


REVIEW

The Poetics of Spiritual Instruction: Farid al-Din ‘Attar and Persian Sufi Didacticism. Austin O’Malley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023). Pp. 304. Hardcover \$120, paper, \$24.95. ISBN 978147447512

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Many critical traditions posit a distance between literature and reality, a distance marked and measured in different times and places by a range of verbs: literature imitates, copies, symbolizes, enacts, or analogically corresponds to the world. How have scholars, and authors themselves, conceived of the remove between a literary representation of a thing and that thing itself? And how do nonspecialist readers, past and present, mind that gap? Such foundational questions about experiences of reading, the nature of literature, and the structure of a text’s possible relations to the world are at the heart of *The Poetics of Spiritual Instruction*, Austin O’Malley’s magnificent study of Farid al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d.1221) and the Persianate devotional and literary cultures to which he belonged. O’Malley’s exploration of the reader-literature-reality nexus in ‘Aṭṭār’s corpus underwrites one of the book’s most exciting interventions: the recovery for a modern readership of the much-maligned category of didactic literature. Since the nineteenth century, English-reading audiences have often reacted with hostility to texts tinged with homily; the charge is that such works are rendered fundamentally unliterary by their rigid moralizing register and suppression of interpretive freedom. There is no doubt that ‘Aṭṭār’s corpus falls squarely into the “didactic literature” category: his fame rests on long narrative poems (*maṣnavīs*) and other works whose explicit aim is to intervene in readers’ lives and reshape their views, choices, and values. However, O’Malley establishes definitively that ‘Aṭṭār’s texts are challenging, aesthetically complex objects that are capable of spurring audiences to read, think, and introspect—even embark on “a symbolic act of spiritual wayfaring” (2). This historical form of reading is recoverable through attention to the texts themselves, and O’Malley unfolds the readerly wayfaring ‘Aṭṭār wants his audience to undergo as an imaginative, surprising, full-bodied event. When ‘Aṭṭār himself reflects on this process, he does not view didacticism as a dry, straightforward transfer of ideas; his aim is to bring about profound, lasting changes in his readers’ lives, a task he understands to be at once spiritual and aesthetic. In other words, contrary to modern impulses, the didactic and the literary cannot, and should not, be prized apart.

O’Malley situates ‘Aṭṭār within the rapidly changing literary and devotional cultures of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries A.D., a time when Sufism was reaching new audiences through the medium of Persian literature. The book’s main claim is that ‘Aṭṭār’s works, which describe and reflect on spiritual transformation, are carefully crafted to affect his audience in such a way that reading itself becomes a spiritually transformative experience. The book’s introduction, seven chapters, and conclusion investigate different metaliterary techniques that undergird ‘Aṭṭār’s didactic poetics. ‘Aṭṭār positions himself as a figure of

authority—like a preacher or shaykh—albeit one who dispenses his teachings in textual form. He describes his poems as a “spiritual guide for everyone” (1). ‘Aṭṭār’s long narrative poems often alternate between homilies and illustrative anecdotes, and chapter 1 shows how this structure derives from real-world pedagogical events (sermons, lectures). As a result, what looks to modern eyes like free-association parataxis in ‘Aṭṭār’s works is actually evidence of pedagogical flexibility and anticipatory responsiveness to audience needs. Chapter 2 connects ‘Aṭṭār’s works to Sufi devotional practices, and O’Malley explains how the *Mukhtār-nāma*, ‘Aṭṭār’s selection of his own quatrains, was explicitly intended for contemplative use (*ta’ammul*, *tafakkur*). ‘Aṭṭār’s pen name was no idle choice. Presenting himself as a “perfumer” and “pharmacist” allows him to elaborate on how his texts could have therapeutic effects on readers, and chapter 3 examines how the organizing metaphor of text-as-medicine is used by ‘Aṭṭār to emphasize the “pragmatic value” of literature for anyone who takes up his recommended “regimen of reading” (91).

Chapters 4 and 5 provide an important corrective to modern readings of *The Conference of the Birds*, ‘Aṭṭār’s famous “allegory of the sufi path” (126). O’Malley reminds us that this work in fact contains no direct description of *taking* the path. Most of the poem is devoted to homiletic discourses between the hoopoe-preacher and an audience of birds who are not yet sufficiently prepared to undertake a spiritual journey; the journey itself is barely elaborated. ‘Aṭṭār’s readers would have understood the importance of such propaedeutic instruction. O’Malley argues that *The Conference of the Birds* is best understood as a “vicarious oral homiletic assembly” (164), and that we should not cherry-pick narratives (as many have done) while discarding the homiletic contexts that the poem takes such care to represent. ‘Aṭṭār’s use of frame stories, which create “recursively nested acts of reading,” allows him to imagine (and shape) readers’ responses to his teachings (181). The resulting narrative complexity—story within story within story—encourages readers to occupy positions of intensifying self-awareness as they are guided toward new understandings of “the soul’s internal relation to the divine” (182). This relation is marked by a deep ontological divide, and chapter 6 examines how ‘Aṭṭār’s works represent “spiritual ascent,” an individual soul’s quest to cross that gulf. The *Muṣibat-nāma*, for example, is a poem in forty parts, corresponding to the forty-day retreat (*chilla*) undertaken in many Sufi traditions. O’Malley reads this poem as a “simulated visionary experience” driven by the mechanics of allegory (10). Chapter 7 analyzes moments of shock and surprise in ‘Aṭṭār’s narratives that upend expectations, prompting readers to reexamine their beliefs. A short conclusion offers final comments on the transformative effects of ‘Aṭṭār’s didactic poetics, focusing on how reading itself becomes “a ritualised, spiritual performance” (253).

