The Subtle Realm:
Corbin, Sufism, and Swedenborg

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Excerpted and Compiled by Kate Davis

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Western Dualism and Reality of the Soul

The contemporary French philosopher Gilbert Durand has stated that classical spirituality is a “pseudospirituality”: by separating spirit from matter and thereby mind from body—it denies concrete reality to the soul.1 The archetypal psychologist James Hillman has appropriately called this Cartesian dualistic attitude the “double curse of our Western myth—the spirit’s vision of perfection and matter’s fundamental limitation, two archetypal fictions.”2 In this view there is no third way between the unlimited and the limited, the eternal and the temporal, spirit and matter. It is always the case of either matter tending to absorb spirit or spirit swallowing up matter. In its final formulation, matter (res extensa) and spirit (res cogitans) are conceived as two completely separate realities, which, thanks to divine ordination, come together at only one point—the human brain. The final outcome of the Cartesian dualistic fantasy is that the material world is automatically deprived of any spiritual content, while the spirit, for its part, is reduced to the status of an abstract counterpart of the material reality.

Swedenborg, together with the Islamic scholar and mystic Henry Corbin (d. 1978), belongs to the tradition of sophia perennis (perennial wisdom), whose proponents have undertaken the difficult and unpopular task of resuscitating the soul as the third realm between matter and spirit. For these “protectors” of the soul, the third realm is the proper “place” of all spiritual or visionary events, which, in turn, must be seen as events of the soul.

In Swedenborg and Corbin (as well as in Jung and Hilman), the soul is real; it represents the coming together and resolution of the polarities of the spiritual and the physical, the divine and the human, the universal and the concrete. What is meant here by the word soul is far removed from some vaporous, ghostly substance (refined matter) inside the body. For these thinkers, the soul is not something purely spiritual standing in opposition to matter, but a microcosmic reality, a compendium of nature reflecting the macrocosm. Clearly, in such a perspective the question of “inner” and “outer,” subjective and objective, spirit and matter, simply does not arise. All events whatsoever take place in the soul, or rather they are transfigured in the light of the soul, which is the same as saying that they are first imagined then perceived. Imagination and perception are two gnoseologically and ontologically distinct “faculties” or powers.

Swedenborg possessed what in mystical literature is known as “dual vision”—the ability to perceive things in at least two ways simultaneously. In Paul Valéry’s words, he was capable of “an effortless coming and going between two worlds.”3 There was no confusion in his mind between ordinary reality (the world of precepts) and the world of visions or images. Swedenborg could imagine and perceive concurrently.

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Psychic Reality and Archetypal Images

For Swedenborg, “spirit” (the soul) is quite real in its own right. In this sense, his system is consonant with Jung’s idea of psychic reality. Jung describes the status that must be ascribed to the psyche as follows:

It is characteristic of the Western man that he has split apart the physical and the spiritual for epistemological purposes. But these opposites exist together in the psyche. . . . “Psychic” means physical and spiritual. . . . This “indeterminate” world seems unclear and confused because the concept of psychic reality is not yet current among us, although it expresses life as it actually is. Without soul, spirit is as dead as matter, because both are artificial abstractions; whereas man originally regarded spirit as a volatile body, and matter as not lacking in soul. . .

Jungian psychology has experienced an important creative development in the form of archetypal psychology, founded by James Hillman. Hillman’s work constitutes a daring attempt to restore the soul to its central place not only in psychology, but in human and cosmic life as a whole to “re-soul” the world. In archetypal psychology the Jungian archetypes, the patterns of the psyche, are no longer noumenal (unknowable), but always phenomenal. Archetypes are simply images, infinitely ambiguous in character, multivalent, and polysemous (capable of having a variety of meanings). Our psychic essence is “imaginal,” and, as such, fully accessible to imaginative exploration. Psyche is image and imagination.

The Imaginal Realm

Henry Corbin has assisted in fathering archetypal psychology by his insight that the world of archetypes (the Sufi alam al mithiḥāl) is identical with mundus imaginalis, a distinct field of “imaginal” realities requiring a sui generis mode of perception. The adjective imaginal is used by Corbin in order to distinguish it from the derisory connotation that often accompanies the word imaginary. He proposed the term imaginal, as well as the Latin locution mundus imaginalis, as pointing to an order of reality that is ontologically no less real than what we call physical reality, on the one hand, and spiritual or intellectual reality, on the other. The characteristic faculty of perception within the mundus imaginalis is imaginative power, which noetically is on a par with the power of the senses or the intellect. In short, imagination, and by the same token the soul, is a structured reality and functions as an intermediary (the Platonic metaxy) between the sensible world and the intellectual world. . .

Corbin’s main body of writings is devoted to Sufism, to pre-Islamic, Islamic, and Persian philosophy and to Israelian Shi’ism, areas in which he has uncovered vistas of thought previously unknown to or underestimated by Westerners. His thinking, nurtured by early interest in Boehme, Swedenborg, and Heidegger, emphasizes the inner, visionary pursuit of truth.

