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Story-Telling as Philosophical Pedagogy: The Case of Suhrawardī

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Amongst the writings of the founder of the school of Illumination and key figure in post-Avicennan Islamic philosophy Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191)¹ 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 which punctuate his philosophy. Given their concrete language, these tales add a dimension of depth not easily discernable in Suhrawardī's strictly-speaking philosophical works, given the latter's reliance upon abstract language.

The phenomenon of a philosopher composing stories to convey aspects of their philosophical teachings is, of course, not unique to Suhrawardī. We have a number of antecedents to him in the Islamic philosophical tradition who did just this, as is evidenced in the writings of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā',² Avicenna³ (d. 428/1037, a direct influence upon Suhrawardī in this regard), and Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 581/1185).⁴ But what makes Suhrawardī's treatises unique is that, for one thing, the vast majority of his tales were written in Persian;⁵

¹ For Suhrawardī's life and work, see Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardī and the School of Illumination*, Corbin, *En islam iranien*, volume 2; Marcotte, Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl; Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* 52-82; Walbridge, *The Leaven of the Ancients*; Ziai, Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī.

² See their best-known epistle, *The Case of the Animals Versus Man Before the King of the Jinn*.

³ The relevant texts are translated and analyzed in Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*.

⁴ See *Ibn Tufayl's Hayy ibn Yaqzān*.

⁵ His Persian works can be found in *Majmū'ā-yi muṣannafāt*, volume 3. For French translations of most of Suhrawardī 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 parr-i Jibrā'īl* and his *Mu'nis al-'ushshāq* (also known as *Fī ḥaqīqat al-'ishq*), see Suhrawardī, *L'Archange empourpré*, part 2. Readers familiar with

and, more importantly, they explicitly and consistently draw on key terms and concepts from the Islamic philosophical tradition on the one hand, and the Sufi tradition on the other. Moreover, the figure of the Angelic guide features prominently in these narratives, serving as a kind of pedagogical link for readers to be taken 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 parr-i Jibrā’īl* (*The Reverberation of Gabriel’s Wing*).⁶ In order to understand the pedagogical posture which the author assumes in this particular tale, I will offer a close reading of the 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

Thackston’s 1982 edition of translations of Suhrawardī’s visionary recitals would do well to read Hermann Landolt’s review article of this work, Suhrawardī’s “Tales of Initiation.” Thackston’s translations have been reissued in a bilingual edition. See Suhrawardī, *The Philosophical Allegories and Mystical Treatises*. Two of Suhrawardī’s other Persian treatises are available in translation. See the bilingual edition of *The Book of Radiance* and *The Shape of Light* (translated earlier in Kuşpinar, *Ismā’īl Ankaravī on the Illuminative Philosophy*). This latter text has been the subject of some important commentaries in Ottoman Turkish and Persian. See Kuşpinar, *Ismā’īl Ankaravī on the Illuminative Philosophy* 53ff. and Dawānī, Commentary on Suhrawardī’s *Temples of Light* respectively. For more on Suhrawardī’s Persian writings in general, see Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia* 154-9.

⁶ The text is be found in Suhrawardī, *Majmū’a-yi muşannafāt* iii, 208-23. From here onwards, citations from the work will simply appear as “*Āwāz*,” with the relevant page numbers going back to volume 3 of *Majmū’a-yi muşannafāt*. A study of this text can be found in Tuft, Symbolism and Speculation in Suhrawardī’s *The Song of Gabriels’ Wing*. For a translation of a 8th/14th century Persian commentary upon *Āwāz-i parr-i Jibrā’īl* by an anonymous Indian author (along with a translation of the original text), see Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination* 151-65. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

the significance of the symbology of the Angel's wing within the cosmological matrix of the tale.

The Basic Setting

At the beginning of *The Reverberation of Gabriel's Wing*, Suhrawardī speaks of his being freed from the womens' quarters and from some of the shackles and limitations experienced by children.⁷ In a state of discomfort as the result of what he calls "the onslaughts of a dream" (*hujūm-i khwāb*),⁸ he takes a lamp and goes towards the mens' 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.⁹ Suhrawardī encircles (*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*).¹⁰ After closing the door that leads to the city he proceeds towards 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.¹¹

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 are 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-ʿaql al-faʿāl*). These Intellects were identified with the Angels by Avicenna,¹² and Suhrawardī further angelized the cosmos by

⁷ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 209.

