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Author: Mahmoud Nuri

Affiliation: Tehran University of Art, Tehran

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Allegory as the Image of Philosophy

Mahmoud Nuri

Tehran University of Art, Tehran

Abstract

Farabi was a renowned philosopher having a variety of writings in the fields of metaphysics, political philosophy, ethics, logic, mathematics, and cosmology. He was also a musician and music scholar. Moreover, he is credited with his treatises and commentaries on the original Greek texts. He held that true artists in the 'Utopia' should make a variety of images for philosophical issues and divine happiness, distributing them among public. Frank in his article "Castrated Raphael: Friedrich Overbeck and allegory" pointed it out that true art reflects the divine. On the other hand, Suhrawardi, the Persian philosopher and the founder of Illumination school (Maktab al-Ishraq), in his real life, acts as if he is undertaking the role of the ideal artist in Farabi's Utopia. He has ten allegorical treatises, illustrating his philosophical views through visual metaphors.

Keywords: Farabi, Suhrawardi, allegory, ideal artist

Introduction

Wartenberg in his article “Illustrating philosophy: Mel Bochner’s Wittgenstein drawings” dealt with illustrating the abstract claims of philosophy.¹ Farabi was a renowned philosopher having a variety of writings in the fields of metaphysics, political philosophy, ethics, logic, mathematics, and cosmology. He was also a musician and music scholar. Moreover, he is credited with his treatises and commentaries on the original Greek texts. He held that true artists in the ‘Utopia’ should make a variety of images for philosophical issues and divine happiness, distributing them among public.² Frank in his article “Castrated Raphael: Friedrich Overbeck and allegory” pointed it out: “True art reflects the divine.”³

On the other hand, Suhrawardi, the Persian philosopher and the founder of Illumination school (maktab al-ishraq), in his real life, acts as if he is undertaking the role of the ideal artist in Farabi’s Utopia.⁴ He has ten allegorical treatises, illustrating his philosophical views through visual metaphors.⁵ In his fictions, Suhrawardi tells the story of the worshipper who seeks divine happiness, traveling toward heavenly spheres and contacts them. This concept bears a remarkable similarity to what Frank wrote in his article on Overbeck’s *Triumph of Religion in the Arts*, arguing that Overbeck illustrates his Catholic conception of art through the visual metaphor. Frank pointed out that “True art... mediates and encourages contact between the worshipper and the heavenly sphere.”⁶

Here I explain Suhrawardi’s allegories in detail, giving an account of his treatises.

The Heavenly Spheres

Suhrawardi lays the foundation of the worshipper’s journey on traditional geocentric cosmology. In traditional cosmology, the nine spheres and the sublunary realm managed by ten intellects are on the

well known descending route of the Origin. The Peripatetic philosophers believed in ten separate intellects emanate from the First Being. The tenth one, the Active Intellect, gives rise to the sublunary realm.⁷

The eleven spheres system is attributed to Ptolemy and his disciples. Ptolemy held this order of the heavens: Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Fixed Stars or Starry Heaven, adding ninth heaven, the Primum Mobile.⁸

In his fictions, Suhrawardi allegorizes the theory of the nine spheres emanated from the ten intellects.

Suhrawardi and allegories

It deserves note that for deciphering the allegories I do not rely on my own taste. In “A Day with a Group of Sufis”, Suhrawardi himself has decoded his allegories. First, he mentions the theory in allegorical form.

When the worshipper said to his master, “The engraver’s craft is amazing.” his master said, “There is a well-known tale in their craft, but no one tells it fully, and no one knows the meaning of it.” “What is this tale?” the worshipper asked. His master went through the story:

Once, an engraver had a jewel. He wanted to display his skill on it. So from it he made a round shell like a ball. Then, from the residue left in the middle of the shell he made another shell inside the first. Again, from the residue of the second he made a third, and so on until he had made nine shells. Afterwards, from the remainder of these shells he made a jewel, which he wrapped in two pieces of cloth, one of which had no color and the other of which was whitish. These he placed in the middle of the shells. He then polished the first shell and engraved a few medallions on the second shell and gilded it. On the

third, fourth, and so on to the ninth shells he engraved one medallion each.

