

Beyond Philosophy: Suhrawardī's Illuminationist Path to Wisdom



Hossein Ziai

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Is there a dimension in the religious tradition of Islam related to “Myth, Philosophy, and Practice” confined neither to the prevalent juridical nor to the historians’ interpretation?*

As a participant in the Colloquium I began to probe this question in earnest. I looked beyond the Muslim jurists’ and theologians’ views of religious life, including thought and practice, shaped purely on the basis of God’s revelation to Muhammad codified as a complete set of laws— *the shari’a*.¹ In examining the intellectual traditions of Islam I concentrated on a school of philosophy known as the philosophy of illumination, *ḥikmat al-isbrāq*. This philosophical way, while including the impact of Hellenic philosophy on Islamic intellectual traditions, as does the Islamic Peripateticism, attempts further to incorporate a special initial and

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intuitive grasp of the whole of reality. In its attempt at a total formulation of reality the philosophy of illumination aims to construct a consistent system based on a prior innate knowledge. This prior knowledge is claimed to be based on an *experience* of reality not confined to cogitation and simple sense perception. The language of the philosophy of illumination in its attempt to combine philosophical construction and poetic perceptions is beyond ordinary language and ultimately mytho-poetic. As I examined, with a comparative eye, the varied texts in this tradition of philosophy in Islam, comparing its discursive language to its metalanguage of the experienced and the imagined, a set of issues presented themselves. These comprise questions relating to a type of experienced knowledge which in practice continues to inform and shape the world view not only of individual philosophers and thinkers, but also of a larger group of poets as it relates to their conception of God, man, and nature. Through a conscious use of poetic language employing metaphor and using symbols of widely known myths and legends, the illuminationist, *ishraqī*, tradition was able to go beyond the formal Peripatetic philosophical teachings and in so doing influence a much wider audience. This is evidenced in the widespread use of illuminationist terminology, symbols, and metaphors in mystical poetry and in allegorical mystical and philosophical tales. In this tradition, poetic wisdom came to be considered the final means by which man was to learn his position in the world. The illuminationist dimension in the civilization of Islam may be thought of as mystical indeed, but should not be identified purely with Sufism and with the history of Sufi orders. Here the language of myth, legend, and allegory is used to narrate stories that convey an experience of life not confined to the recitation of a singular revelation. Ordinary language is replaced by metaphor, and poetic wisdom comes to be the recognized end of philosophy.

In order to show the interconnection among myth, philosophy, and poetic wisdom I shall concentrate on the allegorical formulation of the philosophy of illumination, whose main proponent is the twelfth-century Persian sage Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī—the Divine Master as he is referred to in the texts—who in the year 1191 was executed by order of the Ayyubid Sultan Saladin in Aleppo, on charges of proclaiming prophethood.² His major writings have been published by the late Henry Corbin whose contribution to our understanding of Suhrawardī's thought and its impact on the development of "Iranian Islam" cannot be overestimated.³ The philosophy of illumination is heir to an ancient

Iranian religious world view that posits the material and the spiritual as necessary attributes of a single undivided reality. In systematically reformulating the principles of this world view on a mystical plane related to, but not restricted by Islam, Suhrawardī ensured its continuity in Iranian culture in a vastly more profound and dynamic way.

To fully appreciate the poetic, metaphorical, and ultimately experiential character of illuminationist wisdom, it may be useful to deal briefly with the significant analytical and systematically philosophical part of the philosophy of illumination that serves as the discursive grounds on which it is founded.⁴ As with the systematic Peripatetic Islamic philosophy (predominantly the Avicennan doctrine) before him, Suhrawardī's philosophical works begin with the study of logic, continue with physics, and culminate with metaphysics. Suhrawardī makes major methodological, structural, and conceptual changes to the traditional systematic philosophy of his time. The most significant distinguishing character of these changes is in Suhrawardī's departure from Peripatetic epistemology. At the very outset of constructing an epistemology Suhrawardī rejects the Aristotelian theory of definition. The illuminationist theory does not accept the value of a unitary formula of an essentialist definition as a step in constructing philosophy. The Aristotelian *horos*, the Avicennan *al-hadd al-tāmm*, is rejected by Suhrawardī on the grounds that the *summum genus* plus the *differentiae* of a thing to be defined cannot be exhaustively enumerated in any definition. Thus an essentialist definition is considered to be only a turn of phrase, *tabdīl al-lafz*—a tautology—that does not convey knowledge of essence. In the language of current analytical philosophy Suhrawardī's views can be summed up by stating that the illuminationist view does not accept the validity of any definition by extension, and that a definition by acquaintance may be considered a valid type in certain cases.⁵ A thing's essence may be known not through a constructed definition of it, but through an "experience" which, in the illuminationist terminology, is stated to be a vision, *mushāhada*, of the thing as-it-is.⁶ The same principle of vision is explained to apply to the corporeal as well as to the noncorporeal realms. In the activity of external sight, "vision" takes place at the moment when a sound eye meets an illuminated object—potentially knowable—when no obstacles exist between the two, and when a medium for the vision, i.e. light, is present. In internal or illuminationist vision, *mushāhada*, *ishraqiyya*, "vision" takes place based on a similar principle. Here the subject is the philosopher-sage who has prepared himself to "see"

through praxis. The object is the illuminated and potentially knowable object of the realm of experience, known as the *mundus imaginalis*, and light is a noncorporeal light that emanates from the source referred to as the "Light of Lights," *Nūr al-anwār*. Illuminationist epistemology is thus based on direct vision, and knowledge is nonpredicative but depends on a relation, *iḍāfa*, between the subject and the object. The laws that govern illuminationist vision, such as its time and place, apply only to the separate realm of the *imaginal* and not to the corporeal. For example the time involved in a vision is a time without duration and thus measureless, called *ān*, and *where* it takes place is not *in* extended space. Illuminationist vision takes place in a durationless instant in a place that is not here or there nor above nor below. The realm of experience, the *mundus imaginalis*, is real yet separate from the subject, who, however, when having a vision actually comes to "reside" there.⁷ In his theory of vision Suhrawardī does incorporate an Avicennan doctrine of intuition, *ḥads*, yet by giving it a fundamental role in the way knowledge of essence is obtained he moves further than Avicenna towards a philosophical position that I propose to call "primacy of experience and vision." In this paper I will omit discussing the philosophical side of the theory of illumination and vision and concentrate rather on the metaphorical and allegorical works by Suhrawardī. For this is the domain wherein a final poetic language is employed to create new myths that combine symbols and metaphors that continue to inform man of the experience of the whole of reality.