⁸ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 209.

⁹ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 209.

¹⁰ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 210.

¹¹ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 210.

¹² See Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* 42ff.

assigning an angelic function to everything in his cosmic system.¹³ The tenth or Active Intellect is identified with the Angel Gabriel, that is, the Angel of Revelation 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 of humanity.

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.¹⁴

The Angel reminds Suhrawardī of the eighth clime,¹⁵ that place “which cannot be pointed at by the forefinger.” 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 re-turn to one’s true self in its entirety. The Angel is a guide for Suhrawardī because he will cause him to re-trace 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 re-turn to his primordial nature.¹⁶ 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 re-learn what he always has known, so that he may once again know who he truly *is*.

¹³ See the helpful summary in Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination* 81-6.

¹⁴ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 211.

¹⁵ Suhrawardī, *L’Archange empourpré* 258, n. 12. See n. 28 for references to the “eighth clime,” more commonly referred to as the “world of imagination.”

¹⁶ *Ta’wīl* is literally defined as “taking something back to its origin.” For the *ta’wīl* of the soul, see Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* 28-35.

As Henry Corbin (d. 1978) notes in his *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, a fundamental change must take place within the individual which allows it to re-cognize itself as a prisoner in what Corbin calls the “cosmic crypt,” thus acting as an impetus for its awakening for the encounter with the Angel.¹⁷ That there needed to be a fundamental shift 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 it that you have descended into this *khānaqāh* after claiming to never move or change?”¹⁸ In response to his question, the Angel provides Suhrawardī with an 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 that faculty which will allow him to see it. But when he can see it, this is because a change has occurred in him and 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 (*ḥāl*).”¹⁹

This meeting could only have taken place in a semi-dream state, when Suhrawardī was imaginably positioned between waking and sleeping. In the beginning of the narration 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,²⁰ 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

¹⁷ Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* 19.

¹⁸ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 215.

¹⁹ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 215.

²⁰ Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* 26.

be, but of which he is only now aware by virtue of his realization of his being trapped in the “cosmic crypt.”

It will be recalled that Suhrawardī encircled the mens’ 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*.²¹ Corbin notes that the term *khānaqāh* is to be understood here as “the interior temple as the ‘place’ for the encounter with the Angel.”²² It is precisely in this interior temple that Suhrawardī has this 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 towards himself; in other words, he turns inward.

This initial step Suhrawardī takes towards 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 whom 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 *centre*, which is his own image *in divinis*.

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 which the Angel takes him through allow him to understand the text of the cosmos with greater clarity. As he increases in knowledge, he re-cognizes more of

²¹ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 210.

²² Suhrawardī, *L’Archange empourpré* 258, n. 6.

himself and his situation *in divinis*. The Angel goes on to teach Suhrawardī the art of tailoring (*‘ilm-i khiyāṭa*), telling him that knowledge of this science will allow him to repair his own patched frock (*muraqqa‘a*) whenever it needs to be stitched.²³ 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 which the Angel teaches him is nothing other than the 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 the *dhikr* that the *dhākir* (invoker) may mend the substance of his soul, thus transcending himself into the presence of the *madhkūr* (Invoked).²⁴

Suhrawardī then asks the Sage to teach him the Word (*kalām*) of God.²⁵ 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.”²⁶ The Sage responds to Suhrawardī’s request by telling him that so long as he is “in this city” (*dar īn shahr*) he could only learn so much of God’s Word.²⁷ “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 which leads to the city he closes himself off to the materiality of this world, to the “city” full of distractions, and enters through the door leading to the open field, which symbolizes that infinite interstitial space known as the world of imagination (*‘ālam al-khayāl*).²⁸

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

²³ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 216.

²⁴ For *dhikr* in Sufism, see, Anawati and Gardet, *Mystique musulmane* 187-260; Chittick, *Sufism* 52-60; Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* 167-78.

²⁵ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 216.

²⁶ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 211.

²⁷ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 216.