According to Corbin, the realm of creative imagination encompasses the “suprasensible world which is neither the empirical world of the senses nor the abstract world of the intellect.” It is the “angelic world,” or the mundus archetypalis, the place of visionary events that are witnessed by each human soul at the time of its exit from this world of astronomical time and space. The forms and figures of the imaginal realm subsist on an ontological plane above the concrete and opaque density of the material things and below the intelligible world of pure ideas; they are more immaterial than the first and less immaterial than the second.

We thus have a threestated universe (corresponding to the tripartite human of archetypal psychology): the earthly human or sensible world (the object of ordinary sensory perception); the intermediary world of archetypal or visionary imagination—known in Sufism as alam mithiḥāl, or Malakūt, the world of the soul (the object of imaginative perception); and the world of intellectual forms, of pure theoretical intelligences (the object of intelligible knowledge). The function of mundus imaginalis is defined by its median and mediating situation between the intellectual and the sensible worlds. The faculty of perception corresponding to this intermediary world is archetypal imagination, whose “speciality” is to effect a complete and immediate realization of the imagined contents. In Corbin’s words, imagination on the visionary plane “posits real being.”

Imagination is not only the human faculty par excellence but also the primordial power of the universe; in a sense, it is reality itself.

Let me also add, by way of anticipation, that Corbin’s concept of imagination escapes the pseudodilemma of myth versus history, real versus unreal. The events taking place in the mundus imaginalis are neither myth nor history in the ordinary sense of these words. Rather, it is history of the Malakūt imaginal or visionary history. Similarly the places and countries of this history constitute imaginal or visionary geography. Access to these imaginal realms is opened for us by the kind of hermeneutic denoted by the Arabic word ta’wil, literally to “reconduct something to its source, to its archetypal image, to its true reality.” According to Corbin, ta’wil is a “symbolic understanding, the transmutation of everything visible into symbols, the intuition of an essence or person in an Image which partakes neither of universal logic nor of sense perception. . . . “Ta’wil is a theophasic method of discourse, based on the ancient principle “only the like knows the like.” It is in this sense that mundus imaginalis becomes accessible only by generating in oneself a minimum of visionary power. Put simply, the imaginal
world is to be known only by imagination.

In Sufism, the organ that is said to be responsible for the creation of *mundus imagnalis* is called *himma*, "creative power of the heart," connoting the notions of meditation, projection, intention, desire, force of will, faith. The creativity of *himma* is ontological in the sense that it produces changes in the so-called outside world: the object on which the "heart" concentrates its creative power, its imaginative meditation, appears as an outward, extrapsychic reality perceivable by others who have reached an equivalent degree of visionary power. These "objects," however, are not separate from the imaginer's imagination; they are "out there" and yet no other than the person who imagines them. One could say, their "outness" is only an index of the microcosm that is a human being insofar as he or she reflects the macrocosm. It is because people are compendiums of spirit and nature, that their imaginative power is capable of "placing" them exactly where they want to be. In these realms seeing is not only believing, but also being. In Corbin's terms, the creative function of archetypal imagination (*himma*) consists in "initiation to vision." Visions, in contrast to rational demonstrations and sensual perceptions, are "in themselves penetrations into the world they see."

The imaginal world is also called by Islamic authors the "eighth clime" (subsisting beyond the seven climes of the sensible world of space) or the "climate of the Soul." It is a concrete spiritual world of apparitional forms, a country nowhere that can only be reached by going inward (*taa'wil*), that is, from the external, literal, and esoteric to the hidden, inward, and esoteric. In the language of gnosis it is a movement from macrocosm into microcosm. However, when this journey is completed, the microcosm (the infinitely small) turns out to be a reflection of the macrocosm (the infinitely great). The inner reality now envelops, surrounds, and contains the outer and the visible reality. As a result of this "internalization," the spiritual reality itself is the "place" of all things, meaning that it is not located anywhere in sensory space; in relation to the latter, the "where" of the imaginal reality, "its ubi is an ubique," a "ubiquitous place."

The ubiquity of the imaginal space is the very opposite of the quantitative scientific space conceived as an infinite, lifeless, cold void. The quantitative space is the "satanic space" of William Blake, the blank, unfeeling stage on which matter plays its aimless, random acts without regard for the human. The person who inhabits this space is, as Pascal has it, only an accidental reed, liable to be crushed at any moment by the forces of a blind, indifferent universe. "Cast into the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened." To be a "thinking reed" may well be a special privilege but it also adds to a person's essential loneliness in the midst of an unthinking

In contrast to the quantitative space of modern cosmology, the real imaginal space for Corbin is a field of unframed relationships, evoked by myth, dream, and religious vision, in which the figures and events seem free-floating in an environment without clean-cut boundaries. Like the chariot of Ezekiel, the bodies in this qualitative space move through no spatiality external to themselves. Each body has its own world, or rather, creates its own world, and, in Swedenborg's terminology, according to its "ruling love."

