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THE IMAGE OF THE STRANGER IN THE WRITINGS OF PLATO, SAADI, IBN BAJJA, SUHRAWARDI

This essay epitomizes the history of an idea: the stranger. The almost inexhaustible meanings of the word allowed the author to trace a fascinating trajectory of this notion within the history of culture and the history of ideas. The archaic significance defines the stranger in the political and legal context of the Greek *polis*, a status which is described by Plato in *The Laws*. The system of thought of the Hellenistic Gnosticism incorporates the image of the stranger as a symbol revealing the traumas and beatitudes of the human soul on the way towards redemption. In this respect, *The Hymn of the Pearl* stands as a masterpiece of the Gnostic literature. Furthermore, the symbol of the stranger was borrowed into the spiritual realm of philosophical and mystical Islam, in the Middle Ages. Towering figures of Sufi wisdom, such as Ibn Bajja, Saadi and Suhrawardi, used the image of the stranger in order to create priceless literary and religious brilliance.

Plato (*ca.* 427 – 348 / 347 BCE) describes in *The Laws* the four categories of strangers the leaders of the *polis* have to deal with.

The merchants, who must reside outside the walls of the city, nevertheless in its immediate neighbourhood, and are granted access only so far as the gates of the public edifices.

The travellers animated by the desire to feast their eyes and ears on the artistic “beauties“ of the city, on performances and musical compositions. It is fitting that they should be entertained with benevolent hospitality and lodged in dwelling places situated in the proximity of the temples.

The diplomatists, who come from foreign countries for the affairs of the state and are met by generals, ilarchs and taziarchs, while the responsibility for their care is shared between their hosts and the pritanes.

In the fourth category are included the wandering scholars, the researchers of the morals and manners, who have the intention to gain knowledge about the good institutions of other states and to impart, at the same time, discoveries and establishments still unknown to the inhabitants of

the city. They are entitled to enter uninvited in the houses of the rich and of the learned, because they possess the same qualities as them, they are rich and learned in spirit. After exchanging the novelties of wayfaring for the novelties of the city, they leave the metropolis overwhelmed by the gifts received and by the honouring bestowed by friends upon friends (*cf.* Plato, *The Laws*, XII, 6, E. Bezdechi, p. 358-359).

As a stranger of the fourth category, Plato himself was welcomed in countless spiritual cities, including the vast universe of the mystical Islam, the Sufism, a metropolis beyond the threshold of which his name was metamorphosed into *Aflatun*. No wonder, consequently, that Saadi (n. ca. 571 / 1175 – 1176, m. ca. 690 / 1292) rewrites, in his *Gulistan* (considered by Arthur J. Arberry, in *Classical Persian Literature*, p. 205, “a most intricate weave of subtly varied rhythms, an astonishing exercise in perfectly controlled virtuosity“), the fragment about “the strangers who immigrate“ and enriches the initial theme with an interesting Persian orchestration. A father exhorts his son who longs to start roaming in the world, in search of fortune, on the five categories of travellers who are foreordained to enjoy the privileges of the journeys.

The merchants who, thanks to their wealth and to their attendants, pass their days in the cities and their nights in the inns, experiencing a perpetual recreation in the midst of all the good things of the world.

The learned man who, through the power of his words, through the gift of the art of rhetoric, is welcomed everywhere, while those who are hosting him are honoured by his presence.

The young man whose beauty attracts the benevolence of the Sufi masters, as long as a charming face is a balsam for the grieved hearts.

The one who, resembling King David, is gifted with a melodious voice and is capable to stop the birds from their flying through the magic of his singing, which is the reason why his company is sought by the pious people.

The craftsman who earns his daily bread by the sweat of his brow and is not compelled to lose his honour in order to feed himself (*cf.* Saadi, *Gulistan*, III, 27, Omar Ali Shah, p. 131-134).