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The goal of the Philosophy of Illumination is to gain an unqualified knowledge of that which cannot be qualified: beyond a knowledge of God in His oneness, and of the identity of oneself with His being, its goal is the cognitive *experience* of a state of consciousness where all identities are obliterated, and with it all expressions and references.⁸ Those who possess it are invariably referred to as the People of Truth, of Reality, or of Love. This knowledge is argued as being superior to all other types of knowledge, including knowledge based on observation and argumentation. For while the latter rests on, and is limited by, the Active Intellect,⁹ the proof of the former lies in the direct experience of its validity. The following story is cited by Suhrawardī by way of illustrating this contention:

One of the sufis was asked, 'What is the proof of the creator's existence?' He replied, 'The morning renders the lamp unnecessary.' Another of them says, 'One who seeks God through logical proof is like someone searching for the sun with a lamp.'¹⁰

In illuminationist terminology, this knowledge is nonpredicative and forms a "science based on 'presence,' and vision'," *al-ilm al-ḥudūrī al-shubūdī*, which serves as the basis for that which is subsequently acquired and explained through philosophical construction.¹¹ In its methodology, therefore, the philosophy of illumination employs discursive reasoning only in order to systematically depict the results of visions. In other words, it only makes use of the method of Peripatetic philosophy but does not consider it to be an end in and by itself. In sum, its definition and praxis are based on a primary intuition of time-and-space, and on a perception of reality that is extrasensorial.

From a philosophical point of view, *ḥikmat al-isbrāq* is, or intends to be, a perfect synthesis between the Peripatetic and the Platonic schools of thought. Suhrawardī incorporates a reconstructed theory of knowledge in which intuitive reasoning, *al-aḥkām al-ḥads*, comparable to the Aristotelian notion of "quick wit,"¹² together with the coupled process of vision-illumination, *al-mushāhada wa'l-isbrāq*, serves as the foundation for the construction of philosophy. In this respect he has, while employing the Avicennan term *al-ḥads*, given intuition a general epistemological priority confined by Avicenna only to certain ranks of individuals such as prophets.¹³ Thus in the Avicennan view intuition is used to explain specific phenomena¹⁴ and does not receive the same position in the foundation of a theory of knowledge as it does in illuminationist epistemology. Using a modified Peripatetic terminology, Suhrawardī identifies intuition, first, as an activity of the intellect *in habitu*, '*aql bi'l-malaka*,'¹⁵ and secondly, as the activity of the holy intellect, *al-'aql al-qudsī*,¹⁶ but the most important activity of intuition is the subject's ability to perceive the intelligibles and the essence of things instantaneously and without guidance.¹⁷ "Judgments of intuition," *aḥkām al-ḥads*, *ḥukm al-ḥads*, are thus valid forms of inference¹⁸ and are of the rank of demonstration.¹⁹

Given the nature of its praxis, however, the philosophy of illumination has to be further qualified as a mystico-philosophical tradition which, rooted in Zoroastrianism and further influenced by Islam, provides a personal, spiritual, and always ecstatic way for contemplating, discerning, influencing, creatively shaping, and finally living, reality.

The structure as well as the individual components of the techniques by which this wisdom is attained are analogous to other highly evolved traditions such as Buddhism and classical yoga and, like them, find many points of correspondence with primitive and archaic rites of passage that transform a neophyte into a person of a qualitatively altered status and sensibility. Within the latter category, the closest analogy in terms of the ordeals and the initiatory pattern of the journey of the soul, the spatio-temporal concepts and the symbols used to depict them, and in the value given to magical prowess, is to be found in shamanic rites. For the esoteric knowledge gained by the initiated—usually though not necessarily through a master of initiation—may manifest itself in such occult powers as clairvoyance, the ability to heal, foretell the future, conjure up images, walk on water, and change his form at will.²⁰ In sum, the Philosophy of Illumination is a unique synthesis of concepts and traditions as old and primal as those of the hunting societies of the paleolithic age and as late and refined as those of medieval Islamic culture.

The outstanding mode of presentation and instruction of this philosophy—both textual and oral—while didactic in style, is mythological in form and poetic in essence, myth and poetry being the most suitable media for eliciting an experience of an object and for expressing the transcendental and often paradoxical measures of reality. Suhrawardī's use of myth and metaphor—both ancient Iranian and Judaeo-Islamic—is personal, creative, and synthetic and departs from the mainstream tradition in Islam where myth is neither the source of inspiration or the stuff of revelation. The Koran recognizes a selection of Biblical legends as testimonials of prophethood, *nubuwwa*, in the Abrahamic traditions, but it creates no myths of its own. Logos is the *kalima*, word of God, and the practice of religion is inspired and directed by what is derived from revelation, *wahy*, and the personal way, *sīra*, of the Prophet Muhammad—the seal of the prophets, *khātām al-anbiyā'*, with whom revelation ends. In contradiction to this official notion, illuminationist philosophy holds that revelation is a continuous process manifest through personal revelation, *ilhām*, and vision-illumination, *mushāhada-isbrāq*: "God is not miserly that He close the doors of revelation and vision," insists Suhrawardī.²¹ Revelation is not confined to the rank of prophets but is, in fact, accessible to all seekers, although more so if they have a special "aptitude," or are more "worthy," or "wise,"²² words well descriptive of Suhrawardī himself. One of his most poetic compositions entitled *On the Reality of Love, or the Solace*

of Lovers, for instance, which is an interpretation of a Koranic revelation based on the Old Testament legend of Joseph—here in allegorical form—begins *as* a cosmogonic myth thus:

