

# Knowledge and Education in Classical Islam

*Religious Learning between Continuity and Change*

VOLUME 1

*Edited by*

Sebastian Günther



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# Contents

## VOLUME 1

Foreword	xI
<i>Jane Dammen McAuliffe</i>	
Acknowledgments	xviii
Notes on Transliteration and Style	xxI
List of Illustrations	xxiii
Abbreviations	xxiv
Notes on Contributors	xxviii

### Islamic Education, Its Culture, Content and Methods:

An Introduction	1
<i>Sebastian Günther</i>	

## PART 1

### *Setting the Stage*

1	The Humanities through Islamic Eyes: The Beginnings	43
<i>Wadad Kadi</i>		

## PART 2

### *Prophetic Mission, Learning, and the Rise of Islam*

2	“Arcane Knowledge” Communicated in the Quran	61
<i>Angelika Neuwirth</i>		
3	Muhammad as Educator, Islam as Enlightenment, and the Quran as Sacred Epic	81
<i>Todd Lawson</i>		
4	Divine Inspiration, Storytelling, and Cultural Transfer: Muhammad’s and Caedmon’s Call	98
<i>Gregor Schoeler</i>		

- 5 The Exercise of Theological Knowledge in the Church of the East, Provoked by Coexistence with the Muslims (Seventh Century CE) 112  
*Martin Tamcke*
- 6 Contributions of the *Mawālī* (“New Converts to Islam”) to Education in Early Islam (in Arabic) 121  
*Jamal Juda*

### PART 3

#### *Rational vs. Spiritual Approaches to Education*

- 7 How Do We Learn? Al-Fārābī’s Epistemology of Teaching 147  
*Nadja Germann*
- 8 Al-Fārābī and His Concept of Epistemological Hierarchy 186  
*Mariana Malinova*
- 9 Educational Discourse in Classical Islam: A Case Study of Miskawayh’s (d. 421/1030) *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq* 200  
*Yassir El Jamouhi*
- 10 Teaching Ignorance: The Case of al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) 223  
*Paul L. Heck*
- 11 *Al-Rafīq qabla l-ṭarīq*: Remarks on al-Ghazālī’s View of Sufism as a Way of Learning Religion 244  
*Steffen Stelzer*
- 12 “Only Learning That Distances You from Sins Today Saves You from Hellfire Tomorrow”: Boundaries and Horizons of Education in al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd 260  
*Sebastian Günther*
- 13 A Sufi as Pedagogue: Some Educational Implications of Rūmī’s Poetry 298  
*Yoones Dehghani Farsani*

**PART 4*****Learning through History***

- 14 Ibn Ishāq's and al-Ṭabarī's Historical Contexts for the Quran:  
Implications for Contemporary Research 315  
*Ulrika Mårtensson*
- 15 Scholars, Figures, and Groups in al-Azdī's *Futūḥ al-Shām* 354  
*Jens Scheiner*

**PART 5*****Literature as Method and Medium of Instruction***

- 16 Education through Narrative in *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* 389  
*Shatha Almutawa*
- 17 Storytelling as Philosophical Pedagogy: The Case of Suhrawardī 404  
*Mohammed Rustom*
- 18 The Masters' Repertoire (*Mashyakha*) and the Quest for  
Knowledge 417  
*Asma Hilali and Jacqueline Sublet*
- 19 The Use of Verse as a Pedagogical Medium, Principally in the Teaching  
of Grammar 449  
*Michael G. Carter*
- 20 Islamic Education Reflected in the Forms of Medieval Scholarly  
Literature: *Jam'*, *Tā'rif*, and *Taṣnīf* in Classical Islam 475  
*Alexey A. Khismatulin*
- 21 Primary Schoolteachers between *Jidd* and *Hazl*: Literary Treatment of  
Educational Practices in Pre-modern Islamic Schools 488  
*Antonella Gherseti*
- 22 The Metaphor of the Divine Banquet and the Origin of the Notion of  
*Adab* 516  
*Luca Patrizi*

- 23 Wisdom and the Pedagogy of Parables in Abraham Ibn Ḥasday's *The Prince and the Ascetic* 539  
*Jessica Andruss*

