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BIRD TALK #3

The conference of the birds is political
20th April 2023, 7pm @hinterland

Sama Maani (born in 1963 in Graz) is an Austrian writer, psychoanalyst, psychiatrist and lateral thinker. He initially thought that he had no connection with Attar's work - but found that he did a year after coming across Attar's story. Indeed there were many connections, about which he talked to us at hinterland on 20 April 2023. His own literary work, "Žižek in Tehran", unwittingly has links to Attar, and the convergence points are quite astonishing. His psychoanalysis practice is located in the same street as hinterland and he was himself the first person to hold a reading in the hinterland.

English Summary of Bird Talk #3

Text by Caroline Ahorner / Translation: Deman Translations GmbH

Seek and you shall find. The 'Bird Talk' evening and discussion was clearly stimulating for the host Gudrun Wallenböck, and for Maani himself. Yet, especially afterwards, guests remained "there" and, in the same breath, they thought, laughed and forged links, to each other and to the two stories back and forth, a ping pong game of curiosity. Sama Maani grew up in Graz, has Iranian roots, has lived in Iran and has dealt with Iranian literature, but had not really studied Attar's "Festival of the Birds" before the "Conference of the Birds". This is why the author's moment of wonder was captured so well: he was visibly amazed at how many political issues can be found, from ancient Iran and also today's Iran.

In the subsequent discussions, we try to unravel a host of issues, the big questions behind the general question: who is leading us, why and for what purpose? Sama's book was republished this year. We hope to rediscover Attar's journey and his protagonists this evening in Sama Maani's literature. Maani jumps right in at the deep end and reads a passage from "Žižek in Tehran". Just as the guests at the discussion evening were making themselves comfortable, so too was Maani's character in the first few sentences he read aloud in the book: he lies on the couch arranging his cushion. The book's story takes place in a semi-fictional state, the Islamic Republic of Tehran, in which worrying things are going on, from the point of view of the current rulers. The leaders of state believe that they face an existential danger. Why? Fragments of a mysterious text are circulating. Maani notes here that his story is somewhat reminiscent of Monty Python's "Killer Joke", which causes people to die from laughing. Readers of this mysterious text are similarly affected: the text does something to people, not fatally, but it transforms men in particular. They begin to feel like women, and through this radical change enter into a conversation with God: as a result, a women's revolution takes place in the fictitious state.

To return to the details of the short reading: Sama Maani uses a specific statement in his text: "Miraculous birds...". What is exciting here is that this "bird" fragment of a word originates from another literary text and he created it here. It is a statement by the Leipzig-based Daniel Paul Schreber, a lawyer and politician, who suffered from schizophrenia and wrote the haunting book "Memories of a Nervous Patient" in 1900. One becomes aware of Maani's background as a psychoanalyst and his interdisciplinary knowledge here. What does "miraculous" mean at all? The author explains that this word is probably a neologism, a new creation of the schizophrenic, so to speak. In relation to birds, it is said to mean birds produced by God and created by miracles. Keyword birds! The bird synonym can often be found and is charged with meaning through the

hinterland

Iranian clear "connection" from one text to another, but also in a number of ways, often concealed, but uncovered here by Maani. There are mentions of finches, swallows, sparrows and crows.

Maani cites Schreber, as well as Freud. Sigmund Freud stated that birds are used to describe young girls, comparable to geese, who have a bird brain, and can expound nothing but rehearsed phrases. In Schreber's work, the souls of birds are used as a description for girls' names: their names reflect their characteristics, such as lust and curiosity. Schreber's work also talks about birds best being compared to young girls and resembling the rays of God. A kind of "negative transition", as Maani calls it, to the next topic: his own novel was written one and a half years before the current wave of protests in Iran. The subject of separatist propaganda is dealt with in his fictitious Tehran. Seven different separatist groups coordinate an uprising together, which is intended to lead to the disintegration of the empire. In Attar's story too, the country is in turmoil. The subject of the collective recurs – in Attar's story, the hoopoe, the enlightened bird, tries to gather the other birds together – separatists? – and send them on their way. But, again and again, a few birds also become rebellious.

Maani calls Attar's work a mystical piece of writing that needs to be explored. He tells us that Attar was an unorthodox representative of the imaginary world of monotheistic religions. God governs as an instance, and the King leads the kingdom according to God's ideas. As a poet and mystic, Attar did not deal with the laws of external behaviour, but with the inner attitude and relationship of the individual to God. A central premise in Iranian culture, this attitude is expressed in the famous verse by the poet Rumi: "We have taken the flesh from the Qur'an, we leave the skin to the idiots." This concerns celebrating introspection and criticising external laws: evocative of Christendom. For instance, radical internalisation, in particular St. Paul's radical criticism of the law: "I would not have known about coveting, if the law had not said 'you shall not covet'". Sama Maani digresses and introduces different approaches into the discussion, which nicely underline the topic. For some, the highest and most intimate form of love, he says, is identification. Cathy Earnshaw, in Emily Brontë's "Wuthering Heights", says about Heathcliff, who she passionately loves: "I do not love him, I am Heathcliff [he]." The phenomenon of identification can also be found in Attar's construct of the relationships between birds – firstly, in identifying with the mystical bird Simurgh, and secondly in themselves – when they realise that they themselves are divine.

An identification has two meanings or origins: I identify with A because I would like to be like A - which equates to idealisation. The second meaning of identification is that I am already like A: the equitable aspect or the democratic aspect. These two senses of identification, as a metaphorical allegorical narrative, are not alone in this regard, but are deeply interwoven in the tradition of the mystical poetry of Persia. Moses and the Shepherd, for example, also a story by Rumi. With Attar, however, it is about the dynamics of relationships in a collective: Simurgh makes the birds identical to the king, explains Sama. It is a new collective twist that Attar creates by identifying with a God King and offers a possible link to the feminist revolutionary movement in Iran. It raises a question about whether this requires leadership at all and, if so, by whom. We need to revise widespread assumptions about Iran to understand events in Iran in the West and place them in a historical context. When we consider the 'Revolution in Iran', we tend to think about the Islamic Revolution of 1979. However, the real revolution in Iran was the Constitutional Revolution, which began in 1905 and lasted until 1911. It was a liberal and democratic revolution based on European ideals, like those of the French Revolution, and had an important role in women's rights. The aim was to wrest a democratic constitution from the absolute ruler, the King, based on the Belgian model. Opponents of the revolution became vociferous between 1905

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and 1909 and declared that in Islam believers and infidels and women and men can never be equal. The revolution in 1979 was a late victory of the counter-revolution.

The present revolutionary movement means correcting this counter-revolution as a historic error. It is about deconstructing the metaphysical and mythological basis of God's legitimacy in Iran, when the flock of birds finally recognizes: we are the People, we are the God, the King is dead, it is the turn of the People of the Birds. An interpretation of the "Conference of the Birds" might be that democracy would only be possible in a manageable collective. Or: These 30 birds, which are ultimately enlightened in Attar's story, may not stand for a People, but for a Leadership Collective. Perhaps the one does not rule out the other. And the birds, as was subsequently discussed in the audience, are just enlightened because they renounce their 'Me', 'I' and 'Ego'. They are committed to the journey.