²⁸ A recent treatment of the nature of the imaginal world in Suhrawardī can be found in Marcotte, Suhrawardī’s Realm of the Imaginal. For broader treatments of the topic, see Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds* 67-113; Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*; Rahman, *Dream, Imagination and ‘ālam al-mithāl* 409-19.

end of the tale refer to as merchants,²⁹ that is, the merchants of the material world—are imprisoned by virtue of their distance from the open field, and hence their true selves.³⁰ 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* [i.e. Qur’anic 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.”³¹

Suhrawardī goes on to say that numerous unexplainable wonders (*‘ajā’ib*) were revealed to him and that whenever he was unable to understand a “passage” from the *sūra* of the cosmic text, the Angel would teach him the answer.³² The reference in this passage to the tablet of one’s own being immediately calls to mind the *lawḥ al-maḥfūz* 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 Qur’ān, 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 *sūras* 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.³³ The Words inscribed upon the Preserved Tablet are also to be found in the cosmos and upon the tablet of

²⁹ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz*, 223.

³⁰ 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. It should be noted here that translations of all Qur’anic terms and verses are taken from Nasr et al. (eds.), *The HarperCollins Study Quran*.

³¹ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 216.

³² Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 217.

³³ For a detailed investigation into this point, see Lings, *Symbol and Archetype*.

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*).³⁴ 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.

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.³⁵ Suhrawardī asks him how he is supposed to understand what this means. The Angel replies in the following manner:

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. Its relation in light and manifestation to the other Words is like the relation of the sun to the other stars.³⁶

The Angel proceeds to explain that the rays of the Highest Word form another Word, whose rays then form another Word and so until their number becomes complete.³⁷ He states that

³⁴ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 217.

³⁵ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 217.

³⁶ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 217. The phrase, "from the august glories of His noble countenance" is taken from the famous Prophetic tradition which 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.

³⁷ 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, *The Triumph of Mercy* 21-6.

these Greater Words are collectively to be referred to as the Engulfing Words (*kalimāt-i tāmāt*),³⁸ 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 Qur'anic 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 which proceed from the last Great Word are what are known as "Smaller Words" (*kalimāt-i ṣuḡhrā*).³⁹ 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 which proceed from it. The blowing of the Spirit is, therefore, the coming about of human spirits from the last Great Word. And, through the emanative descent beginning with the Greatest Word or the First Intellect (in the language of Islamic philosophy), 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.

³⁸ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 218.

³⁹ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 219.

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 which 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 which will enable us to understand these Engulfing Words. The Angel addresses Suhrawardī:

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 which are on the surface of the moon, much like 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.⁴⁰

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 coming from the side of the Greater Words. From the shadow cast by the Angel's left wing there thus emerges the material world.⁴¹ 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 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 thus reverberations of the Angel's left wing because they are

⁴⁰ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 220.

⁴¹ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 221.

imperfect as 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 evil doers and those who do not believe in God are also reverberations of the Angel’s left wing, but are “muddled echoes” (*ṣadā āmīz*).⁴² 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 (*ṣūra*) of the wing of Gabriel, the Angel replies, “Oh 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?”⁴³ It was mentioned earlier that the Greater Words are referred to as the *tāmmāt*. This term appears in Q 79:34 with reference to the “great calamity” of the day of judgment.⁴⁴ 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 existentiatio from the Godhead), and through the downward flow of their descents engulf and overflow and thus fill the cosmos. Yet those in the material world cannot grasp their reality. The Greater Words are so far removed from the creatures on earth that they have no access to them. It is only through the Angel—who is the last of the Greater Words—that they may comprehend them.

There would not be a purpose for those in the material world to understand the function of the Greater Words on their own. It is, therefore, necessary to comprehend them through the symbols in the tale insofar as they convey to those in the material world their own

⁴² Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 221.

⁴³ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 222.

⁴⁴ Q 79:34 and the verse following read, “So when the Great Calamity befalls—a day when man shall remember that for which he endeavored”.

cosmic situation. The symbols employed in this tale are there simply to relate the nature and purpose of human existence. The function of the Angel's wing is to act 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 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 that very thing which will allow us to ascend.

By Way of a Conclusion

At the beginning of *The Reverberation of Gabriel's Wing* Suhrawardī cites the important early Sufi figure Abū 'Alī Fārmādī (d. 477/1084)⁴⁵ as saying, "of all of the reverberations of Gabriel's Wing, one of them is you."⁴⁶ 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 all the more clear 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 that he himself is. He is a Word of God and he reads the Words of God in the very cosmic reverberations which find their manifestations in forms on the outward plane, and upon the tablet of his soul on the inward plane.

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⁴⁵ For whom, see Gozashteh and Negahban, Abū 'Alī Farmādī.

⁴⁶ Suhrawardī, *Āwāz* 209.

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