

L'Alchimie du bonheur parfait

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L'Alchimie du bonheur parfait, by Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi, translated by Stephane Ruspoli. Paris, Berg International (Collection L'île verte), 1981, 151 pp. (no index).

THIS translation of chapter 167 of *Al-Futûhât al-Makkîya* is an important and pioneering effort in many ways: it is perhaps the first complete Western translation of a long chapter of the *Futûhât* (14 pages of Arabic text, or about 0.5% of the whole work), and the translator has chosen one of the more complex and condensed passages in the whole book, a text whose elucidation and understanding inevitably require references to many other parts of that immense work. One's first encounter with this translation, for those readers whose acquaintance with Ibn 'Arabi is based mainly on the *Fusûs* and its commentaries, is likely to produce a sort of *hayra*, or 'bewilderment', that can only be resolved (on one level, at least) by plunging into study and eventual translation of much more of the *Futûhât*. It is as though one were handed a few pieces of an enormous puzzle, with only the vaguest conception of what the overall picture might be: the *Fusûs* and its commentaries can help in understanding certain passages, but readers of this translation will also encounter fundamental aspects of the Shaykh's thought and expression that are only hinted at, at best, in the available English studies.

The central importance of this chapter of the *Futûhât* had already been recognized by Asín Palacios, who gave a long outline (focusing, however, more on its structure and eschatological symbolism than the actual contents) in his *Islam and the Divine Comedy*¹. The narrative framework is the story of the search for spiritual perfection undertaken by two friends, a 'follower of Muhammed' (with all that implies for Ibn 'Arabi) and an ambitious 'theoretician' (part

mutakallim, part philosopher) who proudly relies on his own cosmological and theological reasonings. The presentation of their contrasting paths and experiences in the context of the traditional stages (based on Koran and *hadīth* accounts) of the *Mi'rāj/Isrā'* of the Prophet enables Ibn 'Arabi to summarize many of his most essential spiritual insights and realizations while continuing to remind the reader of their indispensable practical and personal presuppositions.

Certain of the main themes of this chapter should be understandable without any specialized background: this is especially true of the contrast — a recurrent theme in Ibn 'Arabi's writings — between the self-limitations of the 'rationalist' theologian and the vast world of spiritual insight and experience opened up to the seeker who is willing to accept and practise the teachings of the Master-Messenger, in all his manifestations. And some of the particular expositions, like corresponding passages in the *Fusūs*, have a striking simplicity and directness which requires no further commentary: e.g., the discussion of the spiritual origins and powers of music and *samā'* (pp.125-126), of the 'faith of Pharaoh' (complementing the famous passage in the *Fass Mūsā*), or the scattered remarks on the limited spiritual relevance of proofs and theories. However, the greater part of the text consists of allusions phrased in Ibn 'Arabi's manifold symbolic vocabulary (alchemy, medicine, astrology, astronomy, *kalam*, and *'ilm al-hurūf*, not to mention the ever-present symbols from the Quran and *hadīth*) which can only be fully understood by reference to the detailed ontological and cosmological chapters, as well as the discussions of spiritual practice and phenomenology which make up the larger part of the *Futūhāt*. It is to be hoped that the detailed commentary which the translator promises in his introduction — to be based mainly on chapter 367 of the *Futūhāt* (a fascinating discussion of Ibn 'Arabi's own spiritual ascensions and their broader implications) and his longer *Kitāb al-Isrā'*... (Pt. I, no. 13 in the Hyderabad, 1948 edition of the *Rasā'il Ibn al-'Arabi*) — will eventually be available to help elucidate these difficult and allusive sections.

An appreciation of the qualities of this translation must above all acknowledge the pioneering nature of this effort, since this chapter summarizes, in the most extreme form, all the challenges facing a translator of Ibn 'Arabi — and of the *Futūhāt*, in particular. In this

case, to begin with, Dr. Ruspoli was working without the critical edition and massive commentaries available to students of the *Fusûs al-Hikam*. But more importantly, by choosing to translate a long and complete chapter of the *Futûhât* — unlike the selections or brief chapters translated earlier by Asín Palacios, H. Corbin, M. Valsan, and others — he has had to respond to two dilemmas facing anyone who would undertake that task: (1) What to do with passages one doesn't really understand; and (2) what to do when, as is often the case, the adequate explanation of a symbol or allusion would itself require either pages of commentary or reference to Arabic texts inaccessible to most of one's readers. Those who have already explored the *Futûhât* will readily appreciate the gravity of both of these dilemmas, and — since more and more translations are likely to appear in coming years — it is especially important both that readers relying on those translations be aware of their potential limitations, and that translators and scholars adequately fulfill their responsibilities with regard to their larger audience.