In view of the above it should not be insuperably difficult for us to assert with the Sufi masters that the imaginal world refers to the archetypal images of individual and singular things that it possesses extension and dimension, figures and colors. Indeed, everything in this world has shape, size, color, and other qualities that the material objects of our world have: as in Swedenborg it has a scenery like that of the earth, human forms, grotesque or beautiful, senses that know pleasure and pain.

The eighth clime of the Sufi gnosis is a real imaginal place, fully accessible to imagination: there are heavens and earths, animals, plants, minerals, cities, towns, and forests. The physical things of our terrestrial earth are reflections of the celestial earth, the world of the soul. Or again, as Corbin observes in another variation of this theme, the celestial and all things belonging to it represents the phenomenon of the earth in its absolute state, that is, "absolved from the empirical appearance displayed to the senses. . . . Here all reality exists in a state of Images and these Images are a priori, or archetypal." In other words, it is a realm of absolute or pure psychic activity. Or, if you prefer, the *mundus imagnalis* is a world composed of absolute matter, that is, free from the determinations that are peculiar to the dense and corruptible matter of the sublunar world. Absolute matter is a kind of prematerial, or primal matter, which is fully transparent to its own forms. Like anything in an artwork, it is pure apperception, a purely visionary thing, an image pure and simple.

It is important to emphasize that the figures and objects of the eighth clime, even though they are the exact replicas of everything existing in the sensible world, cannot be perceived by the senses. They are images, or the essences, of the sensible corporeal things, having different causal properties from those of the physical world. But this is far from saying that these images are identical to Platonic Ideas or, for that matter, to the unknown and unknowable archetypes of Jung. According to Corbin, the contrast between celestial (sensible) matter and the earthly visible matter must not be reduced to a Platonic dualism between idea and matter or between the universal and the particular. For "the state of infinity, of lesser being and darkness represented by the present condition of the material world, results not from its material condition as such but from the fact that it is the
zone invaded by the demonic Contrary Powers, the arena of struggle and also of the prize."

In contrast to the universal and immaterial character of the Platonic Ideas, the beings of the world of archetypal images are conceived by Suh meditators as "particular forms that are separate from matter, but by no means from all material envelopes." They are personal presences, individual and unique, having a corporeality and spatiality of their own, an "immaterial" materiality, or what the Cambridge Platonist Henry More called spissitudo spiritualis, a kind of "spiritual extendedness." In the median world of theophanic space, the soul, instead of being bound to spatial coordinates, as in the quantitative space of science, is situative (creates its own space).

It is also for this reason that in the Sufi gnosis the question that is consistently asked is not about the essences (wholeness) of things, but about their "personality" as, for example, Who is the earth? Who are the waters, the plants, the mountains? The mundus imaginalis, or the "eighth chime," is a fully personified cosmos, a presence in which the essence of a thing is fully manifested in its existence. As in a painting or a poem, in these environs the content is inseparable from the form; things mean exactly what they are, and are what they mean. As Swedenborg would have it, in the world of spirits, the masks drop off.

The Image of God in a Mirror

The key to Swedenborg's visionary universe is his doctrine of "correspondences," which he shares with Neoplatonism, the hermetic, alchemical, Gnostic, and cabalistic traditions. The principle of correspondences is succinctly expressed in the hermetic dictum "As above, so below; as below, so above"; it embodies the insight that "there is always a correspondence (harmony) between the laws and phenomena of the various planes of being and life"—inorganic, plant, animal, human, spiritual. In psychological terms, correspondence is similar to the Jungian "synchronicity"—a meaningful connection among physical and psychic planes of events. According to Swedenborg, everything we perceive in our visible or material world has a counterpart in or symbolizes with the invisible or the spiritual world. The spiritual world is a duplicate, in more noble form, of the visible world, and the correspondence between the two extends to the most minute details.

Another central idea in Swedenborg is that of "influx." All things exist by divine influx: "Every created thing . . . is a recipient of God," that is, "an image of God in a mirror" (DH 560). It is important to note that the divine influx, or the divine life, is received according to the capacity of the recipient and thus presents infinite variety (AC 2888, 3484). This, however, should not be construed as pantheism, for "the created universe is not God, but is from God; and since it is from God, there is in it an image of Him like the image of man in a mirror, wherein indeed the man appears, but still there is nothing of man in it" (DLW 58).

The Suh seers have tried to convey this idea by saying that the subtle body (man as microcosm) is a mode of being that constitutes its own matter. The most frequent comparison, used by Suhrawardi, is the mode in which images appear and subsist in a mirror. Images are like forms seen in a mirror: the mirror is the place of the apparition of images, but images themselves are "in suspense"; they are neither like material things in a place nor like an accident in its substratum. The expression in suspense indicates that the image of the subtle body is "independent of the substratum in which it would be immanent in the manner of an accident (e.g., like the color black subsisting through the black object in which it is immanent)."