Know that the first thing God created was a glowing pearl He named Intellect, '*agl* . . . This pearl He endowed with three qualities, the ability to know God, the ability to know itself, and the ability to know that which had not existed and then did exist. From the ability to know God there appeared *ḥusn*, who is called Beauty; and from the ability to know itself there appeared '*ishq*, who is called Love. From the ability to know that which did not exist and then did exist there appeared *ḥusn*, who is called Sorrow. Of these three, who sprang from one source and are brothers one to the other, Beauty the eldest gazed upon himself and saw that he was extremely good. A luminosity appeared in him, and he smiled. From that smile thousands of cherubim appeared. Love, the middle brother, was so intimate with Beauty that he could not take his eyes from him and was constantly at his side. When Beauty's smile appeared, a consternation befell Love, who was so agitated that he wanted to move. Sorrow, the youngest, clung to him, and from his clinging the heaven and earth appeared.²³

The tale goes on to relate how the brothers separated after the creation of Adam and how Beauty came to reside in Joseph and increased thereby; that Jacob grew intimate with Sorrow and Love became Zuleikha's companion. And so on through twelve chapters Suhrawardī uses his own version and interpretation of this Biblical legend to expound on the nature and attributes of the human soul and the divine source of his condition. In interpreting the word of God, the claim to truth rests with the man who is at once a mystic, a philosopher, and a poet. "The worst era," adds Suhrawardī, is when the world is devoid of the wisdom of such a sage, when "the mind soars no more, the doors of revelation are shut and the paths of visions are blocked."²⁴

It should come as no surprise that over and above the appeal of its theoretical propositions, it is the practical end of the philosophy of illumination as a way of life and gnosis that came to dominate the Iranian mystical experience in the post-Islamic era. And heirs to the same traditions, it was the mystic poets of Persia—those farthest-reaching messengers of the Iranian world view—who went on to act as the main communicators of this ideology to a receptive audience that cuts across the Persian speaking world to this day.

The study of an illuminationist path of knowledge that reaches beyond philosophy should invite general interest among humanists, particularly in the fields of semiotics, the history of religions, and comparative mythology. I shall attempt to present the principles of this subject in terms that may serve such a purpose and will, therefore, focus on examining the nature of the illuminationist experience and the symbolic system in which it is expressed, and omit discussion of the theoretical foundations of the Philosophy of Illumination and its place in the history of Islamic philosophy.

Some remarks on the nature of the illuminationist universe and the type of people—real or fictitious—that reside in it are required. The cosmos in which the illuminationist experience unfolds is four-fold:²⁵ 1) the world of controlling lights, *‘ālam al-anwār al-qābira*; 2) of managing lights, *‘ālam al-anwār al-mudabbira*; 3) of intermediaries, *‘ālam al-barāzikh*, also of bodies; and 4) of dark-and-light-seeking suspended forms, *‘ālam al-ṣuwwar al-mu‘allaqa al-zuhmāniyya wa’l-mustanira*. The first world, that of controlling lights, is similar to the rank of the Plotinian universal intellect; it is noncorporeal and should be considered as the first station from where light is propagated from what is called the “Light of Lights.” The second world, also called the “Isfahbad lights,” manages the celestial domain, the movements of the spheres, and the affairs of men. In this last capacity the Isfahbad lights, especially the light called “Isfahbad al-Nasut,” serves the same functions as the peripatetic Active Intellect. The third world, called Barzakh, is the world of corporeal entities, simple elements, and material compounded bodies. The fourth world, the *‘ālam al-mithāl*, also referred to as the “Heavenly Earth Hūrquyā,” or to use Corbin’s rendition, the *Mundus Imaginalis*, is the most amazing and awe inspiring of all. The spiritual substances of this world that include the luminous (the good) as well as the dark (evil) beings may appear as Epiphanies, and although they are not situated in Euclidean space, are real, *mutaḥḥaqaq fī ‘ālam al-mithāl*, and can be experienced, and “seen,” in the sense that they are accessible to a vision-illumination, *mushābada wa isbrāq*.²⁶

The champions who populate this realm, Imagemakers, *Aṣḥāb al-Barāyā* (lit., *those who possess the ability to create images*), Wayfarers, *sālikūn*, or the Brethren of Abstraction, *Ikhwān al-Tajrīd*, as they are variably called, constitute a category of prophets, sages, “divine” philosophers, kings, warriors, and mystics that include the Prophet Muḥammad, Pythagoras, Plato, the ideal king of the Avesta—Kaikhusrow—the greatest hero of the Iranian national epic—

Rustam—and a long list of mystics that includes the martyred al-Ḥallāj, Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Dhū’n-Nūn al-Miṣrī, Sahl al-Tustarī, Abū Yazīd al-Bastāmī, Ibrāhīm ibn Adham, and even Junayd and Shibli.²⁷ Of particular interest is the exclusion of philosophers such as Alfarabi or Avicenna in favor of Hermes, Asclepius, Empedocles, Socrates, Plato, and others. Indeed the visionaries, *arbāb al-mushābada*, are said to be in opposition to the Peripatetics²⁸ and are distinguished from them by their ability to gain knowledge of all intelligibles without recourse to teachers or texts,²⁹ their inner vision allowing them to dispense with cogitation, *fikr*, altogether.³⁰

