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The Status of Suhrawardi Studies in the West

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Abstract

Suhrawardi is the most important Muslim philosopher between Avicenna's and Averose's periods. Usually it is said that Corbin has been first scholar that introduced Suhrawardi to the western thinkers. The author of this paper intends to give a historical and relatively complete report about the studies that western scholars have done on Suhrawardi before and after Corbin, and how they have evaluated him.

Key Words:1- Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi 2- Shaykh al-Ishraq 3- Sufism 4- Illuminative Philosophy 5- Islamic Philosophy

1. Introduction

Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi is the founder of the school of *ishraq* and the most important philosopher between the early peripatetic philosophy of Ibn Sina and the later peripatetic philosophy of Ibn Rushd. Suhrawardi, who is the link between these two golden periods of Islamic philosophical thought, should also be regarded as the figure that laid the groundwork for the emergence of the school of Isfahan since both Mir Damad and Mulla Sadra were heavily influenced by the enormous weight of his philosophical school.¹

Suhrawardi who is both an original thinker and a great synthesizer, has left us not only with a unique philosophical genre which can be labeled as *ishraqi* and a peculiar use of language known as *lisan al-ishraq*, but also with a number of highly analytical works as well as purely Sufi writings. It is perhaps for this multifaceted nature of his works that so many philosophers in recent years have taken a keen interest in him.

The present work is concerned not with the validity of his ideas nor does it seek to discuss Suhrawardi's numerous contributions to Islamic philosophy but instead it is a survey of the development of

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Suhrawardian studies in the West in the last century, its present status and future prospects.

It is indeed difficult to say with absolute certainty who pioneered Suhrawardian studies in the West but in the opinion of this author, it began by Germans in the latter part of the last century and then the French after the second world war, and finally the Americans and to a lesser extent the British. There are currently several Spanish and Italian scholars who are also working on Suhrawardi. In this regard, the efforts of such Iranian scholars as Seyyed Hossein Nasr who through his works on Suhrawardi in English and French introduced Suhrawardi to the West must be acknowledged. Needless to say that Suhrawardi studies in the Arab world and the subcontinent is extensive but it is beyond the scope of this work.

The earliest references in the Western world to Suhrawardi are made in various histories of world philosophy and encyclopedias such as *Encyclopedie Philosophique universelle* (31) where he is referred to as a critic of the peripatetic philosophy as well as such lexicons as Soheil Afnan's *Philosophical Terminology in Arabic and Persian* (1) in which the etymology of some of his *ishraqi* terms are analyzed. Mercea Eliade, the famous historian of religion and the editor of the encyclopedia of religion, has also alluded to the significance of Suhrawardi's theological and mystical thought in chapter thirty-five of his major work *Historie des croyances et des idees religieuses* (51). He includes Suhrawardi among such figures as Farabi, Ibn Sina and Ghazzali as one of the most outstanding Muslim philosophers. Let us now consider specific European contributions to Suhrawardian studies in different parts of the world.

2. Germany

Beside fragmented references to Suhrawardi in the early part of last century such as A. Von Kramer, in *Geschichte derherrschenden Ideen des Islam* (49) in 1868 and Carl Brockelmann's encyclopedic work (18) in which Suhrawardi is mentioned, the first major work on him is by the German scholar Max Horten in his *Die Philosophie der Erleuchtung nach Suhrawardi* (43) written in the early part of last century (1911). This work contains a summary of Suhrawardi's *Hikmat al-ishraq* in German as well as Mulla Sadra's glosses on it. This work had become a source book for many other German scholars who came

to know of Suhrawardi. Horten in another work entitled *Die Spekulative und positive Theologie des Islam nach Razi* (42, pp.123-365) composes a lexicon of philosophical terms based on works of a number of philosophers such as Mulla Sadra and Razi and includes Suhrawardi's *ishraqi* terminologies. Horten in this work takes special note of the distinct language of Suhrawardi's *lisan al-ishraq*.

The other German scholar who in the early part of the last century turned his attention to Suhrawardi is Otto Spies who in his edited volume *Three Treatises on mysticism by Shihabuddin Suhrawardi Maqtul* (67) introduces three of Suhrawardi's Sufi writings, *Risalat al-tay*, *Lughat-i muran* and *safir-i simurgh*. Also, one has to mention the two extensive articles of Helmut Ritter on Suhrawardi entitled "Die vier Suhrawardi,"(59) in which he offers a general discussion of Suhrawardi and alludes to the central themes of his philosophy.