## VOLUME 2

### PART 6

#### *Travel, the Exact Sciences, and Islamic Learning*

- 24 War and Travel, Patrons and the Mail: The Education of Abū l-Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (d. 440/1048) 567  
*Barbara Stowasser*
- 25 Variants of Galenism: Ibn Hindū and Ibn Riḍwān on the Study of Medicine 581  
*Lutz Richter-Bernburg*
- 26 Teaching Mathematical and Astronomical Knowledge in Classical and Post-Classical Islamicate Societies 610  
*Sonja Brentjes*

### PART 7

#### *Politics of Knowledge and Muslim Identity*

- 27 The Development of a Sufi Anti-curriculum: Politics of Knowledge and Authority in Classical Islamic Education 637  
*Sara Abdel-Latif*
- 28 Knowledge in the Buyid Period: Practices and Formation of Social Identity 668  
*Nuha Alshaar*
- 29 A Ruler's Curriculum: Transcultural Comparisons of *Mirrors for Princes* 684  
*Enrico Boccaccini*

- 30 Interpretive Power and Conflicts of Interpretive Power: Caliphate, Religion, and “True” Islamic Education at the Dawn of the Seventh/Thirteenth Century in Baghdad 713

*Angelika Hartmann*

- 31 The *Ālim*-Caliph: Reimagining the Caliph as a Man of Learning in Eighth/Fourteenth and Ninth/Fifteenth-Century Egypt 741

*Mustafa Banister*

## PART 8

### *Principles and Practices in Ibadi and Shi'i Learning*

- 32 Teaching Ethics in Early Ibadism: A Preliminary Study 771

*Jana Newiger*

- 33 Scholars of Ḥilla and the Early Imami Legal Tradition: Ibn Abī ‘Aqīl and Ibn al-Junayd, “The Two Ancient Scholars,” Retrieved 798

*Ali R. Rizek*

- 34 Shi'i Higher Learning in the Pre-Safavid Period: Scholars, Educational Ideals, Practices, and Curricula 818

*Maryam Moazzen*

## PART 9

### *Gender, Human Growth, and Authority in Muslim Education*

- 35 Denial of Similitude: The Exegetical Concern with Gender in “And the Male Is Not Like the Female” (Q 3:36) 849

*Hosn Abboud*

- 36 “If Music Be the Food of Love?” The Singing-Girls and the Notion of *Tarab* as Part of an *Adab*-Ideal 870

*Agnes Imhof*

- 37 Women Scholars of *Ḥadīth*: A Case Study of the Eighth/Fourteenth-Century *Muʿjam al-Shaykha Maryam* 906

*Mohsen Hareedy*

- 38 Knowledge, Piety, and Religious Leadership in the Late Middle Ages:  
Reinstating Women in the Master Narrative 941  
*Asma Afsaruddin*

**PART 10**

*Transformations of Classical Muslim Learning*

- 39 The Development of Arabo-Islamic Education among Members of the  
Mamluk Military 963  
*Christian Maude*
- 40 Dissociation of Theology from Philosophy in the Late Ottoman  
Period 984  
*Mehmet Kalaycı*
- 41 The Malaysian Scholar Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (b. 1931) on  
Islamic Education: An Evaluation in View of Classical Islamic  
Sources 1001  
*Hans Daiber*
- General Notes on the Indices 1015  
Index of Proper Names 1016  
Index of Geographical Names and Toponyms 1056  
Index of Book Titles and Other Texts 1064  
Index of Scriptural References 1081  
Ḥadīth Index 1086  
Index of Topics and Keywords 1087

## Storytelling as Philosophical Pedagogy: The Case of Suhrawardī

*Mohammed Rustom*

Amongst the writings of Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191),<sup>1</sup> the founder of the School of Illumination and a key figure in post-Avicennan Islamic philosophy, are a series of visionary tales. In the context of each of these narratives, Suhrawardī employs numerous symbolic images in order to convey several key ideas that punctuate his philosophy. Given their concrete language, these tales add a dimension of depth not easily discernible in Suhrawardī's strictly speaking philosophical works, given the latter's reliance upon abstract language.

