CHAPTER FIVE

A THEOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION OF SALĀMĀN VA ABSĀL AND ITS RELEVANCE TO ITS HISTORICAL SETTING

There is, in the outer form of every tale,
A certain share of its meaning meant for those who are able to see fine points.
Given that the outer form of this tale has been completed,
You must now attain to that meaning.

—Jāmī, Salāmān va Absāl

In his study of the visionary tales of Ibn Sīnā, Henry Corbin points out that it is a mistake to read the Salāmān and Absāl cycle as a “simple and banal” allegory. He goes on to explain the potency of the symbolism of the tale by first arguing that the Greek version of the story is, in the truest sense of the word, an “autobiography of the human soul.” In other words, besides being a dramatic expression of the Neo-Platonic hierarchy of intellects, the tale of Salāmān and Absāl is really the story of the lonely efforts of the soul to return to the primordial abode from whence it came. As Corbin explains, this journey began in pre-existence, when the soul was torn from its roots and “born” into the material realm as a child of Reason, which is understood to be its father, and of Love, which is taken to be its mother. Conflicted about its dual nature, the soul struggles to recognize its unique position as the isthmus, or barzakh, between the realm of Reason, which is characterized by masculinity, logic, and deliberation, and the realm of Love, marked by the traits of femininity, premonition, and spontaneity. According to Corbin’s hermeneutics, the soul qua “mystical child” must reconcile these opposing traits if it is to recognize its noble origins and escape (temporarily at least) from a corporeal existence (al-ḥayāt al-dunyā), which Islamic tradition maintains is fraught with danger, illusion, and deception.

The union of these opposites (conjunctio oppositorum), namely the union of Reason and Love, is a major theme of Salāmān va Absāl, in that it describes the eventual absorption of all the characters in the tale.

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1 Jāmī, SA, 445, lines 1075–76.
2 Corbin, Avicenna and the Visionary Recital, 235.
3 Corbin, Avicenna and the Visionary Recital, 220.
into the person of Salāmān. The King and Absāl, for example, who could be theosophical symbols of Reason and Love (father and mother), and thus two opposing forces in the soul of every human being, disappear from the narrative as Salāmān is transformed from carnal to spiritual man. This transformation occurs when Absāl is consumed by the fire, and Salāmān inherits his father's throne. Another, more subtle transformation occurs when the Sage substitutes the memory of Absāl in Salāmān's heart with the image of Venus. Not only is Salāmān's loyalty to Absāl replaced by his newfound devotion to Venus, but his obedience to the Sage—who is none other than Salāmān's inner guide—is comparable to the Sufi aspirant who relinquishes all attachments and, as Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) is reported to have said, surrenders to his spiritual master "like a corpse in the hands of its washer." When Absāl, Venus, and the Sage amalgamate into Salāmān, who in turn absorbs his father, the King, during his investiture ceremony, Salāmān becomes the symbol of the perfect saint who has internalized his spiritual transformation. Not only does Salāmān become his own sage but also his own wet-nurse (dāya). The role of the wet-nurse in the attainment of enlightenment, though remarkable, is not a creation of Jāmī, and first appears in Persian poetry in a verse in book 1 of the *Mašnawī* by Rūmī, in which Rūmī refers to the Sufi saint as a dāya, the milk of whose spiritual knowledge nourishes the Sufi adept.

This centripetal movement calls to mind the Sufi adept who transcends his sense of selfhood by embarking on an inner voyage, which is to say a personal journey in which he contemplates the true reality of the one-ness of God (tauḥīd). According to mystical tradition, arriving at this “higher self” through the negation of the ego-self (nafs) usually involves the spiritual guidance of a Sufi shaikh, and in the case of *Salāmān va Absāl*, the shaikh is represented by the Sage (ḥakīm). The indispensible role of the ḥakīm, or shaikh in the spiritual transformation of an adept is a frequently discussed topic in classical Persian mysticism. In many cases, however, Sufi poets who wished to emphasize the esoteric nature of their knowledge or sought to shield themselves against the literalist ʿulamāʾ often avoided direct references to shaikhs. Instead, the shaikh was cast in the role of a Zoroastrian sage (pīr-i mughān), a prophet (usually Solomon or

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5 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, bk. 1, line 422.