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Judgments of Taste in Translating the Persianate:

‘Attar’s *Ilahi-Nameh* through the Lens of Aesthetics

The contemporary reader of a medieval work of Persian literature encounters numerous difficulties. Chief amongst these is language: even someone fluent in modern Persian will discover arcane vocabulary, obscure references, and possibly encoded messages whose meaning has either vanished or transformed in proceeding centuries. Larger still are the issues of the contemporary Anglophone, to whom not only the language but also a whole scope of idioms, geography, style and format might seem wholly unfamiliar. The latter’s problem becomes compounded by the availability of adequate, critical translations—some of which, as in the present case, are out of print. Further, no matter how “faithful” or literal such a translation may strive to be, it will itself emerge from a panoply of modern paradigms, reflecting both the translator’s own cultural milieu as well as his or her understanding of the original author’s historical context and circumstances.[[1]](#footnote-1) This colors not only the verbiage the translator chooses but also the information he or she proposes to communicate. Ultimately, the reader also brings to bear his or her own comprehension of the material, its sources and contexts, as well as his or her own values, interests, and interpretations. The reader thus ends up much as a gentleman in a barber’s chair, looking into the mirror in front of him at the mirror the barber holds, staring at the back of his own head.

The difficulties encountered in reading medieval poetry need not be treated as obstacles, but rather as opportunities. As Robert Pinsky writes, “Difficulty, after all, is one of life’s greatest pleasures.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The difficulties encountered in engaging with the medieval tradition may be manifold: it is precisely these manifold difficulties that make these texts interesting. Walter Andrews, in his introduction to *Ottoman Lyric Poetry,* [[3]](#footnote-3) outlines how medieval poetry stands as a bridge between the era of the classic and the modern, and thus blurs the lines upon which many modern notions of inherited nationalist literatures and ideas are based. What are now described as “middle period” Persian and Ottoman poetry and thought were heavily influenced by not only the Islamic, Jewish and Christian traditions with which they are generally associated, but also Greek, Buddhist, and a host of other inherited myths and belief systems. The modern reader, by engaging with the broad scope of these ‘bridging’ narratives to literary history and its identification with nation and culture, actually steps out of his or her own paradigms and into something radically different.[[4]](#footnote-4) Andrews writes:

When we are exiled from the order and unities of culture, language, ethnicity, that make up the great smooth national narratives of history, we are cast out into a multicultural, multi-lingual, multiethnic ‘non-nation,’ an empire that frustrates our need to narrate a descent from origins and forces us to confront the lyrical unevenness of our lives.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Reading medieval literature not only informs and reflects on the past. It transforms the present, and poses that potential for the future as well.

This paper takes as its subject the Persian writer Farid ad-Din ‘Attar, who lived in the 12th century in the city of Nishapur, which now sits within the boundaries of northern Iran. More specifically, the paper addresses one of his six major books, the *llahi-Name,* or *Book of God.* There is perhaps no better person for negotiating, and enjoying, the difficulties outlined above than ‘Attar, who, in the words of Paul Losensky, has a “seemingly boundless store of narrative” which “draws on history, legend, folk lore, everyday life, and the religious tradition [of Islam]”. [[6]](#footnote-6) Farid ad-Din ‘Attar was himself a translator between languages (Arabic and Persian), as well as an interlocutor between various traditions—religious, philosophical, historical, etc. Yet he himself subsumes these traditions in the *Ilahi-Name*, crafting a unique frame story which allows for diverse perspectives on and interpretations of not only these traditions, but the place of the poet, the reader, and the world(s) in which they exist.

From the very first lines of the *Ilahi-Name,* ‘Attar introduces the discourse of kingship, describing kingship in terms of both ultimate reality and as a metaphor, both an ontological truth about the divine and a literary device with which to speak about his subjects. His dynamic usage of this theme of kingship proves ultimately transformative to ‘Attar’s own person, and possibly, his intended audience. The present study seeks to re-present the manner kingship functions in the *Ilahi-Name*, as well as the varying ways this book has been understood by previous scholars of ‘Attar. In so doing, I hope to suggest avenues by which ‘Attar’s ideas, and their persistent relevance, might continue to be discussed in the “multi-ethnic ‘non-nation’” within which all such scholarship takes place. In so doing, I also wish to introduce the idea that a scholar’s taste affects his or her judgment when translating and interpreting a work of literature, or art. While we have come to rely on some “true judges”[[7]](#footnote-7) for our approaches to Sufi texts and their meanings, we might also develop our appreciation of these texts through other—and perhaps even more clearly—subjective judgments about these texts and their import. This intersubjectivity between the modern reader and the premodern author poses a unique set of difficulties, given that, in this case, the author is truly dead. In my view, by examining the limits of previous translations and interpretations of works like these we come to expand on the possibilities for communication with these types of works of art and their progenitors, and expand potentially our own world as a result.

II.

Inasmuch as ‘Attar offers a model for the study of adaptation and reformulation of tradition, he offers scant little as a subject for the historian interested in establishing the social and cultural contexts in which he lived and wrote. His death is generally thought to have come at the hands of invading Mongols sometime between the sack of Nishapur in 1220ce and 1230ce, which would have given him the “improbable” age of 114 years old, according to one of his foremost biographers and interpreters, Helmut Ritter.[[8]](#footnote-8) Evidence of his life and/or place in the prosperous society of Nishapur may have been lost to the devastation generally associated with Mongol invasions,[[9]](#footnote-9) or ‘Attar may not have had much fame in his own lifetime. Some have written that he remained true to his name ‘Attar, or “perfumist”, a type of medieval medical practice involving scents, and worked at this profession throughout his life. Others suggest that he abandoned the family trade to pursue the Sufi path, with his voluminous poetry the product of his later labor.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Of the many works attributed to ‘Attar, contemporary scholars have accepted six books of poetry and one book of prose as authentic.[[11]](#footnote-11) It is no small matter that some of ‘Attar’s works have been deemed inauthentic: John Andrew Boyle, who produced the only English translation of the *Ilahi-Name* in 1976, bases some of his understanding of ‘Attar’s life and manner of composition on a work now thought, by most scholars, to be spurious.[[12]](#footnote-12) Helmut Ritter, his most exhaustive biographer,[[13]](#footnote-13) cited, in 1939, up to 12 books as possibly coming from ‘Attar’s pen, an entry which remains in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* to this day.[[14]](#footnote-14) Carl Ernst, in his essay “Hallajian Motifs in Poems Ascribed to ‘Attar”, writes that “there is still no agreement about who ‘Attar really was.”[[15]](#footnote-15) As a result, the legacy of ‘Attar is left to the varying interpretations of scholars like Ritter and Massignon, as well as Shi’i rationalist and Ismaili interpretations, amongst others, with no fixed notion of who ‘Attar was and what he wrote being possible, and perhaps, desirable. The ways in which ‘Attar has been interpreted by previous scholars with the corpus they had *at hand* becomes as interesting a subject, as Ernst argues, as the texts themselves.

The most famous of the determinate ‘authentic’ books in the minds of Western audiences is the *Mantiq al-Tayr,* (translated, variously, as the *Conference of the Birds, The Bird Parliament, The Speech of the Birds,* etc.) This work has seen several English translations, starting with Edmund Fitzgerald’s attempts in the 19th century, continuing on through the 20th through the work of R. P. Masani, C.S. Nott, Dick Davis, and Peter Avery. The book’s success is as much owing to the skill of its translators as it is to the distinctiveness of its form: the fanciful, almost romantic journey of the soul’s ascent to God as told through the extended allegory of birds in search of their mythic hero king, the Simorgh. AJ Arberry’s translation of ‘Attar’s prose work, *Tadkhirat al-Awliya,* was recently given an updated treatment by Paul Losensky. That book’s innovative treatment of a diverse range of early Islamic mystics stands out for its literary, religious, and historical value. Yet the *Ilahi-Name* has not captured the imagination of English translators (and audiences): only John Andrew Boyle’s 1976 version exists, and it is no longer in print.

