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**SUHRAWARDĪ'S WESTERN EXILE
AS ARTISTIC PROSE**

It is often said that creative artistic prose did not exist in Classical Arabic literature, or that it ended with the early *maqāmas*, or, finally, that it concentrated on form at the expense of content. This ignores many movements in Classical Arabic literature: the novelistic tendencies in *adab* collections, experiments with the *risāla*, and post-Ḥarīriian narrative *maqāmas*.²

Sometimes, too, especially in philosophy and mysticism, one can find hidden texts of literary interest considered to be outside the scope of *belles lettres* that have not been sufficiently recognized in histories of literature. One such case is Shihāb al-Dīn (al)-Suhrawardī's (d. 587/1191) *Qiṣṣat al-ghurba al-gharbiyya* (The Tale of the Western Exile), his only Arabic allegory. Suhrawardī's literary production was partly written in Persian, partly in Arabic. His more technical works were mainly composed in Arabic, whereas all his shorter allegories are, with this one exception, in Persian. *The Western Exile* is, briefly, a philosophical allegory of an immortal soul's descent into, and ascent from the material world. Without going into detail, the basic allegorical equations link the West to the material world, the East (and Yemen) to the spiritual world, and 'Āṣim, the companion of the first-person narrator, to the intellect.

From a literary point of view, the text might, at first sight, seem to contain all the supposed weaknesses of Late Classical Arabic prose. It is built around Qur'ānic quotations and laden with allegorical meanings. The narrative has its context in a literary universe, not in the real world: *The Western Exile* is a text built on other texts and its ties with reality are slight. One might think that it is a learned tractate, breathing the thin air of mysticism and philosophy. It is, however, a vivid text, full of evocative imagery with more than a touch of surrealism and the absurd. On closer inspection, it also turns out to be innovative and ex-

¹ I wish to thank my students with whom in autumn 2006 I read Suhrawardī's *Qiṣṣat al-ghurba al-gharbiyya* and whose comments, especially those by Mr. Janne Mattila, M.A., often provided inspiration.

² See Hämeen-Anttila. *Short Stories*; Hämeen-Anttila. *Essays*; Hämeen-Anttila. *Maqāma*. P. 178–296, 328–359.

perimental, as it is in marked contrast with earlier stories of similar content.³ Had such a text been written within the Western literary tradition it would automatically have been considered literature.

In the following, I will give a new translation of the text and discuss its structure and some of its literary features. The translation is made exclusively from the Arabic text. The older translation by Thackston is often led astray by the anonymous Persian translation printed together with the Arabic text in Corbin's edition, and also Corbin's French translation now and then actually translates the Persian text.⁴ It should be emphasized that the Persian translation and commentary are not always accurate, which is not only shown by their evident mistakes⁵ but also in the acknowledged uncertainties in the explanations of several passages (e.g., § 25: *shāyad ke ḥaml bar ... kunī*). The purpose of my article is, however, not to study the philosophical content of the text⁶ but to discuss the literary devices used by the author and the text's internal movements.

In quoting the Qur'ān, I use A.J. Arberry's translation as my basis but freely modify it according to need. I have marked the Qur'ānic quotations in bold face, beginning from § 1. Often Suhrawardī modifies the Qur'ānic expressions to place them in a new context,⁷ which complicates the marking of the exact lengths of the quotations and causes some ambivalence. I have also marked inexact quotations which will have been recognized as Qur'ānic by the first audience. Less obvious and uncertain quotations and allusions, as well as overall resemblances, are in italics. In the translation bracketed numbers refer to the Qur'ān (Surah: verse).

Translation

In the Name of God

The master and leader, learned gnostic, peerless in his time and the master of his epoch, shaykh Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī, may God hallow his soul and illuminate his grave, has said:

Glory be to God, the Lord of the Worlds, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen, especially upon our lord Muḥammad, the Chosen, and his family and all companions.

³ I mainly have in mind Sufī ascent stories, such as that of Bāyazīd-i Bisṭāmī (cf., e.g., 'Aṭṭār. *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'* I. P. 172–176; Arberry. *Muslim Saints*. P. 105–110), or philosophical allegories such as Avicenna's *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*.

⁴ See: Thackston. *Philosophical Allegories*. P. 112–124; Corbin. *Oeuvres philosophiques*. P. 274–297; Corbin. *L'Archange*. P. 265–287.

⁵ Cf., e.g., the explanations for al-Hādī and al-Khayr in § 3.

