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Philosophical Sufism in Translation

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As someone who studies classical Sufism, I want to share the wonder that strikes me when encountering primary sources. Yet Islamic studies still seems to be catching up with its analogues in other religious traditions. Many of the best texts remain untranslated, partially translated, or translated in a way that is almost incomprehensible to non-specialists. So Mohammed Rustom's *The Essence of Reality: A Defense of Philosophical Sufism* is one very important step forward in the study of one of Islam's richest intellectual traditions, namely, philosophical Sufism.

Few premodern Sufi authors will inspire the sense of excitement that 'Ayn al-Qudāt can. A prodigy from western Iran, 'Ayn al-Qudāt (1098–1131) rose through the ranks of scholarship to become a Shafi'i judge at a very young age, possibly as a teenager. Later, he met and became a disciple of Ahmad al-Ghazali (d. 1126), brother to the more famous Muhammad (d. 1111). Ahmad has become known as a teacher of Sufi visions of love on a cosmic scale, where love sits at the very center of existence. 'Ayn al-Qudāt developed many of Ahmad's views and, eventually, became his spiritual successor. He stood at odds with the rulers of his time, the Seljuqs, especially taking issue with their neglect of the poor and hungry.

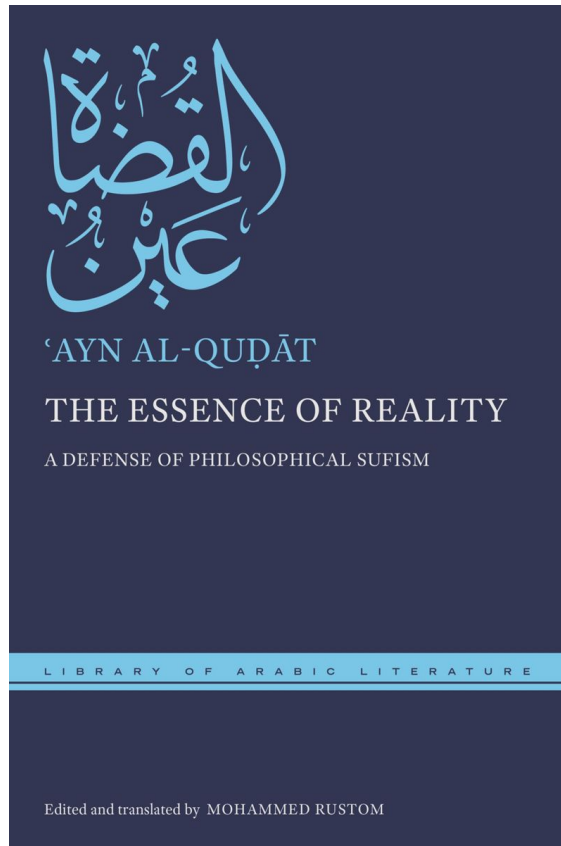
In his useful and succinct introduction to the text, Rustom informs us that it was ‘Ayn al-Qudāt’s opposition to Seljuq policies that brought about his execution in 1131 CE—and not the author’s heterodox statements as is more commonly imagined. Heresy served only as a pretext for this politically motivated execution. The execution amplified this legendary figure, immortalizing him especially to readers of Persian texts, already drawn to the author’s captivating style and original perspectives on all aspects of Islamic thought.

‘Ayn al-Qudāt’s most famous writings are in Persian, especially the *Tamhīdāt* (*Paving the Path*). Yet he did leave Arabic writings as well, of which only two are extant. The author composed one of those two, *The Exile’s Complaint* (*Shakwā al-gharīb*), in a Baghdadi prison, addressing therein the charges of heresy made against him. The other, *The Essence of Reality* (or *Zubdat al-ḥaqā’iq*), is the subject of this review. The book was dictated over the course of three days in the year 1120 CE, when its author was a mere 24 years of age. In it, ‘Ayn al-Qudāt addresses some of the major intellectual questions of his day, questions that continue to matter in Islamic learning: ways of knowing God and cultivating love for Him; the role of theology and reason in knowing the truth; and the significance of prophets, death, and the hereafter, among other topics.

His responses to these issues anticipate the later rise of what has been called “philosophical Sufism,” a response to Arabic philosophy—especially the philosopher Ibn Sina—from within the epistemological framework advanced by many Sufi thinkers. In this regard, the book showcases its author’s mastery of the philosophical tradition, as well as his Sufi proclivities. While the former emphasized rational reflection, the latter emphasized direct and experiential knowledge of God, through forms of remembrance. In responding to this question, *The Essence of Reality* addressed one of the most pressing issues of Islamic intellectual history: the place of the intellect in a religious context that venerates revelation. Perhaps this helps explain the popularity and influence of ‘Ayn al-Qudāt’s book.

Each of the short, one hundred chapters of this book deserves repeated reading. ‘Ayn al-Qudāt’s method of instruction involved offering metaphors and examples for concepts from Sufi thought, so that the reader could unpack them, each time uncovering a layer of significance. For those unfamiliar with what might be called “theoretical Sufism,” this book serves as an excellent introduction. For those familiar with the body of texts currently available in English translation, this book offers a glimpse into theoretical Sufism at an early

stage. Moreover, concepts conveyed abstrusely in other texts—such as the realization of all things as manifestations of God’s attributes—appear here in clear and often allegorical language.



‘Ayn al-Qudāt al-Hamadhānī. *The Essence of Reality: A Defense of Philosophical Sufism*, edited and translated by Mohammed Rustom. Library of Arabic Literature. New York: New York University Press, 2022. Pp. 241 + xxx. \$35.00.

The text itself follows the Library of Arabic Literature’s dual-language (Arabic-English) format. In fact, part of the value of this edition is that Rustom has offered a newly edited version of the Arabic text, using four available manuscripts. While ‘Ayn al-Qudāt tends to write clearly and engagingly, he does make use of technical terms that could easily create a sense of imperviousness for those unfamiliar with Arabic philosophy or Islam’s theological traditions. This is where Rustom excels. His translation strikes a delicate balance between faithfulness to the Arabic original and readability for a wide audience. His careful use of non-technical vocabulary conveys the energy of ‘Ayn al-Qudāt’s style, which often relies on a mixture of

autobiographical anecdotes, direct address, poetic passages, and profound observations. Moreover, Rustom's care in choosing terms that can be used consistently means that those with little or no background in Arabic can follow one term throughout the text.

In terms of teaching tools for Sufi studies, Rustom's translation pairs nicely with another text published previously by the Library of Arabic Literature, *The Principles of Sufism* by 'Ā'ishah al-Bā'ūniyyah (d. 1517). Offering this lesser known text has shed light on a fascinating summation of Sufi teachings by a female author—when very few such texts are available to English-reading audiences. Here, again, the Library of Arabic Literature has done the field of Islamic studies a great service in publishing Rustom's masterful edition and commentary.

Doing so seems to indicate, to me, an acknowledgement of the salience of Sufi authors, poetry, and treatises in Arabic literary history and Islam's intellectual history, a salience apparent to those within Islamic studies, but not often to those outside it. Perhaps, also, the appeal of this text will inspire new translations of 'Ayn al-Quḍāt's Persian works, which bring together imagination, literary flair, and intellectual originality in a manner that has long been celebrated by Persian readers. Those qualities, found here in *The Essence of Reality*, render this translation a revived classic—a historical classic brought back to life by Rustom's able skills as translator and commentator.

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