In this respect, Dr. Ruspoli is to be applauded for his efforts in making this work more accessible to readers without a specialized background. Most notably, he has divided the text, along natural lines, into a number of chapters, sections, and paragraphs, each preceded by a brief summary. While one might dispute particular choices, there is no doubt that this procedure greatly aids study of the work; something of the sort is probably indispensable for large-scale translations of the *Futûhât*, especially since many longer chapters lack even the formal narrative unity of this one. Secondly, the annotation includes helpful internal cross-references, occasional mention of related discussions in the *Fusûs* (especially useful, given the availability of translations) and other parts of the *Futûhât*, and indispensable explanations of the many allusions to the Koran and hadith which are often crucial to Ibn 'Arabi's argument, but whose meaning (or very existence) would be unintelligible without an extensive background and familiarity with the relevant *hadith* collections. Again, although the translator has risked the embarrassment of overlooking certain key references, all readers will be indebted to him for bringing out this background (unfortunately lacking in many previous translations of the Shaykh), and one can

only hope his example will be followed and improved upon by future translators.

Finally, the translator — whose background includes years of research on Ibn 'Arabi's famous commentator and son-in-law, Sadr al-Din al-Qunyawi (or Qunawi)² — was clearly aware of the technical nature of much of Ibn 'Arabi's vocabulary. Although generally preferring free, contextual translations (or even paraphrases) of key terms, he frequently provides reference (either in a note or the body of the translation) to the underlying Arabic expressions. Again, this is a minimal requirement for students undertaking a comparative study of Ibn 'Arabi (and of related Sufi writers), given the radical — and no doubt inevitable — variations in translated terminology even among the few studies presently available. However, this is also one of the main reasons one must regret the inexplicable lack of any index: it should be increasingly evident, with the growing number of translations and of readers who are not scholarly specialists, that any translation of Ibn 'Arabi must have adequate indexes of Koran and *hadith* references (including implicit ones), proper names, and technical terminology (keyed to the underlying Arabic terminology) if it is to serve as something more than yet another 'introduction' or basis for private teaching and commentary in the traditional manner. One can only come to appreciate the intended meanings of Ibn 'Arabi's symbolism and terminology through the cumulative experience of its use in many contexts, and this is only possible — given a large and disparate body of translations — if each translator takes care to provide parenthetical reference to the underlying terms, as well as indexes fully reflecting those distinctions.

In addition to the lack of any index, there are more serious problems with this work that likewise appear to indicate that it was hastily printed without any careful editing and review of either the translation or the notes and introduction. Most importantly, there are recurrent errors of translation (i.e., either misunderstandings or omissions of the Arabic, not simply disputable interpretations) on virtually every page. Where the text is simply descriptive, these do not usually obscure the overall impression and flow of the story, but they do account for most of the points where the reader may notice seemingly illogical or inconsequential arguments. And frequently where Ibn 'Arabi enters into serious metaphysical discussions

(especially pp. 89-97, and again in the concluding sections, pp.140-149), the misunderstandings are so widespread and fundamental as to misrepresent the basic point of whole passages. A similar haste and lack of integration of Ibn 'Arabi's unifying thought and intentions is evident in the introduction and annotations, where one's reading is often disrupted by tangential remarks and comments, while truly essential points remain unexplained. No doubt for similar reasons, the translator's evident intention to create a free, smoothly flowing translation — which is marvelously successful in many cases — sometimes results in an impression of verbosity and rhetorical excess that fails to communicate either the sobriety or the careful argumentation of the original Arabic.

Clearly most of these problems, which unfortunately limit the usefulness of this translation in this version, could easily have been avoided if more time had been taken to review the work with outside readers. As such, it is a healthy reminder to all of us working in the field of the advantages of revision with an editor or other interested readers who will persistently ask the basic questions as to what makes sense (or doesn't) in the translation, and what annotation may be necessary to bring out that sense. Failure to do so — as teachers and students of many areas of Islamic studies can attest — tends to leave us with the two extremes of 'scholarly' translations so literal (and insufficiently annotated) as to be incomprehensible, or 'amateur' efforts (in the root sense of the term) in which readability is often achieved at the price of much of the original meaning. Hopefully the Society and its Journal, as a sign of the wider audience and increasing interest in these studies, will serve to encourage translators (of every background) to take into greater consideration the collective and ongoing nature of their task, to remind us, as Ibn 'Arabi (following the *hadith*) might have put it, that 'the learned are the heirs of the prophets' — with the responsibility that implies.

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