

The Prophetic Tradition and the Battle for the Soul of the World

An Introduction to the Spiritual Vision of Henry Corbin

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Henry Corbin, Islam and the Imagination

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Introduction

There is a great deal that I want to say in quite a short time by way of introducing Henry Corbin, but I want to take a few seconds to explain my own orientation. I wrote the first book-length study of his work in English, and seem to have become known as something of an authority rather by default because no one else had done it. But I am no scholar and I am certainly not an Orientalist. I cannot possibly be an authority on Corbin, at the very least because I don’t know any of the many languages in which he was fluent. Nonetheless my work has met with some approval among those who do know the world in which he lived, for which I am very grateful.

I first read of Corbin in James Hillman’s 1981 Erano lecture “The Thought of the Heart.” I was so intrigued by what Hillman said of him that I immediately bought *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi* which begins with a brief discussion of phenomenology. It is unlike anything I ever heard in school. On the very first page he writes that “with the help of phenomenology,”

we have learned to register and to make use of the intentions implicit in all the acts of consciousness or transconsciousness. To say that the Imagination (or love, or sympathy, or

any other sentiment) *induces knowledge*, and knowledge of an “object” which is proper to it, no longer smacks of paradox.¹

This seemed a radical transformation of the kind of phenomenology I had been taught. I was both captivated and disoriented and the more I read the more baffled and enmeshed I became. I have spent about 17 years now trying to explain Henry Corbin to myself. I am delighted that my attempt has been useful to others.

A Sketch of a Life

The details of his outer life are as simple and straightforward as one might expect of a man who devoted his entire life to reading, writing and teaching. The great marvels lie in his prodigious output as a scholar and even more in the variety and depth of his interests. It is not easy to keep it all organized in your imagination. Even this brief account is a bit dizzying, and I've left out quite a bit.

He was born in Paris on the 14th of April, 1903. His mother died six days later and he was raised by his aunt and uncle. His health was fragile which often forced interruptions in his studies. Early on he demonstrated the sensitivity to music that is so often evident in his work, and he studied both organ and music theory. At the age of 23 he wrote “The rhythm of music is the rhythm of my soul.” He was educated in the Catholic tradition and in 1925 he took his “licence de philosophie” at the Sorbonne under the great Thomist Étienne Gilson, with a thesis on “Latin Avicennism in the Middle Ages.” In the same year he began studying both Arabic and Sanskrit, initiating what he called a “period of mental asceticism.” Corbin was entranced by Gilson's scholarship and his teaching. In an essay written in the last year of his life Corbin wrote,

This was my first contact with Islamic philosophy. I discovered there a complicity between cosmology and angelology... and this angelological concern has not, I believe, left me my entire life.²

During the same period he attended Emile Bréhier's lectures on the relation between Plotinus and the Upanishads. In 1926 he met with Joseph Hackin, the Director of the National Museum of Asiatic Art. Afterwards Corbin said he was filled with a joyous certainty and “saw the link between my studies of medieval philosophy and Hindu metaphysics.” In 1928 he received the Student Diploma for his work on “Stoicism and Augustinism in the Work of Luis de Leon” the 16th century Spanish theologian.

In 1929 he received his diploma in Arabic, Persian and Turkish. In April he began work at the Bibliotheque Nationale where he met Louis Massignon, director of Islamic Studies at the Sorbonne. Corbin's attraction to the mystical element in oriental studies was confirmed by contact with Massignon. On the 13th of October he paid him a visit and it was no doubt then that Massignon gave him the lithographed copy of Suhrawardi's *Hikmat al-Isbraq* that was to change his life. Corbin's account of the episode in an interview given shortly before his death speaks volumes:

... Massignon had an inspiration from Heaven. He had brought back from a trip to Iran a lithographed edition of the major work of Suhrawardi... With commentaries, it formed a large volume of more than 500 pages. "Take it," he said to me, "I think there is in this book

¹Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, Trans. R. Manheim, Princeton: Princeton/Bollingen Series XCI, 1969, 3.

² *Henry Corbin*, edited by Christian Jambet, Cahier de l'Herne, no. 39. Consacré à Henry Corbin, Paris, 1981, 39.

something for you.' This 'something' was the company of the young Shaykh al-Ishraq, who has not left me my whole life. I had always been a Platonist (in the broad sense of the term); I believe that one is born a Platonist as one is born an atheist, a materialist etc. Unfathomable mystery of pre-existential choices! The young Platonist that I was then could only take fire at contact with the one who was the 'Imam of the Platonists of Persia...' ...through my meeting with Suhrawardi, my spiritual destiny for the passage through this world was sealed. Platonism, expressed in terms of the Zoroastrian angelology of ancient Persia, illuminated the path that I was seeking."³

But his interests extended well beyond the vast landscapes of Platonism, western scholasticism, Zoroastrianism and Islamic mysticism. During the 1920's and the early 1930's he simultaneously pursued studies that in and of themselves would have clearly marked him as a creative and eclectic *Protestant* theologian. He was deeply engaged with the German theological tradition; what he would later call the "lineage of hermeneutics:" Luther, Boehme, Hamann, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Barth. He made several visits to Germany and Scandinavia and lectured and delivered papers on Luther, Kierkegaard and Hamann, whose *Aesthetics in a Nutshell* he also translated. In these same years he was publishing translations of Suhrawardi.