⁶ For this, the reader is referred to the French translation and notes by Henry Corbin which are extremely valuable, although Corbin's synthetic view of the philosophy of illumination (*ḥikmat al-ishrāq*) sometimes made him read more into the text than is actually there.

⁷ E.g., § 7 *idhā akhrajnā aydiyanā lam nakad narāhā* < Q 24: 40 *idhā akhrajā yadahū lam yakad yarāhā*.

To begin: When I saw the tale of *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, I found it, despite its wonderful spiritual sayings and profound allusions, devoid of intimations which beckon towards the Greatest Experience which is the Great Overwhelming (79: 34), treasured in the Divine Books, deposited in the philosophers' symbols and hidden within the tale of *Salāmān and Absāl*, which has been compiled by the author of *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*.

This is the secret upon which are arranged the stations of Sufis and those who receive visionary intuitions. There are no allusions to this in the tractate of *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* except at the end of the book where it is said: "oftentimes some individuals emigrated towards Him", etc., until the end of the text.⁸

I wished to mention to a noble brother of ours some of this secret in the form of a tale, which I have titled the tale of the Western Exile. In God I trust in my endeavours.

Beginning of the story

§ 1 I was travelling with my brother *Protector* ('Āṣim)⁹ from Transoxania to the Maghreb, to catch some birds on the banks of the Green *Abyss*.¹⁰

§ 2 All of a sudden, we came to¹¹ **the City whose people are evildoers** (4: 75). I mean the city of Qayrawān.

§ 3 *When its inhabitants perceived*¹² *that we had come upon them unexpectedly and that we were children of the old man* known by the name of Guiding, the son of Good, the Yemenite,

§ 4 *they surrounded and captured us*, putting us in chains and iron shackles. They imprisoned us at the bottom of a *well* (22: 45), infinitely deep.

§ 5 **The neglected well** was filled with life by our presence. Above, there was a **lofty**¹³ **palace** (22: 45) with numerous towers.

§ 6 It was said to us: "**It will not be held against you**"¹⁴ *if you ascend to the palace naked in the evening. But in the morning you cannot evade falling back to the bottom of the pit* (12: 10)."¹⁵

⁸ *Corbin*. Avicenne. P. 81 (Arabic text) (§ 24).

⁹ The name may have been taken from Q 11: 43, a verse which is quoted several times in the text. The word *āṣim* also occurs in Q 10: 27, alluded to in § 31, and Q 40: 33.

¹⁰ The word *lujja* 'abyss' forebodes the use later in the text (§ 7) of Q 24: 40, where we have *baḥr lujjī*. The only other attestation of this rare word in the Qur'ān comes in Q 27: 44, in the story of the Queen of Sheba.

¹¹ Note that *waqa'a* applies to both horizontal ("come to") and vertical ("fall") movement.

¹² The verb *aḥassa* seems consciously selected: the travellers have fallen into the world of the senses.

¹³ The edition vocalizes *mushayyad* here but one should read it alongside the Qur'ānic *mashīd*.

¹⁴ This is a frequent Qur'ānic expression (e.g., Q 2: 158). From here on, the dual is often replaced by the plural, but this seems to be a grammatical mistake with neither philosophical nor literary significance.

¹⁵ The idea of the nocturnal ascent of the soul during sleep derives from Q 39: 42.

§ 7 At the bottom of the *well* there was **darkness above darkness; when we put forth our hands, well nigh we could not see them** (24: 40).

§ 8 *Yet at evening times we used to climb up* to the palace and look from a window at the open space. Oftentimes doves came to us from the thickets of Yemen to tell us about the state of the holy meadow. At other times, we were visited by Yemeni lightning which flashed on *the right, eastern side* (cf. 28: 30) and told us about the nocturnal events¹⁶ of Najd. The fragrance of arāk added emotion to our emotion. We became filled with emotion and yearned for our homeland.

§ 9 *Whilst we were ascending at night and descending at day*, we saw on a moonlit night how the **hoopoe** (cf. 27: 20) entered through the window and saluted us. It carried in its beak a note, sent **from the right bank of the water-course, in the sacred hollow, coming from the tree** (28: 30).¹⁷

§ 10 **It said to us: “I have comprehended a way for your salvation and I have come to you from Sheba with a sure tidings** (27: 22). That will be explained in this letter of your father.”

§ 11 We read the note, and it said: “It is from your father Guiding.” It read: **“In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate** (27: 30). We aroused longing in you but you did not long. We summoned you but you did not set forth. We signalled to you but you did not understand.”

