Book Reviews

Bilal Orfali and Nada Saab (eds.)


This meticulously executed critical edition of the Sufi treatise by an early Sufi master Abū l-Ḥasan al-Sīrjānī (d. ca. 470/1077), who hailed from the Iranian province of Kirmān, is a welcome addition to the body of early Sufi literature that has been growing steadily over the past few years. One of the editors, Bilal Orfali, is already familiar to specialists thanks to his editions of the early Sufi texts by Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) and Ismāʿīl b. Nujayd al-Naysābūrī (d. 366/976–7) (Dar el-Machreq, 2009 and 2010). His most recent contribution to the Sufi corpus is a critical edition (together with Gerhard Böwering) of *Salwat al-ʿārifīn wa-uns al-mushtāqīn*, a Sufi manual by Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī (d. ca. 470/1077). Like the present edition, it was put out by Brill in 2013. Such a selfless dedication on the part of a scholar to making new Sufi texts available to his peers is highly commendable, to say the least. A mere look at the detailed and variegated indices appended to the critical text of *Kitāb al-Bayāḍ wa-l-sawād* and to Orfali’s other editions of Sufi works reveals the painstaking care and dedication that he and his co-editors have invested in their preparation.

*Sufism, Black and White* consists of an English “Introduction” that discusses the personality and oeuvre of the author, a Sufi from the city of Sīrjān, an erstwhile capital of the Kirmān province in Persia, together with a critical edition of the Arabic text of his treatise whose full title (*Kitāb al-bayāḍ wa-l-sawād min khaṣāʾiṣ ḥikam al-ʿibād fī naʿt al-murīd wa-l-murād*) the editors have rendered into English as “The Black and the White in the Words of Wisdom by Bondsmen Describing the Seeker and the Mystic Quest.” One might take issue with the translation of *murād* as “mystic quest” instead of the “object of mystic quest,” but the editors’ explanation of their choice of words (12) sounds convincing to this reviewer.
In the absence of any substantive biographical information about the author, the editors have to make do with whatever facts they can elicit from his text. After briefly describing the author as “a man of comfortable means” who devoted his whole life to serving Sufis by managing a local Sufi lodge (ribāṭ) and collecting and penning down Sufi sayings, the editors address some subtler aspects of his written legacy. One of them is the author’s voice, or, rather, the near absence of one in al-Sīrjānī’s rubricated collection of authoritative Sufi pronouncements on Sufi concepts, terms and rules of conduct. The author’s presence is indeed rather scarce compared even to the inconspicuous authorial stance assumed by his predecessors and contemporaries, such as Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988), Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996), al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) and al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), to name but the most famous ones (see the editors’ references to these and other early Sufi writers of the age on page x and elsewhere in the text of the “Introduction”). Only once, at the very beginning of his Kitāb al-Bayāḍ wa-l-sawād, does the author explicitly articulate his goals in composing it: “I collected these wisdom sayings in love for the predecessors, in service to the successors, and in need to view and accompany them in this world and after. . . . Every person who comprehends the maxims’ meaning will receive good fortune, whereas one whose understanding is incapable of reaching these meanings is in great danger” (7 of the English “Introduction”; 5–6 of the Arabic text). From these and similar remarks one may surmise that the author considered the collection and transmission of the Sufi lore to be not only his duty, but also a singularly meritorious deed that bestows blessings on both himself and his qualified readers. For the unqualified ones, on the other hand, this lore could be a source of error and temptation. This author’s caveat indicates that the intended audience of the book are Sufis of various ranks of spiritual attainment. The authorial voice then recedes into the background and remains almost undetectable throughout the rest of the book.

The most one can hope for is to deduce the author’s position vis-à-vis various Sufi topics from the ways in which he presents and reconfigures past material as well as “his short comments which conclude the theme of every chapter and connect it to the theme of the next” (6 of the “Introduction”). This approach may appear almost self-effacing and, as such, eminently suitable for a conscientious and self-critical Sufi author anxious to avoid worldly fame and status. Overall, the contents of Kitāb al-Bayāḍ wa-l-sawād (helpfully summarized on 22–9 of the “Introduction”) reflect closely the themes discussed in the other Sufi manuals of the age, including those whose authors were mentioned above. It is only natural that the editors identify its genre as “guide to a Sufi adept” (9) that elucidates the meaning of such critical Sufi concepts and practices as