Western readers encounter, for many reasons, an at times obscure and confused history of ‘Attar in combination with abridged, altered, and oddly rendered translations. Further, ‘Attar is generally studied in the West for his description of the so-called “Sufi path”, the framework of Islamic mysticism concerned with the soul’s journey toward union with the divine. His works are chosen and analyzed, most often, for their contributions toward the discussion of the development of the Sufi worldview—not necessarily for their contribution to the development of poetry or for their relevance to the social issues of the day.[[16]](#footnote-16) A notable exception to the rule comes in R.P. Masani’s introduction to his 1923 version of the *Mantiq al-Tayr*:

What, then, is the justification for a book on Sufism in such stirring times? The justification lies in the fact that mysticism like other systems of religious philosophy has an ideal as well as a practical side. If it leads some to passivity, or lures them to the realms of fancy, it also quickens others to rise above the plane of common life and come in closer touch with the reality of things. The exalted doctrines and high principles for which it stands sustain alike those who long for a life of spiritual peace and those who are ready to face the stern struggles of an active life. Worthless, indeed, would be these tenets and precepts for the ascent of man should they break down when subjected to the pressure of events such as those through which society is now passing.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In the following analysis of ‘Attar’s *Ilahi-Name,* I strive to strike a middle ground between communicating—as best I understand—the didactic and ideological messages ‘Attar sought to impart through his work alongside the poetical means he employs in the process, while also engaging with the contemporary “stern struggles of an active life” which find resonance with even non-scholarly readers. While ultimately I wish to suggest that this is, in itself, what ‘Attar actually sought to impart in the *Ilahi-Name*, it is my hope that, even if unconvinced by my argument, both scholar and student alike will find my analysis accurate, engaging, and above all, enjoyable.

II. Case Study

The theological framework for the *Ilahi-Name* can be found in its very title, *The Book of God*.[[18]](#footnote-18) The book was also known as the *Khusrau-Name*, or *The Book of the King*, due to its structure, which is built upon the frame tale of a king and his discourse with his six sons.[[19]](#footnote-19) While such a structure immediately calls to mind the famous ‘Mirror for Princes’ genre, it should be noted that ‘Attar himself did not, apparently, seek the patronage or approval of the ruling classes of his time—in fact, quite the opposite seems to be the case. Hermann Landolt writes that ‘Attar “has strong reservations about the customary dependence of the poets on worldly patrons, and claims that his one and only mamduh, is, by contrast, ‘wisdom’ itself.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Comparative works in the genre from the Middle East show contrasting aims. According to historian Marshall Hodgson, Nizam al-Mulk’s intended audience in the *Siyasat-Name* is someone concerned with proper and pious governance, namely Malikshah. The *Qabus Name* of Kay Ka’us concerns itself with proper noble conduct.[[21]](#footnote-21) The usage of the kingship frame tale within the *Ilahi-Name* displays a diverse range of meaning--and potency-- within both earthly and divine authority, the display of which becomes at times intimately personal to both ‘Attar and his reader. Thus the kingship framework employs a transformative structure, establishing a dialectic between “real” or “ultimate” kingship and “earthly” or “material” kingship, as well as “societal” and “personal” notions of royalty. It may be a mirror, but it is not a mirror any materially-focused prince would like to see himself within, in all likelihood. As ‘Attar writes: “Though thou hast piled up a treasure of silver and gold thou wilt not without pain drink a single draught of water.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

It is worth noting however, that some scholars, such as Julian Baldick, have read the *Ilahi-Name* as a statement about proper political authority in Persianate Islamic society at the time of its composition. I will return to the arguments in favor of and against this idea in the following section. It is sufficient, for now, to state that what ‘Attar actually accomplishes with his frame story and its contents has proven to be a bit more complex than a guide to proper princely behavior when examined from the standpoint of its employment of metaphor and allegorical structures relating to kingship.

In writing about the *Mantiq al-Tayr,* Fatemah Keshavarz discusses ‘Attar’s usage of associated metaphors within a larger frame tale:

The more thoroughly metaphors are used, the more effective they are. Widening the focus from single metaphors to larger allegorical constructions reveals ‘Attar’s awareness of this point. He makes persistent and precise attempts to make use of the interactive nature of single images in their emerging environment.

Though the above was written about ‘Attar’s layering of bird imagery, the same pattern of embedded metaphors reflecting on and illuminating the frame tale can be found in the *Ilahi-Name*. In fact, these references to kingship emerge in the exordium, before the frame tale has even been begun, and continue after the frame tale has concluded in the works epilogue. When the *Ilahi-Name* begins, it is God who is called “Molak”, the king; when it ends, ‘Attar refers to himself as “Molak”.[[23]](#footnote-23) In the *Mantiq al-Tayr,* the metaphors rely on fanciful, imaginary images of birds and valleys, placing the soul’s journey within an escapist realm unchained from the bonds of the earth. In the *Ilahi-Name*, the metaphors rely on the historical, religious, and mythic underpinnings of the very social fabric of ‘Attar’s audience. In this way, the reader’s imagination is brought to reinterpret the social order through the kingship framework of ‘Attar’s poetry, a transformative process both internally (that is, psychologically) and externally: for ‘Attar, for his reader, and for their perceptions of the forces that sought, and seek, to exert power in their day.

III. The Exordium: An overlooked introduction

The exordium which opens the *Ilahi-Name* lays the foundation for the frame story that follows.[[24]](#footnote-24) In these opening pages, ‘Attar utilizes a variety of metaphorical applications of "kingship": human, divine, and different admixtures of the two. These motifs are then further deployed throughout the work by means of various anecdotes and fables, related by the voice of the “king” speaking to his “six sons”. In this section, I will summarize the multiple usages of the kingship and other, related metaphors found within the exordium. The following section will illustrate how the allegorical usages displayed by and found within the frame tale discourses further complicate a fixed picture of kingship. The final section, fittingly, deals with the close of the work, and includes my own translation of the opening section of ‘Attar’s epilogue to the *Ilahi-Name*, and a reflection on how the closing sections and the interpretations of these sections comments on the issues raised within the paper.

First, I would like to make a quick note on my usage of the terms “metaphorical” and “allegorical” in reference to the semantic range of the word “king”. I use these terms because, thoroughout ‘Attar’s texts, the words "king", "kingship", "dominion" (etc.) are not consistently applied to any one person or entity, but rather to a variety of individuals and beings as well as the characteristics and qualities each possess that somehow relate them to the broad semantic frame of reference for the word, “king”. The "true king", which 'Attar understands as God, is thus still considered as a metaphorical usage, designating a reality of kingship not inherent solely in the word "king": it signifies God's inherent dominion over all things in creation-- rather than the usual associated denotations of kingship, i.e. rule over specified lands and peoples, armies, and a court and castle. Actual historical kings[[25]](#footnote-25), like Alexander and Mahmud of Ghazna, as will be demonstrated, are themselves acting out, within the text, a series of allegorical exercises that transforms the notion of kingship and power generally applied to them (and to rulers in general).[[26]](#footnote-26) There exists within the *Ilahi-Name* no fixed definition of what it ‘means’ to be “king”, and thus its varying applications allow for transformative interpretations of the people and entitities to which the metaphor is applied by ‘Attar.

'Attar ascribes kingship to God in the first line: "In the name of Him whose kingdom is unending.”[[27]](#footnote-27) ‘Attar describes God’s empire, writing that “it can neither decrease nor increase”[[28]](#footnote-28), and then some lines later describes his realm, writing “that if the world ceased to exist its expanse would not be a single hair’s breadth less”.[[29]](#footnote-29) After describing God’s eminence in the form of a 2nd person address to God, ‘Attar begins to the address the reader directly, writing “be thou beggar or king thou shalt take two ells of linen and ten bricks”[[30]](#footnote-30), and further “though thy realm stretch from the Fish to the Moon, thou must in the end pass through this gate.”[[31]](#footnote-31) This rhetorical strategy of addressing both God and the reader in the 2nd person makes it seem as if ‘Attar is moderating a discussion between God, himself, and the reader.

The reader is then drawn into the realm of myth through a comparison to the mighty Alexander: “And though thou be an Alexander, this transitory world will one day provide a winding-sheet for all thy Alexander-like glory.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Then ‘Attar returns to describing God’s actions for the reader, describing God in the 3rd person: “…the King without consulting thee has laid up a treasure in some spot.”[[33]](#footnote-33) (In Boyle’s translation, the capitalization[[34]](#footnote-34) of “King” reinforces the signification of God.) 'Attar drives home the point, so oft repeated throughout the text, that God’s is the true or everlasting kingship, that is, 'real kingship' in the ultimate ontological sense, whereas that of man is merely a microcosmic—and fleeting—representation of true kingship. The homiletic message is thus for humans to serve the ‘true king’, and give up the pursuits of worldly dominion.