As Cyrus Zargar has recently demonstrated in his ground-breaking study, the use of storytelling in order to convey ethical, philosophical, and spiritual teachings is quite commonplace in Islamic civilization.<sup>2</sup> We thus have a number of antecedents to Suhrawardī in the Islamic philosophical tradition who did just this, as is evidenced<sup>3</sup> in the writings of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā',<sup>3</sup> Avicenna (d. 428/1037)<sup>4</sup>—a direct influence upon Suhrawardī in this regard—and Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 581/1185).<sup>5</sup> But, what makes Suhrawardī's treatises unique is that, for one thing, the vast majority of his tales were written in Persian,<sup>6</sup> and, more

1 For Suhrawardī's life and work, see Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardī*; Corbin, *En islam iranien* ii; Marcotte, *Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl*; Nasr, *Three Muslim sages* 52–82; Walbridge, *Leaven*; and Ziai, *Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī*.

2 Zargar, *Polished mirror*.

3 See their best-known epistle, Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Case*.

4 The relevant texts are translated and analyzed in Corbin, *Avicenna*.

5 See Ibn Ṭufayl, *Hayy ibn Yaqzān*.

6 His Persian works can be found in Suhrawardī, *Majmū'a-yi muṣannafāt* iii. For French translations of most of Suhrawardī's symbolic tales, which are accompanied by complete notes and introductions to each recital, as well as paraphrases and summaries of anonymous Persian commentaries upon his *Āwāz-i par-i Jibrā'il* and his *Mu'nis al-'ushshāq* (also known as *Fī ḥaqīqat al-'ishq*), see Sohrawardī, *Archange empourpré* part two. Readers familiar with Thackston's 1982 edition of translations of Suhrawardī's visionary recitals would do well to read Landolt, Suhrawardī's "tales of initiation," his review article of this work. Thackston's translations have been reissued in a bilingual edition, Suhrawardī, *Philosophical allegories*. Two of Suhrawardī's other Persian treatises are available in translation. See the bilingual edition of

important, they explicitly and consistently draw on key terms and concepts from Islamic philosophy on the one hand and Sufism on the other. Moreover, the figure of the Angelic guide features prominently in these narratives, serving as a kind of pedagogical link to take readers through the multiple levels of the cosmic order and into the very depths of their being. As is the case with all of his symbolic stories, the narrator is Suhrawardī and is not Suhrawardī. 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 inward significance of its symbols. Through unveiling the text by “becoming” the narrator, its readers unveil and, therefore, “become” their true selves.

For my purposes here, I will focus on what is perhaps the best-known of Suhrawardī’s symbolic stories, namely his *Āwāz-i par-i Jibrā’īl* (*The reverberation of Gabriel’s wing*).<sup>7</sup> In order to understand the pedagogical posture that the author assumes in this particular tale, I will offer a close reading of its symbols, culminating in an analysis of the function of Gabriel’s wing. Scholars who have worked on this text have variously translated the term *āwāz* as “chant,” “sound,” and “song.” Here, it will be rendered as “reverberation,” which is equally plausible. By reading *āwāz* as reverberation, there emerges a more nuanced understanding of the significance of the symbology of the Angel’s wing within the cosmological matrix of the tale.

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Suhrawardī, *Book of radiance and Shape of light* (translated earlier in Kuşşınar, *Ismā’īl Ankaravī*). This latter text has been the subject of some important commentaries in Ottoman Turkish and Persian. See Kuşşınar, *Ismā’īl Ankaravī* 53, and Dāwānī, *Commentary*, respectively. For more on Suhrawardī’s Persian writings in general, see Nasr, *Islamic intellectual tradition* 154–159.