§ 12 He (i.e., our Father) addressed me in the note, saying: “O you, if you wish to be saved with your brother, then you two must not tire of travelling determinedly. **Hold fast to our rope** (3: 103) which is the Dragon’s Tail of the holy sphere, the master of the regions of eclipse.

§ 13 **When you come to the Valley of the Ants** (27: 18), dust the lowest part of your garment and say: *Praised be God who brought me to life after having made me dead*¹⁸ **and to Whom is the uprising** (67: 15). *Then cause your family to perish* (cf. 29: 31)

§ 14 and kill **your wife who belongs to those bygone** (29: 32; 15: 60). Go where you are told to **because the last remnant of these will be cut off in the morning**¹⁹ (15: 66). **Embark the ship and say: ‘In the Name of God shall be its course and berthing**²⁰ (11: 41).”

§ 15 In the note he explained all that was to happen on the road. The **hoopoe** went before us until *the sun* (cf. 27: 24) was above our head and we arrived at the edge of the shade. **We boarded the ship which ran with us amid waves like**

¹⁶ The word *ṭawāriq* may also refer to nocturnal travellers (fem. pl.), as understood by the Persian translator (*rāh-āyandagān*).

¹⁷ The allusion to the Burning Bush gives the impression that the message comes from God even though, as later explained, it originates merely from a lower emanation.

¹⁸ I.e., non-existent. The expression is Qur’ānic.

¹⁹ The edition reads here *muṣhibīna* which seems to be a printer’s error.

²⁰ Note that the two *basmalas* frame §§ 11–14 as a unit.

mountains (11: 42). We wanted to ascend *Mount Sinai* to visit the hermitage of our father.

§ 16 **The waves came between me and my child, and he was among the drowned** (11: 43).

§ 17 I knew that **the promised time of my people was the morning: was the morning not nigh** (11: 81)?

§ 18 I also knew that **the city that had been doing deeds of corruption** (21: 74) **would be turned uppermost nethermost and stones of baked clay, one on another, would be rained on it** (11: 82).²¹

§ 19 When we arrived at a *place where waves hit against each other* (cf. 18: 61) and waters were rolling *I took my wet nurse who had given me breast, and threw her into the sea* (28: 7).

§ 20 We had been travelling on a **ship** (*jāriya*, 69: 11) **which had planks and palm-cords** (54: 13). **We made a hole in the ship** (18: 71) **being afraid of a king behind us who was seizing every ship by brutal force** (18: 79).

§ 21 **The laden ship** (26: 119)²² had sailed with us by the island of *Gog and Magog* (cf. 18: 94), to the left²³ of **Mount al-Jūdī** (11: 44).

§ 22 I had with me **some satans who worked before me** (34: 12) and under my command was **the Fount of Molten Brass** (34: 12). So **I said** to the satans: **“Blow!” until it became like fire** (18: 95). **I set up a rampart** (18: 94) so that I was separated from them.

§ 23 **Thus, the promise of my Lord became fulfilled** (18: 98).

§ 24 On the road I saw the skulls of *Ād and Thamūd*. *I wandered in that region which was fallen upon its turrets* (22: 45).

§ 25 I took *the two burdens*²⁴ along with the spheres and put them, together with the satans, into a round bottle which I had myself made²⁵ and which had stripes on it, like circles.²⁶

§ 26 I crossed the rivers in the centre of the sky (or: I cut the rivers from the liver of the sky).

§ 27 When water was cut off from the mill, *the building* (cf. 2: 22) collapsed and air was freed into the air.

§ 28 I cast the sphere of the spheres on the skies so that it ground the sun and the moon and the stars.

²¹ The metaphor of rain links this destruction scene to a storm.

²² Also Q 36: 41 and 37: 140.

²³ There may be a faint allusion here to Q 20: 80.

²⁴ *Ath-thaqalayn* (Q 55: 31). Here the term does not seem to refer to satans and mankind as it is usually understood. What the exact reference is remains unclear.

²⁵ I read *fī qārūratin šana' tuhā ana mustadīratin* (for the edition's *mustadīratan*).

²⁶ Corbin (*L'Archange*. P. 285, footnote 28) comments: “Commence avec ces strophes une série d'événements obscurs exprimés en images grandioses et apparemment incohérentes (...) Mais l'important est de saisir intuitivement les étapes...”