To illustrate Suhrawardi's statement, Corbin invites us to imagine the form of a statue in its pure state, liberated from the marble, the wood, or the bronze. Corbin's comparison of the subtle body with the pure form of a statue is certainly helpful provided we do not confuse the latter with the ideal forms of Plato, relegating the statue itself to a "phantasmic" and shadowy piece of artistry (and so twice removed from the ideal form). In the Sufi view, the bronze or the wood would have to be wholly in the statue, just as in Hillman's view images are wholly in the modes of their manifestation. For it is precisely the artist's task to transform the crude "material" matter into subtle or spiritual matter in such a way that the former disappears or, rather, is fulfilled in the latter. It is in this sense that we may say with Suhrawardi that the statue—as an image—is independent from its substratum, the bronze. The bronze is only used, like the alchemist uses vulgar metals, to create a new thing, which, as created, is independent from and ontologically prior to the material substance. The "new thing" (the statue or the subtle body) exists "in suspense" because its status is that of a median and intermediate reality. It is a visionary thing, which, in order to be seen, demands a corresponding visionary ability in us.

Everything in the universe is a mirror reflecting the supreme light (Maximus I homo), and all the mirrors reflect in such a way that each one of them reflects all the rest of the mirrors. There is a mutual interpenetration among all things and events, a kind of circumcession, which makes Swedenborg's view of reality pansymbolic rather than pantheistic. This, however, far from dissolving the individual into a mushily selfless condition, establishes him as a unique embodiment of the universal reality.
The Universal Human

In Swedenborg, as in Sufism, the status of the human being is that of an intermediary reality or a subtle body. Each person is a potential angel (potentially divine) or a potential demon, but never “just a person” in a flat humanistic sense. A human is essentially “ek-static,” a being that is always beyond itself, outside its simple ontic presentness. Humans are not simply “localizable,” not confined to a fixed, predetermined place in the scheme of things, but participate in all the strata of the universe. For, according to Swedenborg, besides the correspondences that exist between the outward creation and spiritual world, there is also an intimate (symbolic) relation between the nature (physis in the pre-Socratic sense) and the “spirit” (soul) of a person. There is a correspondence of all things in a person with all things in the physical universe. There is a spiritual (imaginal) heaven and earth, spiritual sun, moon, and stars; there are mountains, hills, valleys, and plains of the soul; there are spiritual (imaginal) trees, flowers, and tender herbs. All these living multitudes have correspondences in the soul of what Swedenborg calls Maximus Homo, the Universal Human. The universe is a living organism (Platonic anima mundi). Expressed in religious language, a human is a microcosm in the image of God not only in the spiritual sense, but also in the corporeal sense. A person is a gestalt, an image, the whole of which is more than the sum of its parts. In the human, God himself is present and spiritually perceptible.

Swedenborg repeatedly stresses that “God is the essential person. The only concept of God throughout all the heavens is the concept of a Person. This is because heaven, overall and in its parts, is like a person in form, and the divine which is among angels constitutes heaven” (DILW 11).

Swedenborg’s idea of a cosmic or divine person has nothing to do with a simplistic anthropomorphism; rather what is meant here is that humanity is the norm of the creation and that knowledge of the cosmic human is to be the realization of true humanity.

Swedenborg distinguishes between the divine being (Essa Infinitum, which he rather incongruously also refers to Jehovah) and divine existence (Exister) or manifestation (the Lord or the Divine Human). Jehovah or Essa is beyond all thought and every conceivable thing, hence it is in vain to seek or learn the nature of God in his esse. It is enough to know him according to created things in the bosom of which he exists in an external form. The Divine Human, then, is the “face of Jehovah,” the first manifestation of God in “the form of an angel” (AC 1057). God manifested in this form prior to his historical incarnation in Jesus the Christ (the latter, according to Swedenborg, became necessary when humanity turned away from God in his first “incarnation” as the Divine Human).

Swedenborg’s Universal Human is homologous to the Adam Kadmon of Cabala, the Logos of St. John’s gospel, Purusha or Purusha of Hinduism, the Iliaster of Paracelsus, the filius philosophorum or the anthropos pharmacos (the man of light), Metatron in the Zohar, the Buddha, and in the intellectual intuition or the nous in the emanationist scheme of Plotinus. The Universal Human is also sophia (at once Mary and Eve), which functions as the intermediary between the divine abyss (syunya) and the world of maya (Sufi Hijab).

In Böhme’s theosophy, sophia is the “body” or the “housing” of God through which the corporeal manifestation of God takes place. She is the supreme veil (illusion, fiction) and also the supreme theophany, or the “first step toward the inception of the path of God whose end is corporeality.”

Islam ascribes the same function to the “Divine Mercy” (rahmat) whose “breath,” symbolizing the nostalgia of God to be known, existentiates the world. According to the famous tradition of the Prophet, “I was a hidden treasure, I desired to be known, hence I created the world in order to be known” (Hadith Qudsi). In all cases the basic idea is that God, out of the innermost dark depths of his being, presses toward self-revelation, toward the manifestation of his essence in a bodily form. The world is God’s self-disclosure.

