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Book Review

L.W.C. van Lit. *The World of Image in Islamic Philosophy: Ibn Sina, Suhrawardi, Shahrazuri and Beyond.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.

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L.W.C. Van Lit covers a rarely studied topic of Islamic theology, eschatology. The book hovers around a single statement written by medieval Islamic scholar Suhrawardi in his magnum opus, *Hikmat al-Ishraq* [The Philosophy of Illumination, 1186]: “Whoever sees that place is certain of the existence of another world different from the [world of] bodies, in which are suspended images” (p. 1). Van Lit points out that the whole book can be considered as one giant explanation of this quote. By analyzing the works of previous scholars, starting with the famous polymath Ibn Sina, known in the West as Avicenna, Van Lit paints a detailed and elaborate picture of a once infamous idea within the Islamic world and systematically traces its progression and development up to the current age in Shia Islamic thought. Before doing so, he walks the reader through the technical terminology and intricate methodology in his introduction. In this first chapter, he introduces the prominent scholars covered in the text and provides a brief outline of his work. Despite all the explanations, some concepts and lines of logic might be challenging for novice readers of this topic.

In the second chapter, Van Lit describes Ibn Sina’s idea of using “imagination after death”. According to Ibn Sina, deceased people could perceive pleasure and pain only with the use of celestial bodies. The majority of scholars rejected Ibn Sina’s idea, and Van Lit does an excellent job of providing quotes from these scholars with his explanations. For example, he explains that when a scholar mentions Ibn Sina’s idea without naming him, such as “there are some who say,” then it most likely meant the scholar dissociated himself from this concept and did not agree with it. Suhrawardi was one of the few scholars who embraced Ibn Sina’s idea of using celestial bodies

to imagine sensations after death. Van Lit adds that Suhrawardi wanted to transform this idea by introducing concepts of “an additional realm” and “suspended images.”

The third chapter focuses on Suhrawardi’s novel idea of suspended images and its implications. These elaborations become perplexing with mythical metaphors like mirrors and images in the eye. Van Lit explains that Suhrawardi believed in another realm that can be reached through death, daily life, dreams, and meditation. Suhrawardi argued that his idea was backed up by earlier philosophers, as well as the prophets of Islam. Nevertheless, these evidences are nowhere to be found in the book; it is unclear whether Suhrawardi ever covered these evidences in his works, or if Van Lit excluded them for the sake of conciseness. Inclusion of these so-called evidences of Suhrawardi would have been an improvement to Van Lit’s book. After discussing Suhrawardi’s idea, Van Lit acknowledges that Suhrawardi left many questions unanswered. Thus, he turns to one of Suhrawardi’s followers, Shahrazuri, in the fourth chapter.

Van Lit provides excellent background information about Shahrazuri and his “history of philosophy.” He then mentions how Shahrazuri further developed Suhrawardi’s idea of an additional realm and suspended images by establishing a “world of image.” The author gives a clear-cut explanation to distinguish between Suhrawardi’s “suspended images” and Shahrazuri’s “world of image” since both seem very similar. He also gives a thorough analysis of Shahrazuri’s various works by showing how he focused on his idea of the “world of image” in these different texts, with some phrases worded differently here and there, albeit the concept remaining the same. Van Lit then outlines the main features of Shahrazuri’s concept, where he gives us Shahrazuri’s “proof” of the existence of this “world of image,” but then delves into topics, such as the “position of the cosmos,” which may be confusing for some readers. Van Lit finds it interesting that Shahrazuri never mentioned that he had directly experienced this “world of image” himself; rather Shahrazuri cited other authors and their claims of seeing this world.

In the fifth chapter, Van Lit momentarily takes a step back from Shahrazuri to show that Suhrawardi’s ideas of “an additional realm” and “suspended images” were met with lukewarm reception. Although many disagreed with his ideas and dissociated themselves from them, some scholars engaged with his text at different degrees. Van Lit outlines how various scholars have reacted to Suhrawardi and Shahrazuri’s works; some neither praised nor condemned their efforts, while a few engaged with the idea of a “world of image.”

