. Direct references to Rūzbihān in later Persian Sufi literature are not terribly common, and they tend to focus on his reputation as a lover of beauty.² He is known for his prescription of the three things which the gnostics require of a singer when listening to music (*samā'*): fine fragrances, a beautiful face, and a sweet voice (*rawā'ih-i ṭayyiba wa wajh-i ṣabīḥ wa sawt-i malīḥ*). Frequently one also finds mention of the well-known episode in which he forbade a young woman to veil her face, on the grounds that separating beauty and love would be a crime.³

Rūzbihān's writings were difficult, however, and there are not many explicit responses to his works by later authors. Some commentaries on his writings do exist, however; an Anatolian Naqshbandī Sufi named 'Abdullāh Ilāhī Simābī (d. 896/1491) commented on the *Risālat al-quds* (*Treatise on the Sacred*), a work on Sufism addressed to novices,⁴ and an anonymous writer also glossed Rūzbihān's treatise on love, the *'Abhar al-'āshiqīn* (*Jasmine of the Lovers*).⁵ We know that Rūzbihān's works were studied by authors such as Jāmī (d. 897/1492) in fifteenth-century Herat, and that they attracted the interest of the Mughul prince⁶ Dārā

1. Cf. C. E. Bosworth, 'The Political and Dynastic History of the Iranian World (A.D. 1000-1217)', in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 5, *The Saljuq and Mongol Periods*, ed. J. A. Boyle (Cambridge University Press 1968), pp. 172-173.
2. See, e.g., Fakhr al-Dīn 'Irāqī [attr.], *The Song of Lovers*, ed. and trans. A. J. Arberry (Calcutta: Islamic Research Association 1939), pp. 88-90 (text), 57-58 (trans.). See also A. J. Arberry, *Shiraz: Persian City of Saints and Poets* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 1960), pp. 86-111, for a brief sketch of Rūzbihān's life and works.
3. Jāmī, *Tuḥfat al-aḥrār* (Lucknow: Tej Kumār, 1966), pp. 61-62. Jāmī also tells the story in *Nafahāt al-uns wa ḥadārāt al-quds*, ed. Mahdi Tawḥīdīpūr (Tehran: Kitāb-furūshī-yi Maḥmūdī 1337/1957), p. 256.
4. This commentary, entitled *Manāzil al-qulūb*, is printed in Muḥammad Taqī Danīsh-puzhuh, ed., *Rūzbihān-nāma*, Silsila-yi Intisharāt-i Anjuman-i Athar-i Milli, 60 (Tehran: Chāp-khāna-yi Bahman, 1347/1969), pp. 387-420, from a MS. from Yugoslavia. 2 other MSS. of this text are in Egypt, and another is reported to be in Manisa, Turkey; cf. Abū Muḥammad Rūzbihān al-Baqlī al-Shīrāzī, *Kitāb Mashrab al-arvāḥ*, ed. Nazif Hoca, İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Yayınları, No. 1876 (İstanbul: Edebiyat Fakültesi Matbaası, 1974), Introduction, p. 1. On Ilāhī Simābī, who studied in Samarqand, met Jāmī in Herat, and died in Rumelia, see *Rūzbihān-nāma*, pp. 64-66. See also Rūzbihān Baqlī Shirāzī, *Risālat al-quds wa ghalāṭāt al-sālikīn*, ed. Dr. J. Nurbakhsh (Tehran: Chāp-khāna-yi Firdawsī 1351/1972).
5. Rūzbihān Baqlī Shirāzī, *'Abhar al-'āshiqīn*, ed. Henry Corbin and Muḥammad Mu'in, Ganjīnā-yi Nivishtahā-yi Irānī, 8 (Tehran: Anjuman-i Irān-shināsi-yi Farānsa dar Tehrān 1360/1981), pp. 149-202. These glosses appear to date from the early Safavid period (*ibid.*, Persian Introduction, p. 108).
6. Dārā Shikūh had Rūzbihān's *tafsīr*, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, translated into Persian, and he wrote an abridgement and update of Rūzbihān's commentary on the ecstatic sayings of the early Sufis (*Sharḥ-i shaṭṭhiyyāt*) under the title *Hasanāt al-'arīfīn* (p. 356, n. 2). For the original text, see Rūzbihān Baqlī Shirāzī, *Sharḥ-i shaṭṭhiyyāt*, ed. Henry Corbin, Bibliothèque Iranienne 12 (Tehran: Département d'Iranologie de l'Institut Franco-Iranien 1966).