The individual who has obtained illumination through intuition has undergone a transition from a simple subject, *al-mawḍū‘*, to a knowing subject, *al-mawḍū‘ al-mudrik*, to a knowing, creating subject, *al-mawḍū‘ al-mudrik al-khallāq*. This means a transformation from the natural state, *nāsūt*, where man has to follow the ordinances of religious law, *Sharī‘a*, to the first excited state where he seeks the object of quest beyond the confines of religion and reason, and finally to the state of unity, when as a knowing subject he enters the realms of power and divinity, *jabarūt* and *lāhūt*, and obtains knowledge of the invisible world, *al-‘ālam al-ghayb*, and of the reality, *ḥaqīqa*, of things and, thus, the power of creation, *kun*, (be!). This state of creation known as *maqām kun*, is derived from the Koran XVI:42, *naqūl labu kun fayakūn*, “[God] said to it, ‘Be!’ and it was.”³¹ It is in this final phase of creation where the individual soul obtains a vision of the Isfahbad lights—an imagery taken from Zoroastrian cosmology—and joins the exalted company of the Brethren of Abstraction,³² so called because they are free from the bondage of corporeality. “The divine Plato,” says Suhrawardī in his *Intimations*, “has related a story concerning [the experience] of his soul. . . . ‘It so happened that I had retreated to my soul, and I had removed my body from extended space, *jānīb*, and I had become as though abstracted, without body, stripped of natural clothings, absolved from Prime Matter, *hayūlā*. So I realized that I [had become] a part of the elevated noble world, *al-‘ālam al-a‘lā al-sharīf*.’”³³

Another class of intuitively illuminated persons who act as God’s vicegerents on earth³⁴ and are named as members of this noble world are historical rulers such as the first four Caliphs: Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān, and ‘Alī. In fact, the Brethren of Abstraction are individuals who often serve political functions, the term *political* being taken in its broadest sense as referring to actions and relations that affect social

units beyond the person's immediate circle of associates. This attitude also reflects on Suhrawardī's list of the luminaries taken from Persian mythology, epic, and legendary history, so that the magician-medicine man-king Afrīdūn of the Avesta who can change his shape at will, as well as the legendary Sasanian sage and king's counselor, Buzurgmihr, who is credited with—among other things—discovering the rules of chess, are also counted among the illuminati. From Avestan mythology he also borrows the concept of the Farrah-i Īzādī, Divine Glory, which signifies a sometimes personified celestial quality that resides in and identifies the most exalted among men.³⁵ In Suhrawardī, this Divine Glory is depicted as light and, as in the earlier tradition, is retained so long as the person is deserving of it; or in Suhrawardī's usage, continues to recognize its existence in himself. The illuminationist experience may in fact be summed up by saying that it is an experience of one's own being as a substantial light.

As the "Epiphanies of the Cosmos," *Mazāhir al-ʿālam*, members of this spiritual fraternity are responsible for channeling wisdom, or Sacred Knowledge, *al-khamāra al-muqaddasa*, in history, the wisdom that is synthesized in Islam, the quintessence of which is captured by Suhrawardī himself. The source of this wisdom is fourfold, the exemplar in each case being Hermes, the father of philosophy; Plato, the divine philosopher; Kayumārth, the progenitor of mankind [Gayo-maretan, the first man/mortal in Avestan mythology]; and the Brahmins who are collectively referred to as the "sources of Indian wisdom."

The process by which this wisdom is attained is nowhere methodically delineated by Suhrawardī himself. However, it is possible to extrapolate from his writings a paradigm that describes it in terms of an ecstatic-like rite of passage in to Hūrqulyā that is marked by four stages of preparation, visionary experience, illumination, and definition. No one is barred from walking this path for it is submitted that every man possesses its two fundamental requirements: intuition, and a portion of the light of God.

The first stage consists of a rite of separation and is properly marked by ascetic practices and mental exercises that prepare the candidate for initiation. A forth-day fast "with a little agreeable food" that is ritually clean and legitimately acquired is prescribed, to be followed by a purgative consisting of 'whatever is dear to the person,' "possessions, property, material things, psychological and carnal pleasures."³⁶ This is to be repeated until the person "can see things not with the physical eye but through the eye of logic" which is how "the people of reality" see

things. The mental exercises should be directed toward gaining self-knowledge which is said to form the basis for the attainment of unqualified knowledge. When in a personal vision induced after a night of ascetic practices Suhrawardī confronts Aristotle with the problem of knowledge, *mas'alat al-ʿilm*,³⁷ the "Master of Philosophy" as the latter is called replies: "Revert to your self (or soul)."³⁸

The search for "perception" and "discovery," *mushāhada wa mukāshafa*, undertaken in a state of self-contemplation will bring the candidate to "see" his own essence and to recognize the "I" as that which knows his own self, *dhāt*. Indeed, according to a fundamental component of the illuminationist epistemology, knowledge of the soul is self-constituted, for every individual is cognizant of his essence by means of that essence itself.³⁹ In this preparatory stage, then, the successful candidate will come to accept the reality of his own existence and admit the truth of his personal intuition.⁴⁰ "So I entered my soul," declares Plato in the *Intimations*, "and went outside of everything else. I thus saw in my soul things of beauty and worth, and things that glisten and radiate, and [I saw] amazing beautiful primordial things."⁴¹ In a treatise entitled *The Shrill Cry of the Simurgh*, it is suggested that even without ascetic practices it is possible at times to experience this heightened sensibility spontaneously and without warning as when one is present in an open prayer-field amidst a sonorous festive crowd, or in the pitch of a clamorous battle, or on a galloping horse that takes the breath away.⁴²

The second stage of this journey is said to occur in a state between sleep and wakefulness where "one hears horrible voices and strange cries." It unfolds by virtue of the "polar" mechanism of vision-illumination, *mushāhada-isbrāq*, while the person is still in the same "unconscious state."⁴³ For the process to succeed, one has to eventually cease using the five external senses, replacing them by the internal ones: "When the inner eye is opened, the outer eye should be sealed to everything."⁴⁴ Elsewhere in a dialogue between Love and Zuleikha, the process is described in different terms as 'scaling the nine barriers' that lead to the City of the Soul.⁴⁵ In Suhrawardī's personal experience, the process is achieved not through cogitation nor speculation but "through something else."⁴⁶ This "something else," as we are told by the author himself and by the commentators Shahrāzūrī (13th c.), Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (14th c.), and later by Hirawī (17th c.), is that special experiential mode of knowledge called "illuminationist vision," *al-mushāhada al-isbrāqiyya*.⁴⁷ The epistemology of this vision is worked out in great detail by Suhrawardī and is the subject of much discussion by all later com-

mentators, reformulated and reexamined by one of the leading twentieth-century Muslim *isbrāqī* philosophers, Seyyed Kāzim ‘Aṣṣār.

