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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-Suhrawardi (d. 587/1191), and al-Shahrazūrī (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-Suhrawardi 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,”

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

Chapter 2 identifies the passages in which Ibn Sinā 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-Abhari (d. 663/1264), and Najm al-Dīn al-Qazwīnī al-Kātibī (d. 657/1276) did not mention the idea of an “imaginative eschatological felicity.” Some, like Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādi (d. ca. 560/1164), actually refuted the idea. Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Lawkāri (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-Āmiddī (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 (mawḍū’) 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 mu’allaqa)” 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

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He then presents al-Suhrawardi’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 Suhrawardi 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 ‘Arabi (d. 638/1240) (proposed by Landolt, Fazlur Rahman); and the pseudo-Aristotelian Uthūlūjiyyā (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-Suhrawardi’s “knowledge” / “perception” versus al-Baghdādi’s “awareness”), and arguments for vision and perception. Van Lit then lists a number of issues that remained unaddressed or unresolved: al-Suhrawardi’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-Suhrawardi’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., ‘ālam 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 (maẓhār); expanded its topography,

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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-Suhrawardi’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-Lamaḥāt, Niẓām al-Dīn al-Tūdhī al-Hamadhānī (d. after 650/1252) preferred Ibn Sīnā’s celestial bodies as substrate for the imagination (eschatological solution); in his al-Aqṭāb al-Quṭbiyya, ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Aharī (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-Abharī, in his Kashf al-Ḥaqā’iq, relied on al-Suhrawardi’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-Suhrawardi’s views to those of Ibn Sīnā and the lack of proof to confirm or disprove them. Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d. 710/1311), also hesitant, “simply incorporated al-Shahrazūrī’s commentary” without providing “a personal” interpretation in his Sharḥ Hikmat al-Ishrāq and epistle on the world of image that, according to van Lit, would consist of “merely an appropriation and reorganization” of al-Shahrazūrī’s Sharḥ. Written between 1329-39, an anonymous epistle entitled al-Muthul al-ʿAqliyya al-Aflāṭūniyya 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.

A later group of “cautious commentators” belonged to the Shiraz school, where al-Suhrawardi’s and al-Shahrazuri’s views were rediscovered for their “philosophical soundness” and “perceived contradiction,” notably with “scriptural promises concerning bodily resurrection.” In his Mujli Mir’ā al-Munji (based on al-Shahrazuri’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 Shawākil al-Ḥūr, al-Dawānī (d. 908/1502) commented on al-Suhrawardi’s Hayākil 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-Dashtaki (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). In his glosses on al-Dawānī’s Shawākil al-Ḥūr, al-Nayrizī (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-Dashtaki 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-Shirāzī’s Sharḥ), thereby remaining closer to al-Shahrazuri’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 Šadrā (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-Shahrazuri “ontologized” the suspended images, Mullā Šadrā “de-ontologized” the world of image by “denying the independent
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 ‘Arabi (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-Shahrazūrī’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 Shahrazūrī’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 Shahrazūrī’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-Maqaṣid, 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 Mīr (d. 911/1505) in his commentary on the dīvān attributed to ‘Ali 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 Harawi’s commentary on Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq. Others used al-Shahrazūrī’s Rasā’il more extensively, like Ibn Abī Jumhūr, along with al-Shahrazūrī’s Sharḥ al-Talwīḥāt, 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’ī (d. 1030/1621), also known as Bahāʾ al-Dīn al-ʿĀmili, “introduced the idea in traditional Shiʿī thought as a hermeneutical tool to understand the barzakh, the place and moment in between death and resurrection” (152), for example in his al-Arbaʿūn Ḥadīthan, which “seems to be heavily indebted” to al-Taftāzānī’s Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid and possibly to Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī’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-Shahrazūrī, although he alluded to it in his glosses on Ibn Sinā’s Shifa’ and in his Asfār. The passage is also discussed by Mullā Ṣadrā’s student ʿAbd al-Razzāq Lāhiji (d.1072/1660), who “seems to draw from the commentary tradition of Ibn ‘Arabi, not al-Suhrawardi” (161). In the eighteenth century, al-Shahrazūrī’s world of image appears in traditional commentaries of Shiʿī ḥadīth, such as Majlisī (d. 1110/1698) who discussed barzakh and referred to works by al-Taftāzānī and Shaykh Bahāʾī, 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 ʿAḍud al-Dīn al-ʿIjī’s (d. 756/1355) al-ʿAqāʾid, 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 Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq, omits al-Shahrazūrī’s term “world of image.” Nonetheless, it is taken up in Shah Wali Allah’s (d. 1176/1762) Ḥujjat Allāh al-Baligha (Mughal India), in Ahmad al-Aḥṣāʾī’s (d. 1241/1826) Sharḥ al-ʿArshiyya (Qajar Iran), and in Qāsim ʿAlī Akhgar al-Ḥaydarābādī’s (d. after 1945) Nihāyat al-Ẓuhūr (cf. Table 6.5). In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a number of scholars are mentioned, among them the Iraqi Shiʿī ʿAl Kāshif al-Ghiṭā’ (d. 1945), who depends on Shaykh Bahāʾī’s work; Riḍā Sadr (d. 1994), who also mentions the passage; and Ṭabāṭabaʿī (d. 1981), who uses the expression ʿālam miqdāriyy, which people like Ardabili (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 Sinā), 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-Mashārī’* (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 ʿArabī and his major commentators, Muʿayyad al-Dīn al-Jandī (d. 691/1292), ʿAbd 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 ʿArabī’s Reshaping of the Muslim Imagination” and its commentary tradition on the notion of the world of image should eventually fill.⁵

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