Active Intelligence

Swedenborg traces the “oblivion” of the Divine Human to pre-historical times. For him, this oblivion has been the result of a general deterioration of human affairs on the terrestrial plane. A fascinating parallel seems to exist between, on one hand, these speculations by Swedenborg on the oblivion of the Divine Human and the consequent necessity of a second incarnation; and on the other hand, the loss in Western philosophy of the “Active Intelligence” — a loss that Corbin sees as being the root cause of man’s alienation from the cosmos. Corbin identifies Active Intelligence with archetypal imagination, or “agent imagination.” According to him, the Active Intelligence (nous poietos, creative imagination) prior to Latin Averroism and Aristotelian Thomism was a quasi-cosmic reality constituting what is highest, most powerful, and most worthy in the essence of both man and nature. Beginning with Averroes, in the twelfth century, however, this power is severed from the individual soul: the latter receives its individuality and uniqueness no longer from the Active Intellect but only through the fact of its union with the body. In this way, says Corbin, “the individual is identified with the perishable; what can become eternal in the individual pertains exclusively to the separate and unique intelligence.”

From Averroes onward, the Active Intelligence was regarded by the Western rationalist orthodoxy as heretical, or, at best, was accorded the status of a secondary faculty
that “secretes nothing but the imaginary, that is, the unreal, the mystic, the marvelous, the fictive, etc.” The tragedy, the “metaphysical catastrophe,” is that in the course of this development the official philosophy of the West came to admit only two sources of knowledge—sense perception, providing so-called empirical data, and the concepts of understanding that order and govern empirical experience.

As a consequence, what must be called “spiritual events” are deprived of a *situs* of their own and are assigned either to the realm of history and chronological time or—when explanation through historical causality fails—to the realm of myth (see the earlier section “The Imaginal Realm”).

The proper place of the ultimate kind of imagining is, according to Corbin, “the place of apparition” of spiritual beings, Angels and Spirits.” The *situs* of these archetypal figures is “an intermediate universe where the spiritual takes body and the body becomes spiritual,” a world consisting of real matter and real extension that by comparison to sensible, corruptible matter these are subtle and immaterial.” In this realm there is no gap between reality and appearance, for what “appears” or presents itself as an image is from the very outset radically multiperspectival and metaphorical.

The same must be said of another pair of opposites—being and thinking: in the world of vision, being and thought coincide. Thought is creative in the sense that whatever we will or desire tends to be brought about. Of course it is not at all the case that every whim, every fleeting fancy of ours is always in some mechanical way immediately fulfilled; that would be sheer chaos, a madman’s world. What is meant by the creative character of thought is that “in the long run” a person is as he or she thinks. To put it as does the ancient Greek sage Heraclitus, as well as the Lord Buddha, “character is destiny.” In states of archetypal imagination there is no wavering between conflicting desires; we desire what we are and are what we desire. As Swedenborg portrays it, we invariably get what we love.

**Angels and Spirits**

An angel is a human in whom the inner and the outer, the material and the spiritual, perfectly correspond to each other, that is, a person in the state of completed self-expression (Jung’s individuation) or in the state of fully realized divine image. An angel’s face, far from being an idealized stereotype, is a true image of a spiritual state. In Swedenborg’s words:

> When angels present themselves to the sight, all their interior affections appear clearly and shine forth from the face so that the face is an external form and representative image of them. It is not permitted in heaven to have any other face than that of one’s affections. Those who simulate another face are cast out from the society. From this it is evident that the face corresponds to all the interiors in general, both to man’s affections and to his thoughts. (HH 179)

Swedenborg’s conception of angels stands in sharp contrast to that of the traditional Christian theology, where angels are imagined as higher types of created spirits (spiritual substances) not bound up with a body. In this way they are distinguished from the human soul, which is assumed to be unable to function without the aid of a physical body. To circumvent the fact that in the scriptures angels occasionally do appear to men in bodily form (for example to Abraham and Lot), Mortimer Adler, representing the Thomistic view, suggests that these bodies must be merely “assumed bodies.” The angels take them on not for their own sake, but for ours, in order to perform their ministry to us. “Strictly speaking [for this view], they would be like masks, which are not real visages but deceptive counterfeit of faces.”

In Swedenborg’s eschatology, angels, far from being special creations, are men and women in perfect (imaginal) form: “There is not a single angel in the universal heaven who was originally created as such, not one devil in hell who was created an angel of light and afterwards cast down thither, but all, both in heaven and in hell, are from the human race” (HH 311; see also 73, 75, 77).