Endnotes appear with each chapter, and there is a bibliography and index. Intricately plotted narratives can be hard to summarize, and the use of charts for this purpose is highly effective. For instance, Table 4.1 offers a conspectus of *The Conference of the Birds*, correlating each bird’s objection to spiritual reform with the hoopoe’s response; this both acquaints readers with the basic plot and underscores the presence of repeating patterns of interaction between the hoopoe-preacher and his flock. The book’s only structural weakness is the absence of the original Persian. O’Malley helpfully supplies single words in parentheses, but full transcriptions are not given. Endnotes point to Persian sources, but even specialists may not have access to those editions, and it can take some sleuthing to locate original passages by working back from the translation. One hopes that in the future the series editors will allow transliterated original passages to appear in endnotes or appendices.

Among the book’s major critical achievements is the effective collocation of theories, past and present. ‘Aṭṭār’s corpus thematizes and reflects on its own reception, and on occasion the book invokes twentieth-century reader-response criticism (e.g., Wolfgang Iser, Louise Rosenblatt) and speech-act theory (J. L. Austin). This is done judiciously: modern Euro-American theory is not forced onto premodern Persian texts, nor are such theorists treated as uniquely capable of furnishing critical insights. O’Malley suggests that ‘Aṭṭār

himself elaborates “something like” the reader-response theory Iser and Rosenblatt were pursuing at a different historical moment (5). Leveling the playing field like this has the exciting effect of showing that Iser, Rosenblatt, Austin, and ‘Aṭṭār all have something important to say to each other.

Far more stage time is allotted to premodern theorists, and the book’s extensive, rich engagement with Ibn al-Jawzī, Aḥmad Ghazālī, Ibn Sīnā, and others establishes beyond doubt that ‘Aṭṭār’s didactic poetics belongs to a wider culture of homiletic instruction and devotional practice. O’Malley also reads ‘Aṭṭār’s didactic poems alongside “popular” genres that flourished in courts and throughout the demimonde, and it may be illuminating to expand this line of comparison to include South Asian traditions. Sanskrit narratives are also intensely self-reflexive, and frequently use frame stories to theorize their own didactic functions.¹ One such work available in ‘Aṭṭār’s milieu was the *Pañcatantra*, the famous Sanskrit collection of edifying fables set in a frame story, which was reworked many times into Arabic and Persian. O’Malley touches on *Kalīla va Dimna* in his discussion of how narrative texts create the fiction of orality (chapter 5), and it may be fruitful to pursue this further. For instance, in the preface to his twelfth-century Persian version, Naṣrullāh Munshī discusses the didactic function of Indian fables in terms strikingly similar to ‘Aṭṭār’s metaliterary reflections. He claims that his text will impart “wisdom and didactic instruction” (*ḥikmat va mau‘izat*) to a wide readership of elites and commoners (*khavāss* and *‘avāmm*); he also writes about processes of reflective close reading (*ta‘ammul*, *tafakkur*, *muṭāla‘at*), and promises that whoever “reads [this text will find that] wisdom gradually settles into their natures.” Naṣrullāh too describes speech (*sukhan*) as a remedy (*dārū*); tales from India are likened to a potent medicinal herb growing in the mountains of the subcontinent that can bring the dead back to life (i.e., guide readers out of ignorance into wisdom).² O’Malley’s meticulous reconstruction of ‘Aṭṭār’s didactic poetics demonstrates how he makes sophisticated use of the same terms quoted above. However, wisdom (*ḥikmat*) for Naṣrullāh is more about cultivating social and political canniness than the kind of spiritual transformation intended by ‘Aṭṭār. It makes complete sense that O’Malley focuses primarily on Sufism, and his elucidation of the devotional, pedagogical, and philosophical contexts that are relevant for ‘Aṭṭār is scrupulous and wide-ranging. But additional comparison with texts that impart not-quite-spiritual teachings (e.g., everyday social know-how, or the slippery politics of good governance) could reveal ‘Aṭṭār’s participation in an even wider culture of transformative textuality—one that includes non-Islamic traditions and spans many varieties of wisdom.

