

Suhrawardi on Sacred Symbolism and Self-Knowledge*

by Mohammed Rustom

This essay was first published in the journal, **Sacred Web** (www.sacredweb.com), and is reproduced here with the kind permission of Sacred Web Publishing.

Amongst the writings of the founder of the school of Illumination and key figure in post-Avicennan Islamic philosophy, Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi (d. 587/1191)¹, are a series of mystical/philosophical narratives or ‘recitals’ written in Persian. In the context of each of these narratives Suhrawardi employs numerous symbols which take his readers through the multiple levels of initiation into the very depths of their being. As is the case with all of his symbolic recitals, the narrator of these tales is Suhrawardi and is not Suhrawardi. It is he because he relates the tale in the first person. But it is not he insofar as those reading the tale follow the footsteps of the narrator and become initiated into the esoteric significance of its symbols. Through unveiling the text by ‘becoming’ the narrator, its readers unveil and therefore ‘become’ their true selves.

At the beginning of perhaps his most famous symbolic treatise, *Awaz-i parr-i Jibra'il* (*The Reverberation of Gabriel's Wing*)², Suhrawardi speaks of his being freed from the womens' quarters and from some of the shackles and limitations experienced by children.³ In a state of discomfort as the result of what he calls “the onslaughts of a dream” (*hujum-i khwab*),⁴ he takes a lamp and goes towards the mens' quarters of his home. This entire scene takes place against the background of the setting of darkness, which is referred to as “the hand of the brother of non-existence” upon the regions of the lower world.⁵ Suhrawardi encircles these quarters until the break of dawn, at which time he wishes to enter his father's *khanaqah* or Sufi lodge. One of its doors leads to the city and the other door leads to an open field (*sahra*) and a garden (*bustan*).⁶ After closing the door that leads to the city he proceeds towards the field and the garden. Once outside, he encounters ten beautiful Sages (*piran*) seated upon a bench. With great hesitation he approaches them and greets them.⁷

The Angel and the Interior Temple

The meeting that takes place with these Sages is indeed mysterious. Ten, which is the number assigned to them, would seem arbitrary if it were not known that in the classical Islamic philosophical conception of the cosmos there were ten Intellects, one proceeding from the other in a series of emanative descents from the First Intellect (the first descent from the Godhead) all the way to the tenth or Active Intellect. These Intellects were identified with the Angels by Avicenna, and the tenth or Active Intellect was identified with the Angel Gabriel. In *The Reverberation of Gabriel's Wing*, Gabriel is the Sage seated at the furthest end of the bench. He is the Angel who brings revelations to the Prophets and acts as the guide of humanity since he is the ‘link’ between Heaven and Earth.

When Suhrawardi approaches these Sages he addresses the Angel Gabriel, asking him where the Sages have come from. Gabriel replies in the following manner:

“ ‘We are a group of disengaged Folk who have come from the direction of No-Place-Estan (*na kuja abad*).’ I did not understand the reference, so I inquired, ‘To which clime does that city belong?’ He replied, ‘That clime which cannot be pointed out by the index finger.’ Thus I came to know that the Sage was extensive in knowledge.⁸”

The Angel reminds Suhrawardi of the eighth clime,⁹ that place “which cannot be pointed out by the index finger.” The place which is no place is, in fact, where this very encounter takes place. By meeting the Angel he becomes initiated into what he always has been *in divinis*. The Angel, as celestial guide, orients him to his own situation by ‘pointing’ out to him that place from whence they came, which is the place that cannot be ‘pointed out.’

The meeting with the Angel implies initiation at the very moment of the encounter, but it also requires one to re-turn to one’s true self in its entirety. The Angel is a guide for Suhrawardi because he will cause him to re-trace those steps leading him back to himself. The Angel will allow him to perform the necessary *ta’wil* or spiritual exegesis of his own soul so that he may re-turn to his primordial nature. His perfect nature or true self is, from this perspective, distinct from him, which is why it can function as his guide. In reality they are not different. However, because his soul is still trapped in the world he must re-learn what he always has known, so that he may know once again who he truly is.