§ 29 I was freed from fourteen coffins and ten tombs from which the shadow of God emanates so that **I**²⁷ **was drawn gently** (25: 46) to holiness **after He had set the sun to be a guide to it** (25: 45).

§ 30 Then I encountered **God's path** and realized **that this was my road, straight** (6: 153).

§ 31 **A chastisement of God** had enveloped (12: 107) **by night** (7: 4)²⁸ my sister-consort²⁹ and she spent the night **in a dark portion of the night** (10: 27; 11: 81),³⁰ feverish and haunted by nightmares that resulted in a serious *fit* (cf. 69: 7).

§ 32 *Then I saw a lamp containing oil, and from it flowed light which spread to all corners* (cf. 55: 33) *of the house* (cf. 24: 36). *Its niche was illuminated and its inhabitants lit up from the illumination of the sun's light above them* (cf. 24: 35).³¹

§ 33 I put the lamp into the mouth of a dragon³² which rested in the tower of a water wheel. Below, there was a Red Sea³³ and above, stars. The places where their rays fell were only **known to the Creator and those firmly rooted in knowledge** (3: 7).

§ 34 I saw that the lion and the bull had disappeared and the bow and the crab had been folded within the fold of the spheres' revolution. The scales remained balanced when the Yemenite star rose from behind thin clouds composed of what the spiders of the elementary world's corners had knit in the world of generation and corruption.

§ 35 We had some small cattle with us. These we left in a desert where earthquakes destroyed them and the lightning's fire fell upon them.

§ 36 When the distance had been crossed, the road cut off and **the oven boiled** (11: 40; 23: 27) from the conical shape, I saw the celestial bodies. I came to them and heard their tunes and melodies. I learned their songs, and their sounds reverberated in my ears like the sound of a chain drawn across a solid rock. My sinews³⁴ were almost cut and my joints torn apart by the rapture I felt. This went on until the clouds dispersed and the membrane was torn.

²⁷ The subject of the verb *yaqbiḍunī* remains unclear to me, if it is not the shadow. God does not take an active role in this allegory. Corbin (*L'Archange*. P. 277) translates "qu''elle [c.-à.-d. ombre, JHA] est attirée".

²⁸ Also Q 7: 97; 10: 50.

²⁹ I take *ukhtī wa-ahlī* to refer to one person, *ahl* being a common euphemism for wife. This seems to be corroborated by the singular form *akhadhat'hā* and the Persian translation which (like Corbin) ignores the word *ahlī*. For sister-consorts and incest in general, cf.: *van Gelder*. Close Relationships.

³⁰ Also Q 11: 81; 15: 65. In Q 10: 27 we also have the verb *ughshiyā*.

³¹ Cf. Q 24: 35.

³² Many of the following words also have an astrological meaning: *Tannīn* 'Draco', *Burj* 'constellation', *Dūlāb* 'Aquarius', etc.

³³ (*Baḥr qulzum*). Note that the Red Sea should be *Baḥr al-qulzum*, although the mistakes in grammatical details in Suhrawardī's text make it possible to ignore this irregularity.

³⁴ Suhrawardī here plays with the double meaning of the word *awtār*, which also means 'strings'.

§ 37 I emerged from **the cavities** (9: 57) and **caves** (cf. Surah 18) until I had passed **the chambers** (49: 4), heading for *the Fountain of Life* (cf. 18: 86). I saw the great *rock* (18: 63) on the top of a hill, like a great mountain. I asked the *fish* (7: 163; 18: 63)³⁵ which had assembled in *the Fountain of Life*, enjoying and taking pleasure in the great, overtowering mountain's shade: "What is this mountain? What is this great *rock*?"

§ 38 **One of the fish took its way in the sea, burrowing** (18: 61), and said: "**This is what you were seeking** (18:64).³⁶ This hill is *Mount Sinai* and the *rock* is your father's hermitage." I asked: "What are these *fish*?" He replied: "They are your likes. You are sons of one father. To them happened like unto you. They are your brothers."

§ 39 When I heard and realized this, I embraced them. I rejoiced in them and they rejoiced in me. I climbed the hill and saw our father, a grand old man. **The heavens and the earth were well nigh split asunder** (19: 90) *through the revelation of his light* (cf. 7: 143). *I remained baffled and confused* (cf. 7: 143) because of him but I went to him. He greeted me and I prostrated myself before him and was almost annihilated in his radiant light.