- 7 The text is to be found in Suhrawardī, *Majmū’a-yi muşannafāt* iii, 208–223. From here onward, citations from this story will simply appear as *Āwāz*, with the relevant page numbers going back to vol. 3 of *Majmū’a-yi muşannafāt*. A study of this text can be found in Tuft, *Symbolism*. For a translation of an eighth/fourteenth-century Persian commentary on *Āwāz-i par-i Jibrā’īl* by an anonymous Indian author (along with a translation of the original text), see Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardī* 151–165. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

In Persian, *par* primarily denotes a “wing,” although it can also mean a “feather,” a “leaf,” etc. See the entry s.v. “par, parr” in Steingass’s famous Persian-English dictionary: [https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/steingass\\_query.py?page=239](https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/steingass_query.py?page=239). In the text that forms the subject of the present article, the primary sense of *par* as “wing” is quite naturally understood and even demanded by the cosmological picture in which the text is framed.

## 1 The Basic Setting

At the beginning of *The reverberation of Gabriel's wing* Suhrawardī speaks of being freed from the women's quarters, and from some of the shackles and limitations experienced by children.<sup>8</sup> In a state of discomfort, the result of what he calls “the onslaughts of a dream” (*hujūm-i khwāb*),<sup>9</sup> he takes a lamp and goes toward the men's 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.<sup>10</sup> Suhrawardī circles (*tawāf*) these quarters until the break of dawn, at which time he wishes to enter his father's *khānaqāh* or Sufi lodge. One of its doors leads to the city, and the other door leads to an open field (*ṣaḥrā*) and a garden (*bustān*).<sup>11</sup> After closing the door that leads to the city, he proceeds toward the field and the garden. Once outside, he encounters ten beautiful Sages (*pīrān*) seated upon a bench. With great hesitation, he approaches them and greets them.<sup>12</sup>

## 2 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 (*al-'aql al-fā'āl*). These Intellects were identified with the Angels by Avicenna,<sup>13</sup> and Suhrawardī further angelizes the cosmos by assigning an angelic function to everything in his cosmic system.<sup>14</sup> The tenth or Active Intellect is identified with the Angel Gabriel, who is the Sage seated at the furthest end of the bench. Gabriel is the Angel who brings revelations to the prophets, and, as the “link” between Heaven and Earth, acts as the guide for humanity.

8 Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 209.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 210.

12 Ibid.

13 See Nasr, *Three Muslim sages* 42.

14 See the helpful summary in Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardī* 81–86.

When Suhrawardī 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. We have come from the direction of No-Place-ville [*nā kujā-ābād*].” I did not understand the reference, so I asked, “To which clime does that city belong?” He said, “To that clime which cannot be pointed at by the forefinger.” Thus, I came to know that the Sage was extensive in knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

The Angel reminds Suhrawardī of the eighth clime, that place “which cannot be pointed at by the forefinger.”<sup>16</sup> 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 orients him to his own situation by indicating to him that place from whence they came, which is the place that cannot be “pointed at.”

The meeting with the Angel implies a kind of initiation at the very moment of the encounter, but it also requires one to return to one’s true self in its entirety. The Angel is a guide for Suhrawardī because he will cause him to retrace those steps leading him back to himself. The Angel will allow him to perform the necessary spiritual exegesis, or *ta’wīl*, of the text of his own soul so that he may return to his primordial nature.<sup>17</sup> His true self is, from this perspective, distinct from him, which is why it can function as his pedagogue. In reality, they are not different. However, because his soul is still trapped in the world, he must relearn what he has always known so that he may once again know who he truly *is*.

As Henry Corbin (d. 1978) notes in *Avicenna and the visionary recital*, a fundamental change must take place within the individual. This change will allow him to recognize himself as a prisoner in what Corbin calls the “cosmic crypt,” thus acting as an impetus for his awakening for the encounter with the Angel.<sup>18</sup> That there needed to be a transmutation in Suhrawardī’s being is confirmed by the Angel when Suhrawardī asks him why it is that these Sages, who are characterized by immobility, have in fact descended into the lower world: “How is

15 Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 211.

16 Sohrawardī, *Archange empourpré* 258, n. 12. See n. 29 for references to the “eighth clime,” more commonly referred to as the “world of imagination.”

17 *Ta’wīl* is literally defined as “taking something back to its origin.” For the *ta’wīl* of the soul, see Corbin, *Avicenna* 28–35.