The world itself becomes the part of ‘Attar’s lamentations, and his metaphor, albeit negatively: “Oh world, who is there who rejoices on account of thy tyranny?”[[35]](#footnote-35) The conversation now encompasses the world, God, the reader, and ‘Attar, who begins to talk to himself exasperatedly, saying he has searched his whole life for “a friend to whom I could confide my secrets.”[[36]](#footnote-36) He writes that he can find no such friend-- though it seems the book might be an attempt to confide such secrets. The world may be tyrannical, and human life fleeting. Yet something regal remains for the human. ‘Attar writes, utilizing the second person address: “Is not thy essence worshipped by the angels? Hast thou not on thy head the crown of God’s vicarate?”[[37]](#footnote-37) He compares the human to the Qur'anic/Biblical figure of Joseph (Yusuf): “A king’s throne awaits thee in Egypt; why art thou, like Joseph, at the bottom of a well?”[[38]](#footnote-38) Thus there are four distinct usages of the royal metaphor up until this point: the king or King as God, the reader as earthly king (Alexander),[[39]](#footnote-39) the world and its tyranny, and the reader as a divinely blessed king (Joseph)—though this takes place in discussing the reader’s essence, in contrast to the previous addressee overburdened with the weight of the external world.

Addressing the spiritual or “essential” conception of the reader, ‘Attar writes: “It is thou who art the king in the end and the beginning, but the seer sees double.”[[40]](#footnote-40) He calls the reader a “poor wretch” with “foolish thoughts” who is “blinded with greed.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Ultimately, ‘Attar offers this confused reader, seeing double, a method to get what is asked for, and introduces imagery of light and paradise that will reappear in his epilogue and elsewhere:

If thou awake at dawn thou shalt receive what thou ask for.

The robe of honour bestowed at the court of God is bestowed at the time of dawn.

The gate of Paradise is opened at dawn; and it is then that His beauty is revealed to His lovers.

Wouldst thou be king at that moment? Then go and beg at the door of Mohammed.[[42]](#footnote-42)

‘Attar exits the dialogue between the reader, himself, God, and the world. He crosses into the realm of *na^tiyya* poetry, eulogizing Muhammad as a model for that person who would wish to be king.[[43]](#footnote-43) Thus begins the usage of allegory to communicate ‘Attar’s message, a device that will persist throughout the work. It is noteworthy that he lays this idea of becoming “king” at the foot of Muhammad’s door: thus the reader, who has encountered numerous usages of the metaphor up unto this point, is drawn further into ‘Attar’s metaphorical framework through the “pey-ambar”, prophet—just as the Prophet originally drew his followers to him with his message.

‘Attar claims there is a type of special knowledge to be derived from Muhammad, which ‘Attar himself then sets out to communicate. The connection between the two may be illuminated by a passage from the *Musibat-Nama*,quoted in Ritter’s *Das Meer der Seele* under the heading of ‘The Poet on Himself’:

My name is Muhammad (like that of the Prophet), and just as Muhammad put a seal on prophethood (was the last prophet), I’ve put a seal on this art of speech.[[44]](#footnote-44)

While there is not a direct equivalence between ‘Attar and Muhammad, it is obvious from this quote and from the section analyzed below that the model and words of Muhammad play a central role in both ‘Attar’s poetry and in his own understanding of himself and the role of his poetry.

It is thus worth noting that in some previous translations of ‘Attar’s *Mantiq al-Tayr*, significant portions of his na^tiyya poetry are abridged or left out entirely, despite what some have argued is their centrality to the sub-structure of the poem itself.[[45]](#footnote-45) In Boyle’s translation, we encounter the full scope of evocations of Muhammad. Since the present discussion focuses primarily on the usage of the kingship metaphor, I will isolate those portions that refer to Muhammad on these terms specifically—though this is not meant to paint a complete picture of ‘Attar’s conception of Muhammad, if such is even possible.

For ‘Attar, Muhammad was both a historical and a trans-temporal figure, both a prophet and an exemplar of a primordial state of humanity. He was the leader of the religion—but the very fact of his existence established the ‘truth’ of religion for all time.[[46]](#footnote-46) He was and is, according to ‘Attar, the highest exemplar for humankind, as well as the closest “confidant of God.”[[47]](#footnote-47) That ‘Attar sought to have his readers both worship and emulate Muhammad is clear. Yet it also apparent, from the book’s title and framework, that he wished his readers to associate Muhammad’s message for mankind with the messages of ‘Attar’s own work and, consequently, associate each of these with their very selves. He accomplishes this through what Fatemah Keshavarz refers to as the “interconnected nature of poetic logic”,[[48]](#footnote-48) in this case through the continuation of the kingship metaphor in application to Muhammad. In so doing, ‘Attar also ushers in a host of associations that come with interpreting the legacy and person of Muhammad for his readers—as relevant and problematic to the society of his own day much as they are to that of the present.

‘Attar describes Muhammad as “a king without a seal, the sultan without a crown”.[[49]](#footnote-49) He then enumerates the extensive qualities that Muhammad exemplifies: “As a king he reared up a lofty palace, but he followed the principle of ‘Poverty is pride’.” There are none who can compare, he is “the crown of all sovereigns”[[50]](#footnote-50), and “the two worlds are co-existent with his reign.”[[51]](#footnote-51) His “tongue” is the “interpreter of kingship”, a curious honorific. Boyle translates “zaban-esh” here as “his tongue”, rather than “his language”, though it seems more likely in English parlance for “language” to interpret/translate, rather than a “tongue”. However one renders it, the connection to ‘Attar’s work is clear. ‘Attar is himself a “tarjeman”, a translator or interpreter, of kingship, and thus ‘Attar ascribes to Muhammad a task he himself is undertaking in the *Ilahi-Name.[[52]](#footnote-52)*

Though there is some debate about just what kind of Muslim ‘Attar was, the verses on Muhammad definitively establish him as a practitioner and devotee of Islam, one with a flair for the esoteric. His invocation of Muhammad as “the general of the army of mysteries and morals” puts him squarely in the pietistic, Sufi tradition often identified with Hasan of Basra and Rabi’a, both of whom figure prominently in ‘Attar’s books. The Shi’ite and Ismaili traditions claim ‘Attar was either Shi’ite or Ismaili based either on couched meanings within the “mysterious” segments of ‘Attar’s verse, or as mentioned, on statements found in pseudo-epigramic works. Ritter argues against the notion that ‘Attar was a Sufi; Landolt, however, seems persuasive in his critique of Ritter’s assessment as being against the weight of the evidence to the contrary.[[53]](#footnote-53) I will return to the various ways scholars have interpreted the question of whether ‘Attar’s worldview can be seen as endorsing particular sects or religio-political interests throughout paper. For now, it is enough to observe that leaving out verses in praise of Muhammad from English translations of ‘Attar’s books would rob him of a large part of both the religious and social contexts in which he wrote—the specifics of which are, of course, up for debate.

As mentioned, Muhammad occupies not only the central place in the religious and spiritual dimensions for ‘Attar, but also the political and social spheres. It is not enough for ‘Attar to state that Muhammad was the one leader of the one true religion and be done with it. In the exordium, he also shows, through characteristically figurative language, that Muhammad was the greatest of kings, not only the foremost spiritual leader of Islam and religion in general: Muhammad’s sandals “knocked the diadem off the Chosroes head”, “his hair toppled the crown of Caesar”, and “he over-threw with curls the Emperor of China.”[[54]](#footnote-54) The rest of the prophets are likened to an army that precedes the king, “they came only to announce the king.”[[55]](#footnote-55) The union between the notion of ruler and prophet comes in the title “sultan of the Prophets”[[56]](#footnote-56) Muhammad is placed in battle mode: “As his pure heart was the main body of the army, so was the centre of his soul the king,”[[57]](#footnote-57) and further, “What though he ruled the realm of the soul? Holy war was his trade, and hence all this.”[[58]](#footnote-58) ‘Attar herein combines Muhammad’s spiritual reality as ruler of the realm of the soul with his historical personage as a conqueror by means of jihad, holy war.