As Henry Corbin notes in his *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, a fundamental change must take place within the individual which allows it to re-cognize itself as a prisoner in the cosmic crypt, thus acting as an impetus for its awakening for the encounter with the Angel.¹⁰ That there needed to be a fundamental shift in Suhrawardi’s being is confirmed by the Angel when Suhrawardi asks him why it is that these Sages who are characterized by immobility have in fact descended into the lower world, “How is it that you have descended (*nuzul*) upon this *khanaqah* after you just said that motion and change does not proceed from you?”¹¹ The Angel provides Suhrawardi with an analogy of a blind man who does not see the light of the sun. The sun never changes. It is always in its ‘place.’ If the blind man does not perceive it, it is not because of the sun. Rather, it is because he does not possess that faculty which will allow him to see it:

“ ‘We, too, have always been seated upon this bench, yet your [prior] inability to see is not a proof of our non-existence, nor does it indicate [that we] have changed or moved. [Rather,] a change has come about in *your spiritual state (hal)*.¹²”

This ‘meeting’ could only have taken place in a semi-dream state, when Suhrawardi was imaginably positioned between waking and sleeping. In the beginning of the narration of *The Reverberation of Gabriel’s Wing* Suhrawardi provides precisely this background for what will pave the way for the meeting with his celestial archetype. When man ‘awakens’ to the situation of imagination there arises within him a desire to transcend the ephemeral realm and join his celestial archetype,¹³ which is what he always has been and never ceased being but of which he had been heedless on account of his material existence. The desire to move inward is occasioned precisely by this awareness, without which one can never turn inward because of being deluded by the outward, the *zahir*. Yet in order to enter the inward, the *batin*, one must proceed *from* the *zahir* but not be *of* it. The cosmic situation is therefore perfectly set up for us at the beginning of this tale. The semi-dream state in which Suhrawardi finds himself is that realm in which he has never ceased to be, but of which he is only now aware by virtue of his realization of his being trapped within the cosmic crypt.

It will be recalled that Suhrawardi encircled the mens' quarters- here symbolizing his state of contemplation- until the break of dawn, which symbolizes illumination. He then states, "the intense desire to enter my father's *khanqah* came about."¹⁴ Corbin notes that the term *khanqah* is to be understood here as "the interior temple as the 'place' for the encounter with the Angel."¹⁵ It is precisely in this interior temple that Suhrawardi has this encounter. The 'father' referred to by Suhrawardi is the Angel of his own being, his personal celestial guide. By entering the temple of his 'father' he turns towards himself: he turns inward.

This initial step Suhrawardi takes towards himself is instantiated from outside of himself, hence the symbolism of illumination. It is an inner illumination, but one which proceeds from *without*; that is to say an illumination from his archetype forever fixed in the divine 'mind' impels him from *without* to turn *within*. This 'from without' is not to be understood in terms of physical space. I use it here to denote the complete dependency the spiritual aspirant has upon the divine volition (in this sense 'outside' of him) for him to turn to himself, which is nothing but an image of the divine Self. The Angel whom Suhrawardi encounters is none but his own true self *in divinis*. Suhrawardi enters the temple in order to *contemplate*, that is, in the etymological sense of the term, to enter that place where one may witness God's divine signs. By entering the temple of his father, who is responsible for bringing him up and for guiding him, Suhrawardi is able to concentrate upon the one whose image he seeks and who seeks him. By concentrating, he returns to his *centre*, which is his own image *in divinis*, being none other than his father, his Angel and guide.

