

L. W. C. van Lit. *The World of Image in Islamic Philosophy: Ibn Sīnā, Suhrawardī, Shahrāzūrī and Beyond*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017. 278 pages. ISBN: 9781474415859.

*Roxanne D. Marcotte**

L.W. Cornelis (Eric) van Lit studies the idea of a fourth (cosmological and ontological) “world of image,” a novel solution to the soul’s fate in the afterlife in Islamic philosophy. The work is quite skillfully crafted with its very specific object of study, research approach and method, text-grounded evidence, and analyses. The issue-focused approach to post-classical Islamic intellectual history drives the work’s distinctively broad historical sweep. This results in a detailed study of the “world of image,” along with that of “suspended images,” that starts with its earlier proponents, Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037), al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191), and al-Shahrāzūrī (d. ca. 687/1288) and then “unearths” these notions’ influence on later developments until today. The author thus makes a valuable contribution to post-classical Islamic eschatology.

Chapter 1 begins with a review of earlier studies by Henry Corbin (d. 1978), Alfred von Kremer (d. 1889), and Louis Massignon (d. 1962) and later ones by Hermann Landolt, John Walbridge, Hossein Ziai, Roxanne D. Marcotte, Nicolai Sinai, and Rüdiger Arnzen on al-Suhrawardī and his world of image. The author introduces the study’s two-pronged methodological strategy (9-18): a first “close reading” of passages discussing the world of image and suspended images and a “distant reading,” a method proposed by Franco Moretti, both of which are applied to the “core corpus or source text,” the “restricted commentary tradition,”

* Professor of Contemporary Islam, Université du Québec à Montréal (Canada), Département de Sciences des Religions; Honorary Research Senior Fellow in Studies in Religion, The University of Queensland (Australia), School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry. Correspondance: marcotte.roxanne@uqam.ca.

the “commentary tradition,” the “textual tradition,” and the “wider discourse” to propose an “intertextuality of the commentaries.”¹

Chapter 2 identifies the passages in which Ibn Sīnā provided “rudimentary,” though insightful, comments on a possible eschatological place and function of imagination. Soteriological considerations have weighed in considerably, as souls were deemed capable of connecting to celestial bodies, where beholding divine promises could occur, although a new world was not postulated. Earlier commentators like Bahmanyār (d. 458/1066), Athīr al-Dīn al-Abharī (d. 663/1264), and Najm al-Dīn al-Qazwīnī al-Kātībī (d. 657/1276) did not mention the idea of an “imaginative eschatological felicity.” Some, like Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī (d. ca. 560/1164), actually refuted the idea. Abū al-‘Abbās al-Lawkarī (d. 517/1123) mentioned it but remained “neutral.” Others provided a number of objections, like Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), on whom Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī (d. 631/1233) seems to depend for his interpretation. Still others, like al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), considered the view “not fully proven” but “not impossible,” whereas others, like al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153), seemed to endorse it.

More important was how Suhrawardī received, took up, and developed the function of imagination after death. He proposed a fourfold soteriological division and, wary of possible accusations of metempsychosis, expanded (physics) on the idea of “bodies made of smoke and vapor” as a possible organ for the soul’s use of imagination after death: Celestial bodies (any one of them) could function as substrate (*mawḍūʿ*) for the imagination of posthumous souls.

Chapter 3 begins with al-Suhrawardī’s “major innovation” (*Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq* and *al-Talwīḥāt*; see Table 3.1 and its comparison of passages selected from the two works) in the form of a “new notion he called ‘suspended images’ (*muthul muʿallaqa*)” that exist “not in a place (*makān*), nor in a substrate (*maḥall*),” but partake in this new world of image. He wrote: “Whoever sees that place is certain of the existence of another world different from the [world of] bodies, in which are suspended images” (*Ḥikmat*) (50). Then, van Lit classifies various suspended images: those “located among the celestial bodies” and accessible to souls after death, those “present in the faculty of imagination, located in the brain during life” and accessible in daily life, those in dreams, and finally those during meditation

1 L.W.C. (Eric) van Lit, “Commentary and Commentary Tradition: The Basic Terms for Understanding Islamic Intellectual History,” *MIDÉO* 32 (2017): 3-26.

