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13 THE LANGUAGE OF THE BIRDS

René Guénon

Wa-ṣ-ṣāffāti ṣāffan,
Faz-zājirāti zajran,
Fat-tāliyāti dhikran. . . .
By those ranged in ranks,
And who drive away, repulsing,
And who recite the invocation. . . .
Qurʾān 37:1-3

There is often mention, in diverse traditions, of a mysterious language called "the language of the birds"—a designation that is clearly symbolic, for the very importance that is attributed to the knowledge of this language, as the prerogative of a high initiation, does not allow us to take it literally. We read, for example, in the *Qurʾān*: "And Solomon was David's heir. And he said, O mankind! Lo! we have been taught the language of the birds (*ullimnā manṭiq aṭ-ṭayr*) and have been given abundance of all things" (27:16). Elsewhere we read of heroes who, having vanquished the dragon, like Siegfried in the Nordic legend, instantly understand the language of the birds; and this makes it easy to interpret the symbolism in question. Victory over the dragon has, as its immediate consequence, the conquest of immortality, which is represented by some object the approach to which is guarded by the dragon; and this conquest essentially implies the reintegration into the center of the human state, that is, into the point where communication is established with the higher states of the being. It is this communication which is represented by the understanding of the language of the birds; and in fact birds are frequently taken as symbols of the angels, that is, precisely, of the higher states. We have had occasion elsewhere[1] to cite the Gospel parable that refers, in this very sense, to "the birds of the heavens" which come and rest in the branches of the tree, the same tree that represents the axis which passes through the center of each state of the being and links all the states with each other.[2]

[1] *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedānta*, chap. 3.

[2] In the Medieval symbol of the *Peridexion* (a corruption of the word *Paradision*), one sees the birds on the branches of the tree and the dragon at its foot (cf. *The Sym-*

In the Qurʾānic text given above, the term *aṣ-ṣāffāt* is taken as meaning literally the birds, but as denoting symbolically the angels (*al-malāʾikah*); and thus the first verse signifies the constitution of the celestial or spiritual hierarchies.[3] The second verse expresses the fight of the angels against the demons, the celestial powers against the infernal powers, that is, the opposition between higher and lower states.[4] In the Hindu tradition this is the struggle of the *Devas* against the *Asuras* and also, according to a symbolism which comes very close to the symbolism of our theme, the combat of *Garuda* against the *Nāga* which is, moreover, none other than the above mentioned serpent or dragon. The *Garuda* is the eagle, and elsewhere it is replaced by other birds such as the ibis, the stork, the heron, all enemies and destroyers of reptiles.[5] Finally, in the third verse, the angels are said to be reciting the *dhikr* which is generally interpreted as meaning here the *Qurʾān;* not the *Qurʾān* that is expressed in human language, needless to say, but its eternal prototype inscribed on the "Guarded Tablet" (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūẓ*), which like Jacob's ladder extends from the heavens to the earth, and therefore throughout all the degrees of universal existence.[6] Likewise, it is said in the Hindu tradition

bolism of the Cross, chap. 9). In a study on the symbolism of the "bird of Paradise" (*Le Rayonnement intellectuel*, May-June 1930) Charbonneau-Lassay has reproduced a sculpture in which this bird is represented by only a head and wings, a form frequently used to depict the angels (cf. *Le Bestiaire du Christ*, chap. 46, p. 425).

[3] The word *ṣaff* or "rank," is one of those many words which have been suggested as the origin of the word *ṣūfī* and *taṣawwuf;* and although this derivation does not seem acceptable from a purely linguistic point of view, it is none the less true, as with many other derivations of the same kind, that it represents one of the ideas really contained in these terms: for the "spiritual hierarchies" are essentially identical with the degrees of initiation.

[4] This opposition is expressed in each being by the two tendencies, ascending and descending, called respectively *sattva* and *tamas* by the Hindu doctrine. It is also that which Mazdeism symbolizes by the antagonism between light and darkness, personified respectively by *Ormuzd* and *Ahriman.*

[5] See on this subject the remarkable works of Louis Charbonneau-Lassay on the animal symbols of Christ (cf. *Le Bestiaire du Christ*). It is important to note that the symbolic opposition of bird and serpent does not apply except when the serpent is considered under its malefic aspect; on the contrary, under its benefic aspect it sometimes is united with the bird as in the case of *Quetzalcohuatl* of the ancient Meso-American traditions. Moreover, one also finds in Mexico the combat of the eagle with the serpent. As regards the association of bird and serpent, we can recall the Gospel text: "Be ye wise as serpents and guileless as doves" (Matt. 10:16).