The Art of Tailoring and the Tablet of One's Being

The Angel continues to initiate Suhrawardi after his initial initiation into the different orders of cosmic reality to which his soul, in its pure luminous substance unbounded by matter, truly belongs. The different levels of initiation which the Angel takes him through allow him to understand the text of the cosmos with greater clarity. As he increases in knowledge, he recognizes more of himself and his situation *in divinis*. The Angel goes on to teach Suhrawardi the art of tailoring (*'ilm-i khiyatat*), telling him that knowledge of this science will allow him to repair his own patched frock (*muraqqa'ah*) whenever it needs to be stitched.¹⁶ This patched frock worn by the Sufis symbolizes their orientation in the world. The science of tailoring therefore can be taken to be a type of spiritual method in which the Angel instructs Suhrawardi so that he may never go about without his Sufi frock, that is, so that he may never be without his fundamental orientation in the world. This spiritual method which the Angel teaches him is nothing other than the invocation (*dhikr*). So long as the soul is tied to the material world, the 'frock' of one's being will be torn. It is only through the *dhikr* that the *dhakir* (invoker) may mend the substance of his soul, thus transcending himself into the presence of the *madhkur* (Invoked).

Suhrawardi then asks the Sage to teach him the Word of God (*kalam-i khuday*).¹⁷ When Suhrawardi met the Sage at the beginning of the tale the latter told him that both he and the other nine Sages were "preservers of the Word of God."¹⁸ The Sage responds to Suhrawardi's request by telling him that so long as he is "in this city" he could only learn so much of God's Word.¹⁹ "This city" is to be understood as the material world. This explains why Suhrawardi, when describing the inner temple, speaks of it as having two doors, one which leads to the city and the other which leads to an open field and a garden. By closing the door which leads to the city he closes himself off to the materiality of this world, to the 'city' full of distractions, and enters through the door leading to the open field, which symbolizes that infinite interstitial space known as the world of imagination (*'alam al-khayal*). When one enters the open field of imagination the city is seen for what it truly is: a place engrossed in

materiality and within which its adherents- whom Suhrawardi shall at the end of the tale refer to as merchants²⁰, that is, the merchants of the material world- are imprisoned by virtue of their distance from the open field, and hence their true selves. At the end of the tale we encounter this city once again, where Suhrawardi cites a verse from Q 4:75 in which the people dwelling in the city (*qaryah*) are oppressors.²¹ Yet so long as man is embodied in the city, so long as he is characterized by some type of material framework, the city is ‘inhabited.’ It is to the degree of man’s detachment from the city that he will learn the Word of God.

Recounting how the Angel taught him God’s Word, Suhrawardi says:

“Quickly, he took hold of *my tablet (lawh-i mara)*, and then taught me a rather mysterious alphabet (*hija*’) with which I could know whatever *sura* [i.e. a chapter of the Qur’an] I wanted [to learn]. He said, ‘Whoever does not know this alphabet, those secrets (*asrar*) of God’s Word which one should know will not be grasped by him. And whoever understands the spiritual significance of this alphabet will attain nobility and constancy thereby.’²²”

Suhrawardi goes on to say that numerous unexplainable wonders (*‘aja’ib*) were revealed to him and that whenever he was unable to understand a ‘passage’ from the *sura* of the cosmic text, the Angel would teach him the answer.²³ The reference in this passage to the tablet of one’s own being immediately calls to mind the *lawh al-mahfuz* or the Preserved Tablet mentioned in Q 85:22. The Preserved Tablet is the primordial, celestial archetype for all the Words of God. The Qur’an, which is the Word of God, is in the Preserved Tablet, as are the other Words of God. Yet here we are also told that Suhrawardi has his own tablet upon which the mysterious alphabet taught by the Angel was transcribed and with which he was able to read the *suwar* of the Word of God.

The tablet of one’s being is nothing other than a reflection of this primordial Tablet: there is a direct correspondence between the archetype and its symbol. The Words inscribed upon the Preserved Tablet are also to be found in the cosmos and upon the tablet of one’s being. That Suhrawardi had in mind this correspondence between the metacosm, the macrocosm and the microcosm is made perfectly clear in the lines which follow, where he asks the Angel about the correspondence (*munasabat*) between the blowing of the Spirit (*nafath-i ruh*) and the Holy Spirit (*ruh al-qudus*).²⁴ As will become clear from the Angel’s answer, the correspondence between the blowing of the Spirit and the Holy Spirit is the same as the correspondence between the spirits of humans and the Holy Spirit.

