

Who Is Alive: the **More** or the **Less** The intersemiotic translation of “The Conference of the Birds”¹

Written by: Leila Sadeghi



Farid al-din Attar (1146-1221), a Persian poet, composed his masterpiece ‘The Conference of the Birds’ (Mantiq al-tair) in 1177. Although other writers, notably Avicenna (980-1037), Mohammad Al-Ghazali (1058– 1112) and others authored similar works before him, the version attributed to Attar is considered by most scholars to be aesthetically superior to the others. Furthermore, a number of different intersemiotic translations have been done from Attar’s work which reflects the significance of his work.

How the Birds gather in a Conference

According to the poem’s plot, thirty birds gather to decide who is to be their king. The wisest of them (the hoopoe) suggests that they should seek out the legendary Simorgh, a bird more or less analogous in the Western tradition to the mythical Phoenix. “Simorgh” literally translated means “thirty birds” and functions in Attar’s version of the poem as a metaphor for God. When the assembly of these thirty birds at last reaches the Simorgh nest, they find only their own reflections gazing back at them from the surface of a lake.

Attar organizes his poem so that each part is narrated by a different bird, and eventually the thirty individual frame stories accumulate to produce a single effect, uniting in a single construct-- a multiform but coherent and therefore superior bird. Because of its distinctive structure, Attar’s work is, by definition, an early example of macrofiction.

What is macrofiction?

According to Van Dijk, it is possible to interpret many phenomena as “wholes” (macrostructures), i.e. as cognitive units of some kind, which with respect to the relationships between their various “parts,” “sections” or “elements” (microstructures) can be said to realize a “logic of text.” Thus, macrostructure could be considered as plot, as either summary or outline of the idea structures and/or substructures of the particular text, or as large-scale statement of the content of a text. This part-whole relation, in my formulation of the concepts as they apply generally to poetry and to Attar’s poem in particular, can be analyzed into a more basic cognitive notion called macrofiction. Not only does this formulation apply to specific properties of different thematically unified narrative macrostructures, but it also applies to those modular, loosely aligned structures joined together by transtextual elements to build an unspoken but implied backstory and to build larger and more intricate narrative arcs as well. This technique of ordering in Persian storytelling, in my opinion, starts from “The Conference of the Birds” (Manteq-ol-teyr) (Sadeghi, 2012). The structures of various narrations by the different bird-narrators (the

micro-fictions) share a similar and predictable pattern (the logic of the text) in which all the elements are in harmony with the lexical, semantic and mythical properties of the bird-identity which tells the story. In other words, the ideational components of a single framework are simply replicated and the lexical components of the other narrating identities are systematically inserted into the frame. The larger theme of the macrostructure remains the unchanged but is further elaborated by each successive narrator.

Three levels of a literary work: Evaluation of literariness

Every literary work has to have three levels of conceptual mapping, including attributive, relational and system mapping in Freeman's terminology which are Projection, pragmatic and schema mapping, respectively, in Fauconnier and Turner's terminology. Generally, attributive mapping is a perception of similarity between objects (Freeman, 1998: 255). According to conceptual domain theory, an identified property is mapped in one domain then the resulting pattern is replicated in a different domain. Attributive or projection mapping may "project part of the structure of one domain onto another" (Fauconnier, 1997: 9). Secondly, relational or pragmatic mapping is considered as "sensitivity to relations between objects" (Freeman, 1998: 255) and generalized a small resemblance between the corresponding objects and their relations in terms of cause and effect as well as their contiguity. "The two relevant domains which may be set up locally, typically correspond to two categories of objects, which are mapped onto each other by a pragmatic function" (Fauconnier, 1997: 11). Finally, system or schema mapping refers to mapping based on objects and relations that are highly interconnected, so each element in the source is mapped consistently and is uniquely related to an element in the target (Holyoak & Thagard, 1995: 31). It operates "when a general schema, frame, or model is used to structure a situation in context" (Fauconnier, 1997: 11). The attributive and relational mapping may account for the details and microstructures of a fictional work, and system mapping could reveal its larger ordering rationale, its macrostructure. In addition, system mapping, adapted as a tool of literary criticism, could differentiate and establish the necessary criteria for evaluating two literary works that treat the same subject matter. Since Attar's 'The Conference of the Birds', for instance, was more treasured, imaginative and challenging through the history than Avenic's song, an individual could claim that the structure of Attar's poem, its three levels as well as its macrofiction, not its content, leads to its being a master piece of mystic literature.