§ 40 I cried for a while and lamented to him the imprisonment of Qayrawān. He said to me: "Come now! You have freed yourself, except that you must return to the Western imprisonment because you have not as yet completely laid aside your chains." When I heard his words, I lost my mind. I sighed and yelled like one who is on the verge of ruin and I pleaded with him.

§ 41 He answered: "The return is now inevitable. But I give you glad tidings of two things. One is that when you have returned to your imprisonment, you may come to us and ascend easily to our paradise whenever you want to. The second is that in the end you will be free in our presence³⁷ and you will totally leave all the Western regions."

§ 42 I rejoiced in what he said. Then he said to me: "Know that this is *Mount Sinai*. Above this hill is **Mount Sīnīn** (95: 2), the abode of my father, your grandfather. In relation to him, I am no more than you are in relation to me.

§ 43 We have further ancestors, until the lineage ends with the king who is the greatest ancestor and has no ancestor or father. We are all his slaves, from him we borrow our light and take our fire. To him belongs the greatest splendour, the loftiest majesty and the most dominant light. He is the highest of high, the light of light and above light, for all eternity, past and future. He is manifest to all things and **all things perish, except His face** (28: 88)."

³⁵ Cf. also Q 18: 61.

³⁶ Note that Suhrawardī uses a singular form, whereas the Qur'ān has a plural (*mā kunnā nabghī*).

³⁷ The first good tidings refers to "our paradise" (*jannatinā*), the second to "our presence" (*janābinā*). The two words are orthographically very close, and one might speculate on reading *jannatinā* in both places. The Persian translation, however, does not support this emendation.

§ 44 In the middle of this tale my state changed and I fell from on high into the **pit** (101: 9) among people who were not believers and was again imprisoned in the Maghreb. Yet there stayed with me a pleasure which I cannot explain. I wailed and supplicated and sighed because of the separation. That comfort passed as quickly as dreams.

§ 45 May God save us from the captivity of Nature and the chains of matter. And say: **“Praise belongs to God. He shall show you His signs and you will recognize them. Thy Lord is not heedless of the things you do”** (27: 93). And say: **“Praise belongs to God. Nay, but most of them have no knowledge”** (31: 25). Prayers be upon His prophet and all his family.

The end of the Story of the Western Exile.

Analysis

On a structural level, the text may be analysed in terms of a *qaṣīda*. It contains a prelude, culminating in § 8, full of terminology familiar from Arabic *na-sīb*, as noticed by the Persian commentator (*in hame be-rasm-e ‘arab gufte-ast*). The two travellers and the listing of place names (§§ 1–2) are topoi of *qaṣīda* poetry, and the ruined well wherein the two are confined (§§ 5–7) echoes the theme of *aṭlāl*. The following section (§§ 9–15), with its nightly visitor, takes up the motive of *ṭayf al-khayāl*, the visit of the dream image. In the *qaṣīda*, the aim of these parts is, at least according to Ibn Qutayba (*Shi‘r* 14–15), to generate sympathy and commiseration for the poet and a similar motive may be seen behind the description of the pitiful condition of the travellers, imprisoned in the well and only occasionally rising to temporary freedom.

With § 15, we come to the next main structural element of the *qaṣīda*, the *riḥla*. As in many *qaṣīdas*, the *riḥla* here becomes the focus of the whole text and concentrates more on the description of the hardships suffered by the traveller than on the animal or vessel on which he journeys.

The *riḥla* section (§§ 15–36) is divided into three. §§ 15–21 describe a voyage by sea. This part ends with the sinking of the ship (§ 20) and, in the next paragraph, a reference in the past tense³⁸ to the sea voyage. In §§ 22–25 the journey continues through wild and barren countries, and in §§ 26–36 this changes into following God’s path (§ 30). The section on seafaring (§§ 15–21) and the beginning of the next section, §§ 22–23, are heavily loaded with Qur’ānic quotations and move on very rapidly.

Finally, with § 37, we come to the *qaṣd*, the final part of the *qaṣīda*. This is the least convention-bound part of the *qaṣīda*, but it often refers to the patron towards whom the poet has been travelling, overcoming the hardships of the

³⁸ *Qad marra*. Neither Thackston nor Corbin give attention to the particle *qad*. Another inverted temporal sequence, marked by *qad*, is found in § 31, see below.

road. Both in Suhrawardī's story and in a typical *qaṣīda*, the tone is that of positive anticipation of a future reward, which sweeps away the hardships of the journey and consoles the poetic "I" on the misery he had undergone in the earlier sections.