The Words of the Cosmos

The Angel answers Suhrawardi’s question concerning the correspondence between the blowing of the Spirit and the Holy Spirit by stating that everything in the four corners of the world proceeds from Gabriel’s wing.²⁵ Suhrawardi asks him how he is supposed to understand what this means. The Angel replies in the following manner:

“Know that the Real great and glorious has several Great Words which are *luminous* Words [proceeding] from the august glories of His noble Countenance, some of which are above others. The First Light is the Highest Word, beyond which there is no greater Word. Its relation in light and manifestation to the other Words is like the relation of the sun to the other stars.”²⁶”

The Angel then says that the ‘rays’ of the Highest Word (*kalimah-yi ‘ulya*) form another Word, whose rays then form another Word and so until their number becomes complete.²⁷

The Angel states that these Words are collectively to be referred to as the Engulfing Words (*kalimat-i tammāt*).²⁸ We also learn that the last of these Great Words (*kalimat-i kubra*) is none other than the Angel Gabriel and that the spirits of human beings proceed from this Great Word. The Great Words above Gabriel are therefore the nine Angelic Intellects of Neoplatonic Islamic cosmology and Gabriel is the tenth or Active Intellect.

The Angel offers an exegesis of several key Qur'anic passages to prove that the Word and the Spirit have the same reality. He cites, for example, Q 19:17, *And We sent to her Our Spirit*. Then he cites Q 4:171, in which Jesus is referred to as the Spirit of God (*ruh Allah*) and *His Word which He conferred upon Mary*. After equating the Spirit with the Word the Angel demonstrates how the spirits which proceed from the last Great Word are the 'Small Words' (*kalimat-i suhḡra*).²⁹ The question of the correspondence between the blowing of the Spirit and the Holy Spirit is thus answered by the Angel through his long exposition of the descent of the great Words of God down to the last Great Word and ultimately to the Small Words which are the spirits of human beings.

What is elucidated here by the Angel is the essential divine nature of the things in the world. If the spirits of human beings are Words and the Angel is a Spirit and the last of the Great Words, then there is an intimate relationship between this Angel and the spirits which proceed from it. The blowing of the Spirit is, therefore, the coming about of human spirits from the last Great Word. They are not only related to the Angel. Through the emanative descent beginning with the Greatest Word or the First Intellect in the language of Islamic philosophy, the Small Words or breaths of the Spirit are also related to the other Words. Ultimately, all the Words are rays issuing from the divine Light. But insofar as the last of the Great Words is a ray proceeding from the divine Light, the Small Words which come from the last of these Great Words are rays of its light. It is with this image in mind that we shall now turn to Suhrawardi's exposition of Gabriel's wing.

Gabriel's Wing

Suhrawardi had to be initiated into all the others symbols before he could be informed of the function of Gabriel's wing. The myth which the Angel presents to him is not simply a recasting of the Neoplatonic structure of the cosmos. There is something deeper at work here. It was mentioned above that the Great Words, taken as a whole, form the 'Engulfing Words.' It is the function of the Angel's wing which will enable us to understand these 'Engulfing Words.' The Angel addresses Suhrawardi:

“ Know that Gabriel has two wings, one of which is right and is pure light (*nur-i mahd*), the entirety of whose being is completely devoted to [the side facing] the Real. And [he has] a left wing, upon which are some traces of darkness, like the spots on the surface of the moon [or] the feet of a peacock. This is a sign that its being has one side towards non-being. [Yet] when you consider the relation of its existence with respect to the Being of the Real, it is characterized by His Being.³⁰ ”

The Angel's right wing, characterized by pure luminosity, faces the world of pure Light, that is, the 'side' of the Great Words. The left wing is not 'dark' as such. Its traces of darkness result from a deprivation of the light coming from the side of the Great Words. In other words, the window into the prison of the world only allows for a certain amount of light from the garden of pure luminosity to seep through. From the shadow cast by the Angel's left wing emerges "the world of falsehood and delusion."³¹ Hence, the spirits which appear in this world proceed from the light of the right wing of the Angel which is pointed towards the

world of Light, “Every ray of light which falls upon the world of delusion is from its light.”³²