In the sixth chapter, Van Lit covers the historical reception of Shahrazuri’s “world of image” among the scholars from the twelfth century to the present day. This stunningly-detailed chapter includes Van Lit’s analysis of numerous scholarly references to Shahrazuri’s work. For example, the author mentions how a seventeenth-century Safavid intellectual Shaykh Bahai claimed to have read a work from Shirazi but the way the text was written shows that it would have been copied from a different scholar, Taftazani. Van Lit refers to a scholar that cites a *hadith* (saying of the Prophet Muhammad) related from Shaykh Bahai but does not give that *hadith*. Van Lit points out that only Shia scholars cited Suhrawardi’s above-quoted famous statement, so he clarifies that these ideas were not widely accepted across the Islamic world. Near the end of the chapter, the author presents a statement written by a more contemporary Shia scholar and dissects it to show how four earlier scholars, who engaged with and contributed to Suhrawardi’s statement above, had become quintessential to the statement of the contemporary scholar.

Tracing this development of ideas over eight centuries is certainly praiseworthy. Van Lit brilliantly analyzes and compares original Arabic texts by highlighting their similarities and differences and their inconsistencies along with the reasoning behind these inconsistencies. He guides the novice readers of medieval works by explaining differences between preservation, merely copying a text, and appropriation, an active engagement with a text through further comments and improvement. Lastly, he constructs a wonderfully comprehensive yet tentative genealogy of the study/development of Suhrawardi's idea, forming a tree of scholars that have built off one another. Overall, out of the seven this chapter seems to be the richest with details because of its culmination of all the intertextual analysis covered in the previous chapters. Van Lit ties everything together neatly by showing how Suhrawardi, Shahrastari, and other scholars' ideas have built upon one another and now, unitedly, have a place in modern Shia philosophy.

In his last chapter, Van Lit ponders what other "gems" Suhrawardi could have contributed to society since he was not understood by the people of his time. Suhrawardi was going off on a tangent since many of his claims were, as the earlier scholars had said about Ibn Sina's ideas, farfetched, unsubstantiated conjectures with no solid evidence. The world of the unseen in Islamic theology is a sensitive subject, as it is hard to prove what is claimed. The author adds that only Suhrawardi embraced Ibn Sina's idea positively. Van Lit further mentions that Suhrawardi "denies a bodily resurrection and a Last Day of Judgement" (p. 181). Considering that mainstream Islam, both Sunni and Shia, recognizes resurrection and the Day of Judgement, it is understandable why Suhrawardi remained marginal. Van Lit provides a neat summary of how the concept of the "world of image" was born, and gives a clever analogy to help the reader better understand the perspective of these past scholars; he states that the idea of the soul, body, intellect, and image should be seen more as an emulsion rather than a mixture of fluids of different densities. He also elaborates on the methodology of restricted commentary tradition to show its benefits and how it can help to determine whether a work is simply a copy of a previous text or an original thought.

Throughout the book, Van Lit relays how the scholars, who discuss Suhrawardi's iconic statement, keep mentioning two cities of the world of image, Jabrasa and Jabarq (sometimes the spelling is different), but they never cite where they got these names from. It would have improved the book, had Van Lit addressed this issue. Van Lit's impressive capability of the Arabic language is visible in his analysis. He notes that one scholar gives two different readings for a word that is orthographically the same but phonologically different, thereby concluding that the scholars were working through a written tradition rather than an oral one. He catches mistakes in the original Arabic texts and deduces how and why such mistakes occurred in a later copy/analysis.

The book is quite interesting to read but it is not targeted towards average reader. A basic knowledge of Islamic studies is a prerequisite to comprehend this book; Islamic scholars, academics or graduate students of Islamic studies are its potential readers. The concepts covered are largely studied by Shia scholars, so it would have been helpful for the author to state this earlier in the introduction, or even on the back cover of the book. Mainstream Islamic knowledge embraces an understanding that God gave man very little knowledge of the soul and the realm of the unseen. Thus, dabbling in philosophical matters on souls with pure speculation and conjecture without solid proof is clearly mind dazzling. Nevertheless, it is certainly fun to engage with these ideas. Overall, Van Lit's objectives were to elaborate on the origin of the idea of a "world of

image” and trace its transformation and pertinence in the Islamic world until the modern day; he clearly succeeded in his mission.