In recent years the subject of metempsychosis has been of some interest to the German scholars of Suhrawardi. First we have major work Rainer Freitag entitled *Seelenwanderung in der islamischen Haresie* (36) in which he discusses Suhrawardi's view on metempsychosis and then there is the article by Sabline Schmidtke of the University of Bonn entitled "The Doctrine of the Transmigration of the Soul According to Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi and His Followers"(62). Schmidtke argues that according to Suhrawardi transmigration of the soul, a subject of great controversy among philosophers is not only possible but that Suhrawardi took a favorable attitude towards it.

References are also made by some of the lesser known scholars of Suhrawardi such as Abdolamir Johardelvari's brief history of philosophy in Persia, written in German entitled *Iranische Philosophie von Zarathustra bis Sabzewari*,(46) Miklos Maroth's work on prepositional logic in which he discusses Suhrawardi's logic (47) and Macuch Rudolf in an informative article entitled "Greek and Oriental Sources of Aviceana's and Suhrawardi's Theosophies,"(60) in which he highlights the intellectual sources of these two figures. To this list one should add the Dutch scholar, Simon Van Den Bergh (71) who in 1916 partially translated Suhrawardi's *Hayakil al-Nur* with notes and brief comments.

3. France

The earliest work on Suhrawardi in French is written by Carra de Vaux in 1902 entitled "La Philosophie illuminative"(72) in which he discusses the structure of Suhrawardi's *ishraqi*'s doctrine. Among the next generation of French scholars, we find the towering figure of Henry Corbin. Few Westerner's have contributed more to the introduction of Islamic philosophy in the West than Henry Corbin. His contributions are not only significant in the West but also in Iran since he highlighted the significance of Sohrawardi's for Iranians as well. The list of his translations and commentaries of Suhrawardi's works are too numerous to mention here. Suffice it to say that Corbin has translated, introduced and commented on most, if not all, of Suhrawardi's works.² To being with, he edited the major philosophical works of Suhrawardi (28) in two volumes at the time when Suhrawardi was a much-neglected figure both in Iran and the West. His translations of Suhrawardi's major works include a free translation of *Hikmat al-ishraq and Awaz-i par-i jibra'il* in which he collaborated with Paul Kraus. To Corbin's long list of works on Suhrawardi one can add *En Islam iranien* (22), where in the second volume he discusses Suhrawardi and his connections to Platonism and neoplatonism. One can also find a discussion of Suhrawardi in Corbin's *Historie de la philosophie islamique* (26) as well as his *L'homme de lumiere dans le soufisme iranien* (25), a work that has been translated in English, German and Italian. It is in this later work where Corbin using Suhrawardi develops a "sacred geography" and discusses schools of *Wahdat al-wujud* of Ibn Arabi and *wahdat al- shuhud* of Semnani. He continues to discuss *ishraqi* motifs and the spiritual journey of the soul from the occidental exile to the orient of light in a number of his works among which we can name *L'Iran et la philiosophie* (27) (a collection of mostly unedited articles,) and *les motifs Zoroastrians dans la philosophie de Sohrawardi* (21) a work that traces the philosophical roots of Suhrawardi's thought to ancient Persia and argues for perennial philosophy. Where as Suhrawardi's concept of spiritual humor is the subject of Corbin's short paper titled *Mystique et humor chez Sohrawardi, Shaykh al-ishraq* (23), the philosophical significance of Suhrawardi's *ishraqi* doctrine for comparative purposes is treated in a separate paper (24). Corbin also offers a thorough analysis of his life and thought in his major work *Suhrawardi d'Alep fondateur de la doctrine illuminative* (20). One may find numerous other references to

Suhrawardi³ in the entire corpus of Corbin's works but an exhaustive reference to them is beyond the scope of this work.

Like many great masters, Corbin too has trained a number of students who have paid some attention to Suhrawardi among whom Christian Jambet can be named. In his *La logique des orientaux* (45), Jambet develops and elaborates on what he calls "oriental logic". In the same circle one can name Amir Naffaky whose work *La methode et la logique chez al-Suhrawardi* (52), is concerned with Suhrawardi's methodology, logic and the salient features of the *ishraqi* way of philosophizing.