The depiction of Muhammad spans over 300 lines of verse in the *Ilahi-Name*, touching on his many qualities: spiritual, pious, generous, playful, hard-working, mythic, and celestial. A recurring image is that of his light, within comparisons of Muhammad to the sun, the moon, or a lamp.[[59]](#footnote-59) These comparisons come within a long description of the *laylat al-qadr*, the “night of power” wherein Muhammad journeyed up to the throne of God. Much has been written about the topic of Muhammad’s light in Sufi texts. To cite one example, Seyyid Hossein Nasr describes the ‘Muhamaddan light’ as a doctrine shared by some Shi’ite and Sufi traditions, wherein this light is part of a chain that travels from the “imam” or spiritual guide to the initiate.[[60]](#footnote-60) The association of Muhammad with light stems from interpretations of Sura 24, “al-Nur”, in the Qur’an. Verse 35 reads:

Allah is the light/Of the heavens and the earth./The parable of His Light/Is as if there were a Niche/And within it a Lamp:/ The Lamp enclosed in Glass;/The glass as it were/A brilliant star:/Lit from a blessed Tree,/An Olive, neither of the East/Nor of the West,/Whose Oil is well-nigh/Luminous,/Though fire scarce touched it:/ Light upon Light!/Allah doth guide whom He will/To His light:/Allah doth set forth Parables/For men: and Allah/Doth know all things.[[61]](#footnote-61)

Some interpreters take this verse to mean that Muhammad himself is this “light upon light”. ‘Attar, as I will show in the next section, uses references to this verse to apply not only to Muhammad but also ‘Umar, ‘Uthman, and ‘Ali, amongst others, adapting the Qur’anic framework and its later traditions to his own poetic constructions.

The images of the sun and light, the throne, and the king reappear in ‘Attar’s epilogue, making the exordium a symmetrical counterpart to the conclusion. This symmetry between the opening and closing sections of the *Ilahi-Name* generally gets overlooked by scholars, who tend to focus instead on the structure and contents of the frame story. Yet the three parts do perform in conversation with each other. They are connected throughout by the varying motifs of kingship, divinity, prophethood, and the naturalistic imagery of water, wind, earth, and light. They are further connected by the shared historical and religious framework that informs the motifs found in ‘Attar’s writing.

Returning to the exordium, we see that ‘Attar associates Muhammad with light by referring to a point in Muhammad’s ascension by the aforementioned Qur’anic phrase of “light upon light”[[62]](#footnote-62). During his journey, Muhammad’s “glory gave grandeur to the heavens, his beauty illuminated the sun.”[[63]](#footnote-63) The sun no longer *represents* Muhammad, as Muhammad has surpassed even that shining metaphor. By employing the words “glory” (jalal) and “beauty” (jamal) in application to Muhammad, ‘Attar also makes direct reference to these two attributes of God— the very entity with whom Muhammad then begins to converse in the following lines. ‘Attar depicts the two in the midst of a strange rhetorical game, wherein God asks Muhammad what he wants, Muhammad responds that God knows, that his tongue is tied, and that nothing of him remains: “All is now sun, the shadow is gone,” says Muhammad.[[64]](#footnote-64) Though his beauty was just illuminating the sun, Muhammad returns to the metaphor of the sun, referring now to God’s light. This reaffirms ‘Attar’s dynamic interplay between the “jamal” (beauty) of Muhammad that is also an attribute of God, and the “khorshid” or “aftab” (sun) that applies to both Muhammad and God when Muhammad is in his presence, “light upon light”.

Following an imagistic description of the after-effects of Muhammad’s encounter, ‘Attar addresses himself to Muhammad in the first person: “What more can I say, O Prophet of God? Impotent wretch that I am, I know no more.”[[65]](#footnote-65) This begs the question of how ‘Attar knows as much as he does: here he has reported as if first-hand the conversation between the divine and Muhammad, and now he is addressing Muhammad—since dead for 500 years— as if he is in the room. ‘Attar’s poetry must be seen as functioning within some non-linear system of time, perhaps akin to Mircea Eliade’s idea of “sacred time”. In discussing the difference between “profane duration and sacred time”, twentieth century scholar of religion Mircea Eliade writes that sacred time is “a primordial myth made present,” and:

Hence sacred time is indefinitely recoverable, indefinitely repeatable. From one point of view it could be said that it does not “pass,” that it does not constitute an irreversible duration. It is an ontological, Parmenidean time; it always remains equal to itself, it neither changes nor is exhausted.[[66]](#footnote-66)

From this perspective, ‘Attar is referring to a trans-temporal event that is “indefinitely recoverable”, though some might argue that it is not indefinitely repeatable. ‘Attar is thus not addressing the historical personage, but rather the enduring presence of Muhammad that he views as central to existence and religion.

The conversation between ‘Attar and Muhammad, unlike that between Muhammad and God, is one-way. ‘Attar calls Muhammad the “sultan of the earth and heaven, the lamp of this world and the next,”[[67]](#footnote-67) thus tying, in one verse, the kingship metaphor to the image of light. ‘Attar also becomes boastful: “Thou knowest that none of the poets have sung such praise save only I,” calling his work a “young bride” that “seeks the protection of thy generosity”.[[68]](#footnote-68) He employs the present continuous verb, “mi-dan-i”, (“you know”/ “Thou knowest”), showing that he understands Muhammad’s evaluation of his work to be part of an ongoing process of judgment—perhaps one which will culminate on the Day of Judgment. ‘Attar then enters a type of negotiation with Muhammad: “If thou accept these words of mine, I shall with my art rebuild the ancient heavens,” and later, “If thou wouldst bestow a hundred favours on me, it is in thy power.”[[69]](#footnote-69) He likens his poetry to “a drop” in the “mighty sea” of “thy presence”. This association of ‘Attar’s poetry with the sea returns, as much of the imagery discussed, in the epilogue. ‘Attar worries at the onset that his poetry and its praise of Muhammad will be acceptable, and addresses his pleas for its acceptance to the ultimate judge, Muhammad. In the epilogue, he shows no such concern.

The discussion above highlighted the foregrounded imagery of the sun and its light connected with Muhammad, of water and its connection to ‘Attar’s poetry and Muhammad’s generosity, and of kingship and its associations with God, the reader, Muhammad, and certain prophets and historical figures within the metaphorical framework. These themes will be further discussed in the closing section of the paper, which deals with the opening section of ‘Attar’s epilogue. Additionally, I will address the related issues translational decisions, and how they allow or do not allow certain non-foregrounded, or hidden, messages to appear. As an example, I have highlighted above how ‘Attar employs the 2nd person voice alternately to refer to God, the reader, the world, and Muhammad. But note the formality of speech Boyle employs in the last paragraph for the 2nd person address: words like “Thou”, “thy”, “wouldst”, etc. This choice of register both archaizes ‘Attar’s speech, relegating it to a pre-modern English, as well as depersonalizes the relationship between ‘Attar and Muhammad. This not only complicates the reader’s engagement with the text, it also disrupts the intimacy with which he or she can engage with ‘Attar’s poetry and, by extension, with God and Muhammad as the trans-temporal and somehow eternally present entities ‘Attar depicts them as being.

The above discussion demonstrated how, prior to even introducing his frame tale, ‘Attar primes the reader for various associations related to the idea of kingship. This is the ‘interconnected poetic logic’ of the *Ilahi-Name,* a logic that ‘Attar employs through the structure of the frame tale, and through allegorical and metaphorical usage of historical and mythical personages (Muhammad, Alexander, et al), through imagery of light, crowns, and thrones, as well as through celestial and oceanic references. I have also suggested several paradigms through which ‘Attar’s tale has been and could be viewed. In the following section, I analyze the specifics frame tale of the *Ilahi-Name*, examine in more detail the diverse ways it has been interpreted, and also examine the rhetorical mechanics of the discourses that take place between the king and his six sons to show how these reflect upon the discussions of the previous and present sections.