(54-55). He then presents al-Suhrawardī's new theory of "knowledge by presence" (*al-'ilm al-ḥuḍūrī*) and its epistemological impact: That which the soul grasps now needs to be "present" to the "self" (*dhāt*) that apprehends it in an unmediated manner. This enables the soul to "connect to a celestial body and use it to engage in imaginable perception" (68). This (spiritual) experience (*mushāhada*), to which Suhrawardī gives precedence over the discursive and argumentative (*ḥujja*), allows the soul to grasp suspended images.

The chapter ends with very brief discussions on the possible influences of Zoroastrianism (proposed by Corbin); Sufism, notably Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī (d. after 360/971) (proposed by Landolt) and Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) (proposed by Landolt, Fazlur Rahman); and the pseudo-Aristotelian *Uthūlūjīyā* (proposed by Arnzen). More notably, Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī, although he did not discuss suspended images or accept the idea of a link between imagination and celestial spheres, shared similar epistemological concerns, such as a conception of the immaterial soul (or self / *dhāt*) as the "actual perceiver of all perceptions" (al-Suhrawardī's "knowledge" / "perception" versus al-Baghdādī's "awareness"), and arguments for vision and perception. Van Lit then lists a number of issues that remained unaddressed or unresolved: al-Suhrawardī's unsystematic and at times unclear discussions of suspended images and their link to every type of perception, the domain of "visionary" experiences, and the relation between the world of image and the suspended images – issues that later commentators tackled.

The subsequent chapters follow the trail of the reception and development of the world of image and suspended images, and the relation between them, in the commentary tradition.² Chapter 4 explores the contributions of Shahrazūrī (d. ca. 1288) (notably *Sharḥ al-Talwīḥāt*, *Rasā'il al-Shajarat al-Ilāhiyya*, and *Sharḥ Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*), who upheld al-Suhrawardī's view that celestial bodies served as a faculty of imagination for souls after death. In fact, he turned the world of image into a "more independently real, more abstract, and more extraordinary" (79) world, for which he provided a proof for the existence of the "world of image" by coining a new technical term (i.e., *'alam al-mithāl*), provided greater details, and expanded on the characteristics of this new independent world of image. Positioning it between the sensory and intelligible worlds and stating that it possessed a causal function, he divided it into layers, as places of manifestation (*mazhar*); expanded its topography,

2 L. W. Cornelis van Lit, "The Commentary Tradition on Suhrawardī," *Philosophy East and West* 68, no. 2 (2018): 539-63.

with its “wonders and marvels”; assigned place and rank to Jabarsa, Jabalqa, and Hurqalya, a place where mystical experiences occur; defined the means of entering this place, where souls may transmigrate (*tanāsukh*) as they ascend progressively in this place of “divine mercy”; assured people that it was real; and, finally, attributed the idea to Greek philosophers (Hermes, Empedocles (d. ca. 435 BCE), Pythagoras (d. ca. 490 BCE), Plato (d. 347 BCE), but also including a reference to the Persian prophet Mani (d. 274)).

Chapter 5 introduces two groups of “lukewarm” commentators who were unenthusiastic about suspended images or the world of image. An earlier group included commentators who discussed neither idea: five commentaries on al-Suhrawardī’s Persian literary treatises; Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Kāshī al-Ḥillī’s (d. 755/1354) glosses on Ibn Kammūna’s (d. 683/1284) commentary; and two commentaries from the Ottoman Empire. Some mentioned both ideas “only in passing,” whereas others rejected them, among them Ibn Kammūna, who “refused the idea of a world of image or even the idea of using imagination after death” (115). Others were less categorical. For example, in his *Sharḥ al-Lamahāt*, Niẓām al-Dīn al-Tūdhī al-Hamadhānī (d. after 650/1252) preferred Ibn Sinā’s celestial bodies as substrate for the imagination (eschatological solution); in his *al-Aqtāb al-Qutbiyya*, ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Aḥarī (d. 657/1259) established a “strict hierarchy” of four kinds of existents (viz., intellect, soul, images, and suspended forms).