After the allegorical tale, Suhrawardi starts decoding it.

When the worshipper heard the tale from his master, he said, "I do not understand what you are saying to me. Tell me clearly that I may benefit fully." His master started explaining the allegories, "When the Creator created these spheres, he sent a light to the first sphere." For a sphere is an intermediary between being and non-being, the first sphere was too subtle to bear it. It borders on existence. Then again, it is continuous with nonexistence. As a consequence, the light reached the second sphere, which was able to bear it.

The light was broken up against the second sphere, and every part became a star. What was left over from these stars, came to the third sphere, and from that residue Saturn came into being. Again, what was left over from Saturn reached the fourth sphere, and the body of Jupiter came into being. And so on, Mars from residue of Jupiter, the Sun from the residue of Mars, Venus from the residue of the Sun, Mercury from the residue of Venus, and from the residue of Mercury, the Moon.⁹

Sometimes Suhrawardi speaks of the eleven spheres, adding two spheres of 'zamharir' and 'ether'. In "A Day with a Group of Sufis", the worshipper asks, "Why is the body of the Sun bigger and brighter than the other stars?" His master replies "Because it is in the middle. If you count the seven planets, the Sun is in the middle. And just as there are two spheres above the seven, there are two other spheres below them, ether and zamharir. Therefore, by any reckoning the Sun is in the middle."¹⁰

Hence the Suhrawardi is clear about his cosmology, we are allowed to decode his cosmology, corresponding the allegories to the nine and eleven spheres.

In “A Day with a Group of Sufis”, the nine shells symbolizes the nine spheres. The first shell is polished, and there are a few medallions on the second shell. On the third, fourth, and so on to the ninth shells, there is one medallion.

Cosmology issues in Suhrawardi’s writings encompasses “A Day with a Group of Sufis”¹¹ and these five other treatises: “The Sound of Gabriel’s Wing”¹², “The Red Intellect”¹³, “On the State of Childhood”¹⁴, “On the Reality of Love”¹⁵, and “The Language of the Ants”¹⁶.

I have just explained the account of “A Day with a Group of Sufis”. “The Sound of Gabriel’s Wing” is the next treatise in my account.

In this treatise, ten intellects are symbolized by ten old men seating on a bench. The worshipper says of them, “When I looked I saw ten old men of beautiful countenance seated on a bench. I was so amazed by their magnificence and splendor and so staggered by the sight of their throne, their beauty, their white hair, their garments and trappings that I could not speak.”¹⁷

The old man who was on the end of the bench greeted the worshipper in a most kindly-disposed manner, saying, “We are a group of abstracted ones, come from the direction of Nowheresville.” that means they are ten Separate Intellects.

“Why do the elders seated above you keep silent?” The worshipper asks. “Because the likes of you are unworthy to approach them,” the tenth and last of them, the Active Intellect replies, “I serve as their tongue, for they will never deign to address the likes of you.”

Then the worshipper sees in the courtyard a basin with eleven layers.¹⁸ By these eleven layers, Suhrawardi allegorizes the eleven spheres. There is no crack or no crevice on the surface of the upper nine levels of the basin. This means there is no crack and no crevice on the surface of nine spheres according to traditional theory.

“Although no hole could be made through the nine upper levels, one could easily pierce through the lowest level.”¹⁹ For the lowest level refers to the sublunary world.

The first level has no button at all, whereas the second level has many luminous buttons on it. Because the first level of the basin is the allegory of the Sphere of the spheres and the second level is the allegory of the sphere of the Fixed Stars.

“On each of the remaining seven of the upper nine levels of the basin a bright button was fastened.” These buttons refer to Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, and Moon.

When the worshipper asks the old man what this basin is, he explains the relation between the intellects and the spheres.