Before moving to other figures, the work of Daryush Shayegan has to be mentioned which is both a celebration of Henry Corbin and Suhrawardi. In his major work entitled *La topographie spirituelle de l'Islam iranien* (64), Shayegan, he uses a complex web of psychology, mythology and contemporary European philosophical themes to reflect on the major themes of Suhrawardi's philosophy.

Among other works in French which celebrate the contributions of Suhrawardi are George Anawati's *Avicenna: La Metaphysique du Shifa'* (15), where he discusses the extent to which the structure of Ibn Sina's *Shifa'* influenced Suhrawardi whom he considers to be essentially an Ibn Sina. Anawati also in his work "La notion de wujud dans le Kitab Al-Mashari' wa'l-Mutarahat de Suhrawardi" (14) wrote on Suhrawardi's concept of existence and once again draws analogies to Ibn Sina's concept of existence.

In a different study of Suhrawardi's ontology, Abd al-Rahman Badawi in his *Les points de rencontre de la mystique musulmane et de l'existentialisme*, (17) compares Suhrawardi's ontological structure with that of the existentialism and alludes to the similarities and differences among the two philosophical paradigms. Among other comparative studies one can mention Chahine Osman's work *Ontologie et theologie chez Avicenne* (58) in which the ontological similarities of Suhrawardi and Ibn Sina are philosophically analyzed. Mohamad-Reza Fashahi in his work *Aristotle de Baghdad* (34) devotes a section to Suhrawardi and expounds upon him as a philosopher, politician and martyr.

In this context, one has to mention the contributions of Louis Gardet. This famous French scholar wrote several articles introducing Suhrawardi to the European audience. Among his notable works one can mention his article on the *ishraqi* aspects of Suhrawardi's thought emphasizing the spiritual aspects of his

intellectual paradigm, (39) or his second work which is a survey of his central themes as well as the nature of mystical experience (37). One may also mention his article *Suhrawardi, Shaykh al-Ishraq et la culture musulmane* (38), in which he compares Farabi's peripatetic philosophy with that of Suhrawardi.

Where as the significance of Suhrawardi in the history of Islamic philosophy is highlighted by Gomez Nogales in a work entitled "*Suhrawardi et sa signification dans le domaine de la philosophie*"(57), his philosophical structure is put in a dialogue with the contemporary philosophical debates by Hasan Hanafi. In a most interesting and original article entitled, "La philosophie de l'Ishraq et la phenomenology,"(41). Hanafi in an original work compares the philosophy of *ishraq* with the Husserlian phenomenology both in terms of methodology and the notion of transcendental self.

4. Suhrawardi in the English-speaking world

Among the pioneers of Suhrawardian studies in the West first and foremost one has to mention Seyyed Hossein Nasr who in the late 1950's- 60's began to introduce Suhrawardi to the West. His works on the subject matter are too numerous to mention here⁴ but a few of them are as follows: First there is the volume on his Persian writings with Nasr's introduction to it, a first of its kind. There are also his numerous articles among which one can name "The Persian Works of Shaykh al-Ishraq Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi"(55, pp.154-9) and "The Spread of the Illuminationist School of Suhrawardi" (Ibid, pp.160-171) in which Nasr discusses the spread of Sufi thought in the sub-continent and the West. Also, Nasr's article in the *History of Islamic Philosophy* edited by M. M. Sharif, (63) was one of the first comprehensive articles in the English language. His section in the *Three Muslim Sages* (53) as well as his article "Suhrawardi: The Master of Illumination, Gnostic and Martyr,"(54) published in the 1960's, went a long way to introduce Suhrawardi to the Western audience.

Majid Fakhry, in addition to several articles in Arabic on Suhrawardi, briefly discusses Suhrawardi in his *History of Islamic Philosophy* (32) as well as in his work *Philosophy, Dogma and The Impact of Greek Thought in Islam*, in which he devotes a section to Suhrawardi's critique of the peripatetic (33). Richard Netton, the British philosopher has not only referred to Suhrawardi in a number of his works but has examined the Neoplatonic structure of

Suhrawardi's metaphysical system and regards him as a Sufi-philosopher (56). In this regard, one has to mention Iqbal Lahori who in his *Development of Metaphysics in Persia* devotes a section Sufism and there he discusses Suhrawardi and the *ishraqi* doctrine.