As Suhrawardi has already shown, the Spirit and the Word share the same reality. Therefore, the ‘reverberations’ of the wing of Gabriel are the same as the patches of darkness upon its left wing. Just as the imperfection of light is cast as a shadow, the imperfection of the Small Word is cast as a reverberation. A shadow at once bespeaks its source and a deficiency on its own part. Likewise, a reverberation denotes from whence it proceeds yet by its function it also denotes its imperfection since it is removed from its source. The spirits of human beings are therefore reverberations of the Angel’s left wing because they are imperfect as a result of their descent into the cosmic crypt. By being characterized by the dual nature of light and darkness the Spirit or Small Word is therefore ‘confused.’ Like the spirits of the righteous, the spirits of the evildoers and those who do not believe in God are also reverberations of the Angel’s left wing, but are “entangled reverberations (*sada amiz*).”³³ In other words, their reverberations are more muddled and confused than the reverberations of the righteous. Since the righteous are closer to their source their reverberations are less confused and they therefore manifest in a clearer sense their true natures. In the language of light and darkness, the rays of the unbelievers are darker than the rays of the believers since the latter are closer to the Sun.

It is not until the penultimate paragraph of this tale that the function of the Angel’s wing becomes entirely clear. In response to Suhrawardi’s question concerning the form of the wing of Gabriel, the Angel replies, “Oh heedless one! Do you not know that these are all symbols (*rumuz*), which, if taken literally, would not allow these ‘Engulfing Words’ (*tammāt*) to be understood?”³⁴ It was mentioned earlier that the Great Words are referred to as the *tammāt*. This term appears in the singular in Q 79:34 with reference to the ‘great calamity’ of the day of judgement.³⁵ It conveys the idea of ‘calamity’ and ‘disaster’, its trilateral Arabic root denoting ‘overflowing’, ‘flooding’ and ‘being engulfed’. In Q 79:34 the final day will be a great calamity since it will ‘overtake’ people and its terrors will ‘engulf’ them. The reason the Great Words are ‘engulfing’ is because they proceed from the Greatest Sound (which is the first existentiatio from the Godhead), and through the downward flow of their descents ‘engulf’ and ‘overflow’ and thus ‘fill’ the cosmos. Yet those in the material world cannot grasp their reality. The Great Words are so far removed from the creatures on earth that the creatures have no access to them. It is only through the Angel- who is the last of the Great Words- that they may comprehend them.

There would not be a purpose for those in the material world to understand the function of the Great Words on their own. It is, therefore, necessary to comprehend them through the symbols in the tale insofar as they convey to those in the material world their own cosmic situation. The symbols employed in this tale are there simply to relate the nature and purpose of human existence. The function of the Angel’s wing is to act as an intermediary, demonstrating our celestial origin and how it is that, from our descent into the cosmic crypt, we have become trapped by materiality but may return to our true Home once again. The wing also plays an important role in the very symbolism of the flight of the human spirit to its Origin: we descended into the world by virtue of that very thing which will allow us to ascend.

At the beginning of *The Reverberation of Gabriel’s Wing* Suhrawardi cites an early Sufi figure, Abu ‘Ali Farmadi (d. 403/1011), as saying, “of all of the reverberations of Gabriel’s Wing, one of them is you.”³⁶ It is only after having been shown the function of the wing by

the Angel that Suhrawardi comes to understand why he was not able to learn much of God's Word while trapped in the 'city.' At the same time, the initiation he received into whatever of the Word he could read from the tablet of his being becomes all the more clear to him, as he now understands the correspondence between the tablet of his being and the Words of God. It is nothing but a reverberation of the wing of the Angel which Suhrawardi realizes that he himself is. He is a Word of God and he reads the Words of God in the very cosmic reverberations which find their manifestations in forms on the outward plane, and upon the tablet of his soul on the inward plane.