**IV. Structuring and Interpretation**

The previous section left off the discussion of the exordium with ‘Attar’s direct pleas to Muhammad. The exordium continues with a short story about a Meccan prostitute that Muhammad forgives, then segues into shorter praise sections on, respectively, Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthman, and ‘Ali. These sections assuredly dispel many notions about ‘Attar being from a radical Shi’ite wing of Islam which might deny the validity of the rule of any but ‘Ali. This is especially evident in his writing on Uthman, “If thou breathe the breath of hatred against such a man, thou besmirchest the moon and the sun.”[[70]](#footnote-70) ‘Attar definitely does not seem to have a very generous attitude towards the “thou” in this line. ‘Umar is celebrated for “having closed the door of tyranny forever,” since “with his justice he opened a hundred doors to the Persians.”[[71]](#footnote-71) Perhaps addressing a philosophical controversy on predestination, or just addressing again the aforementioned battle of rightful succession within the sects of Islam, ‘Attar reflects on ‘Umar’s conversion of the Persians and writes subsequently, “He that does not believe in this cause and effect is a foe of both the Persians and Arabs.”[[72]](#footnote-72) ‘Umar (Faruq) is called a “lamp”, continuing the imagery of light, “The radiant sun is the lamp of the heavens; the great Faruq is the lamp of Paradise.”[[73]](#footnote-73) Ali also draws comparisons to the moon and sun, which is then followed by this provocative statement: “Since Ali is of one light with the Prophet they are as one person with no trace of duality.”[[74]](#footnote-74) He is also called the “Sun of the Law, that swelling sea”[[75]](#footnote-75), images previously applied to Muhammad. But ‘Ali, like the rest of the Companions but unlike Muhammad, is consistently referred to in the past tense in this section—not as a present entity that with whom ‘Attar can converse. Hence there is some cause for confusion about ‘Attar’s ‘sectarian loyalties’, and consequently his intentions and audience in writing the *Ilahi-Name*, confusion that is in no way alleviated by the final section of the exordium, wherein the frame tale is introduced within the “Invocation of the Spirit.”

In the Qur’anic framework, the “Spirit” or “ruh” was breathed by God into Man when he was clay, animating his being.[[76]](#footnote-76) ‘Attar cites the verse, “The Spirit proceedeth at my Lord’s command”[[77]](#footnote-77), and writes “Thou art joined to us and yet severed from us,” incorporating the Spirit into the direct dialogue, affected through the 2nd person address (“khetab”), that was previously employed with God, the reader, the world and Muhammad. As with Muhammad, in describing the Spirit ‘Attar appears at a loss for words: “

Thou art the eternal companion of the Almighty. What more shall I say, for thou hast always been known?

Thou art a strange bird. I do not know what thou art, for thou art outside our affirmation and negation.

Since thou art neither on earth not in heaven, where art thou? Thou art with the Lord of the Two Worlds.[[78]](#footnote-78)

In addition to being the companion of God, the Spirit is also referred to as the “mushk-e jan”, the musk of the soul, which the attentive reader would notice refers directly to ‘Attar’s own name/profession. This notion of musk or perfume permeates the text in several key spots. ‘Ali, in previous lines, was associated with musk and with Muhammad’s light. The last story told by the king within the frame tale to come is one of a deer whose pure musk “is sought by great multitudes”[[79]](#footnote-79). The final story of the epilogue is of a certain Bishr Hafi who “perfumed the name of God”, for which he is “both perfumed and purified.” This invocation of the Spirit in terms of musk ties directly to what ‘Attar describes as what he has accomplished with work. He writes: “O Lord, this sweet-singing ‘Attar has perfumed Thy name with the perfume of his poetry. And yet what though he sang sweetly? Thy name has always been perfumed.”[[80]](#footnote-80) The title, the *Book of God,* thus ties the book by means of God’s name directly to this theme of musk, perfume, the Spirit, ‘Ali, and ‘Attar.

The other means by which ‘Attar describes the Spirit is, of course, in terms of kingship. He writes, “Thou art king and caliph forever. Thou hast six sons, each of them without peer.”[[81]](#footnote-81) This passage referring to the Spirit and the role of these six sons has been a matter of some dispute amongst scholars. It also forms the foundation of the 22 discourses to follow, so the way it is interpreted and translated determines, in large part, the way the reader looks at the book as a whole. ‘Attar writes:

Each of thy sons is a lord of conjunction,[[82]](#footnote-82) each of them like a whole world in his own art.

One is the carnal soul, with his abode in the senses. One is Satan, with his thoughts fixed on vain imaginings.

One is intelligence, and speaks of intelligible things. One is knowledge and seeks after ascertainable things.

One is poverty and strives after privation, and one is the belief in God’s union and seeks to find the whole in every essence.

When these six shall have followed the commandment they shall attain to the Eternal Presence.

Since thou art caliph until eternity to come, it is by thy grace that the world is filled with subtleties.

Don the black robes of the caliph like Adam; travel within thy breast as though it were the world.[[83]](#footnote-83)

Within the frame tale that follows, the “Spirit” is assigned the role of the “king”, who then educates his six sons, whose “highest wishes” are symbolic of each of the six states outlined in the above quote. Ritter’s summary interprets the king’s response six princes’ desires as follows: “…he attempts to show them the baseness and worthlessness of their wishes and makes an effort to win over his sons on behalf of higher goals, which gives the poet the opportunity to discuss a series of vices and virtues, and mystical concepts.”[[84]](#footnote-84) Likewise, Annemarie Schimmel in her introduction to Boyle’s translation, writes of the *Ilahi-Name*:

[It]…is the story of a king whose six sons wish to possess six wonderful things connected with worldly power and pleasure. The king tells each of them stories relevant to their respective wishes, always ending with the information that this goal is not worth striving for. The epic thus belongs more to the ascetic tradition than to the later type of poems which praise love or gnosis.[[85]](#footnote-85)

These two descriptions reflect the view that the *Ilahi-Name* should primarily be seen as a homiletic tale in the *zuhd* or ascetic tradition of Sufism, albeit one that has some mystical teachings as its root.

In contrast, the interpretation brought forth by Julian Baldick offers an alternative reading of ‘Attar, which ascribes a hidden political agenda to ‘Attar’s poetic construction. He writes that the *Ilahi-Name* “has been completely misunderstood,” and criticizes the “Orientalists” who “have merely repeated the description given by Ritter” regarding the invocation of the king for the sons to pursue “higher and spiritual goals instead of the gifts for which they ask him.” Baldick instead suggests that there is a “key” to understanding the book. He views the *Ilahi-Name* as a coded message due to the Spirit being “addressed as the caliph,” which he ties to the “revival of the power of the caliphate under Nasir.” He writes that the teacher, or Spirit, the “king” of the frame tale, “is clearly not designated as a “king”, as the orientalists have asserted, but as a caliph.

He places the time of composition of the *Ilahi-Name* as during the time of the competing interests of the caliphate of Nasir and Muhammad Khwarizemshah, which would place it roughly around the turn of the 12th/13th century. According to Baldick’s reading, ‘Attar, by referring to the head of his frame tale as “caliph”, utilizes language supportive of Nasir’s attempted caliphal revival. The subsequent homiletic and spiritual messages of the work are thus seen as subservient to the historical context from which they emerged, and paint ‘Attar as a partisan of a very specific political position, utilizing his poetry to further that agenda.

Baldick’s argument is assuredly as novel as it is difficult to reconcile with the work itself. Yet he finds some support in a more recent article by Hermann Landolt, “Attar, Sufism, and Ismailism”. In Landolt’s approach, ‘Attar’s work is read for its commentary on the prevailing philosophical, religious, and political controversies and power struggles of Khurasan and the larger Islamicate world of his era. Thus ‘Attar is put into conversation not only with philosophers like Umar Khayyam, but also the Ismaili thought that had been prevalent in Khorasan, as well as the political struggles referenced by Baldick. Landolt writes:

Although Baldick’s polemical argument against Ritter and ‘the orientalists’ is itself objectionable on several counts , notably his claim that the king is not a king but only a caliph, there can be little doubt that ‘Attar, too, placed himself on the side of this caliph [Nasir], as was suggested on the basis of the allusion to the ‘black robe of the caliphate’ in the prologue. [[86]](#footnote-86)

Landolt correctly notes that Baldick has overlooked the word “shah” in line 584, which both Boyle and Ritter take to mean king. Thus the Spirit is both “caliph and shah”, not merely one or the other.

