

# No Light did I See Brighter than Silence ...<sup>1</sup>

Ahoo Najafian

Too bright to be seen, too clear to be known, the Light of Lights, from its placeless place, *Nowheresville*, emitted a Light to adorn the Firmament. This ray reached the First Sphere, the Sphere of Spheres, the subtlest of them all; too subtle to bear the Light, this transparent sphere passed the Light on to the Second Sphere, which dispersed It in the form of stars all over its domain. The residual lights rained down to create Saturn, whose residual light begot Jupiter, and downward went the Light to form Mars from what was left of Jupiter's light; from Mars' leftover, the Sun appeared; Venus from the Sun's leftover, Mercury from Venus' leftover, and the Moon from Mercury's residual light. With what was left of the Light, the Moon sired the clouds, the earth, and its creatures.<sup>2</sup>

But, thus goes the cosmogony of the 12th century mystical philosopher, Shahabuddin Suhrawardi, men forgot the Light; so, when gazing upon the skies, some only see a sapphire sphere with luminous buttons sewn upon it. Yet others look at the stars with astrologer eyes; they see the stars and their houses, their conjunctions and influences, their ascents and descents, only to miss what lies beyond. But, there are a few, who know that seeing is a journey with the mind's eye, they close their eyes to see.<sup>3</sup>

They see through the clouds and stars, through the constellations and spheres. Where the astrologers see the twelve signs of the zodiac and the movements of the stars and planets, they see twelve Workshops with seven Masters overseeing scores of artisans.<sup>4</sup> With the inner eye, they make the voyage beyond the First Sphere, where *Nowheresville* (ناکجاآباد) is un-located, untouched by time and place;<sup>5</sup> (no)where *Simurgh*, that immortal mythical benevolent bird, nests in the eternal *Tuba* tree, atop the cosmic Mount *Qaf*.

Inspired by this cosmogony, Ala Eftekar envisions this ocular journey, from the orb of the eye to the Celestial Orb, through a multitude of imageries and metaphors of the portal. In the *Untitled (Manuscript)* series, Eftekar performs a double *removal* of the words. On the first level, he simply removes the text from the manuscript pages, but on a deeper level, he moves the words to another space. Through acts of removal, which leave the frames that once protected the words from spilling out of the page, he chisels

---

<sup>1</sup> Bayazid Bastami

<sup>2</sup> Suhrawardi. *A Day with the Sufis*.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Suhrawardi. *The Crimson Intellect*.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

a window, evoking a shrilling silence from the paper; a silence that resembles Suhrawardi's black-eyed gazelles that rain tears of wisdom and without speaking, whittle meaning.<sup>6</sup> In the latter sense, Ebtekar is pointing to the (un)place in which the words might be standing, similar to Suhrawardi's *Nowheresville*, a space protected from the perish that characterizes time and space.<sup>7</sup> These windows, furthermore, reveal an eye gazing back.

As the artist has asserted, the *Untitled (Manuscript)* series were created in part as an attempt to capture the Benjaminian notion of *aura*. In its most common usage, *aura* refers to an elusive essence that captures an object's authenticity; a sense, Benjamin feels, lost both in mechanical reproduction and acts of translation. In a more neglected sense however, Benjamin uses *aura* as a "weave of space and time"<sup>8</sup> that endows the object with the ability to open its eyes. "Experience of the aura," Benjamin maintains, "rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man."<sup>9</sup> As such, in "empty" frames of the manuscript pages, we are no longer looking at words that repress the unsaid, the unthought, to give us a sense of meaning; nor are we looking at the exotic original language sitting inanimately on the paper, but at something that gazes back, helping the audience to escape the panopticon of language. In conversation with other pieces, these gaping windows invite us to look for an oculus everywhere.

Whereas in the *Untitled (Manuscript)* series, the words of classical Persian poems are carved out to open portals, in the *Tunnel in the Sky* series, Ebtekar fashions ocular mats after archetypal Perso-Islamic arches to explore the possibilities created at the point of contact between the scientific-fictional journey to the future and these liminal gateways to an inward journey.

Such spaces are explored further in the *Zenith* series as sites/sights in which stark binaries crumble; photography meets painting, science converges with art, and two seemingly opposing world-views ("Western" science and "Eastern" tradition) synthesize. These points of convergence become more prominent given Ebtekar's application of the almost alchemical cyanotype technique, in which the surface is treated with potassium ferricyanide and ferric ammonium citrate, where the red iron changes into blue by being exposed to the Sun; from the color of the earth to the color of the sky. Ebtekar then adorns this photo of the celestial clear sky, the color of which in the Jungian psychology stands for truth, with clouds scattered all over, as if to paint the "Real" with his own reality. Again, Suhrawardi's mark cannot be ignored, for the philosopher too combines the astronomical with allegorical to illustrate the journey to/through light, which Ebtekar deploys as both medium and technique; a technique that was developed by the English astronomer Sir John Herschel.

---

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Suhrawardi. *The Sound of Gabriel's Wing*.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin. *Little History of Photography*.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin. "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire."

Adorning his philosophy with Iranian mythical and mystical tradition, Suhrawardi explains the journey to *Qaf* through the familiar figures of Iranian mythical archetypes: mythical creatures like *Simurgh* and heroes like *Rostam* and *Isfandiyar*, the two heroes who accomplished the Seven Labors, the symbolic journey towards the self. In Suhrawardi's rendition, *Rostam*, the eternal symbol of virtue, defeats the invincible *Isfandiyar*, the prince who is tricked by Darkness into fighting him, by shooting the arrow of Light into his eyes by the help of *Simurgh*. Rendering these allegories of the Illumination Philosophy into a visual poetics, Ala Ebtakar in his most recent exploration of the possibilities for the fusion of futures, subtly appropriates elements from a pre-modern Iranian proto-futurism and mixes it with contemporary technology to explore the potentialities of time and space to navigate a shared chronotopia in the future.

*Ahoo Najafian is a Ph.D. candidate in Islamic Studies in the Department of Religious Studies at Stanford University. Her research interests include contemporary literature and visual arts in Islamicate societies with a focus on Iran, issues of identities, authenticity, and gender.*