The harmony of form and meaning: 'manyness turns to oneness'

"The Conference of the Birds" includes 196 secondary stories, each one containing approximately fifteen couplets. All of them share a common pattern with only modest variations in lexical and semantic elements to accommodate each different narrating identity. The narrative arc moves from variety (manyness) to unity (oneness), and this progression is the same in all the stories. However, they represent the multiplicity of voices and variants of the main character. Traditional embellishments, like the introduction and the opening verses of this work, transform into a part of the main body through the holistic interpretation of the work, rather than as some opening verses.

The introduction begins with a verse in the Eulogy of Lord, his prophet and the four Caliphs (who had ruled after the death of Muhammad). Then, the schema mapping of the verse could not be illustrated without reading and analyzing the opening verse which is about thirteen birds. Furthermore, the first line of every bird in the opening includes three lexical and semantic items, which are: welcome terms, the name of the bird (thirteen names) and the attributive terms.

*Dear hoopoe, welcome! You will be our guide...
And you are welcome, finch! who is like Moses...
And welcome, parrot, perched in paradise!...
Welcome, dear partridge -- how you strut with pride...
and so on...*

The stories about birds in the main body of the poem (see couplet 749, ed. Goharin) have the same pattern as well. It is worth to mention, this pattern have been repeated in different parts of the work to show the manyness. That is, the main body starts with three items as well, such as the entrance of the birds, the name of the bird and a modifying term:

*The parrot comes with sweet words...
The partridge approaches joyfully...
The hawk came forward with his head held high...
The owl approached with his distracted air...
and so on...*

For the most part, the frame of all the stories about the birds is repeated except Simorgh (the thirteenth bird of the opening verse), the main narration to which all the other birds' narration united. The items of each narration isomorphically repeated in the rest with replacement of some lexemes. Thus the conceptual mapping of one structure is mapped to all the other birds' stories. It is worthy to mention that the different structure of Simorgh represent the oneness, which is a string united all the stories together. But how different spaces blend to create a new space?

According to Fauconnier, blending theory could operate on more than one domain or space and inherits partial structure from the input spaces and has emergent structure of its own. It works on two input mental spaces to yield a third space, the blend. A poem may be formed from lots of blending spaces and some parallel, simultaneous or crossed system mappings which refer to a macro-system mapping as well. In fact, through reading the epic, an individual meet a number of different entities attributed to other different entities to make a new space. According to the first lines of the poem, for instance, hoopoe and the king Solomon blended to create a new character, the hoopoe as a prophet or guide, as following:

*Dear **hoopoe**, welcome! You will be our guide;
It was on you King Solomon relied
To carry secret messages between
His court and distant Sheba's lovely queen.
He knew your language and you knew his heart --
As his close confidant you learnt the art
Of holding demons captive underground,
And for these valiant exploits you were crowned.*

*And you are welcome, **finch**! Rise up and play
Those liquid notes that steal men's hearts away;
Like Moses you have seen the flames burn high
On Sinai's slopes and there you long to fly,
Like him avoid cruel Pharaoh's hand, and seek
Your promised home on Sinai's mountain peak.
There you will understand unspoken words
Too subtle for the ears of mortal birds.*

*And welcome, **parrot**, perched in paradise!
And so on.*

(Darbandi and Davis, 1984)

There are, therefore, some input spaces which blend to create a new phenomenon (a Prophet bird that is as seeker) for all the mentioned birds. To see the structure of the first story (Hoopoe), which is repeated for the parrot, hawk and others, see the table 1.