Swedenborg’s spirits and angels do not exist in astronomical time and space. Spirit is given to them not as something, which is without, but as a flowing, placeless medium. This is to say that spiritual and angelic space is of the nature of a state rather than of a place. There is direction, but not in the sense of “from somewhere to somewhere.” As in music, it is direction from one state to another, from an “everywhere” to another “everywhere” (as in the hall of mirrors). The motion of spirits is not a change of place or position but a change of state. The spirit is where it acts or “where the action is.” In Swedenborg’s words:

All changes of place in the spiritual world are affected by changes of state of the interiors, which means that change of place is nothing else than change of state. . . . Such are all movements of the angels, and in consequence they have no distances, and having no distances they have no spaces, but in place of spaces they have states and their changes. (HH 192; see also AC 5846, 5848-52)

Spirits are visible to one another when they are in accord, and they vanish when in discord, for their distance from one another depends on their state of affections:

. . . Approaches are likenesses of state of the interiors, and separations are likenesses, and for this reason those are near each other who are in like states, and those are at distance who are in unlike states; and spaces in heaven are simply the external conditions corresponding to the internal states. (HH 193; see also DLW 7)
When a spirit desires the presence of another spirit he immediately sees him appear before his eyes: "Whenever anyone...thinks about another he brings his face before him in thought, and at the same time many things of his life: and when he does this the other becomes present, as if he had been sent for or called" (HH 491; see also 194, 196).

In a similar way, everything that spirits and angels see around them are correspondences of their dominant interior state or their "ruling love" (see III 527; see also 58, 479). Things are representations of the feelings and thoughts of the angels; they are real or "substantial" appearances in that all things existing in the natural world subsist in the spiritual world in a more perfect form. To a spirit who asked Swedenborg if the differences between "substantial" and "material" (spiritual and natural) is not a simple question of degree, the latter replied:

Such is not the distinction. By no subtilization can the natural so approximate the spiritual as to become the spiritual: for the distinction is like that between the prior and the posterior... For the prior is in the posterior as a cause in its effect; and the posterior is from the prior as an effect is from its cause. Therefore the one is not visible to the other. (TCR 280; see also 38)

The Swedenborgian psychologist Wilson Van Dusen puts it as follows: "Essentially, spirits are affections or feelings, the inner or essential aspects of mind that underlie thought or memory." 79

The idea that people in heaven appear in their "true colors" should be taken literally. The inner human possesses a colorful aura, which at death becomes visible in the spiritual world: "...A man or a soul in the other life is known among angels from his sphere, and...this sphere is represented by colors like those of the rainbow, in variety according to the state of each person relatively...to the goods and merits of faith" (AC 1053; see also 1626, 1627, and HH 178, 183, 186). Angels are literally colorful; they are the colorful faces of the deity, and our earthly faces are but pale reflections of the rainbow of the heavenly colors. According to Ernst Benz, colors constitute essential elements and characteristics of the spiritual corporeality of the heavenly world itself.80 They are not a "chimera" of the creation, but belong to the essence of the divine self-revelation, whose goal is corporeality. Instead of being a diminution and distortion of the pure spirituality of God, corporeality in the theosophic tradition of Christian mysticism "belongs to the consummate nature of God. God is the ens manifestatum sui, the being who presses towards self-revelation, towards self-realization...and this self-revelation presses towards corporeality." 81

Angelomorphosis

The Swedenborgian view of the angelic condition closely parallels the speculations about angels in the Islamic gnosis. According to Corbin, the human soul is individuated not through the union with a physical body (as in Aristotle) but by becoming a perfectly polished mirror of its angel in a strictly one-to-one relation. We realize our virtual angelicity through a progressive illumination attained on earth; we are called, by right of our origin and if we consent, to an angelomorphism.82

Instead of speaking about human nature in general, Corbin raises the problem of "specific individuality," that is, of an individuality that is "no longer subordinated to species but is itself its species, its archetype."83 The virtual angelicity of the human soul postulates "not only numerical individuation within the same species, but an individuality specific in itself."84 This is achieved by the natural desire that exists between the human souls and the angelic archetypes. In Corbin's phrasing, individuation of the soul means that it is "to hear and obey a verde was du bist' (become what thou art).85

For the Gnostics and Swedenborg as well, "mythical experience" is not necessarily a matter of attaining union with an undifferentiated Godhead or the Divine Essence. What a human being is destined to attain is the "Angel, the "Face of the Divine" which is also one's own original "Face" or "the celestial pole" of one's being. As a Sufi saying has it, "He who knows himself [his angel] knows his Lord."

In view of these considerations, the process we described earlier as "dropping of the mask" is in effect an angelomorphosis, a reductio ad modum angelicum, or a transformation of the human into angel. Swedenborg's world of spirits and angels is nothing more nor less than a further theosophic manifestation, an ever more irresistible desire on the part of the Infinite to dispense itself in singular things so as to enable each thing to mirror the whole, to be a "world."

Spatializing: Creating Sacred Space

It might be possible to understand the structure of imaginal space more adequately by relating it to what Martin Heidegger calls a human being's essential tendency to remove distance (Ent fernung), to bring close, to "situate."86 Humans exercise a spatializing function by giving things that they frequently use their place according to the importance they have in life. The various places of space that arise in this way have no relation to geometric space; their hierarchy is determined by the necessity they have for the work to be done. Thus what is "nearest" to us is hardly ever that which has the least distance from us but is rather something that
is “within reach” and available for our preoccupied grasp. Heidegger uses the comparison between our “closeness” to a friend approaching us on the sidewalk, and the sidewalk itself. Objectively speaking, the sidewalk is closer to us than the friend; yet we are not aware of our closeness to the sidewalk at all. This observation, trivial in itself, has far-reaching implications. It seems that a human, instead of being a worldless spirit, is necessarily bound up with existence in space or, more primordially, is already in a world. Space, therefore, is neither subjective nor objective, but rather the result of a person’s spatializing activity; it is a mode of one’s existence in the world.