The merchants and the wandering scholars are equally mentioned in the taxonomy of strangers written by Plato and in its rewriting in the apologue signed by Saadi, who is substituting the diplomatists and the searchers after artistic beauties with the archetypes of the traveller more picturesque, perhaps, in the context of the Persian literary milieu: the epebe animated by the *futuwwah*, the singer, the craftsman.

Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn Yahya Ibn Al-Sayigh Ibn Bajja (end of the Vth / XIth century – 533 / 1138), known as Avempace by the Latin

schoolmen of the Middle Ages, had focused the most important of his preserved writings, *The Status of the Solitary*, on the notion of *gharib*, “stranger“, “solitary“, “lonesome man“. These travellers secluded themselves from the world of senses and materiality while trodding the path of speculative knowledge, leading from the knowledge of one’s self to the knowledge of the Active Intellect. Through union with the Active Intellect, the “strangers“ became citizens of an Ideal City, of an accomplished and theocratic State, governing the Realm of the Spirit. Inside this City there are neither physicians, because its inhabitants nourish themselves in the wisest possible way, nor judges, because each individual reached the climax of the moral progress of the human nature. God Alone is acting as a physician and as an all-powerful master. Nevertheless, before being granted the access into the City of the Spirit, its potential citizens are disseminated, as “strangers“ or “solitaries“, within the borders of the imperfect earthly cities, dominated by ignorance, injustice and suffering. The “strangers“ invoked by Ibn Bajja resemble the plants that foretell, in the wilderness of the earthly cities, the paradisiacal reality of the gardens which exist in the Ideal City (cf. *Qur’an*, S. XXXVII / *The Rangers*, v. 40-45; S. LV / *The All-Merciful*, v. 45-75, Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, p. 457, 558-559). Allogeneous to the pure spirit, they await for a while as marginal signs to the intricate text of the adamic family, to the meaningless hierarchy of the human society, sheltered by the walls guarding the cities erected in the desert (cf. Corbin, *Histoire*, I, p.317-322).

Henri Corbin sketched out the spiritual biography of the *gharib*: *Le mot vient de l’ancienne Gnose, traverse les propos des Imâms du shî’isme, domine le Récit de l’exil occidental de Suhrawardi, et nous atteste, chez Ibn Bajja, que la philosophie en Islam se sépare difficilement de la gnose* (cf. Corbin, *Histoire*, I, p. 322). In the famous *risalah* entitled *A Tale of Occidental Exile*, Shihab-ud-din Yahya Suhrawardi (549 / 1155 – 585 / 1191) describes the journey undertaken together with “brother Asim“ (“the guardian“, the speculative faculty of the soul) from the region of Transoxania (“The Sublime World“) towards “the lands of the occident“ (“the realm of matter“, *hayula*, the relation of which to the Sublime World is a covering of darkness) in order to hunt down a flock of birds on the shore of the “Green Sea“ (“the realm of sensibles“). The travellers reach Kairouan (the world of the seen, fallen into sinfulness), a town “whose inhabitants were wicked“ (the inhabitants of the earthly cities). When the people of Kairouan perceived that in their midst arrived two of the sons of the elder known as Al-Hadi Ibn Al-Khair Al-Yamani (Al-Hadi, “guide“, the “First Emanation“ of the celestial hierarchy; Al-Khair, “the good“, the Universal Intellect), they surround the “strangers“, they take them bound in shackles and fetters of iron and they