Thus, one may see the *qaṣīda* structure behind *The Western Exile*. Yet, the dominant feature of the text is not its relation to Arabic poetry but its dependence on the Qur'ān. As already indicated, the vivid central part of the text mainly consists of Qur'ānic quotations which are present throughout the text. The Qur'ānic references circulate around five theme clusters:

Lot — the Evil City — punishment;
 Solomon — Yemen — message;
 Dhul-Qarnayn — the Island of Gog and Magog — quest;
 Noah — al-Jūdī — perilous voyage;
 Moses — Mount Sinai — ascent.

The references to the story of Lot and the Evil City dominate in §§ 2–5: the ruined campsite of a *nasīb* is identified with the Evil Cities that are, in a metaphorical sense, ruined (they represent the lifeless sublunar world) and, on the Qur'ānic level, will be ruined after divine punishment has fallen upon them. The references begin in § 2 with a quotation from the Qur'ān (4: 75), which refers to the contemporaries of the prophet Muḥammad. The three words actually quoted also allude to the words of the Qur'ān just before them (*Rabbanā akhrijnā min hādhihi l-qaryati*, etc. "O Lord, bring us forth from this city...") which are not quoted by Suhrawardī. They set the tone for the whole allegory, which describes salvation from the material world. *The Western Exile* is a story of exodus.

Later, allusions to the Evil City of Lot take central stage. In §§ 3–4, the Traveller and his companion are presented in a way reminiscent of the arrival of Lot's angelic guests in, e.g., Q 11: 78, even though there are no exact lexical links. The celestial origin of the two resembles that of Lot's guests, and the reaction of the citizens of Qayrawān is similar to that of the people of Sodom. The general equation of Qayrawān with all evil cities is continued in §§ 4–5, which allude to Q 22: 45. Here, the scene is set according to Qur'ānic terms: Suhrawardī takes both the deep well and the lofty palace from the vocabulary of this verse, thus achieving a link to the Qur'ānic stories without explicitly referring to the sinfulness of the inhabitants of the city. Furthermore, in § 5 he makes the first allusion to astronomical themes by referring to the towers of the palace, using a word of ambivalent meaning (*abrāj* 'towers/constellations').

In § 7, Suhrawardī makes an allusion to the sea,³⁹ which is to be the central image in the *riḥla* section (§§ 15–21), by quoting Q 24: 40, a verse which is per-

³⁹ Already in his Preface, Suhrawardī had selected the word *al-tamma* (Q 79: 34) for the secret about which he is to speak. The word is traditionally (e.g., *al-Bayḍāwī*. Anwār. V: 173, a.l.) understood to mean 'catastrophe' but the root ṬMM denotes flooding water (see: *Ibn Manzūr*. Lisān s.v.).

haps the most vivid description of marine perils in the Qur'ān. Again, Suhrawardī half hides his allusion, which makes it all the more pointed. He quotes that part of the verse which speaks about the overwhelming darkness but leaves unquoted the description of the sea itself. But his reader could not have missed his intention, especially as the Qur'ānic verse contains the rare word *lujji*, derived from *lujja*, which was already prominently alluded to in § 1. Finally, in § 8 there is another half-hidden allusion, this time to Q 28: 30 and Moses.

Thus, the beginning (§§ 1–8), like the overture of an opera, introduces all the main themes of the text. Later, the text takes these up one by one. References to Lot and the Evil City are used in §§ 13–14, 18, 24, and 31; the sea voyage is the theme of §§ 15–21; §§ 33–36 elaborate on astronomical themes; and the *qasḍ*, §§ 37–43, centres on Mosaic allusions.

Allusions to Noah dominate the description of the sea voyage. Except for a passing allusion in § 36, he is alluded to only in §§ 14–21. In § 14, the travellers board the ship, and § 21 mentions al-Jūdī, the mountain where Noah's ark ultimately stuck. Thus, Suhrawardī takes the whole voyage of Noah and builds on it the central part of his story, adding elements from the travels of Moses, part of whose peregrinations with the mysterious al-Khiḍr are set on the sea in the Qur'ān.

The Traveller and his companion pass through the watery (§§ 15–21) and the earthy elements (§§ 24–25). Fire is briefly brought into the picture in § 22 with the mention of fire-born satans (*jinn*) and the fire-like molten brass. When “air was freed into the air” (§ 27), the Traveller and his companion have traversed the world of the four elements. At the same time, Qur'ānic quotations become shorter and rarer, giving way to astronomical, or astrological, themes. These lead to a rebirth (§ 36), described in terms familiar from both Sufi and other mystical traditions: being chopped into pieces and then re-emerging as a new man.