Shikūh (d. 1069/1659) in the seventeenth century. All these later figures testified to the difficulty of Rūzbihān's style, which at times is admittedly convoluted and obscure. Jāmi remarked that "he has sayings that have poured forth from him in the state of overpowering and ecstasy, which not everyone can understand."¹ Dārā Shikūh found his style "fatiguing."² Despite the preservation of Rūzbihān's legacy by his son and grandson in Shiraz, and for all that Louis Massignon has traced the existence of the *ṭarīqa-i Rūzbihāniyya* as far as Timbuktu, it must be admitted that none of his physical or spiritual descendants has been able to reach Rūzbihān's level of mystical attainment or to match him as a stylist in Persian or Arabic.³ It is not, however, the frequency of references to Rūzbihān that makes him relevant to the study of Persian Sufism; it is, rather, the penetration of his existential insight that makes his writing significant. It is only in recent decades that the rediscovery and publication of his writings has led to a renewed appreciation of his importance for the understanding of Sufism. Muḥammad Mu'in, the pioneering editor of the *Abhar al-āshiqīn*, remarked about this text, that "to understand the works of mystics such as 'Aṭṭār, Rūmī, 'Irāqī, Awhādī-i Kirmāni, and Ḥāfiẓ, researches on this book are quite necessary."⁴ I would enlarge upon this statement and say that the various writings of Rūzbihān Baqlī form a vital resource for understanding the experiential basis of Persian Sufi literature.

Rūzbihān regards the symbol of the bird as multivalent, capable of standing for a wide variety of spirits, persons, and experiences. The importance of this image in Rūzbihān's writings may be gauged by the frequency with which he uses it in the beginnings of his treatises, immediately following the praise of God and the Prophet.⁵ When commenting on a phrase used by Ḥallāj, "the fortunate bird," Rūzbihān offered a startling number of possible interpretations:

The 'fortunate bird'⁶ is the hoopoe of Solomon, on whom be peace, or the phoenix of the west, or the royal *humā*, or the bird of inspiration, or the bird of success, or the bird of the spirit, or lucky augury, or the bird of light who circumambulates the

1. Jāmi, *Nafahāt*, p. 255.
2. Dārā Shikūh, *Ḥasanāt al-ārifin*, ed. Makhdum Rahin (Tehran 1352/1973), p. 3.
3. Louis Massignon, 'La vie et les oeuvres de Ruzbehān Baqlī,' in *Opera Minora*, ed. Y. Moubarac (Beirut: Dar al-Maaref 1963), II, 451-465, esp. 455-456 for the *ṭarīqa*. As far as the subject of this paper is concerned, Rūzbihān's descendants have very little to say; there are no references to the symbolism of flight in their biographies of Rūzbihān, and the only mention of birds is an incident in which Rūzbihān detected that a chicken offered to him as food was not lawful (*Rūzbihān-nāma*, pp. 45, 220-221).
4. Mu'in, Introduction to *Abhar*, p. 84. In this respect, Mu'in shared the view of Dr. Qāsim Ghani, that "from the point of view of the greatness of his mystical station, and from the perspective of ecstasy and spiritual state, Shaykh Rūzbihān is on the level of Shaykh Abū'l-Ḥasan Kharāqāni and Shaykh Abū Sa'id-i Abū'l-Khayr"; Ghani also placed Rūzbihān prominently in his list of twenty-eight major Sufi authors. See his *Baḥth dar āthār wa afkār wa aḥwāl-i Ḥāfiẓ*, vol. 2, *Tārikh-i taṣawwuf dar islām wa taṭawwūrāt wa taḥawwulāt-i mukhtalifa-yi ān az ṣadr-i islām ta 'aṣr-i Ḥāfiẓ* (Tehran: Kitābfurūshī Zawwār 1340/1961), p. 395, n. 2; p. 545.
5. Extensive passages with bird imagery are found at the beginning in Rūzbihān's Koran commentary, *Arā'is al-bayān* (p. 364, n. 2), in his letter to 'Imad al-Dīn Kirmāni (p. 361, n. 6), and in the *Risālat al-quds* (p. 362, n.1), and phrases with bird imagery are frequent in the exordia of other texts as well (e.g., *Sharḥ-i shāḥiyyāt*, p. 4, bottom).
6. *Sharḥ-i shāḥiyyāt*, p. 365. This passage is a commentary on Ḥallāj's *Riwāya* 21, in which the 'fortunate bird' is one of the symbolic transmitters of a *ḥadīth*.



Rūzbihān Baqlī Preaching in Shiraz. From a manuscript of the *Majālis al-'ushshāq*, dated 959/1552. MS. Ouseley Add. 24, f. 54a (Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, Oxford)

throne, or the white cock that is beneath the throne, or Gabriel, or the chosen one [Muḥammad], blessings of God upon him.

Frequently, also, Rūzbihān speaks of the Prophet Muḥammad using bird symbolism, calling him “the nightingale of the love of pre-eternities, the *Simurgh* of the nest of post-eternities.”¹ The two birds, the *Simurgh* and the nightingale, have sharply differing qualities as symbols of the divine beloved and the human lover (discussed below), but the dynamic role of the Prophet mediates between these two poles. Likewise the Sufi saint Bāyazīd Biṣṭāmī (d. 260/874) is called “the bird of the nest of isolation,” alluding to the spiritual state (*ifrād*) with which Bāyazīd is associated.² Sufis who have been persecuted and killed are called “the birds of sanctity” who have returned to their nests.³ In an unedited text on theology, Rūzbihān calls upon the imagery of birds flying in a celestial garden to indicate the role of prophets, angels, and saints: “He manifested the gardens of intimacy and called them ‘the enclosure of sanctity,’ and in it flew the spirits of the elect, among the prophets, messengers, cherubs, spirituals, gnostics, and unitarians.”⁴ Somewhat more abstractly, Rūzbihān uses birds and their songs to symbolize particular spiritual experiences that have been revealed by the ecstatic expressions (*shaṭhiyyāt*) of Sufis such as Bāyazīd and Ḥallāj:

