



MYSTICAL THOUGHT

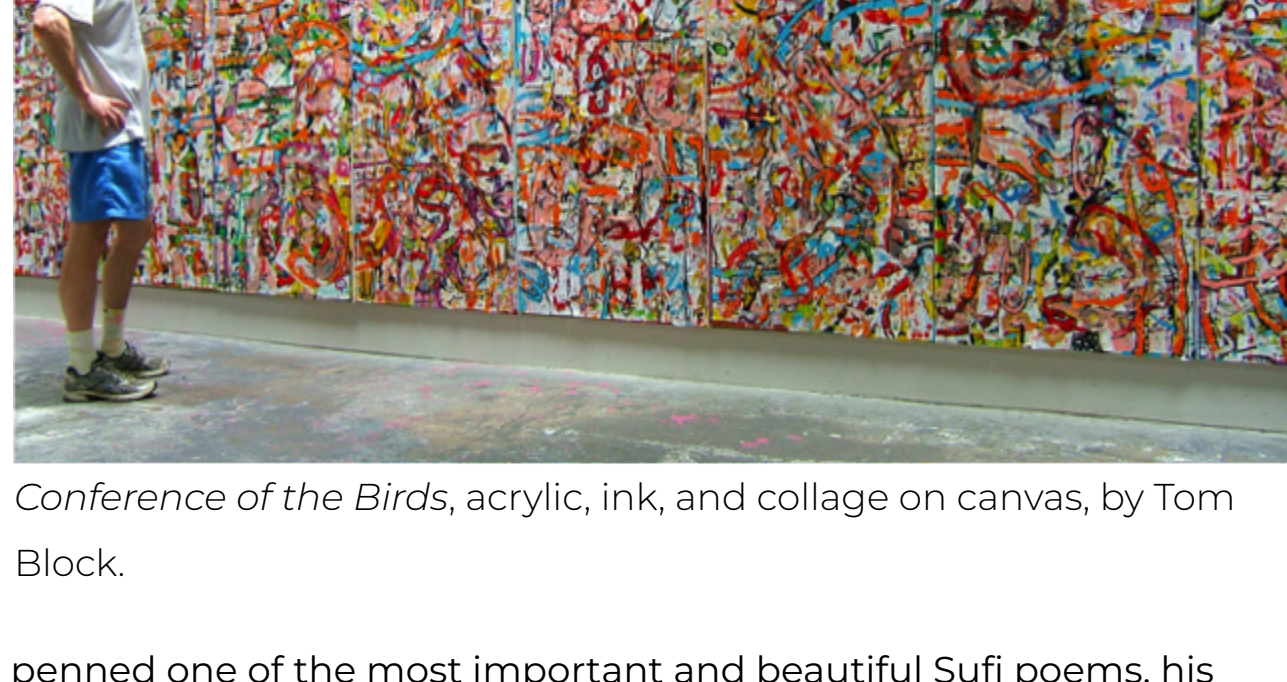
Farid ud-Din Attar

The Conference of the Birds

28 July 2017

This series explores the ideas of three mystical thinkers, and looks at how their philosophies can be applicable to theatrical work.