Most of the Persian Sufi treatises of Suhrawardi were first translated and published by the Havard scholar William M. Thackston and recently this work was published for a second time. It is perhaps as the result of such translations that *Ishraqi* concepts and terminologies have also been noted by some of the American poets such as William Blake and William B. Yeats who in their poetry allude to *Ishraqi* concepts and use some of the technical terminologies. Salah Salim Ali, a contemporary scholar has studied the similarities and the influence of Suhrawardi on Blake and William B. Yeats" (61).

In one of the most outstanding works on Islamic philosophy in the English language, the late Mehdi Ha'iri Yazdi wrote an exposition and commentary on Suhrawardi's theory of knowledge by presence (*ilm al-huduri*) entitled *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence*(40).

Among other of the lesser known works on Suhrawardi in the English language one can name Edward Jurji's article which discusses the revival of the *ishraqi* doctrine (47) in the modern era. Bilal Kuspinar(50) wrote on Mulla Sadra, Ibn Sina and Suhrawardi, comparing their view on Divine knowledge. Anthony Tuft studied Suhrawardi's use of symbolism and how his use of the symbolism of light and that of Ghazzali can be compared. He offers an analysis of this comparison in his article entitled "Symbolism and Speculation in Suhrawardi's *The Song of Gabriel Wing*"(70). There is also Ziya' Siddiqi's article titled "The Philosophy of Ibn Tufayl"(66) in which he discusses Suhrawardi's use of allegories in *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* and the mystical and philosophical symbolism that are implied in this narrative. Shaykh Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi al-Halveti, in his *The Shape of Light* offers a Sufi interpretation of Suhrawardi's *Hayakal al-Nur* (65).

As the result of the pioneering works of Corbin and Nasr, a number of doctoral dissertations were written on Suhrawardi in the 1970's among whom the following can be mentioned: Michael Bylebly wrote his dissertation on the prose and literary aspect of Suhrawardi's narratives. In his work entitled *The Wisdom of Illumination: A Study of the Prose Stories of Suhrawardi* (19), Bylebly undertakes an extensive discussion and analysis of

Suhrawardi's Persian narratives and highlights their literary value. Kazim Tehrani in his doctoral dissertation reflects on four Sufi treatises of Suhrawardi and offers an extensive analysis of the symbolism in these treatises (68). He also wrote an article on the concept of "sage" in the works of Suhrawardi(69). Hossein Zia'i pioneered a doctoral dissertation on Suhrawardi's logic and proposes for the first time that Suhrawardi has a distinct logical system which sets him apart from other peripatetics. He has written a number of article⁵ and a book entitled *Knowledge and Illumination* (78) on Suhrawardi's logic. Perhaps the most significant contribution of Zia'i has been his recent translation of *Hikmat al-ishraqi* (79) with John Walbridge and his critical edition of Shahrazuri's commentary on Suhrawardi. Among other doctoral dissertations one can mention Gesila Webb's work on Suhrawardi's angelology (77) in which she investigated the relationship between the Zoroastrian roots of Suhrawardi's angelology and the Islamic framework of his philosophical thought.

My own contributions to the field of Suhrawardian studies includes a doctoral dissertation on Suhrawardi's epistemology in which his concept of truth and *'ilm al-huduri* is examined. In a number of articles on Suhrawardi, I have examined various aspects of his thought among which the following can be mentioned:(2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,11,12,13) "The Influence of Suhrawardi on Islamic Philosophy," "A Philosophical Exposition of Suhrawardi's Metaphysics and Ontology", and "Suhrawardi's Mystical and Philosophical Poetry". Also, this author's book *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination* (10), can be mentioned which is an introductory and comprehensive work written for the Western audience.