Now once we accept the ontological status of the imaginal world, there is nothing that prevents us from applying it to the kind of spatializing activity that in principle is not different from the one occurring in the “secular” world of humans. Just as humans spatialize in everyday concernful dealing with things, so do they spatialize “in” the mundus imaginalis, in accordance with the direction of their “ruling love.” It is only that in the latter case their spatializing is, so to speak, more thorough and consistent than usually; there is no possibility of falling back into the geometrical space. One does not return from the mundus imaginalis to this world to wait for another chance, as in the reincarnational hypothesis.

It is also significant that the traveler in the ubiquitous soul-space is said to be unable to indicate the road to others. One can only describe where he or she has been, but cannot show the road to anyone who does not share the “mentality” of the traveler himself. Roads can be shown only because there is distance between the traveler and the traveler’s destination, whereas in the celestial landscape, as Swedenborg said, “all progressions . . . are effected by the changes in the state of interiors” (HH 193), that is, by the “ruling love” of the traveler. The soul itself spatializes, converting geographical destination into her destiny, terrestrial geography into “visionary geography.”

The Sufi illuminatus Shaikh Kermäni points out that a human’s essential body is fashioned according to the extent of one’s knowledge, to one’s capacity to understand, to one’s spiritual consciousness and moral conduct. The more developed one’s spirituality, the subtler also will be one’s essential body. We create for ourselves a dwelling place in proportion to the capacity of our spiritual energy. Just as we create the places of our dreams, so is our environment in the “other” world created by human imagination. Indeed it is only in the imaginal realm that we create the kind of environment that is fully and literally our own (fully human). In Kermäni’s somber and liberating words, “Nobody can ever escape from himself, get out of himself: nobody becomes someone other than himself; nothing becomes other than itself.”

The Center

The great historian and phenomenologist of religion Mircea Eliade has described what he calls the sacred or hierophanic space of archaic religions in terms that seem to corroborate Corbin’s interpretation of Sufi cosmology. According to Eliade, the deepest meaning of sacred space is revealed in the symbolism of the “Center.” The Center has no geographic implications, but it is rather part of what Corbin calls visionary geography. Every inhabited region may have several centers, each of which is called “the center of the world”; it can be associated with sacred trees, rivers, mountains, and sanctuaries and is thought to be the meeting point of three cosmic regions—heaven, earth, and hell. Eliade believes that the multiplication of such centers betrays the nostalgia to be as often as possible near the archetype. Every person tends, even unconsciously (or, to be exact, imaginatively), toward a center, where that person can find sacredness or “reality.” It is “the desire to find oneself always and without effort in the Center of the World, at the heart of reality, and by a short cut and in a natural manner (i.e., in concreto or in a bodily form) to transcend the human condition. . . .”

To use Eliade’s conceptual framework, in the world of imagination we are always at the center of the universe, for our center is where the “ruling love” is. In terms of St. Augustine’s memorable maxim, “amor meus ponatur meum (“my love is my gravity”). We get what we love, because our love is a space-maker, constantly reorganizing and refining the circumstances and the environment of our body. Put differently, each soul is not only at the center of the universe, but is a universe in itself.

In the visionary geography of Iranian Sufism, the hierophanic space bestows a center, which is none other than the spatializing and simulacrum soul. The soul, by being a spatializing agency, is also a centering power. “Hierophancies take place in the soul, not in things. And it is the event of the soul that situates, qualifies, and sacralizes the space in which it is imagined.” The mountaintops of the visionary earth are the mountaintops of the soul. The images of the earth and the images of the soul correspond to one another; as the soul projects the earth, so each physical structure discloses the mode of psychospiritual activity. Put simply: on the visionary plane, spirit and nature are reciprocal realities because the substance of the soul is made of the celestial earth and the celestial earth is made of the substance of the soul. Thus there is far less difference between the “living” and the “dead” than we are accustomed to suppose.
Death

In the traditional Sufi narratives the question is often asked, Where are the faithful believers post mortem? The answer is always the same: They are in bodies that are in the likeness of their material bodies.

Swedenborg's conception of death is summarized by the great philosopher of German romanticism F. W. Schelling in his theology of corporeality. To Schelling death is not so much a separation as an “essentialization,” destroying the contingent and preserving the essential, the most truly human, which is far more real than the fragile physical body. He therefore defends St. Paul's view of resurrection against all “merely rational and sterile doctrines of immortality” and maintains that spiritual corporeality is already present in our material corporeality. Swedenborg points out that the appearance of things in the world of the dead are plastic to the states of mind of the spirits. The spirits are not “fixed and dead,” but are, like images, ever-changing.