More receptive, yet still hesitant, al-Abḥarī, in his *Kashf al-Ḥaqqā’iq*, relied on al-Suhrawardī’s discussion (eschatology section) and seemed to argue in favor of “suspended images”; however, he never mentioned them by name, noting only the proximity of al-Suhrawardī’s views to those of Ibn Sinā and the lack of proof to confirm or disprove them. Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shirāzī (d. 710/1311), also hesitant, “simply incorporated al-Shahrazūri’s commentary” without providing “a personal” interpretation in his *Sharḥ Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq* and epistle on the world of image³ that, according to van Lit, would consist of “merely an appropriation and reorganization” of al-Shahrazūri’s *Sharḥ*. Written between 1329-39, an anonymous epistle entitled *al-Muthul al-‘Aqliyya al-Aflātūniyya* included a “sober discussion” of “suspended images” (an entire chapter) with novel arguments in the sections on the existence of suspended images and the arguments against their existence.

3 John Walbridge, *The Science of Mystic Lights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 200-31 [Eng. trans.], 233-71 [Ar. ed.].

A later group of “cautious commentators” belonged to the Shiraz school, where al-Suhrawardī’s and al-Shahrazūrī’s views were rediscovered for their “philosophical soundness” and “perceived contradiction,” notably with “scriptural promises concerning bodily resurrection.” In his *Mujlī Mir’ā al-Munjī* (based on al-Shahrazūrī’s *Rasā’il*), Ibn Abī Jumhūr al-Aḥsā’ī (d. after 906/1501) had already raised this concern in a chapter on the world of image. In his *Shawākīl al-Ḥūr*, al-Dawānī (d. 908/1502) commented on al-Suhrawardī’s *Hayākīl al-Nūr*, including only a “passing mention” of both ideas, seemingly uninterested in the idea of a world of image. On the other hand, Ghiyāth al-Dīn al-Dashtakī (d. 949/1542) included a “substantial” discussion on it that provided a number of arguments for and against its existence; however, he did not accept it as a “valid solution for eschatology” because “bodily resurrection must mean the return of the body exactly as it is here on Earth” (129).⁴ In his glosses on al-Dawānī’s *Shawākīl al-Ḥūr*, al-Nayrīzī (d. after 943/1536) avoided any discussion of these ideas by ending his glosses on *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq* before the section on eschatology; however, he did propose objections similar to those of al-Dashtakī to argue against the world of image in his *Miṣbāḥ al-Arwāḥ* (discussion on vision). In fact, his eschatological solution rested on orthodox descriptions of the afterlife.

Harawī (d. after 1008/1599), who was not linked to the Shiraz tradition, wrote a Persian commentary on *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq* (relying on Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī’s *Sharḥ*), thereby remaining closer to al-Shahrazūrī’s commentary and upheld a world of image “divided into layers” (135) as well as the eschatological fate of souls. From the Shiraz tradition, Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1045/1636) proposed a “textually independent” proof for the existence of the world of image by reinterpreting it in accordance with his own philosophical system. For him, imagination was “an active, immaterial faculty [...] where suspended images become manifest, and the spirit only serves as an intermediary between the imagination and the body” (136-37); likewise, “an ‘imaginable isthmus’ (*al-barzakh al-mithālī*) between spirit and soul” enables the soul to “continue to operate its faculty of imagination after separation from the body” (137).