Vision-illumination is accompanied by sensations of ecstasy, *kbalsa*, euphoric pleasure, *ladhdha*, and eventually, by a total numbness of the body.⁴⁸ In the beginning it induces visionary experiences of flashes of light, or lightning bolts of different degrees of duration and intensity, which are at times accompanied by thunderous sounds such as are not heard in the world. This veritable son-et-lumière constitutes fifteen stages and culminates in a spectacular vision of a “glittering divine light,” *al-nūr al-ilāhī*, so violent that it tears the body limb from limb.⁴⁹ This light then penetrates the seeker in the form of a series of “apocalyptic lights,” *al-anwār al-sāniha*; that illuminate him in such a way that he may go on to obtain a knowledge that will then serve as the foundation of real sciences, *al-‘ulūm al-ḥaqīqiyya*.⁵⁰

Vision-illumination acts on all levels of reality. ● On the human level it acts sense-perceptibly as the sight, *ibṣār*, of an object, *al-mubṣar*, that is illuminated, *mustanīr*, by the sun, which in Suhrawardī’s Zoroastrianizing nomenclature is called the “Great Hūrakhsh,” (Av. *Hvar Kbšaeta*, “the radiant sun”⁵¹). The process of self-realization which began in the first stage induces in him a vibrant eagerness, *shawq*, to “see” the being just above it in perfection, and it is this act of “seeing” that will effect the process of illumination.⁵² ● On the cosmic level, every “abstract light” is directly illuminated by the Light of Lights, and sees the “lights” that are above it, a gradational upward movement which is possible because each “light” instantaneously, at the moment of vision, illuminates the one lower in rank to itself.

The propagation of light from its highest celestial origin to the lowest terrestrial elements⁵³ is achieved by means of intermediary principles called the “controlling/managing lights” *al-anwār al-ghābi-ra/mudabbira*,⁵⁴ a class of which—called the “Isfahbad lights”—directly illuminate the human soul, and as already stated, enable it to receive knowledge.⁵⁵ In other words, the power of the eye to “see” derives from a hierarchical structure that reaches up to a single source.⁵⁶ Also, according to the same paradigm, it is ultimately possible to “see” the emanating-by-essence, *fayyād bi al-dhāt*, Light of Lights,⁵⁷ everything else being a degree of its intensity and thus “connected” to it without any disjunction, *infīṣāl*.⁵⁸ The Light of Lights is the most apparent to itself, and therefore the most self-conscious being in the universe,⁵⁹ and its luminosity, *nūriyya*, essence, *dhāt*, and power, are the same.⁶⁰

The relevance of the imagery of light to a philosophy of illumination is self-evident and ultimately springs from the sun’s unremitt-

ing, brilliant, warm, and fructifying presence in the heavens. In particular though, it is rooted in a universal association of light with lucidity and knowledge, a symbolism that from a phenomenological point of view derives from the sun’s transparent luminosity. Again, and in light of the context and collection of symbols that appear in Suhrawardī’s works, it can be explained as a vestige of the Zoroastrian heritage where it is the symbol par excellence of Ahura Mazdā’s eternal creation and stands for the highest moral principal. Also light imagery is a common Platonic, Aristotelean, and Plotinian metaphor, but the view that where light is no longer therein does exist real dark beings is specifically Zoroastrian. In the philosophy of illumination as in the Zoroastrian tradition, the “Light of Lights” is at once ideal and real, both an abstraction of the incorporeal quality of celestial existence and a quality of these ideal forms when they are personified on earth. Thus, while the transparent quality of light is used as an abstract symbol by Suhrawardī to signify knowledge, the brilliance and heat generated by it are used in a literal sense as it were to signify the candidate’s inner illumination. Their combined effect engenders a new metaphysical condition in such a way that the enlightened man becomes a source of light, i.e. knowledge, himself, while the dark beings, who also dwell in the *mundus imaginalis*, will continue their attempt to prevent the light from emanating from the source.

In this respect, too, Suhrawardī’s usage of what may be called the “Iranian” form of this symbolic code resembles Zoroastrian concepts for it duplicates, on a philosophical and mystical plane, the ideological concept earlier referred to as the “Farrah-i Īzadi,” the god-given mark of distinction possessed by the glorious few, which though an abstract quality in essence, may at times be personified as well.⁶¹ Compare, for example, Suhrawardī’s notion that “incorporeal souls” obtain an “image of the light of God,” *mithāl min nūr Allāh*, which the faculty of imagination imprints upon the “tablet of the sensus communis,” *lawḥ al-ḥiss al-muṣhtarak*. It is by means of this image that they obtain control over a “creative light,” *al-nūr al-khāliq*. Through the instrument of the creative acts of the illuminated subject’s imagination, vision takes place, that is, knowledge is obtained.⁶² It may be noted that in both Zoroastrian doctrine and in Suhrawardī a person may lose his right to the continued possession of this source of power and glory.⁶³