The bird of isolation sang ‘Allāh, Allāh,’ the bird of uniting (*tawḥīd*) said, “I am the Real (*anā al-ḥaqq*)” the bird of sanctification said “Glory be to me (*subḥānī*).” When they arose from the New Year’s garden of witnessing, they flew with the wings of pre-eternities in the post-eternities of post-eternities. Those birds of divinity brought the secret of divinity to the palace of humanity, and spoke with the soul of divinity in the tongue of humanity.⁵

Similarly, when the divine essence retracts and the soul is cut off from spiritual experience, we are told that “the bird of manifestation has gone to the nest of eternity.”⁶ Rūzbihān has been followed by his commentator Ilāhī Simābī in this tendency to use birds to symbolize spiritual experiences, in this case regarding the primacy of the experience of “opening (*futūḥ*)” as a pre-requisite for receiving “unveilings” of the divine sanctity: “From the atmosphere in which the spirit’s *Simurgh* [flies], before this, the bird of ‘opening’ (*futūḥ*) has been seen.”⁷ In other words, before the spirit can soar like the *Simurgh*, it must first take flight with the experience of ‘opening.’ The anonymous commentator on the *‘Abhar al-‘āshiqīn* has also seen

that Rūzbihān’s use of bird imagery is meant to recall spiritual experiences. This can be seen in a passage in which Rūzbihān speaks of the trapped bird as an image of the soul trapped in the body: “See what bird is in your trap, that the nest of the *Simurgh* of the throne cannot bear its grain!” The commentator remarks that “the universal intellect is incapable of comprehending [the soul’s] emanation, which is love.”¹

The particular birds most frequently invoked by Rūzbihān are the nightingale and the phoenix-like bird called *Simurgh* or ‘*Anqā*. Unlike Rumi or ‘Aṭṭār, Rūzbihān is not too interested in describing other varieties of birds and the qualities they represent.² The nightingale, of course, is a staple of Persian poetry, as the figure of the impassioned human lover addressing the unattainable beauty of the divine rose.³ The *Simurgh*, at first a supernatural bird and helper of humanity in ancient Iranian mythology, has become a symbol of the divine in Persian literature.⁴ Because Rūzbihān so often stresses the ascension from human attributes to divine ones, he frequently blurs the distinction between the nightingale and the *Simurgh*. Thus he urges his reader to ascend to the true home, the heavenly nest:

Remove the belongings of the *Simurgh* from this narrow hut, for the orient of the throne is the nest of your eternal soul. Take the power of Jesus’ soul from the heaven of pre-eternity, so that with the birds of angelicity you complete a house for this nightingale of power.⁵

Sometimes he combines the *Simurgh* with the *Humā*, the royal bird whose shadow designates a king. “Cast off the shadow of temporality’s veil from existence, so that the *Humā* of the Attributes opens the wings of pre-eternity, and the *Simurgh* of majesty comes from the orient of eternity.”⁶ But always the injunction is the same: the soul ascends like a heavenly bird to find its identity, and like the birds in ‘Aṭṭār’s tale, it finds God as its true self. “When the *Simurgh* of the soul flies from the realm of humanity to the world of divinity, the growing soul speaks to itself in the rose-bower of Adam’s clay; those seeking the reflection of that shadowing ‘*Anqā* become the shadow of God.”⁷ At times the ‘*Anqā* as the transcendent God becomes overwhelming: “Existence in relation to His might is less than an atom, and all the

1. *Abhar al-‘āshiqīn*, p. 120; cf. also p. 20.

2. *Sharḥ-i shaṭhiyyāt*, p. 185.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

4. Rūzbihān Baqlī, *Lawāmi‘ al-tawḥīd*, MS 1460 Ahmet Salis, Topkapı Library, Istanbul, fol. 4b. This fine manuscript, which was not noticed by previous researchers (Mu‘in, Introduction to *Rūzbihān-nāma*, p. 71; Dānīsh-pūzhūh, *Rūzbihān-nāma*, pp. 264-266 [extract], 341, no. 8), seems to be the sole existing complete copy of this work by Rūzbihān. It is an elementary treatise on theology in 35 fols., accompanied by another short text previously not found, *Maslak al-tawḥīd*, in 21 fols. (cf. Mu‘in, p. 71, and *Rūzbihān-nāma*, p. 342, no. 23).

5. *Sharḥ-i shaṭhiyyāt*, p. 22. On the subject of *shaṭhiyyāt*, see my *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press 1985).

6. *Sharḥ-i shaṭhiyyāt*, p. 187.

7. Simābī, *Manāzil al-qulūb*, in *Rūzbihān-nāma*, p. 402 (verse), commenting on the phrase ‘unveiling of the sanctity of sanctity’ in *Risālat al-quds*, ed. Nurbaksh p. 44.

