Chapter 10

Constructing a World of Its Own: A Translation of the Chapter on the World of Image from Shahrazūrī’s Rasā’il al-Shajara al-Ilāhiyya

L.W. Cornelis van Lit and Christian Lange

Introduction

Even though Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī (d. 1310) may have written the more influential commentary on Suhrawardī’s (d. 1191) Ḥikmat al-ishrāq, it was Shams al-Dīn Shahrazūrī (d. ≥1288) who authored the more original one.1 Hossein Ziai made a significant contribution towards this appreciation by publishing his edition of Shahrazūrī’s Sharḥ Ḥikmat al-ishrāq, thereby complementing the earlier publication of Quṭb al-Dīn’s commentary. In the same spirit, we offer here a translation of Shahrazūrī’s chapter on the world of image (ʿālam al-mithāl) from his Rasā’il al-shajara al-ilāhiyya, whose importance was first pointed out by Hossein Ziai.2 With this translation we aim to follow the example of John Walbridge’s accessible translation of Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī’s “epistle of the ‘Allāma al-Shīrāzī ascertaining the reality of the world of image.”3

The world of image, or imaginable world (al-ʿālam al-mithālī), was primarily conceived to provide a way to understand from within the medieval philosophical discourse such religious notions as a physical afterlife and divine inspiration. The world of image, in its fullest state of development, was thought of as a world beyond our earthly world. It is a world in the sense of consisting of all kinds of things such as mountains, seas, plants, animals, not as Platonic Forms but as individual entities in all their particular details such as color, taste, and scent. The world of image is beyond our own world in two ways. Firstly, it is not bound to any physical laws; time and space are fluid concepts invoked and revoked whenever necessary, and entities can be of whatever kind they need

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to be, even the fabulous. Secondly, we cannot ordinarily witness it with our five senses. Only by crossing the boundaries of the physical world, such as may happen in sleep, meditation, or after death, can we reach this world, witness it, and interact with entities in it. The mode in which the soul can achieve this is the imagination, a faculty that is located right at the threshold between the material and the immaterial.

The notion of a world of image can be seen as one of the most important contributions of late medieval Islamic philosophy, if not already for being unique when compared to other areas of the history of philosophy. Its development into the notion as summarized here knows three major contributors. A first step was taken by Ibn Sīnâ (d. 1037), who spoke of using the imagination after death in order for the soul to have experiences similar to sense perception. In this way, according to Ibn Sīnâ, such a soul could experience a material Heaven or Hell by imagining it. According to Ibn Sīnâ, the imagination is a bodily faculty. Therefore, souls will still need a physical substrate for the faculty of imagination to function. Ibn Sīnâ found a suitable candidate for this in the celestial bodies; after death, he suggested, souls can attach to celestial bodies and utilize them to imagine their eschatological fate. Suhrawardī received this idea favorably and developed it further towards an independent, matter-free realm. He did so by suggesting that what we experience were suspended images (ṣuwar muʿallaqa), which are images with particular sensory qualities that are “suspended”, that is, “in neither a place nor a locus.” Instead, they merely manifest themselves in a place of manifestation (maẓhar). In this way, Suhrawardī turned celestial bodies from substrates into places of manifestation. Since these suspended images are neither intellects, nor souls, nor bodies, they must be of a fourth ontological category, an additional realm, as Suhrawardī argued. Details concerning these new ideas that Suhrawardī proposed were not always provided in his writings, but the direction of his argumentation was clear. Eventually, it was Shahrazūrī who took Suhrawardī’s ideas further into that same direction and turned the notion of suspended images into the world of image: independently existing images which together formed a world just like ours, which we can enter and leave by mediation of our imagination. Celestial bodies are not necessary anymore to facilitate this experience.

Whereas in Ibn Sīnâ and Suhrawardī, these ideas were only present in parts of their eschatology, in Shahrazūrī’s writings the world of image procured its

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4 Already argued for by Henry Corbin, who was one among the first modern scholars to thoroughly study this notion. See Corbin, H., *Terre céleste et corps de résurrection*.