<i>Input: seeker</i>	<i>Input: bird</i>	<i>Input: Prophet</i>	
Traveler	Hoopoe	Solomon	<i>Character</i>
Truth goer	return flight	Be guided	<i>Attributive</i>
Valley's habitant	Messenger	Messenger	<i>Role</i>
God		Queen of Sheba	<i>Goal</i>
Self Knowledge	Language	Language	<i>Vehicle</i>
Secret	Crown	Secret	<i>Valuable object</i>
Ego		Demons	<i>Obstacle</i>
Austerity		Prison	<i>Obstacle</i>
Uniting		palace	<i>Finish</i>
<i>Components from Seeker's domain</i>	<i>Components from Hoopoe's domain</i>	<i>Components from Solomon's domain</i>	<i>Generic space</i>

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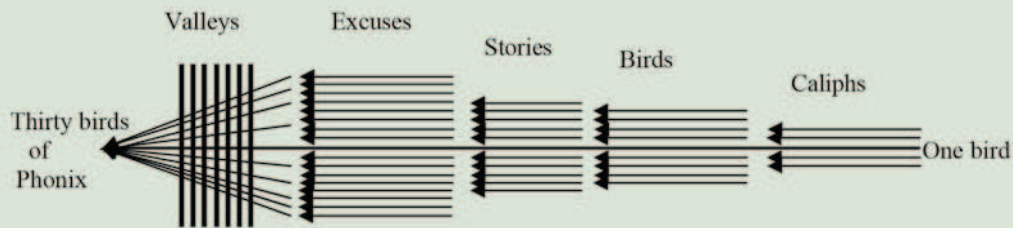
graph TD
    A([Components from Seeker's domain]) --- D([Blending space  
Prophet + bird +  
seeker])
    B([Components from Hoopoe's domain]) --- D
    C([Components from Solomon's domain]) --- D

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Table-1. Conceptual blending of the Hoopoe's story in the opening verse

Figure 1. The interaction of System mapping and Macro structures of “The Conference of the Birds”

Here, attributive and relational mappings have created the metaphor which “the Conference of the Birds is like a path toward the phoenix”, “the valleys are like the obstacles in the journey”, “the birds are like the seekers”, “the phoenix is like the shadow of God”, “the stories are like manyness”, “the phoenix is like oneness”, “the path is like the arrow”, etc.



The main schema of the poem is ‘source, path, goal’, a road in which some birds/seekers start to walk, nevertheless the obstacles or stages guided by a prophet/head. The main path includes many secondary roads (multiplicity/ manyness) that the seeker starts his journey from manyness (source) to oneness (target). It is the macrostructure of ‘the Conference of the Bird’ which becomes able to be represented by mapping in different media.



Picture1. ‘Conference of the Birds’, Juan Ford, 2011

Juan Ford’s ‘Conference of the Birds’ installation exhibited at the Footscray Community Arts Centre in 2011 is considered an intersemiotic translation of Attar’s ‘the Conference of the Bird’. According to Ford’s installation, conflicting Attar’s work, a large number of black birds gather to start a journey, but just one small bird stands back from the flock, sitting on the earth and picking up seeds. The flock seems to be a large black spot, a black monster, including different sorts of birds. It is worth to mention that Ford’s work converse the logic of the story, which is small group of seekers can pave the way, so here a large number of birds gather to take a trip, while just one bird is not going to be a seeker, but a seeder. It means that one bird seems not to be a loser in Ford’s installation.

The black spot seems to be an enormous creature, a single theme or voice as a string which links all the other voices or birds to one. In other words, Simorgh (phoenix) resembles a large black monster contains birds’ moving nowhere. This large spot which refers to a large bird, the phoenix, is moving toward an ambiguous purpose. The phoenix seems to be like a connecting string which unites all the other birds/stories/voices. The birds’ gathering as one entity has slightly similar structure with the arrow in figure 2, in which the microstructure consists of a number of different birds with different styles of flying. However, there are three small different points which leads to a different interpretation. Not only does simply one bird reject to travel with the rest (in contrast to the poem which most of the birds have rejected to continue the spiritual journey), but also all the birds in the painting are not flying forward; it seems they are wandering in the sky without any special purpose. Furthermore, ‘the bird is like a human’ is not expressed directly in Ford’s installation. In the poem, the birds could speak and treat like the human being, so the metaphor of ‘bird is similar to human’ is created. As a result, whole the story of the birds is mapped on the whole story of human’s life. In the installation, however, the title of the work, ‘The conference of the Birds’, as a paratext may activate the metaphor of ‘bird is like a human’.