1. *‘Abhar al-‘āshiqīn*, p. 190, commenting on text, p. 62. In a similar fashion, this commentator identifies the “birds of silence” (text, p. 60) as “the people of concentration and meditation” (p. 187).

2. Occasionally Rūzbihān speaks of the peacock (*Sharḥ-i shaṭhiyyāt*, pp. 226, 236; *‘Abhar al-‘āshiqīn*, p. 142), the hoopoe (*Sharḥ-i shaṭhiyyāt*, pp. 365, 370), or the crow (*ibid.*, p. 257; *Rūzbihān-nāma*, p. 322).

3. Annemarie Schimmel, ‘Rose und Nachtigall,’ *Numen* V (1958), pp. 85-109. For a survey of references to birds in early classical Persian poetry, see C. H. de Fouchecour, *La Description de la nature dans la poésie lyrique persane du XIe siècle: Inventaire et analyse des thèmes* (Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck 1969), pp. 138-150.

4. Cf. Alessandro Bausani, ‘Letteratura Neopersiana,’ in *Antonino Pagliaro and Alessandro Bausani, Storia della letteratura persiana* (Milan: Nuova Accademia Editrice, 1960), pp. 290-293; Johann Christoph Bürgel, *The Feather of Simurgh: The ‘Licit Magic’ of the Arts in Medieval Islam* (New York: New York University Press 1988), pp. 5-7.

5. *Sharḥ-i shaṭhiyyāt*, p. 283.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 143. The ‘foolish *Humā*’ as image of the human soul appears in *‘Abhar al-‘āshiqīn*, p. 62, while in a verse by Rūzbihān the *Humā* is the divinity which cannot fit into the nest of the human heart (*Rūzbihān-nāma*, p. 355).

7. *Sharḥ-i shaṭhiyyāt*, p. 331.

angels of the heaven of power are lowly locusts in the beak of the 'anqā of his eternal wrath."¹ Yet at other times, the soul overwhelmed by the ecstasy of *shah* shifts from the self-effacement of the nightingale to the audacity of the hoopoe, who did not hesitate to show off his knowledge before Solomon.

The lily of beauty reached the stage of the nightingale of perfection. The shadow of the blessed tree of eternity became the illumination of the spring of the nightingales who chant "I am the Real." At the confluence of the sources of pre-eternity the hoopoes of the spirits drank the water of life of "Glory be to me." Thus in the feast of the Solomon of unity, from intoxication they became the sovereigns of existence. With hidden tongue of the human intellect in the sanctified nest beyond canopy and throne, they said "I learned something which you did not."²

The plasticity of the nightingale and the *Simurgh* in Rūzbihān's imagery is a direct result of the sudden and precipitous outbursts of his spiritual experiences, which he has chronicled in more direct terms in his autobiographical *Kashf al-asrār*.³ Keeping in mind the freshness of these images in Rūzbihān's hands may help to counter the impression one frequently gets in later Persian poetry, that images such as the nightingale and the rose have been deprived of all life and loveliness at the hands of mediocre poets. Rūzbihān's use of these symbols to indicate the ascensional experiences of the soul can help remind us of what a mystical interpretation of Persian poetry can be.

Rūzbihān makes use of an extended complex of imagery related to birds to express various mystical insights. When combined, these images provide a more comprehensive picture of the celestial habitat of the soul-bird.⁴ As we have already seen, the nest of the bird is a symbol of transcendence that reveals that the bird's true home is not earth but heaven. The nest must inevitably be located in a tree that is in the heavenly garden, such as the lotus or *Tūbā* tree, as the bird discovers when it finally gains admission: "Since I saw that rose of the rose garden and the dark narcissus, the lotus and the *Tūbā* trees are in my garden."⁵ But getting to that heavenly

garden is not so simple. Because of the rebellious nature of the soul, it must be trapped with bait of grain or sugar. Sometimes it is only the hope of that grain that holds the bird in the trap: "Such a sweet-singing nightingale with so many thousands of songs suddenly fell in the hunter's trap of persecution, and in hope of the grain of seeing the visage of that moon-faced beauty in the thorny rose garden, it remained an attendant at the feast of his pain."¹ Rumi also writes of love trapping the bird of the soul with sugar.² This is a reversal of the pessimistic view of the bird's entrapment as a metaphor for the fall of the soul into matter, as Adam fell, also snared by a grain of wheat.³ In a complex extended passage, Rūzbihān speaks of the entrapment of the bird as the soul's imprisonment in the body, but he optimistically predicts that the soul will free itself and ultimately attain the status of being the hawk on the wrist of the divine hunter:

Know that when the spirit of humanity was placed in the clay of Adam, and the brides of the spirits were imprisoned in those mines, and the gates of the heart were barred with the obstacles of desires, it was for the sake of testing, so that cage-breaking bird would break out of the prison of temporality with the existence-holding beak, and fly in the atmosphere of divinity, and sit in the gardens of witnessing on the branches of the rose of sufficiency, and with a tongueless tongue tell to the beloved the pain of separation from the face of the beloved. But if it acquires a taste for the reins of desires, it will be imprisoned in the four walls of nature, and will be restrained from flight in the atmosphere of pre-eternity.

