In an allegorical animal tale by Shihabuddin Suhrawardi, the twelfth-century Sufi best known for his theosophy of light, a hoopoe is threatened with death by a group of fairies (20–22). Unlike the hoopoe, the fairies are nearly blind and have based their understanding of the world upon their blindness. The seeing hoopoe is thus considered a dangerous heretic because its version of the world differs from theirs. The hoopoe saves its life by deciding to “speak to the people according to their intelligence” and by consequently pretending to be blind (21). When the disheartened hoopoe finally leaves the fairies at the conclusion of the tale, he characterizes the fairies by quoting sura 27:25 of the Koran: “... they worship not Allah Who bringeth forth the hidden in the heavens and the earth” (22). This tale is a simple parable that contrasts those, like the hoopoe, who correctly perceive reality through the Islamic faith, to those, like the fairies, who are figuratively blind to that faith. The tale is also Suhrawardi’s imaginative reconstruction of the narrative of Solomon in section two of sura 27, in which the hoopoe, Solomon’s messenger, reports on the land of Saba whose inhabitants worship the sun rather than Allah, having been seduced by Satan into misperceiving reality. Suhrawardi’s tale consequently depicts the fairies, like the people of Saba, as obvious heretics who are ruled by their senses rather than by faith.

A sub-text of Suhrawardi’s tale concerns the narrative mechanisms through which revealed truth might be disclosed. The parable of the hoopoe in effect suggests that truth should be hidden from disbelievers. Suhrawardi comments on the idea of narrative concealment in discussing his Book of Conversations: “... if one were to study this present book carefully, one would find that it is not devoid of precious things and treasures hidden under a thin veil. If the half-wit is unable to discover them, the fault is not mine” (Corbin, Spiritual Body, 119). One reason for narrative concealment is that controversial, even heretical, ideas can be dangerous, as the hoopoe discovers. Suhrawardi himself, like other Sufis, was persecuted and in fact executed because of his heterodox beliefs. Another motive for narrative concealment, one voiced by the
hoopoe and evoked in world literature, is that the uninitiated, the uneducated, Suhrawardi’s “half-wit,” is not able to comprehend canons of moral law and abstract or difficult religious thought. Unconcealed narrative, such as the philosophic essay, a social realist novel, or a journalistic account, is more or less straightforward in its use of words and images. In this case the linguistic sign occurs at the most literal of semantic levels. Word or sign “x” conveys and is meant to convey a conventional meaning in the most direct manner possible. Rather than occurring as a predominant stylistic idiom, metaphoric expression and figurative language are highlighted as examples in narratives that intend to express a forthright presentation of ideas and “facts.” Contrariwise, concealed narrative uses symbols and allegory of varying degrees of ambiguity to convey its message. Word or sign “x” becomes a symbol for meaning “y.” Common sense, a general understanding of a given ideology or belief system, or the context of the narrative itself reveals the hidden meaning of the symbols or allegory. The animal image, as in Suhrawardi’s tales, often serves as a symbol in popular traditional narrative. It is a two-dimensional symbol of the prudential wisdom of man in the fable traditions, a naturalistic emblem of the play of good and evil according to medieval Christian theology in the bestiary traditions, and an ironical token of the failures and superfluities of human nature and society in the satirical beast epic traditions. Like the Suhrawardi tale that explicates its symbols through quotations from the Koran, the fable elucidates its meaning through a concluding gloss of its narrative, the bestiary interprets its animal subject through a concluding significatio, and the satirical beast epic clarifies its linked animal tales through interspersed moral commentary.

The animal image also serves mythic narratives. Usually expressed in a highly metaphoric idiom, these traditional narratives, which include “delivered” scriptures like the Old Testament and the Koran, represent a primordial sacred time or the convergence of sacred time or intention with history. Myths are explanations of the origin and development of the natural order, the social institutions, the religious rituals, and the beliefs of a given culture. Offering narratives of supernatural beings and forces, myths represent supernatural reality and are therefore sacred texts, unlike the “made up” moral tales of the fable and satirical beast epic traditions or the moralized natural histories of the bestiary traditions. Mythic texts often include divinely prescribed rituals and moral codes and passages that in their ambiguity or imagistic resonance elicit inter-