18 *Ibid.*, 19.

it that you have descended into this *khānaqāh* after claiming to never move or change?"<sup>19</sup> In response to his question, the Angel provides Suhrawardī with the 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 the faculty that will allow him to see it. But, when he can see it, this is because a change has occurred in him, not in the object of his perception, which has always been there. Thus, the Angel tells Suhrawardī, "We, too, have always been seated upon this bench, yet your [prior] inability to see is not an indication of our non-being, nor does [the fact that you can now see us] indicate change or motion [on our part]—the change is in your state (*hāl*)."<sup>20</sup>

This meeting could only have taken place in a semi-dream state, when Suhrawardī was imaginally positioned between waking and sleeping. At the beginning of the tale Suhrawardī provides precisely this background for what will pave the way for the meeting with his celestial archetype. When we "awaken" to the situation of imagination, there arises within us a desire to transcend the ephemeral realm and join our celestial archetype,<sup>21</sup> which is what we have always been and never ceased being, but of which we have grown heedless on account of our material existence. The desire to move inward is occasioned precisely by this awareness, without which one can never turn inward because of being distracted by the outward. Yet, in order to enter the inward, one must proceed *from* the *outward*, 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 Suhrawardī 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 being trapped in the "cosmic crypt."

It will be recalled that Suhrawardī circled the men's quarters—here, symbolizing his state of contemplation—until the break of dawn, which symbolizes illumination. He then states that he had an intense desire to enter his father's *khānaqāh*.<sup>22</sup> Corbin notes that the term *khānaqāh* is to be understood here as "the interior temple as the 'place' for the encounter with the Angel."<sup>23</sup> It is precisely in this interior temple that Suhrawardī has the encounter. The "father" referred to by Suhrawardī is the Angel of his own being, his personal celestial guide. By entering the temple of his "father," he turns toward himself; in other words, he turns inward.

19 Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 215.

20 Ibid., 215.

21 Corbin, *Avicenna* 26.

22 Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 210.

23 Sohrawardī, *Archange empourpré* 258, n. 6.

This initial step Suhrawardī takes toward 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 Suhrawardī encounters is none but his own true self *in divinis*. Suhrawardī 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. Suhrawardī is therefore able to concentrate upon the one whose image he seeks, and who seeks him. By concentrating, he returns to his *center*, which is his own image *in divinis*.

### 3 The Art of Tailoring and the Tablet of the Soul

The Angel continues to initiate Suhrawardī 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 that 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 Suhrawardī the art of tailoring (*‘ilm-i khiyāta*), telling him that knowledge of this science will allow him to repair his own patched frock (*muraqqa’a*) whenever it needs to be stitched.<sup>24</sup> 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 Suhrawardī 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 that the Angel teaches him is nothing other than 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 *dhikr* that the *dhākir* (invoker) may mend the substance of his soul, thus transcending himself into the presence of the *madhkūr* (Invoked).<sup>25</sup>

24 Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 216.

25 For *dhikr* in Sufism, see Anawati and Gardet, *Mystique musulmane* 187–260; Chittick, *Sufism* 52–60; Schimmel, *Mystical dimensions* 167–178.

Suhrawardī then asks the Sage to teach him the Word (*kalām*) of God.<sup>26</sup> When Suhrawardī 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.”<sup>27</sup> The Sage responds to Suhrawardī’s request by telling him that, so long as he is “in this city” (*dar īn shahr*), he can only learn so much of God’s Word.<sup>28</sup> “This city” is to be understood as the material world, which explains why, when describing the inner temple, Suhrawardī speaks of it as having two doors, one of which leads to the city, and the other to an open field and a garden. By closing the door that leads to the city, he closes himself off from the materiality of this world, from the “city” full of distractions, and enters through the door leading to the open field, which symbolizes that expansive interstitial space known as the world of imagination (*‘ālam al-khayāl*).<sup>29</sup>

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 Suhrawardī shall at the end of the tale refer to as merchants (that is, the merchants of the material world)<sup>30</sup>—are imprisoned by virtue of their distance from the open field, and hence, their true selves.<sup>31</sup> 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.” Thus, it is only 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, Suhrawardī says:

Swiftly, he took hold of my tablet (*lawḥ*), and then taught me a rather mysterious alphabet (*hijā*) such that, by means of it, I could know whatever *sūra* [Quranic chapter] I wanted. He said, “Whoever does not understand this mysterious alphabet will not acquire those secrets (*asrār*) of God’s Word as he ought to. But whoever becomes proficient in it will be given nobility and contancy.”<sup>32</sup>

26 Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 216.