Yes, if the secret of longing enters upon him, and he rattles the chain of eternal love, and he brings up that rational spirit from the cage of the body, and makes it fly in the garden of lordship, that hawk (*bāsha*) will wheel about in the existence of angelicity, and overlook the seraglio of might, and will find himself at no other place than the wrist of the hunter of pre-eternity, who catches the birds of the mountains of love with the love-charm of fate.⁴

The soul must take constant effort to practise discipline and avoid bad company, says Rūzbihān: "Start removing yourself from this flock of foolish sparrows, for in the flight of the Western 'Anqā, your soul will not fly with a broken wing."⁵ But the divine mercy will also help to bring the hapless bird out of its imprisonment into the heavenly garden, calling it as God called to Moses on Sinai: "Praise to that lord who brought the bird of felicity from the cage of persecution to the rosebower of purity and trust, with the ringing cry of 'We called him from the right side of the mountain' (Koran, IXX 52), who expelled the crows of nature from the gardens of reality, and who called the nightingale of the most holy spirit with speech."⁶ Breaking out of the cage of the body will involve a death, whether physical or spiritual, before the soul can return to its home.⁷ But when it does finally return to the garden, Rūzbihān is sure that the bird of the soul will perch on the branches of the rose

1. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 20, quoting Koran, XXVII 22, the speech of the hoopoe to Solomon (also cited at *ibid.*, p. 370).

3. For this text, see Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, vol. 3, *Les Fidèles d'amour. Shi'isme et soufisme* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, Bibliothèque des Idées, 1972). Portions of the Arabic text have been published by Paul Nwyia, S.J., 'Waqā'i' al-Shaykh Rūzbihān al-Baqlī al-Shirāzi muqatafat' min kitāb *Kashf al-asrār* 'i wa mukāshafat al-anwār, 'Al-Mashriq LXIV/4-5 (1970), pp. 385-406, and by Nazif Hoca, ed., *Rūzbihān al-Baklī ve Kitāb Kaşf al-asrār'ı ile Farsça bazı şiirleri*, İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Yayınları, No. 1678 (İstanbul: Edebiyat Fakültesi Matbaası 1971), pp. 103-118. On the basis of the complete text, which was partially edited from 3 MSS. by Henry Corbin, a complete French translation has been promised by Dr. Paul Ballanfat of the Sorbonne.

4. For the motif of the soul-bird in general, see Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press 1982), pp. 75-76; id., *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalāloddin Rumi* (London: Fine Books 1978), pp. 113-124. To the standard stock of images, Rūzbihān does not hesitate to add even the ordinarily disgusting picture of a bird disgorging stones from its crop: "The annotations of those seas belong to the soul-killing birds, who from time to time cast forth the pearl of 'I am the Real' from the shells of their crops" (*Sharh-i shahīyyāt* p. 501).

5. Verse, in *Rūzbihān-nāma*, p. 344. On the motifs of heavenly trees, see Bausani, pp. 286-290.

1. *Abhar al-'āshiqin*, p. 60.

2. Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, p. 112, with notes 207 and 208.

3. For this theme in Rūmī, see Schimmel, *Triumphal Sun*, pp. 113-114.

4. *Risālat al-quds*, p. 29.

5. *Sharh-i shahīyyāt*, p. 599.

6. Letter to 'Imād al-Dīn Kirmāni, in *Rūzbihān-nāma*, p. 322.

7. Some of the last verses that Rūmī wrote for his friends treated "the soul bird's flight from the cage of the body" (Schimmel, *As Through a Veil* p. 94).

and sing, recalling and fulfilling the primordial covenant it made by saying yes to God's question, 'Am I not your lord?' (Koran, VII 171). "Let the rose of beauty grow before those nightingales of everlastingness on the branches of majesty, let the nightingale of 'Am I not [your lord] (*alast*)' speak the secrets of love with those birds of the throne."¹ According to Rūzbihān, the epiphany of God as the red rose is the supreme moment of this reunion.

There are times when Rūzbihān abandons the notion of the bird as symbolic of the soul, taking it instead as a symbol of creation. He is led to do this especially when considering Ḥallāj's exegesis of an enigmatic verse of the Koran addressed to Abraham, "'Take four birds and sacrifice them' [Koran, II 260], for the Real does not fly." Rūzbihān in this way treats the birds as representing the unstable four elements of matter, which must be annihilated and abolished from consciousness, so that the ego can be destroyed and the Real can be revealed:

If you wish to know our allusion in reality, and to understand knowledge in oneness, and to arrive at that which we described of the annihilation of the creature in the creator, call the four birds of the elements near to you, and with the sword of intoxication, love, and desire, cut them to pieces...Cut the throat of each bird in the court of the spirit[s] jealousy, because the elements fly [away] and become unsteady; the knowledge of that does not fly [away]...When you have killed and annihilated the birds of the elements, and torn off from them the wings of spatial dimensions, and loosened yourself from those weights of creation, then no duration, time, place, or witness remains; you reach the world of utter nonexistence, and are astonished in it, so that you do not know who you are...²