Some general remarks deduced from Suhrawardī’s accounts of the cosmographic features of the territory wherein the visionary experience does take place is in order before proceeding further. Hūrqulyā or ‘ālam al-mithāl, at times ‘ālam al-khayāl, as it is called by Suhrawardī

and *terre céleste* or the *mundus imaginalis* by Corbin, has already been mentioned as the fourth dominion of the illuminationist cosmos. This is a land beyond the corporeal, of the essence of the fabulous, *hūrqalyā dhāt al-‘ajā’ib*; it is the eighth clima, *al-iqlīm al-thāmin*.⁶⁴ Access to it is gained through the active imagination when it becomes mirrorlike, turning into a zone where an epiphany, *maẓhar*, may occur. One is said to travel in it not by traversing distances but by being witness to “here” or “there” unsituated and without coordinants. Seeing sights in this clime is identified as effects suffered by the soul, or experiences within the self-consciousness of the objective ipseity. The *mundus imaginalis* is an ontological “realm” as it were whose being, though possessing the categorical attributes, i.e. they have attributes of time, place, relation, quality, quantity, etc., are abstracted from matter; which is to say that they are ideal beings with a substance, usually depicted in a metaphorical term as light, which differ from the substances of other beings only in respect to their degree of intensity.⁶⁵

Thus it can be seen that *Hūrqalyā* is a region suspended between the purely intelligible and the purely sensory, where time is not an Aristotelian measure of distance, nor space a Euclidean extension in time. But for all its *imaginalis* qualities, this is, in the words of Corbin, a “concrete spiritual universe.” Like Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin before him,⁶⁶ Corbin qualifies the *mundus imaginalis* in terms of what he calls a “neo-Zoroastrian Platonism” where he states: “It is most certainly not a world of concepts, paradigms, and universals,” for the archetypes of the species that populate it have “nothing to do with the universals established in logic.” Rather, they are an “autonomous world of visionary Figures and Forms” that belong to “the plane of angelology.”⁶⁷

A word of caution must be said here against the temptation to identify the *mundus imaginalis* with Plato’s Realm of Ideas. Suhrawardī himself is quite specific on this point and distinguishes between his suspended Forms, *al-sūwar al-mu‘allaqa*—which are the real beings of the eighth clima—and the Platonic Forms. Platonic Forms are discrete and distinct entities, or things, in the realm of intelligible lights, while the real beings of *Hūrqalyā* are part of the continuum of the *imaginalis*.⁶⁸ Later commentators of illuminationist philosophy divide the *mundus imaginalis* into a continuous and a discrete realm, *mutaṣil wa munfaṣil*, defining the discrete one as a self-constituted realm separate from individual particularization, and the continuous one as a realm which may appear as a series of epiphanies, or as creative acts produced by the imagination.

Let us now look at an allegorical and narrative account of a visionary experience related in *The Sound of Gabriel’s Wing*, with the young Suhrawardī himself as the neophyte, which interestingly enough has structural correspondences to a rite of initiation proper into manhood. It occurred one dark night, says Suhrawardī, “when I had first emerged from the women’s chambers and some of the restrictions of infants had been lifted from me.”⁶⁹ Our sense of the transitional quality of his state is strengthened by the following combination of imagery: awakened by a dream and overcome by despair, the youth heads for the men’s quarters, candle in hand, where he wanders till the break of dawn. Here he ventures into his father’s *khānaqāh* (a chamber for sufi gatherings), that is, into a sacred ground closed to women that brings him into the primity of the spiritually eminent. The idea of separation from the profane world is sealed by another image: he shuts tight one of the two doors of the *khānaqāh*, that is, the one that opens to the city. The account of his ecstatic journey into the wonderland begins as he turns the handle of the second door, the one that leads out into the field. It is here that this “untutored,” “unworthy,” “unenlightened,” “naïve child” as he is called by a master, is to receive instruction that will change his status forever.

In our account of Suhrawardī’s allegory of a sojourn in this realm, the land *Hūrqalyā*, we note that as in quest journeys of traditional tales, his first startling, exotic, and unexpected encounter takes place just across the threshold of the world which he is about to leave. One step beyond the door of the *khānaqāh* that opens to the field, he beholds a group of old men of supreme grace and beauty, with white hair and splendid garments, seated on a magnificent tiered throne. Typical of the quality associated with the experience of the *mysterium*, the youth is struck with a dreadful sense of awe and wonder. Again, following a traditional pattern, his initial fear is dispelled after he makes contact with the strangers. “Pray, sir,” he asks the one seated on the lowest level, “from which direction have my lords honoured us with their presence?” “We are a group of abstracted ones,” replies the old man, “come from the direction of Nākujā-ābād, *lā makān*.”⁷⁰ “In which clime is that?” asks the mystified youth. “In the clime to which your index finger cannot point” comes the reply, and we know that Nākujā-ābād—literally “No-Wheresville”—being the negation of space itself, may not be located on any earthly map. In the treatise on love cited earlier, Sorrow calls it the Sacred Abode where his home stood in the Region of the Soul, Rūḥ-ābād, on Beauty Lane.⁷¹

The fairytale quality of the above image is discernible enough, but the type of elegiac grace and mythic nostalgia stimulated by the internal rhyme of the original Nākujā-ābād cannot be translated. The word evokes an existential yearning to recapture a mythical time and territory of perfect and primordial qualities now lost, except to the imagination. Elsewhere Suhrawardī situates it on the summit of Mount Qāf, a motif borrowed from Islamic tradition which in post-Islamic Iran came to be identified with Harā, the great cosmic mountain of the *Avesta* that rises at the center of the world. In a treatise entitled *The Red Intellect*, the initiation master tells the novice—here depicted as a fettered falcon in search of freedom—that like himself, the novice too “has been brought” from Mount Qāf, and that “eventually everything that exists returns to its initial form.” The Red Intellect himself is no less a person than “the first child of creation,” elsewhere depicted as a glowing pearl. He is a traveler in constant motion who has seen the Seven Wonders of the world which are enumerated as Mount Qāf itself, the Pearl-that-glows-by night, the Ṭūbā tree, the Twelve Workshops, David’s chainmail, the sword Balārak, and the Spring of Life. In the description of each entity that follows, Mount Qāf stands as a symbol for the perilous barrier (of eleven stages) that has to be crossed before one may reach the inner dominion beyond the sensible world. Other than using the linguistic terminology of a mystical philosophy, Suhrawardī resorts to myth as metalanguage in order to communicate the extrasensory dimension of this imaginary land.