As I have demonstrated, ‘Attar employs the metaphor of kingship, and associated terms designating rulers, in a variety of settings and with a variety of referents. In this way, according to one interpretation of his ‘poetic logic’, ‘Attar’s actual purpose is to show that the “caliph” and “shah” are merely representative forms of the Spirit, and not necessarily to show that the title of “shah” or “caliph” means anything when applied to specific human beings, an interpretation I will return to in the next section on allegory. In understanding the work as a coded political message, Baldick looks past the function the direct *world-negating* message the work might have: none of the appellations of authority within society are properly applied to any of their existing holders, because in the end, any notion of kingship can ultimately only be measured in reference to the authority that comes from proximity to, or perhaps union with, God and his ‘companion’, the Spirit. Though the caliph formerly was indeed often argued to be just such a ‘viceregent of God’, whether ‘Attar felt that any existent ruler had such authority, proximity or union is unclear from his work. What is clear, however, is that ‘Attar felt his own work did offer *the poet himself* some type of sovereignty. The question then becomes for the reader who observes this inculcation of kingship whether he/she too is implicated in this process, and may become king or queen of a castle as well.

In this paper, I mainly focus on the consequences of examining the framing of the frame tale for the contemporary reader of ‘Attar, noting that this section’s dynamics are often overlooked. In later sections of the *Ilahi-Nameh,* several other ascriptions of kingship are offered, including, provocatively, to the devil himself. But by identifying, in the exordium, the notion of kingship with the entities of Spirit, God, and a trans-temporal Muhammad, ‘Attar establishes that the king that speaks in his discourse has an authority that might otherwise be undermined by the depictions of kingship found within the text. By establishing the king’s sons wishes as transitory, or merely symbolic of “higher” states, ‘Attar sets up a dichotomy within the frame tale between the perfect authority of the Spirit/king and the subordinated authority of his sons. ‘Attar’s voice, ultimately, is the one behind the king’s words, and thus we can understand ‘Attar’s perception of himself and the world through the lessons put forth by the king.

**V. Conclusion and Translation**

I have been content, up to this point, to follow Boyle’s authoritative translation within this analysis. While Boyle’s translation is useful for its adherence to the basic lexical content of the text, I have found it critical to attempt to recapture, in English, the *voice* behind the opening lines to the final section of the *Ilahi-Name*, for it is here that ‘Attar most clearly exits the realm of the didactic poet and comes closest to being the ecstatic Sufi uttering *shath* statements,[[87]](#footnote-87) the recitation of which risk what Muhammad Isa Waley calls the “opprobrium” of the orthodox:

What kind of Sufi is it, after all, who contaminates his allegedly spiritual poetry with extravagant encomia to himself? One who is too intoxicated with devotion to the Beloved to care what others thin—and whose praise is at least in part for spiritual poetry itself as being one of the highest human activities. For while ‘Attar occasionally looks to inculcate love of the virtues, one of his major didactic purposes is to imbue the audience with the sense of the supremacy of the way of Divine Love and all that leads to it.[[88]](#footnote-88)

This is the traditional ‘Sufi’ reading of ‘Attar, one that rationalizes his boasting as being a type of exception to the didactic humility we find in another parts of his writing. For Meier, the boasting is essential to ‘Attar’s theology, for Waley it is yet another in a series of rhetorical strategies along the Sufi path. Leonard Lewisohn argues that the Sufi way is the only way to read ‘Attar’s work, writing that “the hermetic nature of ‘Attar’s verse can only be understood in the light of the Persian Sufi tradition,” and that, absent Sufi commentaries, it is not possible to “imbibe a single intellectual draught of the gnostic teachings hidden therein.”[[89]](#footnote-89)

Each of the preceding viewpoints, though differing in their aims and conclusions, read ‘Attar for his contributions to spiritual teachings. It becomes reflexive, symptomatic when one reads ‘Attar: his work is either about the soul, about the Sufi path, or about specific homiletic (zuhd, etc.) and historical comments (Nasir and Khwazaremshah, God’s “Friends”). This is perhaps as much due to the centrality of religion to his verse as it is to the structural frameworks he places it within, which allow for narrowed explanations of ‘Attar’s meaning and impart. Or it may be those are the only ways scholars have been interested in viewing ‘Attar. The consequences of this continual spiritual treatment are tragic. It seems as if ‘Attar the poet, the perfumist of speech, is now dead. Scholars might spend their time identifying the features of his corpse, with his (disputed) corpus being the artifact that allows us to see what country he was from, what religion he had, what shapes he made, what his teachings may have been, and onward.[[90]](#footnote-90) Recovery of this information may be the first step in “reanimating the spiritual”, to borrow Fatemeh Keshavarz’s title, but it is however only a step in the journey towards a full reanimation—or recreation—of ‘Attar.

As has been shown, ‘Attar did not hold himself to fixed, linear notions of time, either in application to himself, to the prophet Muhammad, or indeed to his own poetry. He interpreted the past as he saw fit, reanimating age-old myths and tropes in dynamic, creative, poetic ways. In studying ‘Attar, one must keep in mind not only the words and contexts from which his understanding of the world and our understanding of him arose. One should also attempt to hear the voice of the poet speaking out from those words and contexts across the broad sweep of time.

**VI. Appendix: Translation of the Epilogue**

**The First Section of ‘Attar’s Epilogue to the Ilahi-Nama (verses 4556-4583)**

1. (4556) Speech, though it be higher than the throne of the Holy,

Is yet lower than the feet of Farid’s[[91]](#footnote-91) poetry

1. (4557) A majestic one[[92]](#footnote-92), from realms ethereal[[93]](#footnote-93), never

Speaks of that which we’ve related to thee

1. (4558) I conveyed speech up to a station

Where no one is, nor a pathway there

1. (4559) I displayed, so you’d see, the breath of Eissa

Like morning’s breath, I revealed the White Hand[[94]](#footnote-94)

1. (4560) I made so many mementos of beloved’s gardens,

that the world appears pretty as a leaf in heaven’s;

1. (4561) From night til day, brave youths hearts will find

abounding joy from these lovely gardens of mine.

1. (4562) The one who used to boast at his own designs:

Pure as dawn’s light, his breath showed[[95]](#footnote-95)

1. (4563) If he lived up to my era, in viewing these lines

To death he would go.

1. (4564) Yes, when the sun comes and makes morning shine,

not a speck of those bare dawn breaths remain.

1. (4565) Since the complete ocean[[96]](#footnote-96) of my poetry’s gushed forth

Thousands of fountains have overwhelmed the shores of the sea.

1. (4566) Like the ocean, my eyes bring pouring streams from all sides

Every moment a fountain springs up, abundantly

1. (4567) The sun dawns from out of that one spring--

Light is cast upon the world most generously

1. (4568) His head wouldn’t escape the east’s cutting rays

If not for the aid that came from my poetry

1. (4569) Resurrection day will darken the sun in its turn

Yet this verse still shines, eternally

1. (4570) Daily, Paradise’s houris, to love’s tune

Sing these verses from their radiant hearts

1. (4571) Since my poetry is ever about pure *tawhid*, unity,[[97]](#footnote-97)

If in heaven it is sung, what need, then, for timidity?

1. (4572) I disclosed the riches of the divine, Ilahi,

I placed the name *Ilahi-Name* on these.[[98]](#footnote-98)

1. (4573) Those illustrious ones in the seven heavens

Sing the *Ilahi-Name* of ‘Attar[[99]](#footnote-99)

1. (4574) Since they honor my book through their singing

the *Ilahi-Name* stems from the divine’s bolstering me.[[100]](#footnote-100)

1. (4575) Hourly, he sends me new life

With every breath, a heavenly table is laid out of the unseen.[[101]](#footnote-101)

1. (4576) Since my share comes from out of the unseen

Why should I enslave myself to any tyranny?

1. (4577) A heart, mollified by mystic lessons,

Won’t wish to dine when food’s been warmed[[102]](#footnote-102)

1. (4578) I am as a wild beast, in a corner, alone

All the world holds for me is a cold bowl of wheat

1. (4579) The bowl, Hamza, makes this beast, Wahshi, restless

So why should I work with Hamza, or Wahshi?[[103]](#footnote-103)

1. (4580) Since the confines of this turquoise roof is my lot,

In the world, in this one house, I become complete.

1. (4581) What will I do with earth’s fathoms and heights?

What even is the sky, the land, this world?