[6] On the symbolism of the book to which this directly relates, see *The Symbolism of the Cross*, chap. 14.

that the *Devas*, in their fight against the *Asuras*, protect themselves (*achhandayan*) by the recitation of the hymns of the *Veda*, and that it is for this reason that the hymns received the name of *chhandas*, a word which denotes "rhythm." The same idea is contained in the word *dhikr* which, in Islamic esoterism, is used of rhythmic formulas that correspond exactly to Hindu *mantras*. The repetition of these formulas aims at producing a harmonization of the different elements of the being, and at causing vibrations which, by their repercussions throughout the immense hierarchy of states, are capable of opening up a communication with the higher states, which in a general way is the essential and primordial purpose of all rites.

This brings us back directly and very clearly to what was said above about the "language of the birds," which we can also call "angelic language," and of which the image in the human world is rhythmic speech; for the "science of rhythm," which admits of many applications, is the ultimate basis of all the means that can be brought into action in order to enter into communication with the higher states. That is why an Islamic tradition says that Adam, in the earthly Paradise, spoke in verse, that is, in rhythmic speech; this is related to that "Syrian language" (*lughah suryāniyyah*) of which we spoke in our previous study on the "science of letters,"* and which must be regarded as translating directly the "solar and angelic illumination" as this manifests itself in the center of the human state. This is also why the Sacred Books are written in rhythmic language which, clearly, makes of them something quite other than the mere "poems," in the purely profane sense, which the anti-traditional bias of the modern critics would have them to be. Moreover, in its origins poetry was by no means the vain "literature" that it has become by a degeneration resulting from the downward march of the human cycle, and it had a truly sacred character.[7] Traces of this can be found up to classical antiquity in the West, when poetry was still called the "language of the Gods," an expression equivalent to those we have indicated, in as

* Editors' Note: See "The Science of Letters," in René Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, chap. 8.

[7] It can be said, moreover, in a general way, that the arts and sciences have become profane by just this kind of degeneration which deprives them of their traditional nature and, by way of consequence, of any higher significance. We have spoken of this in *The Esoterism of Dante*, chap. 2, and *The Crisis of the Modern World*, chap. 4 [Editors' Note: See also René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, chap. 8].

much as the Gods, that is, the *Devas*,[8] are, like the angels, the representation of the higher states. In Latin, verses were called *carmina*, a designation relating to their use in the accomplishment of rites; for the word *carmen* is identical to the Sanskrit *karma* which must be taken here in its special sense of "ritual action";[9] and the poet himself, interpreter of the "sacred language" through which the divine Word appears, was *vates*, a word which defined him as endowed with an inspiration that was in some way prophetic. Later, by another degeneration, the *vates* was no longer anything more than a common "diviner,"[10] and the carmen (whence the English word *charm*) no more than a "spell," that is, an operation of low magic. There again is an example of the fact that magic, even sorcery, is what subsists as the last vestige of vanished traditions.*

These few indications should be enough to show how inept it is to mock at stories that speak of the "language of the birds." It is all too easy and too simple to disdain as superstitions everything that one does not understand. But the ancients, for their part, knew very well what they meant when they used symbolic language. The real "superstition," in the strictly etymological sense (*quod superstat*), is that which outlives itself, in short, the "dead letter." But even this very survival, however lacking in interest it may seem, is nevertheless not so contemptible; for the Spirit, which "bloweth where it listeth" and when it listeth, can always come and revivify symbols and rites, and restore to them, along with their lost meaning, the plenitude of their original virtue.

[8] The Sanskrit *Deva* and the Latin *deus* are one and the same word.

[9] The word "poetry" also derives from the Greek *poiein* which has the same signification as the Sanskrit root *kri*, whence comes *karma*, which is found again in the Latin *creare* understood in its primitive acceptation; at the beginning, therefore, it was a question of something altogether different from a mere artistic or literary production in the profane sense that Aristotle seems to have had uniquely in view in speaking of what he called the "poetic sciences."

[10] The word "diviner" itself is no less deviant from its meaning; for etymologically it is nothing else than *divinus*, signifying here "interpreter of the Gods." The "auspices" (from *aves spicere*, "to observe the birds"), omens drawn from the flight and song of birds, are more closely related to the "language of the birds," understood in this case in the most literal sense but nevertheless still identified with the "language of the Gods," who were thought to manifest their will by means of these omens. The birds thus played the part of "messengers," analogous—but on a very low plane—to the part that is generally attributed to the angels (whence their very name, for this is precisely the meaning of the Greek *aggelos*).

* Editors' Note: On this question of the origins of magic and sorcery, see René Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, chap. 22, "Seth," the final paragraph.

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Features in

The Underlying Religion: An Introduction to the Perennial Philosophy

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