The rest of the text of *The Sound of Gabriel’s Wing* is in the form of a dialogue between the old man and the youth. Acting as an initiation master, this tailor-traveler, as he calls himself, who knows God’s Word by heart, guides the youth through a cosmic tour, or “an arrangement of the existential order, the angelic realm, and the occult mysteries of heaven and earth,”⁷² to use a description for the object of knowledge from a treatise entitled *The Shrill Cries of the Simurgh*. As elsewhere in the teachings of Suhrawardī, verses of the Koran and on occasion of the Torah are cited in the text and invested with an illuminationist interpretation. By the time the session ends the apprentice has learned “enough of the science of tailoring” to be able to patch up a garment when needed. And although it is unlikely that he should learn much of God’s Word in his condition, he is taught “a strange alphabet” by means of which he may “learn any chapter,” i.e., any science, that he should wish to in the future.⁷³

On the source of, and the interconnection between, the Word and the Spirit, for instance, we learn that God has several Great, luminous, Words of hierarchical value, the first of which stands to the rest as the sun does to the stars. From it issue an intermediate series of Governing Words called the “Incoherents,” and these are the angels. The last is Gabriel, the Word that engenders the innumerable, inexhaustible category of Lesser Words that include human spirits and are themselves a prerequisite for ascending to the presence of God. From here it is argued that Jesus is both Word and Spirit, which two we are told exist in every man as well, and “being so closely interconnected,” “stand for one reality.”

The text goes on to warn that the ignorant may misinterpret this miraculous constitution when it manifests itself outwardly in a man, an example being the predicament of Sulaymān Tamīmī who was accused of sorcery; the man defended himself by explaining that he was, rather, “one of God’s words.” Suhrawardī himself is known as a *khāliq al-barāyā*, creator of images,⁷⁴ and said to have engaged in magic, *nayranj*.⁷⁵ Likewise, the words of another ṣūfī master, Abū-‘Alī Fārmadī are ridiculed by a fanatic who calls them “the ravings of a madman.” Elsewhere in a treatise called *A Day with a Group of Sufis* he says “the mad call such a one mad” who isolates himself from mankind for he cannot find words to describe his “delight in the unseen things.”⁷⁶ The inner dialectics of the Word/Spirit in this treatise are better appreciated when we note that the passage begins with the novice asking the master whether he and the other nine men over “worship” God, i.e., address him in words, and the answer is, “No. . . . If we were to worship, it would not be by the tongue but with a limb that knows no movement,” which is to say, with the spirit.

The one word to use in order to describe the structure of reality as it is thus far revealed is *hierarchical*, and in so far as the essence of the foremost entity is eternal and unchanging, it may be further qualified as absolutist. As evidenced by the grade-system of lights earlier discussed, this structure is at once a conceptual frame within which the dynamics of reality are described and a functional means by which it comes to be known. The source of all light is one, and gnosis is achieved by ascending the scale of lights which are illuminated by it in a descending order. In this treatise other than the classes of Words noted above, the ten-tiered throne itself is arranged in an ascending order of rank, ending at the topmost level with a “master teacher” who instructs the one below him, and so on back down. Of these only the

lowest in rank may converse with the uninitiated who occupies a similar position in the human structure. Another example is an allegory of an astrological map in the form of a translucent sphere of eleven inner layers that the master points out to Suhrawardī in the courtyard of the *khānaqāh*. Animals, water, sand, and luminous discs are found within particular areas of its layers, which are themselves the handiwork of the ten masters. Again, it is only the lowest two layers that may be penetrated. Elsewhere Mount Qāf which surrounds the world, i.e., the external senses to be overcome by the seeker, is said to consist of eleven other mountains, the first two of which are highlighted as being extremely hot and extremely cold. It must be underlined that this insistence on overreaching the sensible world does not amount to a denial of its reality as for instance in Indian thought where salvation is viewed as an ultimate and unqualified negation of existence. The two are rather posited as concomitant necessities of one another. One may even go so far as to say that this duality is celebrated, as when the newly created Adam is described by Love to be "an amazing thing, both heavenly and earthly, both corporeal and spiritual," who has received "not only the other side, but a portion of our own realm as well."⁷⁷

This latter contention is further supported by the fact that the structure reveals a second, horizontal axis, which in symmetrical, relativist terms qualifies another set of the attributes of reality. No single category defines this set which may relate to physical, metaphysical, moral, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, or other attributes of either the macrocosm or the microcosm. This is represented in our text by the Archangel Gabriel's two wings. As the master explains to the youth, his right wing is of pure light; it is associated with enlightened souls, and its totality "is an abstraction of the relation between his being and God." His left wing is marked with dark spots; it is associated with "the vainglorious world of sound and shadow . . . the Wrath, the Awful Cry and the events [of the Last Day]";⁷⁸ it is a "sign that Gabriel's being has one side toward not-being." And so, "if you look at the relation of his being to God's being, it has the attribute of His being." When you look at the realization of his essence, *istiḥqāq-i dhāt*, it is the realization of nonexistence and a concomitant to possible existence, *lāzim-i shāyad-būd*.⁷⁹