Van Lit argues that while al-Shahrazūrī “ontologized” the suspended images, Mullā Ṣadrā “de-ontologized” the world of image by “denying the independent

4 L.W.C. (Eric) van Lit, “Ghiyāth al-Dīn Dashtakī on the World of Image (*‘ālam al-mithāl*): The Place of His *Ishrāq Hayākīl al-Nūr* in the Commentary Tradition on Suhrawardī,” in *Ishrāq: Islamic Philosophy Yearbook 5* (Moscow: Vostochnaya Literatura, 2014), 116-36.

existence of imaginable things which human beings could use to express their eschatological fate” (138-39). The world of image would therefore be “completely empty, and only filled by things that are attached to the very imagination that produces them” (139), a view undoubtedly inspired by Mullā Ṣadrā’s reading of Ibn ‘Arabī (cf. his glosses on *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*). Mullā Ṣadrā used the world of image “to argue that the body we obtain there is obtained actively, that is, created by ourselves, according to our states and habits that we acquired in life, and also in accordance with scriptural promises about the afterlife” (140), the “resurrection body” consisting of “the individual, substantial form existing in external reality, which is not this material world but another world” (*al-Mabda’ wa al-Ma’ād*), namely, the world of image located “in between the sensory and the intelligible world” (140). Mullā Ṣadrā did not subscribe to the “fourfold ontological division,” but only to a cosmology of “the sensory world of material bodies,” the “imaginable world of imaginable apparitions,” and the “intelligible world of immaterial forms” (141).

Chapter 6 unearths the reception of al-Shahrazūri’s idea of a world of image, notably in the Iranian Shi‘ite context. The focus remains on a small number of central passages and all instances of “the intentional textual correspondence it shows” with later texts (Figure 6.1 provides a transmission tree summary of the forty-three thinkers identified up to the twenty-first century). Although this “approach is less successful in pointing out innovations,” it is an “exercise in defining the general structure of the [idea’s] transmission” (143) and cannot “adequately” cover each author. The excursion is greatly exploratory in nature, and so are its results.

The survey begins with Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, who “masterfully weaved Shahrazūri’s passage into” his own *Sharḥ Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*. He inserted and blended his comments “directly into the original text,” having seemingly “constructed his entire *Sharḥ*” on Shahrazūri’s *Sharḥ*, only displacing the passage “to interpret the term ‘the world of abstract apparitions,’” but without adding anything new (the same being true of his epistle on the world of image; cf. comparative Table 6.1). In the fourteenth century, the important transmitter al-Taftāzānī (d. 792/1390) discussed the passage in his *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid*, a commentary on Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī’s *Sharḥ Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq* in which he explained (ontology section) why this world of “abstract things” (*al-mujarradāt*) is “parallel to the sensory”/“Earthly world” (cf. Table 6.2). In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, some authors included the passage, like Ḥusayn Maybudī / Qāḍī Mir (d. 911/1505) in his commentary on the *divān* attributed to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. Others, at times, added minor changes or additional elements, like Ghiyāth al-Dīn al-Dashtaki in his epistle

on *Hayākil al-Nūr* and his note on Harawī's commentary on *Hikmat al-Ishrāq*. Others used al-Shahrazūri's *Rasā'il* more extensively, like Ibn Abi Jumhūr, along with al-Shahrazūri's *Sharḥ al-Talwiḥāt*, or al-Nayrizi who, in his *Miṣbāḥ al-Arwāḥ*, commented al-Suhrawardi's *al-Alwāḥ* (cf. Table 6.3).

Among seventeenth-century Safavid intellectuals, Shaykh Bahā'i (d. 1030/1621), also known as Bahā' al-Dīn al-'Āmili, "introduced the idea in traditional Shī'i thought as a hermeneutical tool to understand the *barzakh*, the place and moment in between death and resurrection" (152), for example in his *al-Arba'un Ḥadīthan*, which "seems to be heavily indebted" to al-Taftazāni's *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid* and possibly to Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shirāzi's *Sharḥ* (cf. Table 6.4). His friend Mīr Dāmād (d. 1041/1631) included an analysis in his *al-Jadhawāt*. Mīr Dāmād's student Mullā Ṣadrā did not use the passage from al-Shahrazūri, although he alluded to it in his glosses on Ibn Sīnā's *Shifā'* and in his *Asfār*. The passage is also discussed by Mullā Ṣadrā's student 'Abd al-Razzāq Lāhijī (d.1072/1662) and Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī (d. 1091/1680), who "seems to draw from the commentary tradition of Ibn 'Arabī, not al-Suhrawardi" (161). In the eighteenth century, al-Shahrazūri's world of image appears in traditional commentaries of Shī'i *ḥadīth*, such as Majlisī (d. 1110/1698) who discussed *barzakh* and referred to works by al-Taftazāni and Shaykh Bahā'i, as did a number of other contemporaneous commentators.