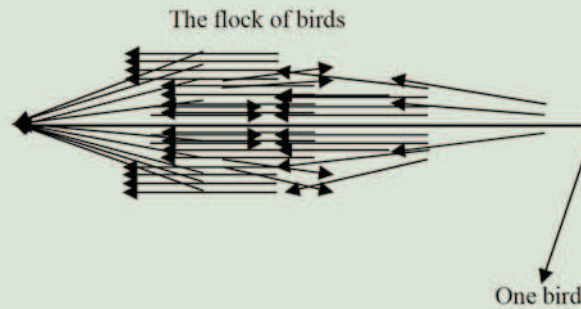


Figure 3- system mapping of “the conference of the birds” in Ford’s installation

To sum up, Ford has changed the macrostructure of the poem in his intersemiotic translation. He expresses his point of view about life through extracting one bird, which signifies focusing on temporary goal, picking up the seeds. As a large number of birds are not thinking about the seed, but wandering in the sky, it seems Ford is criticizing Attar’s point of view about perfect contemplation. What is Ford’s message in his work: stick to the current moment, live and enjoy the life? The following mapping displays how an author could express his point of view through changing a part of macrostructure of a text as well as the relations between structures which leads to a different macrofiction.



Picture2. ‘Conference of the Birds’, Tom Block, 2009.

Another work with the same title, ‘Conference of the Birds’, painted by Tom Block may offer a different intersemiotic translation of Attar’s story about the birds. This work is exhibited at District’s Hamiltonian Gallery in 2009. Block has explored the birds’ journey as urban tale in the series of his works, including a number of panels that all are considered as one, titled ‘the conference of the bird’. Each panel was six feet high, and altogether measures 62.5 feet wide. Thus, Block’s presentation attractively reflects the same pattern of the poem systematically. In other words, it represents the ‘manyness of realities’ (the birds) which are incorporated into a ‘unity of existence’ (the phoenix) in the form of a visual art. In actual fact, the ‘the manyness turn to be oneness’ schema mapped from the poem’s structure to the painting’s presentation system by putting a number of panels next to each other for creating a larger work. Block translates the poem’s macrofiction intersemiotically through mapping the whole structure or system of the poem into his work, so the poem’s macrostructure, which is ‘integrating many objects to one object’, is mapped onto the paintings, on the contrary to Ford’s work but with the same general point of view and interpretation.



Picture3. Three panels of 'Conference of the Birds', Tom Block, 2009.

Each panel may appear at first a chaotic graffiti-like art work; while with a closer look, it refers to the totality of human interaction with the world around them, as Attar's "birds" metaphorically have met each other in a conference to start a journey, a shared road, a common way of living. It is significant that just a few birds (human) who gathered as a social community reached the end which was itself another beginning for another journey as well. The rest of birds or human missed the journey, the goal, the evolution, the right style of living, the experience of being a part of one entity and some similar signifiers.

In fact, Block's work is a precisely 'orchestrated series of images echoing the allegorical quest of thirty birds in the spiritual epic' of Attar, the Persian poet. What Block has done is translating the written text and its structure into a visual media by his point of view, focusing on the target domain, the people's life and their communication. Although Ford's installation has explored the function of seeker and loser by changing the macro-structure, Block expresses a similar idea by omitting the birds as source domain of the metaphor, just speaking about the target, the human itself. However, Attar in his poem focuses on the birds' life, the source domain, not the target domain, to express human's life. For Block, the goal of knowledge is action, not sitting in perfect contemplation. The meaning here is the social life with the benefit of wisdom, not spirituality, leads to integrity of every single person to a larger community, which is culture and civilization.

1. Copy-editor: Jeff Streeby

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