

Ibn 'Arabi: Urwolke und welt: mystische texte des größten meisters

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Book Reviews

Ibn 'Arabī: *Urwolke und Welt: Mystische Texte des Größten Meisters*. Translated and edited by Alma Giese. Munich, Verlag C. H. Beck [Neue Orientalische Bibliothek], 2002. 352 pages.

One of the unsolved mysteries of recent scholarship, in the face of the extraordinary profusion of translations, editions, biographies and related studies of Ibn 'Arabī over the past two decades in English, French and Spanish, has been the almost total absence of *any* such works in German¹ – an absence all the more striking in that German scholars have continued to produce a number of authoritative translations and impressive historical studies of other important Sufi authors and movements over the same period. One possible answer may have to do with the singular presence within German-language culture, at so many levels, of a centuries-long tradition of well-known religious mystics, poets and spiritually-oriented philosophers who already express, in those different *familiar* forms, so many of the distinctive spiritual insights, interests and hermeneutical approaches we associate today with Ibn 'Arabī. The famous closing lines of *Faust*, for example, may convey the Shaykh's deepest intentions as beautifully as anything we have from his own pen.

Whatever the answer to that conundrum, Alma Giese – who has already contributed an outstanding series of earlier translations from other classical Muslim mystics and philosophers – has clearly recognised this puzzling gap and sets out to provide, within this single lengthy volume, a full-scale introduction to all the central facets of Ibn 'Arabī's life, thought and expression, combining lengthy translations from several of his key works with all the extended explanations, historical background, bibliography, glossaries and the like which are essential for initiating any group of new readers of Ibn 'Arabī. In addition – as will be most fully appreciated by those who have ever tried

1. The one possible exception, a translation of the *Fusūs al-Hikam* published in 1986, is now out of print, according to www.amazon.de.

their hand at translating Ibn 'Arabī – she has had to forge an appropriately accurate and yet comprehensible new technical vocabulary in German, with almost no earlier “standard” body of commonly accepted equivalents to rely on. While our level of fluency does not allow any judgment of the prose style and ease of this translation, readers can certainly be confident that its clarity and careful accuracy reflect the author’s extensive familiarity with Islamic mystical and philosophical thought, and her longstanding acquaintance with many of the most knowledgeable and practiced contemporary interpreters of Ibn 'Arabī (whose assistance is mentioned in her Foreword).

The overall organisation and selection of readings for this volume beautifully correspond to almost all the needs – lacking only an index – of the educated, motivated reader (without any special knowledge of Sufism, Arabic or Islam) wishing to acquire the necessary elements for a serious understanding of Ibn 'Arabī’s life, historical context, characteristic teachings and multiple forms of expression, as well as his lasting spiritual and intellectual significance. In effect, Dr. Giese has provided here the essential elements for an intensive, intellectually demanding “graduate seminar” on Ibn 'Arabī, which might be needed by students of philosophy or religion with no specialist Islamic background: its pedagogical equivalent in English today would require one to purchase four or five different volumes. Her concise Introduction (pp. 18–50) begins with the Shaykh’s life and wider historical and religious contexts, gives a summary of some key ideas and teachings, and concludes with some brief remarks on his “posterity”. The same logical order of presentation is followed, but with far more ample and challenging illustrations, in her arrangement of the following translated selections. Those translations, we should add, are clearly original (directly from the Arabic) and include a considerable amount of material, in each case, translated into a European language for the first time, such as important eschatological passages from the massive chapter 371 of the *Futūhāt*. Another sign of Dr. Giese’s constant consideration of first-time readers is her care in selecting relatively “direct” expressions of Ibn 'Arabī’s thought which did not require any footnoted explanations at all. Those who have ever

translated or taught his writings will recognise how painfully difficult that particular discipline must have been!

The first main section (pp. 53–125) is a translation of considerable selections from the entirety of Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Rūh al-Quds*, which gives a considerably different impression of that work from the exclusively biographical selections included in Austin’s classic *Sufis of Andalusia*. Like that work, these passages (including twelve selected biographies) do comprise a most effective introduction, indispensable for most first-time readers, to Ibn ‘Arabī’s own early life, religious and spiritual setting, teachers and influences of his youth – and to the wider cultural and spiritual ambience of Andalusia and the Maghrib in his time. However, Dr. Giese has also included here most of the first part of the same work (previously translated only in the difficult-to-find *Ibn ‘Arabī: A Commemorative Volume*) [available from the Society], and further representative passages (translated for the first time, to the best of our knowledge) from the third, *final* part of that same work which provide a helpfully concrete illustration of Ibn ‘Arabī’s works of more practical spiritual guidance.

The central, longest part of this work (pp. 129–223) tackles the daunting task of providing an introductory overview of Ibn ‘Arabī’s worldview and distinctive teachings in his immense “*Meccan Revelations*”, beginning with representative passages on his cosmology and ontology (the subjects apparently inspiring the German title of this volume), progressing through spiritual psychology and epistemology, the multiple roles of the prophets and *awliyā*’, and concluding naturally with his eschatology. Nothing is wasted here: the subjects chosen are all essential, and although any “connoisseur” of the *Futūhāt* might notice other themes and selections that could have been added, few would want to work within the dual challenges of extreme concision and pure “introduction” (without any assumption of related Islamic, Sufi or metaphysical background) that the editor-translator has so conscientiously faced up to in this work. Moreover, Dr. Giese thoughtfully begins by cautioning her readers (pp. 129–131) about the dangers and limitations of this kind of “anthologising” introduction which, as we know from so many of his earlier Muslim interpreters, always carries the profound

risk of misrepresenting Ibn 'Arabī as essentially a sort of systematic philosopher or “mystical theologian” – a pitfall whose best remedy is often precisely more extensive doses of his own actual, so often deeply and intentionally “un-translatable”, writings.

The concluding section of Dr. Giese's anthology (pp. 227–303), and no doubt the greatest test for a translator, is her extensive selection of full passages (i.e., of both the original love-poems and their later, far more extensive metaphysical commentaries), from Ibn 'Arabī's famous *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* (“The Interpreter of Desires”). This section offers a larger selection of Ibn 'Arabī's own commentaries, in particular, than the familiar, now archaic version of R. Nicholson (or Michael Sells' recent shorter volume). The translator's introduction here, with its careful comparison of earlier English and French versions, reveals more openly the demanding combination of erudition, love, devotion, and painstaking labour that is so evident not only in this concluding section, but throughout this monumental work. One of the most distinctive features of Ibn 'Arabī's profoundly “Germanic” Arabic style, so often illustrated precisely in the *Tarjumān*, is his typically repeated juxtaposition of almost endless, apparently prosaic, metaphysical explanations and logical analyses with sudden, lightening-like imperatives, bursts of intimate poetry, oneiric imagery, or infinitely unfolding allusions to the previously unsuspected depths of a single word or phrase drawn from the Qur'an or hadith. These *are* the “openings” each reader treasures.

Thus the final page of this volume pointedly reveals the degree to which this translator has actually taken on the deeper meanings and intentions of her subject. Acknowledging the unstated “standard” – and daunting model – of the true *tarjumān* (with all the quintessential human responsibilities this multifaceted word conveys throughout Ibn 'Arabī), which every German reader is likely to bring implicitly to the study of this other, equally universal and timeless “greatest master”, this volume tellingly concludes with four of the most famous lines of the *Westöstlicher Divan*, and with the even shorter *āya* that was their inspiration.

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