“The first layer,” he said, “whose body is greater than any of the other levels, was arranged and put together by the old man who is seated at the highest level. The second was done by the second one, the third by the third, and so on down to me. These nine comrades and companions produced the nine layers by their own labor and handicraft. The two bottom levels, along with the bit of water and sand, were produced by me. Since their foundation is stronger, their handiwork cannot be rent or pierced, but what I have made can be.”

Then he explains the relation between the intellects themselves. The elder who is in the highest place is the master teacher and tutor of the second elder, who sits beside him. He has signed the second elder’s order of investiture, the second has signed the third’s order, the third the fourth’s order, and so on down to the tenth.

The next allegories of the spheres, in “The Sound of Gabriel’s Wing”, are the son as the soul of the sphere and the mill as the body of the sphere.

“Do you have children and property and things like that?” the worshipper asks. “We have never had spouses,” he said, “but each

one of us has a son. Each of us also has a mill and we have appointed our sons to supervise the mills. We have never looked at the mills since we built them, but our sons maintain them in good running order by keeping one eye on the mill and the other on their fathers.

The mill of tenth intellect, the Active Intellect, is a dismal place and fraught with dangers and pitfalls, consisting of four levels, i.e., the four elements: earth, water, air, and fire,²⁰ for the sublunary world is so.

Also in “The Red Intellect”, Suhrawardi speaks of the eleven spheres by allegory of eleven mountains. The first one of the Seven Wonders of the World is the ‘Mount Qaf’ that surrounds the world consisting of eleven mountains.²¹ The Active Intellect who instructs the worshipper approaches him as politely as possible. The worshipper narrates:

As I looked at that person, I saw that his countenance and color were red. Thinking him young, I said, “Young man, where do you come from?”

“My son,” he replied, “you have addressed me mistakenly. I am the first child of creation. You call me young?!”

“Why are your features not white?” I asked.

“My features are white,” he said. “I am a luminous elder. But that person who captured you in the snare and placed these disagreeable fetters on you and appointed the wardens over you threw me long ago into a black pit. This color of mine, which appears red to you, is because of that. Otherwise, I am white and luminous.

The wardens refer to the beginning of this tale when worshipper was caught. He narrates himself, “one day the hunters, Fate and Destiny, laid the trap of Fore-ordination and filled it with the grain of Will, and in this manner, they caught me.”²² The Red Intellects, however, describes that every white thing that is connected to light appears red

when admixed with black, like the sunset at the beginning of evening or the end of dawn, which is white where it is connected to the Sun's light. One side of it is toward the light, which is white, while the other side is toward the night, which is black. Therefore it appears red. When the crescent moon rises, although its light is borrowed, it is nonetheless described as light. Since one side of it is toward day and the other side toward night, it appears red. A flame has the same quality.²³

The white side is the allegory of the Separate Intellects versus the black side is the allegory of the sublunary world. For the Active Intellect is the last Separate Intellect and is responsible for the sublunary realm, he has located between the white and the black sides.

The origin of the Active Intellect or Red Intellect is Mount Qaf which its position is above all eleven spheres.

Then the worshipper asks the Red Intellect about wonders he has seen in the world. He answers that he has seen Seven Wonders. First of all is Mount Qaf, which is their realm, surrounding the world and consists of eleven mountains. When the worshipper is delivered of his bondage he will go there. The second is the 'Pearl-that-glow-by-night' that refers to the Moon. The third one is the 'Tuba' tree that refers to the Sun. The fourth wonder is the Twelve Workshops that symbolize the sphere of 'Fixed Stars'. The fifth is David's chain mail and it probably refers to human's body. The sixth is the 'sword Balarak'. Maybe it symbolizes the Death. And seventh is the 'Spring of Life'.²⁴

The fourth treatise, in my account, is "On the State of Childhood" in which is some clear hints on the Moon, the Sun, the Earth, and the sphere. Moreover, the Moon is allegorized in it by the Pearl-that-glow-by-night like his description in "The Red Intellect".²⁵

I asked my master, "Does the sun have such strength that the brightness within the Pearl-that-glow-by-night can come from it?"