Among the other contributors to the field of Suhrawardian studies one has to mention John Walbridge. His work on Qutb al-Shirazi entitled *The Science of Mystic Lights* (73) discusses Suhrawardi's other commentator on *Hikmat al-ishraq*. Also, Walbridge's article on Suhrawardi as a "Neo- Stoic"(74) and his recent book on Suhrawardi entitled *The Leaven of the Ancients* (75) have to be mentioned. Walbridge in this work relies on a reductionistic method of investigation to analyze the intellectual components and sources of Suhrawardi's thought. His forthcoming work is *The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardi and Platonic Orientalism* (76) is in a sense a continuation of the previously

mentioned work in which Walbridge further investigates the intellectual sources of Suhrawadi's school of *ishraq*.

5. Spanish, Japanese and Italian Philosophers

The Spanish philosopher Aragues Juan Manuel, in his work *El pensamiento irracional islamico: el sufismo de Sohrawardi*(16) focuses on the Sufi aspects of Suhrawardi's thought or what he calls the "irrational thought in Islam". The other Spanish philosopher and well known scholar of Islamic thought, Miguel Cruz Hernandez addresses the spiritual symbolism of Suhrawardi's thought in his work *Simbolismo y esoterismo en la filosofia islamica: Ibn Sina y Sohrawardi*,(30) and compares the spiritual symbolism of Suhrawardi and that of Ibn Sina in particular the concept of the flight of birds in Suhrawardi and that of *Risalat al-tayr*. In his other work (29), Cruz Hernandez examines the mystical and philosophical structure of *Hikmat al-ishraq* and the relationship between these two modes of discourse.

In Japan, several scholars have paid attention to Suhrawardi thought although not much literature been produced on him by them. Among such scholars is Tushiko Izutsu who worked with Henry Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr in the 1970's and has trained a number of students in Japan who have been interested in Suhrawardi. Among such students one can name Akiro Matsumo who also studied with Professor Ashtiyani and has translated Jala al-Din Dawani's treaties *Risalat al-wujud*. One has to mention Haruo Kobayashi whose work entitled "Ibn Sina and Suhrawardi on Self-Consciousness: Some Comparative Remarks,"(49) examines Suhrawardi's epistemology and the theory of knowledge by presence in a comparative context to Ibn Sina.

The Italian philosopher, Pio Filippin-Ronconi wrote an important work on Suhrawardi's metaphysics in which he discusses the structure of his thought with references to the Sufi aspect of his *ishraqi* doctrine (35).

The present study has been a summary of most of the works that have been written on Suhrawardi in Western European languages and is by no means exhaustive of all the works. I have not mentioned those works in which Suhrawardi has been mentioned briefly or as a passing reference. Also, some of the anthologies have been mentioned only as anthologies as opposed to mentioning each article in it separately where Suhrawardi is discussed.

Also, the works of Suhrawardi in Eastern languages either in the subcontinent or the Arab world have not been mentioned either. There is certainly room for an exhaustive work on Suhrawardi in all languages which will be invaluable to the students of this great master of learning whose timely message was interrupted by an untimely death. Perhaps the poem that appeared on his tomb summarized it all when it said⁶

The owner of this grave was a jewel
It was a hidden jewel that Allah had made out of nobility
The days did not know his worth,
So Allah returned it to its shell out of loving concern.

Notes

- 1- For more information on the life of Suhrawardi see *Memorial Shihab al-Din Suhrawaedi a l'occasion du huitieme centenaire de sa mort*, Cairo, 1974. Mehdi Aminrazavi, *Shihab al- Din Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination*, London: CURZON Press, 1996.
- 2- For a complete list of Corbin's translations and commentaries on Suhrawardi see *Hans Daiber, Bibliography of Islamic Philosophy*, Brill: 1999, vol. 1, pp. 189- 198 & 866-867.
- 3- Among such works can be mentioned *Terre celeste et corps de resurrection: de l'Iran mazdeen a l'Iran Shi'ite*, Paris: 1960, Part II of this work contains excerpts from Suhrawardi's works.
- 4- For a complete list of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's works see his Bibliography edited by Mehdi Aminrazavi in *The Library of Living Philosophers*, ed. L. Hahn, Illinois, 2001.
- 5- For a complete list of Zia'I's works see Daiber, *Bibliography of Islamic Philosophy*, pp. 968.
- 6- Ibn Ibi Usybi'ah ('Uyun al-anba', Beirut: 1965, p. 644) tells us that the following verses appeared on Suhrawardi's tomb.

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