The horizontal axis is repeated in the description given of God's angels, the "messengers" who, as the master points out, are said in the Koran (XXXV:1) to be "furnished with two, and three, and four pairs of wings." The relationship between the two axes is revealed in the

master's additional comments on the same Koranic verse: "The two are mentioned first because 2 is the closest of all numbers to 1, then 3, then 4. Thus, having two wings is nobler than having three or four." In his totality, then Gabriel signifies the *axis mundi*: on the vertical level he represents eternal order and the one God—albeit on a different scale—from whom he is issued; on the horizontal level he represents a simultaneous spread of possibilities, i.e., infinity, finitude, and potentiality, and mankind who issue from him. By being No. 2 in order of hierarchy and having only two wings in the symmetric order, in his flight upward or down, and in the expansive spread of his wings, Gabriel is the first in whom the total structure of reality is crystalized, this being a direct superimposition of the horizontal axis on the vertical one. Other forms may symbolize the same concept on different planes, such as the Active Intellect, Isfahbad-i Nāsūt, Jesus Christ, or Sraush. This is because their essence reveals the same double axis, by virtue of which they share in the ability to move between two worlds. On the human scale this position is represented by Adam who elsewhere is defined as an "amazing" creature for he is both heavenly and earthly, corporeal and spiritual.⁸⁰ The parallelism with Zurvanite interpretations of Zoroastrianism which posit two creative principles of light and dark that issue from a single, eternal source—Time—is plain and needs no further comment. Suffice it to say that in Suhrawardī the system remains on the level of a metaphysical construction and does not strictly speaking translate itself on the moral plane as does its religious antecedent.

One last vision of a different order should be mentioned before ending our account of Suhrawardī's illuminationist journey. Prompted by a question on the part of the youth, the master embarks on a discourse on generation, regeneration, and perpetuity; motion, motivation, and stasis, using the less esoteric imagery of family, food, and progeny, which, combined with the attainment of knowledge, is the object. He explains that each of the ten old men has a mill, and although celibate, a son to manage it as well. The speaker himself has innumerable sons who are periodically born to a slave girl who sits at the center of the mills. When her eyes meet the master's in direct opposition with each revolution of the millstone, she conceives. Each son takes his turn at managing the four-leveled mill, and then joins his "father" for good, never wishing to return to this perilous state again. During all of this, the state of the masters remains constant and unchanged. In other words, once the toil of material existence or exis-

tence on the level of the senses is ended, the 'son' may represent the vertical axis along with the 'father'. Until then, like the two-winged Gabriel, he possesses qualities of both axes and symbolizes the point of the cross that is itself symbolic of the totality of reality.

"Then, as day was breaking in my father's khānaqāh," says the narrator of the tale *The Sound of Gabriel's Wing* as he ends his account, "the outer door was closed and the door to the city was opened. As merchants began to pass by, the group of old men disappeared from before my eyes. In my perplexity and regret at the loss of their company I sighed and moaned, but it was of no use." The youth had entered the dark chambers guided by the light of his own candle; he leaves it now as the whole world is illuminated by the light of the sun. Dawn becomes a symbol with two opposing referents: on the material level it announces a new day, a return to the "city"—here, the world of the senses—and on the spiritual level, an altered state of mind, enlightenment, and the world beyond.

The sun-candle alternation, suggesting as it does the relation between the real and the imaginary, or to look at it from another angle, the ethereal factor that separates the two is not an isolated image. In many of his treatises Suhrawardī refers to Sīmurgh, the fabulous bird/medicine-man of Persian mythology and epic poetry, to express the same complex of concepts. Sīmurgh appears in the *Avesta* as a primordial falcon with his nest on the Tree of All Seeds and Healing from which all edible and medicinal plants are produced.⁸¹ According to Middle Persian sources it is the beating of its wings that breaks the twigs and scatters the seeds of the tree, an image that Suhrawardī transforms to Gabriel and all that is engendered from him. Finally, in the *Shāhnāma* his nest is atop Mount Qāf, and endowed with magical powers, he is the protector *par excellence* of his favorite epic heroes. In Suhrawardī he turns into the archetype of the Active Intellect and the life-force of creation: "At every instant a Sīmurgh comes from the Tūbā tree to the earth and the one that is on the earth simultaneously ceases to exist."⁸² It is the image of this bird who "flies without moving" and "soars without wings,"⁸³ and whose reflection blinds the beholder,⁸⁴ that best captures the essence of the visionary experience: intense, paradoxical, fantastic, primordial, mysterious, ecstatic, awesome, and swift as thought. But "don't you know that all these are symbols?" says the old master when the youth asks him to describe the form of Gabriel's wings. "If taken at face value," they "produce nothing."

This visionary experience in the world of images opens the gates to the third state of illumination during which, equipped with that "strange alphabet" that is the illuminationist methodology, the initiated man may set himself the task of obtaining knowledge of the whole. Lastly, he may broach the fourth state which consists of a philosophical definition and construction of the knowledge gained and of committing it to writing by means of what is called *lisān al-isbrāq*, the "language of illumination." This is a mode of communication that, to judge by Suhrawardī's life and works, includes not only texts such as those just presented, or the linguistic code as such, but also the meta-language of nonverbal codes transmitted by the presence and personality of the sage himself.⁸⁵ Textual and historical evidence indicates that a circle of initiates received such communication from Suhrawardī in his lifetime, although it is hard to determine with certainty whether they formed a fraternity, properly speaking.⁸⁶ But while his violent end on charges of sacrilege may have inhibited any interest in that direction in the period following his death, his legacy was preserved and propagated through Persian literature.

In conclusion it may be suggested that the illuminationist path to wisdom gained dominance in post-Islamic Iran because its holistic world view and syncretistic approach to reality was able to absorb the new Islamic ideology and reformulate it in a relevant way that retained some of the essential premises of the old tradition. It gained appeal over and above strictly analytical and rational tendencies in Islamic thought in part because it continued to seek the perfect form, though on a mystical plane, and because it employed a philosophical method of investigation and instruction that achieved order through diversity. Likewise its mode of expression recreated a vision of the perfect beginnings, evoking the hope that it can be eternally recovered even amidst the chaos of the present. To sum up, the Philosophy of Illumination never ceases to promise that there is method to this madness.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the concept of Divine Law, *Shari'a*, in Islam, see Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 100-116.