27 Ibid., 211.

28 Ibid., 216.

29 Helpful discussions of the nature of the imaginal world in Suhrawardī can be found in van Lit, *The world of image* 37–78 and Marcotte, Suhrawardī’s realm. For broader treatments of the topic, see Chittick, *Imaginal worlds* 67–113; Corbin, *Spiritual body*; Rahman, *Dream* 409–419.

30 Suhrawardī, *Āwāz*, 223.

31 At the end of the tale (Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 223), we encounter this city once again, where Suhrawardī cites a verse from Q 4:75 in which the people dwelling in the *qarya* (here, “town”) are oppressors. Translations of all Quranic terms and verses are taken from Nasr et al., *Study Quran*.

32 Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 216.

Suhrawardī goes on to say that numerous wonders (*‘ajā’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.<sup>33</sup> The reference in this passage to the tablet of one’s own being immediately calls to mind the *lawḥ al-mahfūz*, or the Preserved Tablet, mentioned in Q 85:22. The Preserved Tablet is the primordial, celestial archetype for all of the Words of God. The Quran, 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 Suhrawardī has his own tablet, upon which the mysterious alphabet taught by the Angel was transcribed and with which he was able to read the *Suras* of the Word of God.

The tablet of one’s being is nothing other than a reflection of this primordial Tablet; there is thus a direct correspondence between the symbol and its archetype.<sup>34</sup> The Words inscribed upon the Preserved Tablet are also to be found in the cosmos and upon the tablet of one’s being. That Suhrawardī 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 (*munāsaba*) between the blowing of the Spirit (*nafath-i rūḥ*) and the Holy Spirit (*rūḥ al-quḍus*).<sup>35</sup> As will be seen 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.

#### 4 The Words of the Cosmos

The Angel answers Suhrawardī’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.<sup>36</sup> Suhrawardī asks him how he is supposed to understand what this means. The Angel replies in the following manner:

You should know that the Real has several Greater Words (*kalimāt-i kubrā*) 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 (*kalima-yi ‘ulyā*), beyond which there is no Greater Word.

33 Ibid., 217.

34 For a detailed investigation into this point, see Lings, *Symbol*.

35 Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 217.

36 Ibid.

Its relation in light and manifestation to the other Words is like the relation of the sun to the other stars.<sup>37</sup>

The Angel proceeds to explain that the rays of the Highest Word form another Word, whose rays then form another Word, and so on until their number becomes complete.<sup>38</sup> He states that these Greater Words are collectively to be referred to as the Engulfing Words (*kalimāt-i ṭāmmāt*),<sup>39</sup> a point to which we shall return shortly. We also learn that the last of the Greater Words is none other than the Angel Gabriel, and that the spirits of human beings proceed from this Greater Word. The Greater Words above Gabriel are therefore the nine Angelic Intellects of Neoplatonic Islamic cosmology, while Gabriel is the tenth or Active Intellect.

The Angel then offers an exegesis of several key Quranic passages to prove that the Word and the Spirit have the same reality. He cites, for example, Q 19:17, “Then We sent unto her Our Spirit.” This is followed by a citation from Q 4:171, where Jesus is described as God’s “Word which He committed to Mary” and as “a Spirit from Him.” After equating the Word with the Spirit, the Angel demonstrates how the spirits that proceed from the last Greater Word are called “Smaller Words” (*kalimāt-i ṣuḡhrā*).<sup>40</sup> The question of the correspondence between the blowing of the Spirit and the Holy Spirit is thus answered by the Angel through his exposition of the descent of the Greater Words of God down to the last Greater Word, and ultimately to the Smaller 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 Smaller Words and the Angel is a Spirit and the last of the Greater Words, then there is an intimate relationship between this Angel and the spirits that proceed from it. The blowing of the Spirit is, therefore, the coming about of human spirits from the last Greater Word. And, through the emanative descent, beginning with the Great-

37 Ibid. The phrase “from the august glories of His noble countenance” is taken from the famous prophetic tradition that speaks of the seventy thousand veils of light and darkness that veil God from His creatures. In *The niche of lights*, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) wrote an important commentary upon both this tradition and the famous Light verse (Q 24:35). The reference to the “Highest Word” in this passage harks back to Q 9:40.