In the nineteenth century, a number of authors from Ottoman Anatolia examined the passage, such as al-Kalanbawī (d. 1205/1790) in his gloss to al-Dawānī's commentary on 'Aḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī's (d. 756/1355) *al-Aqā'id*, where the world of image, along with suspended images, are included in a discussion about God's knowledge. Further East, the *Dabistān-e Madhāhib*, attributed to Mollā Mowbad (d. ca. 1081/1670) (of the Ishrāqī tradition), based on al-Suhrawardi's *Hikmat al-Ishrāq*, omits al-Shahrazūri's term "world of image." Nonetheless, it is taken up in Shāh Wali Allāh's (d. 1176/1762) *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha* (Mughal India), in Ahmad al-Aḥsā'i's (d. 1241/1826) *Sharḥ al-'Arshīyya* (Qajar Iran), and in Qāsim 'Alī Akhgar al-Ḥaydarābādī's (d. after 1945) *Nihāyat al-Zuhūr* (cf. Table 6.5). In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a number of scholars are mentioned, among them the Iraqi Shī'i Āl Kāshif al-Ghiṭā' (d. 1945), who depends on Shaykh Bahā'i's work; Riḍā Ṣadr (d. 1994), who also mentions the passage; and Ṭabāṭabā'i (d. 1981), who uses the expression *'ālam miqdāriyy*, which people like Ardabīli (d. 2012) understood to mean the world of image. The chapter ends with some thoughts on "intertextuality" and the processes of preservation versus appropriation illustrated by some of the comparative examples (Tables 6.1 to 6.5). Yet much still needs to be

undertaken in terms of detailed doctrinal analyses. Consequently, chapters 2 to 4 remain the more interesting part of the work for the detailed study of the emergence (Ibn Sīnā), innovation (al-Suhrawardī), and systematization (al-Shahrazūrī) of the idea of the world of image and the suspended images they provide, and upon which scholars have commented up to the present time.

Finally, the work contains copious notes (189-236), a bibliography (237-55) including twenty-five manuscripts, and two appendices (256–72). The first appendix includes six edited passages from al-Shahrazūrī's *Sharḥ al-Talwīḥāt* (4 mss.) and one from al-Suhrawardī's *al-Mashāri'* (2 mss. + Corbin ed.), all of which are compared to Ibn Kammūna's *Sharḥ al-Talwīḥāt*; the second one includes a list of persons, but not all the names mentioned appear in the index. In short, van Lit provides an extensive historical and philosophical account of the origin and later development of the idea of a world of image and suspended images from the eleventh to the twenty-first centuries, one that manages to cover an impressive body of Arabic and Persian commentary literature (assisted with computer-supported software). In a disclaimer of sorts, he notes the "conspicuous absence" of Ibn 'Arabi and his major commentators, Mu'ayyad al-Dīn al-Jandī (d. 691/1292), 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. ca. 730/1329), Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350), and Jāmī (d. 897/1492) (173-75) – a gap that his current Netherlands-funded research on "Ibn 'Arabi's Reshaping of the Muslim Imagination" and its commentary tradition on the notion of the world of image should eventually fill.⁵

5 For the description of his project, see <https://www.nwo.nl/onderzoek-en-resultaten/onderzoeksprojecten/i/36/29736.html>.