

Ibn 'Arabi et le voyage sans retour

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Ibn 'Arabī et le Voyage Sans Retour. Claude Addas. Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1996. 140 pages.

Claude Addas' latest book on Ibn 'Arabi is something considerably more ambitious than an abridged and more accessible version of her definitive bio-bibliographical study [*Ibn 'Arabī, ou la Quête du Soufre Rouge*. Paris, 1989; also available in English translation (*Quest for the Red Sulphur*, Cambridge, 1993)]. It is really the first serious attempt in modern Western languages at a comprehensive, but popular introduction to the life, works and central teachings of this great mystical thinker. The need for such a broad introductory study accessible to college students and others approaching Ibn 'Arabi for the first time

has long been evident, and all serious students of the Shaykh al-Akbar will appreciate the many daunting difficulties which the author has confronted in composing this dense and complex volume.

To begin with, this study might well be subtitled "The Seal of (Muhammadan) Sainthood": while carefully sketching out the eventful historical background of Ibn 'Arabi's life and travels from Andalusia to Anatolia and the eastern borders of the Arab world, the author has focused throughout on those dramatic experiences and visions most central to the mystic's distinctive conception of his own universal and very specific mission, for the most part using the Shaykh's own descriptions. The result of that approach is not only a remarkably sober "spiritual autobiography" – without the familiar tendencies of hagiographic writing one encounters in almost any tradition – but also a detailed exposition of the key "Akbarian" teachings expressed, for the most part, within the framework of those same key autobiographical passages. Thus the reader encounters Ibn 'Arabi's central theme of pure "servanthood" through its concrete expressions in his own lifestyle (avoidance of possessions, etc.); his distinctive understanding of "sainthood" through the fascinating stories of his early Andalusian companions and spiritual teachers; or his conception of the world of Imagination through his own transforming initiation into that realm. Even the fascinating subject of the Shaykh's mysteriously wide-ranging historical influences is introduced, at the conclusion, through the very different personalities and approaches of his own immediate disciples and students.

The pedagogical and aesthetic attractiveness of this personalized, autobiographical approach is especially evident in contrast with the only two chapters (out of 12) where the author sets aside this broader biographical framework and instead provides a straightforward doctrinal exposition – still expressed almost entirely in Ibn 'Arabi's own words – of his characteristic teachings concerning the "Unicity of Being", the divine Essence and Names, and the process of divine self-manifestation. While these chapters are masterful summaries of incredibly complex theological and metaphysical concepts, the very requirements of concision and condensation produce a kind of dense philosophical exposition – inevitably very close

to centuries of earlier classical Islamic commentaries – which will be intellectually challenging for most uninitiated readers.

An additional virtue of this volume, which clearly sets it apart from the earlier biographical or survey chapters by Corbin, Asin, Nasr, Austin and many others, which have had to serve this introductory purpose in the past, is the author's consistent attempt to draw her readers' attention to those distinctive features of Ibn 'Arabi's writing – especially his diverse *styles* (including the special role of his poetry), his inventive language, and his constant reliance on Qur'an and hadith both in his inspiration and his rhetorical expression – which are such a powerful dimension of his writings' impact and lasting influence. Although these fundamental aspects of Ibn 'Arabi's work cannot readily be conveyed in summary form, the author has rightfully and repeatedly emphasized their importance in a way which should help novice readers to better appreciate those dimensions of his writing when they go on to explore the growing body of translations of his major works.

In short, there can be no question as to the comprehensive scope and scholarly reliability of this work: the author has included all the major themes of Ibn 'Arabi's writing, for the most part expressed in his own words, and has placed them carefully in the context of his major writings and both their immediate and their wider historical settings. There is everything an "outsider" would need by way of orientation for undertaking the study of reliable translations. One can only hope that the burgeoning interest in Ibn 'Arabi and the rapid proliferation of translations of his major works will eventually call forth, in contemporary idiom, the sort of popular, creative transfigurations of his insights that are to be found, as Addas points out, in so many later Persian (and other Islamicate) poets. But even those readers aesthetically drawn to more poetic, personal, and creative re-interpretations of the Shaykh's writings are likely to find Dr Addas's books essential reference works for decades to come.

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