Swedenborg teaches that in the physical body of a human there is contained a subtle organism that is extended but lacks the mechanical properties (inertia and weight) characteristic of ordinary matter. This subtle organism—called limbus or nexus—forms the link between body and soul; it persists after death and is one's bodily substance in the postmortem state. Limbus is the intermediate zone between the physical organism and the suprasensory soul, an organizing mold or formative agent serving as the vehicle (Proclus's okhmeta) of forces, which Swedenborg sees as rigorously conditioned by the soul. At death a person sheds the external or the less refined components of his or her physical nature, which become one's “contaminant.” One must be careful not to confuse the limbus with the “spiritual body.” Limbus itself lacks substantial unity; it is entirely plastic and protean and hence neutral in the formal sense.

Having in itself no particular form (amorphous), the limbus has the potential of assuming any form conceived (imagined) by the soul. The morphological human aspect of the limbus derives from the human soul and its power of imagination. In the last analysis, it is imagination that creates for the soul a corporeal vehicle, a spiritual body that in the postmortem states constitutes the whole person. The organic form of a human is the soul itself as it becomes concrete through the tangible matter, which it structures. To fail to realize one's divine image is to die as only a soul can die—by losing one's potential angelicity, one's ultimate archetypal form.

The dead exist in the world of archetypal images. They pass through our world, but we do not see them with our bodily eyes. The mundus imaginis is beyond our world, but it is also invisibly in our world; it is “a description of the outer things which are the apparaenes reales [archetypal im-

ages, or real imaginal bodies] of inner states.”

The figures and events of the mundus imaginis are not what we perceive with our bodily eyes; rather they themselves are the eyes through which we see the world. In a sense, it is the “dead” who enable us to be alive.

Heaven and Hell

All things in the archetypal world are outer manifestations of a person's inner being. “The Paradise of each one is absolutely proper to him. It consists of man's works and actions, which in the other world will appear to him in the form of hauris (voluptuously beautiful women), castles, and verdant trees.” Each person is inside his or her own paradise or, alternatively, inside one's own hell. A Saintly saying echoes this fundamental thesis: “The paradise of the faithful gnostic is his very body and the hell of the man without faith or knowledge is likewise his body itself.”

Hell is essentially a condition of sleep (unconsciousness) in which the person is ignorant of the true nature of sensory perceptions. One is passively subjected to them as though they were material, objective, and unalterable. It is a complete subservience to data (empirical, historical, etc.), to a fact-mongering mentality, and ultimately to the enslaving objectivizations of reason (the “idiot questioner” of William Blake).

The Irish poet W. B. Yeats, in an essay on Swedenborg, says, “So heaven and hell are built always anew and in the hell or heaven ... all are surrounded by scenes and circumstances which are the expression of their natures and the creation of their thought.”

Within the Swedenborgian frame of reference, heaven and hell are not just states of mind but places or spaces created by the mind, or, rather, by imagination. A human being naturally gravitates in the direction of his or her most basic affections and thereby creates the kind of space that corresponds to these affections. The activity of love is what gives the sense of delight; in heaven its activity is with wisdom, and in hell with insanity, but in both cases the activity produces the delight in its subjects. ... If, therefore, you know what delight is, you know what heaven and hell are, and their nature.” (TCR 570).

Like Gautama Buddha, Swedenborg maintains that man builds his own heaven and hell out of the knowledge and experience he obtained here on earth. Every least thing that we have thought, willed, spoken, done, or even heard and seen is engraved in our souls and can never be erased. Physical death in itself, therefore, does not change the human personality. It simply reveals and brings out into the light of open day what we really are in our innermost being.

The Swedenborgian heaven and hell are fully imaginal states inhabited by real people—real as only images can be real—
subtle bodies in which the inner and the outer exactly correspond to each other. It is a dream-world peopled by real dream-bodies, a world of shadows containing the seel forms (archetypal images) of our empirical existence. As a Kalahari Bushman once said: "There is a dream dreaming us." Indeed, it is not only we who imagine our dead relatives and friends in dreams; they too dream and imagine us. We are all dreaming one another’s dreams and are parts of a dream dreaming us.

Notes
9. Ibid., p. 13. In archetypal psychology too, the soul has its own logos, which operates in the poetic and metaphorical mode rather than logically. "The logic of the soul is based on the Platonic insight that the cosmos, no less than man, is a soul-permeated magnitude. From this universal kinship the ancient thinkers derived the postulate that the like is apprehended by the like. Probably it is best expressed in Plotinus (Enneads I.6.9): "For one must come to the light with a seeing power akin and like to what is seen. No eye ever saw the sun without becoming sun-like, nor can a soul see beauty without becoming beautiful."
28. Ibid., pp. 114–15; see also ibid., pp. 97, 98.
32. Ibid., p. 6.
33. Ibid., p. 10, 11.
36. Ibid., p. 30.
42. Ibid., p. 233.
43. Ibid., p. 234; see also ibid., pp. 187, 221.