In a similar vein, Ilāhi Simābi on occasion deals with birds as symbols of earthly life, the physicality of which must be transcended:

Every pigeon flies in a certain way, but this pigeon [flies] in a directionless direction. We are not kin to the birds of the air, and our grain is a grainless grain.³

So at times the bird-symbolism is used to denote the limitations of physical existence. Most typically, however, Rūzbihān sees the bird as an image of the "rational spirit (*rūḥ-i nāṭiqā*)," the inner essence of humanity, which is forever seeking its divine counterpart even while trapped in the body. "The bird of intimacy, which is the rational spirit, flies in the lesser existence, which is the human body, in conversation with love in the cage of the heart."⁴ In a surprising shift of images, Rūzbihān

stretches the symbol of the soul-bird to the limit, by showing how the soul's wings are consumed by the experiences of nearness and unveiling; the bird has now been transformed into a moth, burning up in the flame of love:

When the sacred birds of the spirits fly from the rose branches of witnessing temporality, and traverse the atmosphere of the heaven of certainty, their nests are nowhere but in the gardens of nearness. . . . The fire of witnessing reached from the light of unveiling to the wings of their souls. From the wrath of this fire, the wings of their souls are burned, and they remained wingless outside the door of the hidden of the hidden. . . . Since no wing remained, in that station of theirs another wing appeared from pure love. With that wing, like moths, they flew again; round the candle of beauty, on the basin of nearness, the light of their union flamed. When every wing, from spirit in spirit, had burned, they collected the knowledge of realities in the palace of pre-eternity. That knowledge became their wings of love and longing, and they flew in the atmosphere of utter nearness.¹

The successive destruction of each pair of wings at every level as the soul flies higher conveys the devastating power of this experience of transcendence.

Perhaps the most remarkable guise in which birds appear in Rūzbihān's writings is as personifications of Koranic verses and *ḥadīth* sayings. Many poets relied on the Koran's statement, that "There is nothing that does not glorify him with praise" (XVII 44), to show how all creatures praise God; the beautiful songs of birds were natural examples to use as a metaphor for creation's testimony to the creator (cf. Koran, XXI 79; XXIV 41). Rūzbihān has, in a way, inverted the process of the metaphor. The symbol of the soul-bird had given an externalized form to a psychological reality, the process and experience of transcendence. Now Rūzbihān re-psychologizes the image of the bird, reducing its image content to a minimum and making the symbol as transparent as possible to the underlying experience. Koranic verses, to Rūzbihān, are not mere words, but verbal theophanies, which act as catalysts for the transformation of the listening soul. The power of the Koran to bring about such a transformation is such that certain verses, for Rūzbihān, announce themselves like birds proclaiming the identity of the divine beloved. Thus we find that it is frequently "the bird of 'Am I not [your Lord]'" (cf. Koran VII 171) who reminds us of the primordial covenant by which humanity was sealed to God in pre-eternity.² The bird of Koranic theophany does not only speak of the primordial covenant, but also recites the epiphanies to Moses on Mt. Sinai. "Have you not heard from Sinai's tree the 'Anqā's cry of 'Truly I am God' (Koran, XXVIII 30)?"³ The bird's Koranic proclamation of divinity does not concern some distant king, but is a reminder of intimate presence. "If from the suffering of love I heard the call of the birds of the morning of 'God spoke [to Moses]' (IV 164), I would be the partner and companion of the Sinai of 'There is no conspiracy [of three but I am the fourth]' (LVIII 7)."⁴ Finally, Rūzbihān puts the prophetic seal on this bird-manifestation of

1. *Risālat al-quds*, p. 3. The nightingale singing on the rose branch recurs in *Sharḥ-i shaḥīyyāt*, pp. 92, 225, 230, and 'Abhar al-'āshiqīn, p. 124.

2. *Sharḥ-i shaḥīyyāt*, pp. 484-485, commenting on al-Ḥallāj's *Tawāsīn* 4.2, which contains the quotation of Koran, II 260. Rūzbihān also offers the interpretation that the four birds are soul, heart, intellect, and spirit, which must be humbled to acknowledge the greatness of God; *ibid.*, pp. 485-486. The symbolism of birds as the four elements recurs in *ibid.*, p. 152. Rūmī identifies the four birds allegorically as representations of different lowly desires; cf. Schimmel, *Triumphal Sun*, p. 113.

3. Ilāhi Simābi, *Manāzil al-qulūb*, in *Rūzbihān-nāma*, p. 403 (*mathnawī* verse). This verse is from Rūmī, *Mathnawī-yi ma'nawī*, ed. & trans. R.A. Nicholson, 8 vols. Gibb Memorial Series, n.s. 4 (London 1925-40), Bk. V 351-52.

4. *Abhar al-'āshiqīn*, pp. 70-71. For the use of this characteristic phrase *rūḥ-i nāṭiqā*, which derives from the vocabulary of al-Ḥallāj, see *Risālat al-quds*, p. 29 (quoted above, p. 361); *Sharḥ-i shaḥīyyāt*, pp. 245, 336, 340-341, 363, 408, 414, 603, 632.