The new status of the Traveller is manifested in his continuing the journey alone. In § 35, the first-person plural is used for the Traveller and his companion, ‘Āṣim, for the last time.⁴⁰ It seems that the process of a solitary journey had already started in § 22, and from here on the narrative is mainly told in the first-person singular. § 31 returns to a more distant past,⁴¹ to a time when the sister-consort — if I am correct in my interpretation, see footnote 29 — had been attacked by fever and nightmares. It would seem that the sister-consort is identical with the Traveller's brother, ‘Āṣim. The change of the companion's sex may reflect the illogical, or rather supralogical, nature of the story from here on. Reason is left behind, like Lot's wife in the Qur'ānic story. Similarly, Muḥammad had to give up his companion, al-Burāq, during the final stage of the *mi'rāj*. In the same paragraph occurs the last allusion to Lot and the Evil City. After this, the ascent

⁴⁰ Note especially the use of the singular in the quotation in § 38, cf. footnote 36.

⁴¹ Note again the inverted temporal sequence indicated by the use of *qad*, cf. § 21.

continues unhindered. Having passed through light, with an allusion to the Verse of Light (Q 24: 35),⁴² the Traveller hears heavenly music and is reborn. This re-birth leads to the final ascent.

The middle sections of the story, especially §§ 13–36, baffle the mind. The Traveller performs enigmatic deeds, sinking a ship and killing innocent people. He seems to be travelling with merely one companion, but all of a sudden there are relatives and others around, beginning with a, presumably elderly, nanny. The enigmatic deeds reflect the irrational behaviour of the mystical co-traveller of Moses, al-Khiḍr, in Surah 18. The irrational behaviour begins in § 13 where the Traveller is advised to kill his family, or wife, if we take *ahl* here in this sense. This continues in § 19 when the Traveller throws his wet nurse into the sea. The use of the rare word *al-yamm* marks this clearly as an allusion. The relevant passage in the Qur'ān (Q 28: 7) speaks of Moses' mother suckling her child and being instructed to throw the baby into the sea to save him from the Pharaoh. Suhrawardī turns the tables, and it is the (grown-up) child who throws his wet nurse, i.e., mother, into the sea, not to save her but to cause her to perish.

Reason, already baffled by the events of the first stage of the *riḥla*, is finally overcome when the Traveller encounters, in § 30, God's path. The journey may thus be seen as an escape from reason. The nonsensical events in §§ 32–35 could belong to the confused and confusing nightmares of the sister-consort which make her (him?) unable to follow the Traveller. In contrast to the companions who come and go and seem to be allegories of worldly passions and bodily attributes, reason is not finally done with, though. (S)he remains behind, in the grip of fever and nightmare, but presumably rejoins the Traveller once he is back from the final ascent. This, at least, seems to be implied by the promise given in § 12. During the story, the status of reason undergoes changes. In the initial "*nasīb*", reason is the co-prisoner of the Traveller. During the hard "*riḥla*", he is a companion, but in the final, ecstatic ascent, (s)he has become a hindrance that must be left behind, to wait for the Traveller's return.⁴³

The *qaṣīda* has given the text its structure and the Qur'ān much of its vocabulary. Yet, in moving the narrative along, the primary tool seems to be free association. Thus, e.g., the verb in § 26 (*fa-qaṭa'tu l-anhār* "I crossed the rivers") associates with 'cutting (off)' and leads in § 27 to *inqaṭa'a l-mā'u* "water was cut off", which further produces the idea of water being cut off from a mill. This causes the building to collapse — the word *binā'* probably associating with Q 2: 22, where this word is equated with *samā'*. This associates with the collapse

⁴² The astral reference in Q 24: 35 seems to be used by Suhrawardī as a starting point for the astrological allusions in §§ 33–36.