* This is a revised version of an article which originally appeared in *Transcendent Philosophy* 7 (2006): 189-202 under the title, "The Symbology of the Wing in Suhrawardi's *The Reverberation of Gabriel's Wing*." I would like to thank Maria Subtelny for her insightful remarks on an earlier version of this essay. My thanks also go to Andrew Hicks and Donald Smith for their comments on aspects of *Awaz-i parr-i Jibra'il*.

1 For his life and teachings, see Mehdi Amin Razavi, *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination* (Surrey: Curzon, 1997) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Delmar, NY: Caravan, 1997, rep. ed.), 52-82.

2 Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi, *Awaz-i parr-i Jibra'il*, in Suhrawardi, *Oeuvres philosophiques et mystiques*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, vol. 3 (Tehran: Académie Impériale Iranienne de Philosophie, 1977, rep. ed.), 208-223. For French translations of most of Suhrawardi's symbolic treatises, see part two of Suhrawardi, *L'Archange empourpré: quinze traités et récits mystiques*, trans. Henry Corbin (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1976). In 1982 Wheeler Thackston published his English translations of Suhrawardi's symbolic treatises. Readers familiar with the 1982 edition of translations would do well to read Hermann Landolt's review article of this work, "Suhrawardi's "Tales of Initiation,"" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107:3 (1987): 475-486. Thackston's translations have been slightly revised and reissued in a bilingual volume, the Persian text of which is primarily based on Nasr's edition. See Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi, *The Philosophical Allegories and Mystical Treatises*, trans. Wheeler Thackston (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1999). For Suhrawardi's Persian writings in general, see Mehdi Amin Razavi, "The Significance of Suhrawardi's Persian Sufi Writings in the Philosophy of Illumination", in *The Heritage of Sufism*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 259-283, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Significance of Suhrawardi's Persian Writings," in Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*, ed. Mehdi Amin Razavi (Surrey: Curzon, 1996), 154-159.

3 Ibid., 209.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 210.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 211.

[9](#) Suhrawardi, *L'Archange empourpré: quinze traités et récits mystiques*, trans. Henry Corbin (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1976), 258, n. 12.

[10](#) Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Irving: Spring Publications, 1980), 19.

[11](#) Suhrawardi, *Awaz-i parr-i Jibra'il*, 215.

[12](#) Ibid.

[13](#) Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, 26.

[14](#) Suhrawardi, *Awaz-i parr-i Jibra'il*, 210.

[15](#) Suhrawardi, *L'Archange empourpré: quinze traités et récits mystiques*, 258, n. 6.

[16](#) Suhrawardi, *Awaz-i parr-i Jibra'il*, 216.

[17](#) Ibid.

[18](#) Ibid., 211.

[19](#) Ibid., 216.

[20](#) Suhrawardi, *Awaz-i parr-i Jibra'il*, 223.

[21](#) Ibid.

[22](#) Ibid., 216.

[23](#) Ibid., 217.

[24](#) Ibid.

[25](#) Ibid.

[26](#) Ibid. The phrase, “from the august glories of His noble countenance” is taken from the famous Prophetic tradition which speaks of the seventy thousand veils of light and darkness that veil God from His creatures. In his *Mishkat al-anwar (The Niche of Lights)*, al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) comments upon both this tradition and the famous Light verse (Q 24:35). See Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, *The Niche of Lights*, trans. David Buchman (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1998).

[27](#) Suhrawardi, *Awaz-i parr-i Jibra'il*, 218.

[28](#) Ibid.

[29](#) Ibid., 219.

[30](#) Ibid., 220.

[31](#) Ibid., 221.

[32](#) Ibid.

[33](#) Ibid.

[34](#) Ibid., 222.

[35](#) Q 79:34 and the verse following read, “And when the Calamity comes- the day people shall recall that for which they strove.”

[36](#) Suhrawardi, *Awaz-i parr-i Jibra'il*, 209.

© Sacred Web

Republished with permission

The Matheson Trust