imprison them at the bottom of an infinitely deep pit (the dark world). Above the “unused well“ was “a lofty palace“ (cf. *Qur’an*, S. XXII / *The Pilgrimage*, v. 45, Arberry, p. 338), on which were “numerous towers“ (“the palace“ represents the souls that were created before the celestial bodies and orbs). The strangers are permitted to ascend from the pit to the palace only when it is evening (in night-time access is granted to the strangers towards the Sublime World, on the highway of dreams; while the senses are asleep, the spiritual travellers ascend to the “palace“ through the *oneiros*-ladder and contemplate “the forms of intelligibles“; by death, every human being reaches “the world of intelligibles“, and sleep is a second death, cf. *Qur’an*, S. XXXIX / *The Companies*, v. 42, Arberry, p. 476). By morning they must sink back down to the “bottom of the pit“ (cf. *Qur’an*, S. XII / *Joseph*, v. 10, 15, Arberry, p. 227), where there is nothing but “layer upon layer of darkness“ (cf. *Qur’an*, S. XXIV / *Light*, v. 40, Arberry, p. 357). The strangers thus experience a discontinuous freedom and during the night journey reside in the palace and peruse the surrounding void through a small window. Sometimes doves would come to them from the bedecked thrones of Yemen (the Sublime World), to tell them of the condition of the Beloved’s (God’s) abode. Sometimes Yemenite lightning-flashes would visit them, winking from the eastern, “right side“ (cf. *Qur’an*, S. XIX / *Mary*, v. 52 and S. XX / *Ta Ha*, v. 80, Arberry, p. 306, 316), and inform them of the highways of Nejd. The *arak*-scented breezes helped them to attain the extatic level of being, to be overwhelmed by the longing after Yemen, by the ardent desire to return in their true fatherland. The nocturnal ascensions and the diurnal descents are interrupted by the advent of the hoopoe (the inspiration, *ilham*), who penetrates through the small window of the palace on a moonlit night and brings to the imprisoned travellers a letter from “the right side of the valley (the Sublime World) in the blessed field, from the tree“ (cf. *Qur’an*, S. XXVIII / *The Story*, v. 30, Arberry, p. 395). The hoopoe brings the redeeming message: “I have come to you from Sheba with certain news (from doubt to certain knowledge), and it is explained in this letter from your father.“ The strangers comply with the precepts contained in the epistle written by the hand of Al-Hadi, embark on a ship that sails with them “between waves like mountains“ (cf. *Qur’an*, S. XI / *Hood*, v. 42, Arberry, p. 216), until they reach the point where they are rescued from the world of the “fourteen coffins and ten graves“ (the fourteen faculties, the ten external and internal senses). The shadow of God absorbs them into the depths of holiness, and the strangers become only one stranger who is meeting “the way of God“ and understands that this is “his right way“ (cf. *Qur’an*, S. VI / *Cattle*, v. 154, Arberry, p. 140). The stranger meets his “Father“, the Universal Intellect or Universal Soul, “an old man from the brilliance of whose light the heavens

and earth were nearly split open“. The wandering ego or I-ness, arrived on the threshold of redemption, complains of the prison of Kairouan and receives the paradoxical verdict of the old man: “It is well. You have escaped. Yet you must return to the occidental imprisonment, for you have not removed your bonds completely (you have come for the sake of thought, *fikr*, and inspiration, *ilham*, but there are still traces of attachment in you). (...) It is necessary for you to return now (in the occidental exile, in order to remove the rest of the chains), but I will give you glad tidings of two things: first, when you return to prison you will be able to come to us and ascend to our paradise easily whenever you wish; secondly, in the end you will be delivered to our presence by leaving the occidental lands absolutely and completely.“ The old man also reveals to him that above Mount Sinai is Mount Sinin, and above the Father is the Father of the Father and a whole range of ancestors, until the line of the theocratical genealogy reaches the King, who is the Great Progenitor, without Father or Father of the Father: “His is the greatest splendour, his the highest glory and the most forceful light. He is above above, the light of light, above light ever and eternally.“ (cf. Suhrawardi, *Al-Risalah*, Thackston, *The Mystical and Visionary Treatises of Shihabuddin Yahya Suhrawardi*, p. 100-108).