“It has such strength,” he said “All the world is obligated to it, but no one is willing to own up to his obligation.”

Then the worshipper says when the Moon is full and the Sun and Moon are in direct opposition, it is obvious that the Earth is in between, asking “why does the Earth not block the light between the Sun and Moon as the dragon’s tail does when it comes in front of the Sun or Moon?”. The master clearly responds in details, not by allegories.

The fifth treatise, “On the Reality of Love”, includes allegorizing nine spheres by the nine-storied pavilion.

Know that above this nine-storied pavilion is a vault called the City of the Soul. It has ramparts of might and a moat of power. At the gate to that city is stationed a young old man whose name is Eternal Wisdom. He continually travels about in such a way that he never moves from his place. He is a good guard. He knows how to recite from the divine book and is extremely eloquent, but he is mute. He is old in years but has never seen the passage of time. He is very, very old but is still untouched by decrepitude.”²⁶

The young old man is the very Active Intellect. He has never seen the passage of time because he is the tenth ‘Separate Intellect’ and there is no time in its world. Consequently, he is young.

The sixth and last treatise that I want to mention is “The Language of the Ants”. There are some dialogues between Enoch and all the stars and heavenly bodies. The belief in the Divine source of astronomy was traditionally attributed to the prophet Enoch or Idris who is also called Hermes.²⁷

In this tale, All the stars and heavenly bodies speak with Enoch, who asks the Moon, “Why is your light sometimes less and sometimes more?” “You should know,” answers the Moon, “that my body is pure, polished and black. I myself have no light, but when I am opposite the Sun, a likeness of its light appears in the mirror of my

body in proportion to the degree of opposition, just as other corporeal forms appear in a mirror. As the degree of opposition increases I progress from the nadir of being a crescent to the zenith of being a full moon.”

Enoch asks the Moon to what extent its friendship with the Sun is. It replies, “To such an extent that whenever I look upon myself as we stand opposite each other, I see the Sun.”²⁸ The conversation goes on, as might be seen, without allegories.

Conclusion

Suhrawardi makes a variety of visual metaphors for his philosophical views including divine happiness. In his fictions, Suhrawardi tells the story of the worshipper who seeks divine happiness, traveling toward heavenly spheres and contacts them. He demonstrates how sophisticated and abstract meanings can, by turning into metaphors, become readable for the mind of the public; as it was desired in Farabi’s Utopia.

His allegories on cosmology spread in the six of his occult treatises:

In “A Day with a Group of Sufis”, the nine shells are the allegories of the nine spheres while the first shell is polished, and there are a few medallions on the second shell. On the third, fourth, and so on to the ninth shells, there is just one medallion.

In “The Sound of Gabriel’s Wing”, eleven layers are the allegories of the eleven spheres with no crack and no crevice on the surface of the upper nine levels of the basin. The two lower ones refer to zamharir and ether. Another allegory could be seen in “The Sound of Gabriel’s Wing” is the son as the soul of the sphere and the mill as the body of the sphere.

In “The Red Intellect”, eleven mountains, surrounded by Mount Qaf,

refer to eleven spheres. The Tuba tree refers to the Sun and the Twelve Workshops refer to the sphere of Fixed Stars.

In “On the State of Childhood”, there are clear hints on the Moon, the Sun, the Earth, and the sphere. And there is no allegory in it on cosmology, but the Moon is allegorized by the Pearl-that-glows-by-night like “The Red Intellect”.

The nine-storied pavilion is the allegory of the nine spheres in “On the Reality of Love”.

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- ⁴ He listed the sages of China and India, enumerating the Kings of Ancient Iran, Hermes of Egypt, and Buddha as the sources of truth. See John Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East Suhrawardi and Platonic Orientalism* (NY: Suny Press, 2001).
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- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 22-23.
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²⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 132.

²⁸ Suhrawardi, *The Philosophical Allegories and Mystical Treatises*, 88-89.