⁴³ This tallies with the usual Sufi doctrine of reason, which is an aid in the beginning of the Path but later becomes a shackle.

of the sky with its rotating, mill-like movement which grinds the celestial bodies in § 28 and becomes a machine of eschatological horrors.⁴⁴

In § 39, comes a striking association, one of the text's most intriguing allusions. The Qur'ānic verse 19: 90 is directed against those who claim that the Merciful has a child. Here, Suhrawardī describes the goal of the Traveller in anthropomorphic terms (father, old man) but at the same time alludes to a passage which strongly reprimands those who claim that a parental relation exists between God and any being. The father in Suhrawardī's story is, of course, not God Himself, but a lower emanation, as explained at the end (§§ 42–43), yet the reader will have had the feeling that it is God who is addressing the Traveller and his companion, and this feeling will have been strengthened by the reference to Q 28: 30 in § 9.⁴⁵

If this is a conscious allusion, one should be able to explain it. It might be a delicate disavowal of the basic metaphor of the story, warning that the reader should not take the allegory at face value. On the other hand, we may instead have here an unconscious association. Suhrawardī has been breaking one of the most basic rules of Islam, not to describe God in anthropomorphical terms. In § 39, after a most anthropomorphic description (“[I] saw our father, a grand old man”) Suhrawardī uses one of the strongest Qur'ānic condemnations of anthropomorphic description, in connection with a Mosaic scene of utter confusion, lexically linked to the Sufī technical term *ḥayra* (here, § 39, *mutaḥayyir*). This is the *ḥayra* one meets with when overstepping the limits of reason and continuing the ascent. Translated into logical language, this paragraph in both cases disavows the metaphorical language used throughout the story and reminds the reader that (s)he is reading an allegory, but, again, without explicitly saying so. Instead of a coarse direct admonition, Suhrawardī uses a subtle allusion, perhaps so subtle as to have evaded the author himself.⁴⁶

If this allusion is unconscious, it shows how Suhrawardī is working with free association, or, better, how free association is working with Suhrawardī. In the Surrealistic movement, automatic writing proceeding from associations was considered to generate texts of a higher level of reality than ordinary, premeditated writing would do. Such a technical approach would have been strange to Suhrawardī, but the sequences of free association do produce a somewhat similar result. The Qur'ānic quotations carry the narrative along through lexical associa-

⁴⁴ A similar association is found in § 15, where the Qur'ānic expression *fī mawjīn ka-l-jibāl* introduces the word *jibāl*, associated with Mount Sinai, thus introducing a Mosaic theme into a Noachical scene. Likewise, the word *bayāt* in § 30 leads to a reference to *bayt* in § 31.

⁴⁵ Cf. footnote 17.

⁴⁶ A similar half-conscious self-critique may also be found in the extremely obscure and ambiguous § 33, where Suhrawardī quotes part of Q 3: 7. This verse criticizes those who turn to the obscure verses of the Qur'ān instead of the unambiguous ones. Again, Suhrawardī alludes to a whole verse by quoting only a part of it.

tions. The quotations are selected by the author, but they in their turn govern the story.

An intricate web of allusions and free associations characterizes the text. The learned quotations do not place the author in any straightjacket but, on the contrary, lend vividness to his narrative and propel the story on. In fact, the liveliest passage with the most vivid description and rapid movement is at the same time the most heavily dependent on the Qur'ān. At least two thirds of §§ 13–24, and especially the storm scene in §§ 16–21, are based on the Qur'ān. The quotations mean that the Qur'ānic text reverberates throughout *The Western Exile*: the narration is intensive, as Suhrawardī does not need to elaborate on his allusions. He can use his words very economically: short sentences are layered with meaning, thanks to the recurrent allusions. The stories of Moses and Noah are not told in *The Western Exile* but the allusions nevertheless draw their Qur'ānic stories into the narrative.

Is *The Western Exile* an innovative piece of literature? According to the widespread opinion of late prose being of inferior value and stagnant, it should not be. Yet, on closer inspection, it proves to be built on an intricate web of allusions, with ever-changing allegorical relations between the text's characters and the world. The Qur'ānic quotations are not there to give prestige to a religious text but form the very essence of the text, the whole narrative being built on, and governed by them. It seems that sometimes the events are derived from free association with the vocabulary of the quotations, or from their immediate context in the Qur'ān.

The Western Exile is also innovative in terms of genre. It is difficult to classify the text. In its way, it is a unique absurd allegory, borrowing its basic structure from Arabic poetry but working on Qur'ānic material to convey a mystico-philosophical meaning.

The Western Exile is not an unoriginal piece of literature. On the contrary, it is an evocative story challenging the reader to follow its windings through an ever-changing set of allegories and a labyrinth of quotations. In a certain sense, the story resembles a dream voyage through a fluid reality. Read as it stands, *The Western Exile* is a fine piece of experimental prose.

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