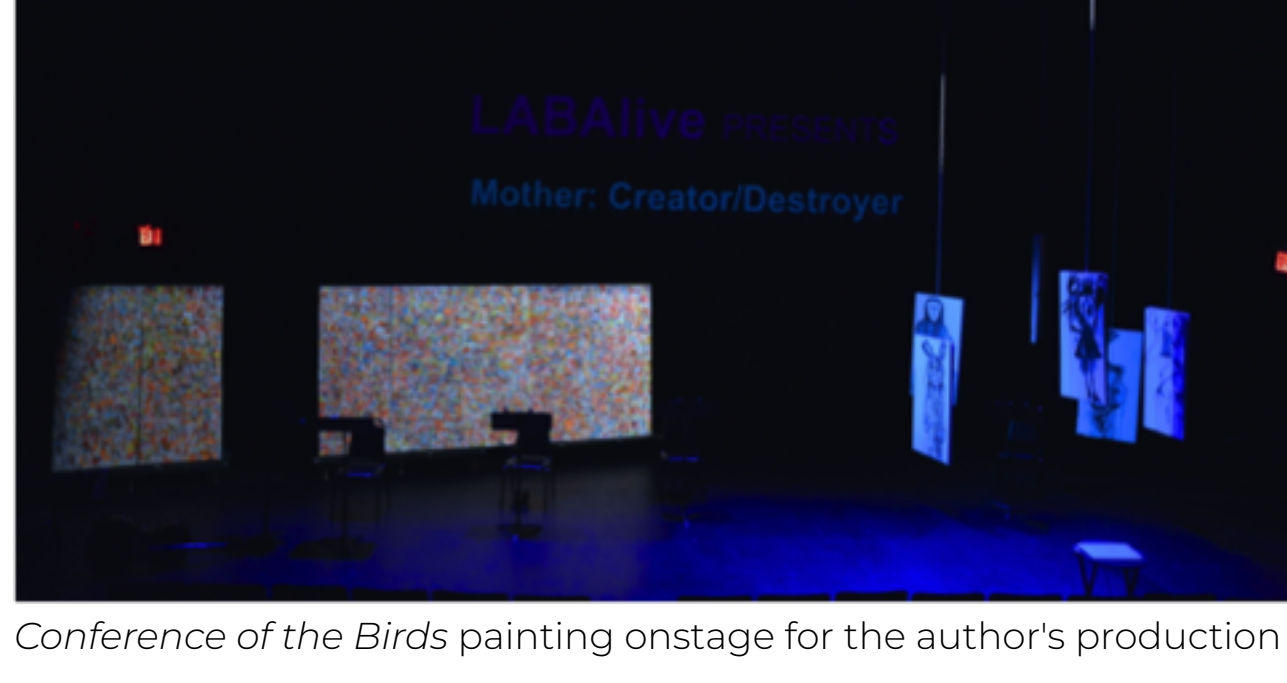
Farid ud-Din Attar (d. 1221 CE), born in Nishapur, Iran, was one of the most important Sufi poets. The son of a prosperous chemist, he was a pharmacist who personally attended to a very large number of customers. Like many Sufi thinkers, Attar eventually abandoned his day job and traveled widely on a spiritual pilgrimage, throughout the Arab world, South Asia, and along the Silk Road, as far away as Turkestan. During these travels, he met with Sufi leaders and studied their ideas. He then returned to his hometown to continue studying, writing, and promote Sufi thought.



Conference of the Birds, acrylic, ink, and collage on canvas, by Tom Block.

Attar penned one of the most important and beautiful Sufi poems, his allegorical journey *Conference of the Birds*. In this piece, the birds of the world gather to attempt a voyage to see the "simorgh," a mythical bird representing God. However, the vast majority of them—each individually representing a human fault that prevents people from realizing God-consciousness—die along the way, in one of the valleys. The trip to the end of time passes through seven horrifying vales:

- The Valley of Quest
- The Valley of Love
- The Valley of Understanding
- The Valley of Independence and Detachment
- The Valley of Unity
- The Valley of Astonishment and Bewilderment
- The Valley of Deprivation and Death



Conference of the Birds painting onstage for the author's production of his multimedia play *La Bestia: Sweet Mother*, along with paintings from his in *Garden of the Mystical Redoubt* series.

According to Attar and the Sufis, spiritual attainment extinguishes the human ego, the sense of "I am." Sufis assure that the individual self is but an illusion, and all truth resides in the universal "naught," or nothingness at the heart of being. Realization of unity takes place through losing the individual sense of self in the divine ocean of naught, "seas that have no shores." As Attar notes in his *Conference of the Birds*:

If you kill the self, the darkest night will be illuminated with your light. If you would flee from evil and its pain swear never to repeat this "I" again!

This idea of killing the "self" provides a powerful and counterintuitive inspiration for a theatrical production. For theatre does not exist without conflict, but conflict is invariably imagined as taking place between two people—two "I's" adrift (as Attar would assure) in the ignorance of self, fighting against each other to attain some kind of un-shareable goal or supremacy over the other.

With the conflict moved to within the protagonist's head, the rest of the personages in the piece become twisted representations of the internal struggle of the hero.

Applying this central mystical ideal of effacing the individual ego to theatre shifts all conflict into the head of the main character, as they wrestle with the "self's squint-eyed" gaze: "part dog, part parasite, part infidel."

This influences a production in profound ways.

First and most importantly, it changes the presentation of all but the main character. With the conflict moved to within the protagonist's head, the rest of the personages in the piece become twisted representations of the internal struggle of the hero. In a sense, this is a far more realistic presentation of "reality" than the current theatrical aesthetic, in which each character is presented from an "objective," omniscient point of view. In point of fact, each of us lives within a narcissistic bubble, experiencing and judging the world from our personal standpoint.

Attar's point of view can influence language, set design, action, blocking—all aspects of the production, which become expressions of the protagonist's struggle. For instance, each character might linguistically mimic the central character, speaking with a similar lilt, vocabulary, or nervous tic, blurring the line between interior and exterior experience.



Adrienne's Dilemma, by Tom Block.