38 Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 218. Suhrawardī’s cosmology here seems to have influenced the famous Safavid philosopher Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640). For Ṣadrā’s understanding of the cosmic function of the Divine Words, see Rustom, *Triumph* 21–26.

39 Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 218.

40 Ibid., 219.

est Word or the First Intellect, the Smaller 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 Greater Words is a ray proceeding from the divine Light, the Smaller Words, which come from the last of these Greater Words, are rays of its light. It is with this image in mind that we shall now turn to Suhrawardī's exposition of Gabriel's wing.

## 5 Gabriel's Wing

Suhrawardī had to be initiated into all the other symbols before he could be informed of the function of Gabriel's wing. The myth that 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 Greater Words, taken as a whole, form the "Engulfing Words." It is the function of the Angel's wing that will enable us to understand these Engulfing Words. The Angel addresses Suhrawardī:

You should know that Gabriel has two wings, one of which is right and is pure light (*nūr-i maḥḍ*). The entirety of this disengaged (*mujarrad*) wing is a relation to the Real. And he has a left wing, upon which are some traces of darkness, like the spots on the surface of the moon which resemble 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 being with respect to the being of the Real, it is qualified by His being.<sup>41</sup>

The Angel's right wing, characterized by pure luminosity, faces the world of pure Light, that is, the "side" of the Greater Words. The left wing is not "dark" as such. Its traces of darkness result from a deprivation of the light which comes from the side of the Greater Words. From the shadow cast by the Angel's left wing, there thus emerges the material world.<sup>42</sup> 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. 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

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 221.

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.

As Suhrawardī has already shown, the Spirit and the Word share the same reality. The spirits of human beings are reverberations of the Angel's left wing because they are imperfect, 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 "muddled echoes" (*ṣadā āmīz*).<sup>43</sup> That is to say, their reverberations are more 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 Suhrawardī's question concerning the form (*sūra*) of the wing of Gabriel, the Angel replies, "O heedless one! Do you not know that these are all symbols (*rumūz*) which, if understood exoterically, would render all of these Engulfing Words (*tāmmāt*) ineffectual?"<sup>44</sup> It was mentioned earlier that the Greater Words are referred to as the *tāmmāt*. This term appears in the singular at Q 79:34 with reference to the "great calamity" of the Day of Judgment.<sup>45</sup> It conveys the idea of "calamity" and "disaster," its 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 Greater Words are engulfing is because they proceed from the Greatest Sound (which is the first existenti-ation from the Godhead), and through the downward flow of their descent engulf and overflow, and thus fill, the cosmos. Yet, those in the material world can only grasp the reality of the Greater Words through the Angel, who is the last of the Greater Words. The symbols in the tale are therefore necessary insofar as they convey to those in the material world their own cosmic situation. Hence, the symbolic function of the Angel's wing in particular acts 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

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 222.

45 Q 79:34 and the verse following it read, "So when the Great Calamity befalls—a day when man shall remember that for which he endeavored."

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 the very thing that will allow us to ascend.

## 6 By way of a Conclusion

At the beginning of *The reverberation of Gabriel's wing* Suhrawardī cites the important early Sufi figure Abū 'Alī Fārmadī (d. 477/1084)<sup>46</sup> as saying, "Of all of the reverberations of Gabriel's Wing, one of them is you."<sup>47</sup> It is only after having been shown the function of the wing by the Angel that Suhrawardī 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 clearer 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 Suhrawardī realizes he himself is. He is a Word of God, and he reads the Words of God in the very cosmic reverberations that are manifested in forms on the outward plane, and upon the tablet of his soul on the inward plane.

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46 For whom, see Gozashteh and Negahban, Abū 'Alī al-Fārmadī.

47 Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 209.

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