1. (4582) My kingship is such that I am entire, sufficient

What I must needs have, only the salve of a rue-seed[[104]](#footnote-104)

1. (4583) I am king, in the kingdom of the contented,

Thus I am able to do what I wish, perpetually.

1. Venuti, Lawence. *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation.* London: Routledge, 2005: “Both foreign text and translation are derivative: both consist of diverse linguistic and cultural materials that neither the foreign writer nor the translator originates, and that destabilize the work of signification, inevitably exceeding and possibly conflicting with their intentions.” p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Pinsky, Robert. “In Praise of Difficult Poetry: The Much Maligned Art.” *Slate,* 23 April 2007. Accessed 5 May 2009. <slate.com>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ottoman Lyric Poetry,* ed. and trans. Walter Andrews, Najaat Black, and Mehmet Kalpaki. Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2006. p. 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Venuti, p. 33:”…such an analysis can not only challenge the cultural and social conditions in which it is performed, but propose different conditions to be established in the future.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Quoted from the translator’s introduction to: *Farid ad-Din ‘Attar’s Memorial of God’s Friends: Lives and Sayings of Sufis,* trans. Paul Losensky. New York: Paulist Press, 2009. p. 10. (Cited as Losensky, *MOFG* throughout the paper.) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste”. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ritter, H. “ ‘Attar, Farid al-Din Muhammad b. Ibrahim”, *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Edited by: P. Bearman , Th. Bianquis , C.E. Bosworth , E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill, 2009. Brill Online. UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO LIBRARIES. 20 May 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Losensky, (*MOGF*) p. 13: “Nishapur would remain one of the most influential and prosperous cities in the Islamic world for the next four centuries, until its heyday came to a violent end with the Mongol sack of the city in 1221.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Lewisohn, Leonard and Shackle, Charles, “Introduction”. In *Farid al-Din ‘Attar and the Persian Sufi Tradition: The Art of Spiritual Flight*. Ed. By Leonard Lewisohn and Charles Shackle. xvii-xviii. Cf. Losensky’s citation of Jami’s narrative, in which a dervish surrenders his soul in front of ‘Attar, leading to ‘Attar’s spiritual transformation. (*MOGF,* p. 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Losensky, (*MOGF)* p. 9. Ritter (*EI, 2nd Ed.)* cites 25 works, arranged into 3 groups based on his level of skepticism of their authenticity. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Boyle, John Andrew. “The Religious “Mathnavis” of Farid al-Din Attar”. *Iran,* Vol. 17, (1979), pp. 9-14. British Institute of Persian Studies. The work he refers to is the *Khusrua-Name,* which according to Losensky, has been “argued on philological and stylistic grounds” to be “not a product of ‘Attar’s pen” by the Persian scholar Kadkani, citing Farid ad-Din ‘Attar, *Mokhtar-nama,* ed. Mohammad-Reza Shafi’I Kadkani, 2nd ed. (Tehran: Sokhan, 1996), 34-59. Boyle offers a quote from the *Khusrau-Name* as evidence that ‘Attar continued his career while also composing epic poetry-- still an admirable feat, if true. Boyle himself admits, in the article, that the *Ilahi-Name* may be the “last of his genuine works”, to the exclusion of his previously quoted *Khusrau-Name.* Why he would cite a book he himself thought may be spurious is anybody’s guess. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ritter, Hellmut. *The Ocean of the Soul: Man, the World, and God in the Stories of Farid ad-Din ‘Attar,* trans. John O’Kane, ed. Bernd Radtke. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003. Referred to as (*DMDS)* in the footnotes to follow. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See above under 6. In the work cited in 11, ‘Attar makes use of “the poet’s four epic works, the *Asrarnama, Ilahinama, Mantiq al-Tayr,* and the *Musibatnama* but likewise takes account of the poet’s other writings (…)”. Cf. “Translator’s Preface”, John O’Kane (*DMDS*). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “Hallajian Motifs in Poems Ascribed to ‘Attar”, Carl Ernst in *‘Attar and the Persian Sufi Tradition.* p. 330-343. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. My argument here is limited to the general sense derived from Western scholarship within the works that I have cited in this paper. In terms of ‘Attar’s poetics: Some attention is paid to metrics and literary devices within the introductions to ‘Attar’s main works, as well as articles written by scholars about them. Generally these are seen as tools in accomplishing the didactic mission ascribed to ‘Attar, not as an independent contribution to literature or culture. Scholarship in Persian, as Lewisohn observes (note 8 above, p. xxvi), has offered a variety of alternative approaches to the study ‘Attar, an investigation of all of these will form the basis for another paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. ‘Attar, Farid ad-Din. *The Conference of the Birds,* trans. R.P. Masani. Mangalore: Oxford University Press, 1924. From the translator’s forward, p. vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Sometimes translated as *The Divine Book* or the *Book of the Divine.* [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. A spurious *Khusrau-Name* was also attributed to ‘Attar. Cf. note 10 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Landolt, Hermann. “ ‘Attar, Sufism, and Ismailism” in *Farid ad-Din ‘Attar and the Persian Sufi Tradition,* p. 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Hodgson, Marshall G.S. *The Venture of Islam*, *Vol. II.* Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977. p. 159. If one defines the Mirror for Princes genre as including books not directly addressed to or written for kings/princes, and instead includes books that touch on the idea of kingship, then ‘Attar’s book makes the cut. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. ‘Attar, Farid ad-Din. *The Ilahi-nama or Book of God of Farid ad-Din ‘Attar*, trans. John Andrew Boyle. p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. ‘Attar, Farid ad-Din. *Ilahi-Name,* ed. Fuad Rouhani. Tehran, Iran: ???? Line 1, p.1. Line 6582, p. 281. In subsequent citations, I will list Rouhani’s line numbers alongside Boyle’s page numbers. The Rouhani edition I have in my possession is more recent than that of Ritter, and, one hopes, more complete and accurate. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. This follows the same sequential structure as the introduction to the *Mantiq al-Tair,* with invocations to God, Muhammad, and the Companions, respectively. The *Ilahi-Nama* also includes an invocation to the *ruh*, which will be discussed in later pages. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Following Boyle, I transfer the title of “king” generally to all usages of words associated with the high leader or ruler . The difference between the titles of “shah”(padeshah, shahenshah), “sultan”, “caliph”, and “king” (molak, khusrau), will be discussed when each emerges in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. My discussion of the function of the kingship metaphor utilizes ideas found in Ted Cohen's description of the notion of understanding the meaning of metaphor: "Grasping a metaphor seems to require, as it were, an extra exertion, something beyond and in addition to what is required in grasping a literal meaning [in this case, to say "Elvis is the king" is different somehow than "Abdullah II is the king"]. Why suppose there is a special kind of meaning that cannot be grasped in the customary way? Furthermore, even if the point of metaphor is relatively specific and fixed, it is still true that metaphorical import often seems open-ended, and not able to be captured in a tidy paraphrase. In this respect, a metaphor seems less something with a determinate meaning than a stimulus to the imagination, an incitement to imaginative and fanciful thought [ie, how is Elvis the king?].” Cf. "Metaphor", Ted Cohen, *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005. p. 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *IN* line 1, p. 1. (Molak-esh: his kingdom). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *IN,* line 21, p. 2. (Molak-et: your kingdom/empire). ‘Attar is now speaking to God in the 2nd person voice. Boyle chooses to translate this as 3rd person, “His empire”, though the voice has switched to 2nd person as early as line 13, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *IN,* line 24, p.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *IN,* line 56, p. 3. ‘Attar employs “shahenshah”, king of kings. This employment of contrasting pairs of words is known as *“tazadd”,* the unity of these pairs is a central trope of Sufi poetry. Cf. Schimmel, Annemarie. *As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam.* New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982. p. 59. She discusses these pairs in terms of God’s attributes, in the cited line here the contrasting pairs are applied to the roles that human beings may play. “Two ells and ten bricks”: That is to say, what a person has to cover his dead body when he is buried within this tradition. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *IN,* line 59, p. 3. (Molak-et). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *IN,* line 60, p. 3. (Iskandar): Alexander the Great figures prominently in the Shahnameh, and is shown to have Persian ancestry. Cf. Ferdowsi, Abolqasem. *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis. New York: Penguin, 2007. p. 456-528. ‘Attar’s words echo Ferdowsi’s: “Whether you are a king or a pauper, you will discover no rhyme or reason to it.” p. 528. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *IN,* line 61, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Persian has no capitalization, Boyle utilizes it throughout his translation when he feels the text refers to God or of any words related to divinity. While this may be problematic in certain instances, in this line the referent seems pretty straightforward. Boyle also uses capital letters in words referring to Muhammad, which definitely creates some confusion, if not controversy, over its appropriateness. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *IN,* line 73, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *IN,* line 76, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *IN,* line 83, p. 4. The word for “essence” is “Guhar”, also known as a pearl. “Crown” is “taj-I”, and it comes from the “khalifat”, which Boyle renders as “God’s vicarate”. I will return to this notion of the “khalifat” later in this section. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Qur’an*, 12:54-56, (A.Y. Ali). Joseph, while not actually a pharaoh or king, was in charge of the pharoah’s storehouses and invested with great power. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. The intended reader could be an actual king, perhaps the caliph Nasir (1180-1225), thus ‘Attar would ostensibly be referring to *that* ruler’s lower self and higher self, and not an inner essence all humans possess. I have addressed the notion of the ambiguity of intended audience and context, and its relevance to contemporary scholarship, in the previous section. I will presume from here on out that the "thou" 'Attar refers to is not, in actuality, the king or ruler in any 'literal' sense—though I will return to the historical-political argument offered by Julian Baldick, et al, in the following section. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *IN,* line 87, p.5: “Shah-I”, a king. Boyle’s translation perhaps over-specifies this as “the king”. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. *IN,* lines 89-95, p.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *IN,* lines 108-11, p. 5-6. “Padeshah-I”, again “king” is indefinite. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Schimmel, Annemarie. *As Through a Veil.* p. 171-211. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *DMDS,* p. 163, quoting from “MN Khatima/1”. ‘Attar, as with many others, has as his first name Muhammad. “Farid ad-Din” is an honorific meaning “Unique of the Religion”, ‘Attar his profession as “Perfumist”, though all three appear self-referentially in his poetry. In the *Mantiq al-Tayr,* his connection to Muhammad appears as more of a plea: “Do not make me mortified on account of sin,; also, grant the due to a namesake.” ‘Attar, Faridu’d-Din. *The Speech of the Birds (Mantiq’t-Tair)*, trans. Peter Avery. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1998. p. 37 (line 407). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. “Repetitive Structures in the Epic Poetry of ‘Attar”, Johann Christoph Burgel in *‘Attar and the Persian Sufi Tradition.* p. 199. He argues that the poem is a representation of the *hadith al-mi^raj* and the notion of vertical ascension. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *IN,* line 148, p.7: “When his religion illuminated the world, all other rites were abolished.” [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *IN,* line 121, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Keshavarz, Fatemeh. “The Poetic Animating the Spiritual”. p.122. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *IN,* line 118, p. 6. Literally, “Shah” and “sultan”. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. *IN,* line 121, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *IN,* line 126, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. *IN,* line 125, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Landolt, Hermann. “’Attar, Sufism, and Ismailism,” *‘Attar and the Persian Sufi Tradition.* p. 5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. *IN,* line 139-140, p. 7. Boyle reports that the Chosroes are the four main Sassanian kings, but also is the generic title of rulers in Persian. Note 23, p.354. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. *IN* line 146-147, p. 7. “Shah” as king. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. *IN* line 148, p. 7: “Shah” as king. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. *IN* line 190, p. 9. Again, “shah” as king. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. *IN* line 196, p. 9. “Sultan-e daralmalak-e jan”: “ruler of the realm of the soul”; “jihad-esh”: his “holy war.” [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. *IN* line 320, p. 15. “Aftab-e sharah”: Sun of the law. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Nasr, Seyyid Hossein. *Sufi Essays*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1973. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Surah 24:35 (A.Y. Ali.) [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Sura 24: 35. *IN* line 325, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. *IN* line 326, p. 15. “Jalal-esh”: “glory”, “Jamal-esh”: beauty. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. *IN* lines 331-335, p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. *IN* line366, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and Profane,* trans. Willard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959. p. 68-9. Eliade cites the example of sacred time in terms of experiences at religious festivals, but it seems to apply to the notion of time functioning in ‘Attar’s work at this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. *IN* line 394, p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. *IN* lines 402-403. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. *IN* lines 406, 411, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. *IN* line 522, p. 24. “Meh o khorshid”: “moon and sun”. Since Uthman married two of Muhammad’s daughters, he is said to have possessed two lamps, signified here as the moon and the sun. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. *IN* line 484, p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. *IN* line 457, p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. *IN* line 507, p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. *IN* line 546, p. 26. This line should not be overlooked, as the explicit union of these figures has theological implications. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. *IN* line 559, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Qur’an 15:29 (AY Ali). [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Qur’an 17:85 (AY Ali). [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. *IN* lines 579-581, p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. *IN* line 6544, p. 333. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. *IN* line 6963, p. 353. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. *IN* line 584, p. 27. “Shah” and “Khalifeh” [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. *IN* line 585, p. 28. This phrase, “saheb-e gheran”, means “owner of the century” and has been applied to those considered “renewers of the Faith” of Islam, one of whom is supposed to appear every century. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. *IN* lines 585, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Ritter, DMDS, p. 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Schimmel, Annemarie. “Foreward” to *IN,* p. xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Landolt, “ ‘Attar, Sufism, and Ismailism,” p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. “Ecstatic utterances”, cf. Ernst, Carl. *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism.* Albany: SUNY, 1985. p. 36-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Waley, Muhammad Isa. “Didactic Style and Self-Criticism in ‘Attar”. p. 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Lewisohn, Leonard. “Sufi Symbolism in the Persian Hermeneutic Tradition” in *‘Attar and the Persian Sufi Tradition*, p.291. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. “Farid” is both the author’s name as well as an adjective meaning “unique”. (Boyle, *IN*, p. 382). [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Persian: mujahiz: here it signifies a well equipped traveler, or some sort of holy soul, though it has a wide semantic range. The indefinite nature of the referent is maintained. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Persian: alamha-ye alavi: literally, “celestial worlds”. Another reading is “the learned of the Alavi”, ‘Attar may have been punning on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. The first half of the verse refers to Jesus (Arabic spelling), the second to Moses, whose hand was burned by the bush. (Boyle, 355). I maintain the Arabic spelling and the more cryptic epithet, as they add to the mysteriousness of the verse/statement. The author is (ostensibly) referring to stories within the book, the “White Hand” is applied by ‘Attar to Muhammad, whose hand appears covered in goat’s milk (Boyle, p. 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. I have translated the Persian 3rd person pronoun as masculine, rather arbitrarily. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Persian: behar: sea/meter. The image of water is also referring to his own poetry herein. “Complete” is substituted for “perfect”, as a “perfect ocean” doesn’t really make much sense, and applying it to poetry does not seem to give the verse much volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Persian: tawhid-e pak. Boyle’s translation has ‘Attar proclaiming his pure monotheism. My suggestion is that ‘Attar is paving the way for his next series of bold statements. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Literally, the Book of God, or the Book of the Divine. With the referent established in the previous line, I maintain the Persian title which maintains the assonance/rhyme of the translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Boyle has “saints” for “bozorgan-i”, and he has them reading in this case. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. ‘Attar is hinting that the book has transformed him into a regal figure, which comes through more explicitly later. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Boyle translates this as “meal”, which sounds a bit too ordinary for my taste. This translation forces a dual reading, wherein the “unseen” is either a place from which it is coming, or the very thing he is consuming. This perhaps gets at the more esoteric meaning of the unseen implied here, at least more so than meal. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. The very next story in the epilogue is a moral fable involving two students, one who has meat and the other does not. ‘Attar counsels that one shouldn’t chase after “carrion and bones”, meaning not just food, but wealth, etc. Thus his lament is also an affirmation of his chosen way of life: his pain is his pride, for it makes him who he is. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. “Washi” is a wild beast, “Hamza” is wheat soup. Wahshi is also the name of the slave who killed Muhammad’s uncle Hamza (Boyle, 383). Thus there’s more to the Hamza/Wahshi relationship than the tension between a wild beast and a bowl of wheat soup. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. According to Boyle, the seed is “to avert the evil eye” (p.383). [↑](#footnote-ref-104)