Language might also be used in a particular manner, with the interior character having a particular accent or vocabulary choice and all of the other characters sharing a different trait, thereby highlighting the struggle within the hero's head. This difference in language—with the main character offset against the others—would throw the protagonist into relief against a backdrop of verbal similarity.

Costume and set designs might also be affected. These props would no longer represent the individual aspects of each character, but the way they were perceived through the scrim of the protagonist's vision. Costumes might bleed into the absurd, as a seemingly normal lawyer's vision was envisioned as terrifying, impotent, or perhaps as bland as beige. Hatred, love, anger, or another strong emotion toward other individuals in the play might all be represented by clothing choices. These would not be representative of each character's personality, but represent the feelings of the protagonist, the only point of view that mattered.

Set design would also be affected. The stage would represent the inside of the main character's mind, as they attempted to free themselves of their "self." Spaces might seem enormous or tiny; the individual might be represented as adrift, or straddling a world they thought could be controlled. Color might bleed from the environment, turning all to white, to represent the nearing of the goal of the divine naught. Or the space might be presented in riotous colors, indicating an inability of the main character to achieve the stated goal.

It should be noted that the idea of setting the play within the main character's head doesn't necessarily have to lead toward spiritual maturity. This concept of presenting a world approaches our lived reality far closer than the standard method to which we are accustomed: with every character presented from some omniscient point of view, with each enjoying an independent reality. We do not live like that. We live far more within Attar's vision, than the contemporary theatrical zeitgeist.

This is but one small iota of inspiration one might take from Attar's work. *The Conference of the Birds* is rich in symbolism, heightened language, metaphysical and spiritual ideas, bizarre stories, characters, and a plethora of other potential motivations. The beautiful book awaits your perusal.



THOUGHTS FROM THE CURATOR

This series explores the ideas of three mystical thinkers and looks at how their philosophies can be applied to theatrical work.

Mystical.Thought

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ELIZABETH FINKLER 5 years ago



I had the honor of playing Hoopoe in the Enacte Arts production of "The Conference of the Birds" in San Jose last year. Ours was staged as a massive multi-cultural dance fantasy. It was a wonderful, spiritual experience. I hope I can do it again.

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TOM BLOCK 5 years ago

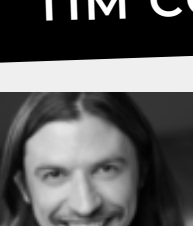


Elizabeth, that sounds like a fascinating production -- is there any video of it anywhere to share? I'd love to get a look at it! Thanks for sharing, Tom

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TIM COLLINGWOOD 5 years ago

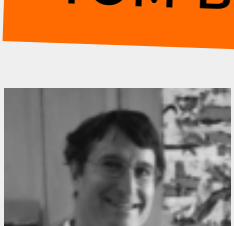


Thank you for this article. I am a huge fan of Rumi, but would like to go beyond my comfort zone. I love Sufi Islam.

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TOM BLOCK 5 years ago

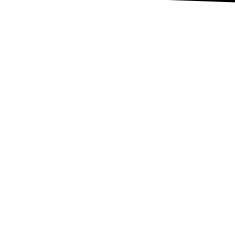
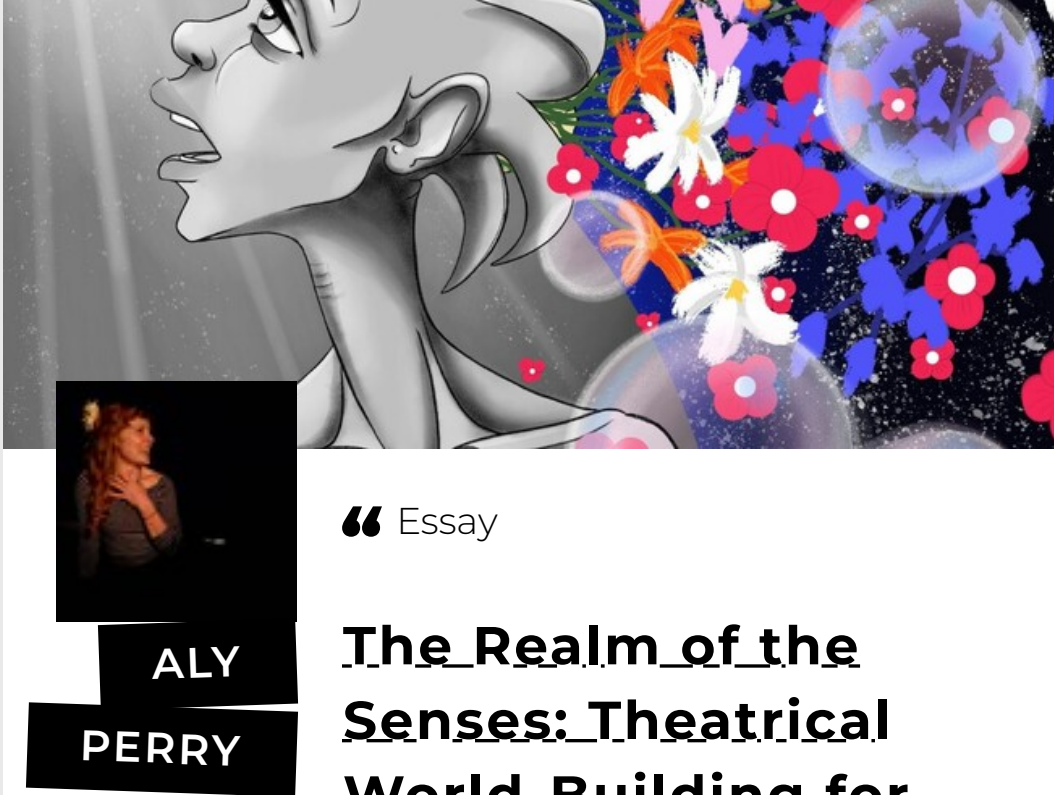