This redemptive theology, of the *salvator salvatus* type, represents an element of continuity between Sufism and the Hellenistic Gnostic systems. The mystical scenario that triggers *A Tale of Occidental Exile* is identical in its essence with the archaic narrative texture contained in *The Hymn of the Pearl*, a poem that expresses the foundation myth of the Gnostic theology regarding the salvation of the human soul. In the opinion of Hans Jonas, *the interchangeability of the subject and object of the mission, of saviour and soul, of Prince and Pearl, is the key to the true meaning of the poem, and to the Gnostic eschatology in general* (cf. Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 127). In *The Hymn of the Pearl*, the Prince or the Son dispatched by the Father (the Father of Truth) and the Mother (the Mother of Wisdom) in search of the Pearl (a symbol of the soul) is forsaking the Orient of his paternal roof in order to travel to Egypt (a symbol of the world engulfed into sinfulness), the occidental realm of the exile of the Pearl, an equivalent of the Kairouan referred to by Suhrawardi in his tale. While residing in Egypt, the Prince is inevitably perceived as a stranger: “since I was all alone, I was a stranger to others in the inn”, “then I put on a robe like theirs lest they suspect me as an outsider who had come to steal the Pearl” (cf. *The Hymn of the Pearl*, in Barnstone, *The Other Bible*, p. 310-311). The Prince assimilates the Egyptian food, becomes oblivious of his royal descent and of his mission concerning the recovery of the Pearl, and finally sinks into a deep sleep. His Father and Mother then send a letter to him, exhorting him to wake up from

the death-like sleep and to recall the fact that he is “a son of kings“ who was dispatched into the land of Egypt with the explicit task of restoring the Pearl from its captivity. The saviour is thus saved by the letter he receives from his parents, and the message metamorphoses itself into a winged messenger: “it rose up in the form of an eagle, the king of all winged fowl“ (cf. *The Hymn of the Pearl*, in Barnstone, *The Other Bible*, p. 310). The messenger-epistle plays in the narrative economy of *The Hymn of the Pearl* a part identical with the one played by the hoopoe in *A Tale of Occidental Exile*, whom the Father, Al-Hadi Ibn Al-Khair Al-Yamani, entrusts with the difficult job to carry his letter to the prisoners in Kairouan. The first redemptive envoy loses the track during his immersion in the occidental exile and his mission would have remained unaccomplished, if the second envoy had not followed in his footsteps in order to bring the “awakening“ of his forerunner through his advent, a situation defined as double salvation and characteristic to an eschatological scenario of the *salvator salvatus* type. The complex theocratical genealogy focused on the “range of ancestors“ leading to the Great Progenitor remembers, in the text of the suhrawardian *risalah*, the Gnostic theology of the celestial hierarchies (eons, syzygies). After regaining possession of the Pearl, the Prince returns in triumph to his oriental residence, to the palace of the “King of Kings“.

To be a stranger in the city or in the realm of the occidental exile expresses, in the last resort, the anxiety of being alive down here. The strangers or travellers leave the exiguous space of their fatherland for the purpose of devoting themselves to the dangers of the earthly wandering and to the unusual experiences promised by the penetration beyond the thresholds of the unknown cities. When the journey reveals itself as a pilgrimage of man towards God or as an absorption of the human being into the Divine Being, the stranger, *gharib*, exfoliates the misunderstanding of the earthly prisons, in order to transmute and disintegrate his own self through the redemptive immersion into the beatifical Orient overlooked by the palace of the heavenly Father. The initial anxiety that covers and darkens not only the birth and death of the adamic beings corrupted by sin, but also the meaning or meaninglessness of their wanderings in the earthly labyrinth, is miraculously annihilated in the proximity of the Divine Orient, in the overwhelming brightness of the Divine Sun. From this perspective, it behooves, may be, to harmonize hermeneutically the solar guilt of Albert Camus’ *Stranger* with the successive writings and rewritings that signpost the ineffable tragedy of the estrangement from the brotherhood of men, the textual continuity of which vouchsafes its own narratological rhythm to the temporal continuity of the last two and a half millenaries, a strange interval dominated by the nostalgia of an incurable banishment from the embracing of the paradisiacal gardens...

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