One of the book’s most exciting interventions concerns allegory. In the discussion of ‘Aṭṭār’s poems as allegorical models of spiritual ascent (chapter 6), O’Malley brings Ghazālī’s and Ibn Sīnā’s theories of symbol and likeness into conversation with Northrop Frye’s modern formulation of allegory as sustained double-reference, in which a text’s plot evokes “another simultaneous structure of events or ideas.”³ Instead of accepting this as a universal definition, O’Malley argues that, for ‘Aṭṭār and his readers, an allegorical work’s “narrative surface does not just ‘refer’ to hidden signifieds but . . . grants ontological access to them” (192). This revision of modern assumptions about what allegory is and how it works will certainly be of great interest to scholars across literary studies. It also is a salutary reminder of the provisional and historically bounded nature of English-language concepts that are used in literary criticism all too often as though they had universal purchase.

How exactly did ‘Aṭṭār intend his texts to “grant ontological access” to higher orders of reality? O’Malley answers this question by drawing on concepts of performativity, which form a connecting thread that runs through the book. There is the “performative work”

¹ See, for instance, Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty’s discussion of narrative frames in *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities*.

² Bikhvānand va bi-tadrīj ān ḥikmat-hā dar mizāj-i īshān mutamakkin gardad. Naṣrullāh Munshī, 18.

³ Frye, quoted in O’Malley, 192.

of allegory, which empowers the audience to “reenact” or “insert themselves into a soteriological drama” (207); didactic anecdotes allow readers to “play the role” of someone who has converted to a more spiritual path in life (246); reading itself becomes a “ritual performance in which the reader not only interprets, but enacts” (190); even ‘Aṭṭār himself “performs didacticism” (252). Given the importance of this conceptual register for the book’s claims, at first glance it is curious that the book does not supply a rationale for its use or even a criterion for what counts as “performance”. It is perhaps clear how a charismatic sermon with deft manipulations of an audience’s emotions through preacher-listener interaction could be constructively construed as “performative”. But if a text that describes a sermon is also a “performance” of that sermon, and someone who reads that text “performs” it too, are all these uses of “performance” really getting at the same thing? In the book, at times “performance” seems synonymous with “action”: someone says or does or writes something in public, in the world, with consequential effects on others. But “performance” also tags private events of interior experience, such as a solitary reader working through their own feelings or trying out a new perspective or role. Fascinatingly, O’Malley’s nuanced readings of ‘Aṭṭār’s corpus demonstrate that the intended effect in each example listed above is functionally the same: performances transform participants.

If the framework of performativity summons a host of ambiguities, ultimately this ends up being a critical strength. O’Malley observes that ‘Aṭṭār himself did not subscribe to any lockstep theory about the gap (or lack thereof) between public performance and inward experience, representation and reality. For ‘Aṭṭār, “the didactic event . . . takes on the character of a spiritual exercise, sometimes directly and sometimes in a more symbolic fashion” (253). O’Malley in this way recovers a premodern approach to the problem of art and reality that productively complements and complicates modern pronouncements on this difficult issue. Take Viktor Shklovsky’s monolithic insistence that “the word is not a shadow [of a thing]. It is a thing.”⁴ Or Maya Deren’s more nuanced variation: “The distinction of art is that it is neither simply an expression, of pain, for example, nor an impression of pain, but is itself a form which creates pain.”⁵ Shklovsky and Deren don’t just want to bridge the chasm between art and world; they want to make it disappear. ‘Aṭṭār’s position, on O’Malley’s reading, is more flexible. His style of spiritual instruction in a literary medium relies on possibilities of moving freely between reality and representation, text and world. ‘Aṭṭār’s readerly wayfaring falls along a foggy continuum, which ranges from the purely descriptive, to the symbolic or virtual, to something very real. Trying to gauge where one is on that continuum at any given moment is a crucial part of the reading experience.

The Poetics of Spiritual Instruction is a major contribution to the fields of Persian literature, Islamic studies, reader-response criticism, and religion and literature. O’Malley’s limpid writing style and flawlessly organized arguments will make it interesting and legible for undergraduates and specialists alike. Scholars further afield will find the book’s interventions generative and exportable, and its vindication of didactic literature is brilliant, and long overdue. ‘Aṭṭār’s didactic poetics is not simplistic or mechanical. His works allow for interpretive freedom, even as they guide readers toward “spiritual progress in a literary mode” (256). Nor is his corpus merely versified doctrine. It is sophisticated, nonlinear, even ambiguous; in a word, it is literary. O’Malley makes ‘Aṭṭār’s didacticism come alive as a reader-oriented activity. His texts do things to readers: they animate, shock, recalibrate—and, yes, they also instruct. But, at the same time, there is room for readerly agency and emotion, reflection and imagination. Like the corpus it explores with such care, O’Malley’s *Poetics of Spiritual Instruction* will guide, surprise, delight, reshape, and edify.

⁴ Shklovsky, *O teorii prozy*, 5.

⁵ Deren, *Anagram*, 17.

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