1. 'Abhar al-'āshiqīn, p. 124; cf. also pp. 48 and 88 for moth imagery.

2. *Sharḥ-i shaḥīyyāt*, pp. 225, 230-231, 257 (where God gives the pearl of "Am I not" to the crows of creation), 316; *Risālat al-quds*, p. 3 (quoted above, at n. 43).

3. *Sharḥ-i shaḥīyyāt*, p. 318; cf. p. 175: "the birds of manifestation strike the bell of 'Truly I am God' [Koran, XXVIII 30] from the tree of Moses."

4. *Sharḥ-i shaḥīyyāt*, p. 229.

scripture, through birds that recall the ascension of the soul, modelled on the Prophet Muḥammad's night journey (*isrā'*) to paradise and his confession of his inability to praise the infinity of God.

Do you not know that knowledge is the wings of nearness, up to the gateway of eternity? Beyond that, one can fly no further with these. . . . Whoever does not come out from the twilight of nature, and does not travel the journey of "Glory to him who brought [his servant] by night" [Koran, XVII 1] in the night of the soul's ascension, does not know the cry of the nightingale of "I cannot count [your] praise" in the garden of the throne.¹

In this way, Koranic verses become birds that fly like messengers from God and humanity, proclaiming divine lordship. Moreover, not only the Koranic revelation, but also the act of exegesis itself, becomes another bird-flight, in response to the divine word. In a revealing passage located at the very beginning of his massive Koran commentary, the *'Arā'is al-bayān* or *Brides of Explanation*, Rūzbihān describes his approach to scriptural interpretation as one long flight in bird form to the paradisaal garden of the Koran.

When the birds of my mysteries (*asrār*) had finished flying in the states and stations, rising beyond the battlefields of spiritual combat and self-observation, reaching the gardens of unveiling and witnessing, alighting on the branches of the flowers of nearness, and imbibing the wine of union, they became intoxicated by seeing the divine beauty, love-stricken in the lights of divine splendor, and they recovered from [their intoxication] with the station of sanctity by the taste of intimacy. From the dawn of the Unmanifest they seized the blossoms of the subtleties of the Koran and the refinements of the truths of the Criterion. They soared on wings of gnosis, and warbled the best elucidation by means of the melodies of paradise, [intoning] the mysteries (*rumūz*) of God (*al-Haqq*) by means of this tongue, mysteries that He has hidden from the understanding of the people of forms.²

The bird of the spirit ascends, then, in response to the call of the bird of revelation.

Flight is a primary metaphor for spiritual experience. Rūzbihān states this boldly in his lexicon of Sufi terminology, when he defines the term "overwhelmingings (*ghalabāt*)" as "the flight of the spirit in angelicity."³ In his commentary on 1001 spiritual stations, he describes flight (*tayrān*) as station number 924, and he removes any suggestion of merely physical levitation from the term: "In the station of flight, it is the *khalifas* who fly with the angels in spirit and body, for they are spirituals, in whom is the likeness of the angels. . . I have not flown in the air because of my knowledge, but I found that meaning by which they fly in me."⁴ Thus he knows the flight of the exalted figures called "successors (*khalifas*)" not by external flight but by perceiving them in the atmosphere of his soul. One begins practicing

this kind of flight by meditation, which Rūzbihān describes in a chapter entitled "On the Meditation which is the Wing for the Bird of Intimacy in the Station of Love." In this section, all the metaphors of trapping birds in the desert are used to convey the approach to the beloved through the meditation of love.¹ At its highest, the experience of love brings the lover to a state of utter nearness to the beloved, and then "he may fly like the spirituals of angelicity in the highest of the high with the peacocks of the angels, like Khidr, Ilyās, Idris and Jesus."² Spiritual experience as flight in this way encompasses the highest realms of the angels and prophets.

From the viewpoint of mystical experience, ascension to divinity is the key to the symbolism of birds and flight. Many of Rūzbihān's allusions to flight explicitly invoke the most famous account of mystical ascension in Sufi literature, the ascension of Bāyazīd Bisṭāmī. Rūzbihān himself commented extensively on Bāyazīd's ascension in his *Sharḥ-i shāḥiyyāt*.³ Bāyazīd had described himself as becoming a bird with a body of oneness, and wings of everlastingness, flying in an atmosphere without quality until he reached an eternal tree, of which he ate the fruit; he then realized that all of this vision was a deceit, a trick of his own imagination.⁴ Rūzbihān in his commentary amplified on the imagery of wings and flight, introducing, for example, the moth-like burning of the wings of the soul in the flame of divine majesty. The entire sequence of Bāyazīd's vision, if understood as a return of the soul-bird to the heavenly garden, fits very well with Rūzbihān's symbolic picture of the bird's flight to its nest on the branch of the celestial tree, where it will sing to its beloved the song of its pain. In one variation on this theme, Rūzbihān says,