Tim! Sorry I missed this -- Attar is a spiritual brother of Rumi, and definitely not outside of your "comfort zone." Maybe try Epicetus or Plotinus or Marcus Aurelius for that.]The Conference of the Birds is an eminently readable tract -- hope you get the chance to check it out. All my best, Tom

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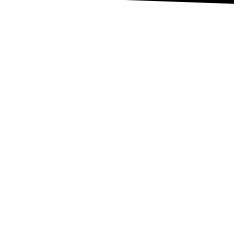
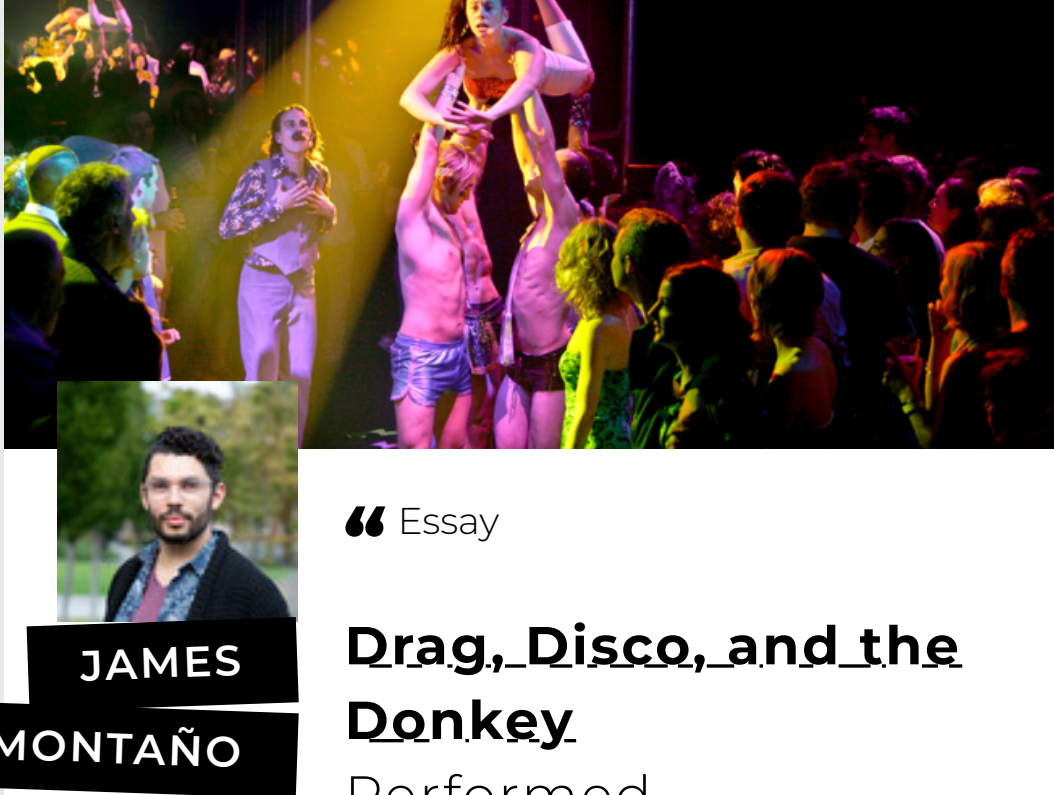


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