The pigeon of temporality escaped the beak of the falcon of love. It spread its wings in the atmosphere of identity, near the *Simurgh* of the orient of eternity, and it flew at the edge of union. Then, with the tongueless tongue of "I cannot count your praise," it began to tell secrets to the bird of pre-eternity. When it was finished with the hidden secret, it thought that there was no one else but itself.⁵

In the end, the images of birds, wings, and ascensions are only images, figures through which the soul attempts to comprehend its own nature. Therefore Bāyazīd

1. *Ibid.*, p. 316. For the well-known *hadīth*, "I cannot count your praise," see Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), pp. 126, 162, 222; Badi' al-Zamān Furūzānfar, *Aḥādīth-i Mathnawī*, Intishārāt-i Dānishgāh-i Tehran, 283 (Tehran: Chāp-khāna-yi Dānishgāh 1334/1956), p. 2, no. 3.

2. *'Arā'is al-bayān fi haqā'iq al-Qur'ān* (Calcutta 1883), I, 3, trans. Alan Godlas, "The Qur'anic Hermeneutics of Rūzbihān al-Baqlī," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Berkeley. I would like to express my thanks to Alan Godlas for bringing this passage to my attention.

3. *Sharḥ-i shāḥiyyāt*, p. 553.

4. *Mashrab al-arwāḥ*, p. 284.

1. *Abḥar al-'āshiqīn*, p. 106: "When the caravans of intellects pick up the burdens of the spirit's practice, flight in the atmosphere of the heaven of eternity becomes easy. The soul reaches the beloved's place of visitation, the bird of love joins the cage of the bird of intimacy in the station of meditation, and the hunters' trap catches the birds of manifestation in the desert of the heart."

2. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

3. *Sharḥ-i shāḥiyyāt*, pp. 80-82. See my *Words of Ecstasy*, Appendix, pp. 167-169, for a translation of this passage. The last sentence of the commentary on p. 169 is to be corrected as follows: "That which he said concerns the eclipse of the Attributes; otherwise, he who is of the Essence — Alas!" For another mystical use of the term "eclipse (*kusūf*)," cf. *Sharḥ-i shāḥiyyāt*, p. 92, line 2.

4. It is surprising that R. C. Zaehner's fanciful theory of the Upanishadic origin of this symbolism has once again been revived, even if in a limited form, by Julian Baldick, in *Mystical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1989). The imagery of wings, birds, and trees is abundantly present in the ascension literature of the Near East from ancient times onwards, and it hardly seems necessary or meaningful to suppose that Bāyazīd could only have learned of such an image from Indian sources, which in any case have altogether different structures.

5. *Sharḥ-i shāḥiyyāt*, p. 401. For other allusions to Bāyazīd's ascension, cf. *ibid.*, pp. 22, 129, 167, 214; *Risālat al-quds*, pp. 29 (quoted above, p. 361), 31, *Abḥar al-'āshiqīn*, pp. 3, 124.

ultimately denounced them as a deceit.

The fundamental experiences of the soul in tension toward the divine need to find expression, however. Sometimes this can be done verbally, through the abstract technical terms of Sufism, through the ecstatic expressions of the mystics, or through scriptural passages that can act as the locus for the human-divine encounter. But it is also necessary for these experiences to take form, to be refracted in the medium of consciousness and assume the density of symbols taken from the natural world. Then, as Rumi put it, the secret of the beloved can be revealed through stories about others. The poetic imagination uses imagery to express experience. If the poet is successful, the images will continue to function transparently; if the poet is less successful, the images will still work on the level of abstract allegory. But from the point of view of the mystic, the images become false when they solidify to the point of blocking out vision altogether, and take on an importance in themselves. The symbolism of birds and flight always remained, for Rūzbihān, a pliant and dynamic one, in which the lover's nightingale at any moment might be transformed into the beloved's *Simurgh*. The alienation of existence was felt as a cage, from which the soul sought escape by flight, at last to find the heavenly garden, or even to perch on the wrist of the celestial hunter. The soul's ascent through self-transcendence was symbolized by the burning or ripping away of its wings, which were ever replaced by new ones. Birds and flight imagery thus formed an extensive complex of images from the natural world, one which was particularly well adapted for the expression of the realities of the soul. Rūzbihān reminds us that the flight of the bird covers the distance between heaven and earth; its arrival on earth and its departure to heaven imitate and embody the journey of the soul from its origin to its end, just as the bird's song can praise God or deliver a scriptural epiphany to humanity. When, therefore, we read Persian poets telling for the thousandth time of the nightingale's song to the rose, or the bird who nests in eternity, we should not be lulled into dullness, anaesthetized by mere repetition. Mystical authors like Rūzbihān can help us recover the experiential power of a symbol even when it becomes threadbare in the hands of lesser writers. Then, perhaps, when we encounter these symbols, we will follow the advice of one of Rūzbihān's followers, and recall that "These are the places of the descent of the *Simurgh* of the spirit . . . [and] the ascent of the 'Anqā of the heart."¹

1. Ilāhī Simābi, *Manāzil al-qulūb*, in *Rūzbihān-nāma*, p. 404.