In 1930 a second defining encounter in Corbin's spiritual odyssey took place. This was his reading of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. The two men met for the first time in Freiburg in 1931 and then again in 1934 and 1936.

In 1933, he married the woman who was to be his lifelong companion, Stella Leenhardt, daughter of the pastor and ethnologist Maurice Leenhardt and Jeanne Andre-Michel. In 1939 the Corbin's traveled to Istanbul for what was intended as a six-month stay, to collect manuscripts for a critical edition of Suhrawardi. Corbin served as the only member of the French Institute of Archaeology there until the end of the war. When his replacement arrived in September of 1945, the Corbins traveled to Teheran for the first time. Corbin came to love Iran, which he called a country "the color of heaven." He was to be professor of Islamic philosophy at Teheran University until the end of his life. They returned finally to Paris in July 1946 after an absence of seven years.

In 1949 he first attended the Eranos Conferences in Ascona, Switzerland, where he became a major figure along with C.G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, Gershom Scholem, Adolf Portmann and many others. In 1954 he succeeded Massignon in the Chair of Islam and the Religions of Arabia at the Sorbonne, and it was during the 1950's that the three major works upon which his reputation largely rests in the English-speaking world were first published in French: *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* and *Spiritual Body & Celestial Earth*. His four volume *magnum opus*, still not translated into English, is *En Islam Iranien*, which appeared between 1971 and 1973. From the 1950's on his time was divided among Teheran, Paris, and Ascona. His life was spent teaching, writing and lecturing, and editing Persian and Arabic manuscripts. His published work comprises over 200 critical editions, translations, books and articles. He presented his last paper in June 1978, "Eyes of Flesh, Eyes of Fire: the Science of Gnosis." Here is an excerpt from Stella Corbin's memoir of his final days:

On the 26th of September the doctor authorizes the return to Rue Odéon. Henry, overjoyed, barely sleeps, plans to finish his works, and then, slightly troubled, asks the Doctor: "But do you think I can finish this book?" Dr. Gonnot: "Oh! I know you. Even if you had 100 years ahead of you, you would ask me the same question. You would have yet another urgent book to finish... and many more besides." Corbin replies, "That may well be!

³ *ibid.*, 40-41.

The thing is, you see, with my books, I am struggling against the same thing as you. Each in our own way, you as doctor, and I as historian of religions, are engaged in the same struggle, we are leading a campaign against Death.”⁴

He died on October 7, 1978 at the age of 75 and was buried in the old cemetery in Montmorency, a few miles north of Paris.

The Legacy of Henry Corbin

The Project of a Life

The geography of Corbin’s world is so vast and varied that it is impossible to describe in any short travelogue. And which of the many jewels hidden in the luxuriant and imposing landscapes of his writings will catch your attention depends very much on the path you take, and on who you are. I want to paint in the very broadest strokes the outlines of what I currently see as some of the main features of his vision of reality, and hope this will encourage you to explore the terrain for yourselves. It is a journey well worth the effort.

Henry Corbin is known primarily as a scholar of Islamic mysticism. And he certainly was that – one of the most important of the 20th century. He has been criticized for a kind of over-enthusiasm for his subject, and a partisanship unbecoming a scholar. He has been accused, with good reason as far as I am able to judge, of misrepresenting Ibn ‘Arabi, of overemphasizing the mystical aspects of Suhrawardi’s writings, of seeing Islam through exclusively Shi’ite eyes, of having a somewhat lax attitude towards standards of historical scholarship, and of completely undervaluing the non-mystical aspects of Islam as it is in fact practiced by most believers. If any or all of these things are true, then what makes him the important figure that many people believe that he is? Certainly his scholarly work and the critical editions he produced and sponsored are milestones in the world-history of philosophy and theology. But to appreciate the significance of his vast opus we have to understand what it was he was attempting to do. Only then can we begin to assess the importance of his work.

Corbin was a radical and creative Protestant Christian theologian, philosopher and mystic. His life was lived as a passionate and all-consuming search for the inner meaning of the religions of the Book. He outlined a unified view of the grand sweep of the Prophetic Tradition as a whole - from Zoroaster in the 2nd millennium BCE in the mountains somewhere in Central Asia, to Joseph Smith and the Mormons in the 19th century in the mountains of western North America, and no doubt beyond. He was of course a passionate student of Islamic, and particularly Iranian, mysticism, but his spiritual move towards the East was an integral part of a quest that began long before. Many people who read his works are surprised to say the least, as I certainly was, to find that he was the first French translator of Heidegger. But from Corbin’s perspective there is nothing whatever odd about this. He was immersed in German mysticism and theology, and saw Heidegger’s work as a continuation of the lineage of Biblical hermeneutics that includes Luther, Hamann and Schleiermacher. And he thought that Heidegger’s chief merit lay in making hermeneutics the central task of philosophy, and indeed of human life. But whereas Heidegger tries to do this without reference to transcendence, Corbin sees vistas opening to worlds beyond that Heidegger “had not foreseen.” So from Corbin’s perspective *Being and Time* is a moment in a cross cultural conversation that includes that central concept of Shi’ite hermeneutics, *ta’wil*. And it should be no surprise to hear

⁴ Available at www.amiscorbin.com

that Corbin's copy of this most German text is glossed in Arabic. Dr. S.H. Nasr who taught with Corbin in Teheran has said

Corbin...used to translate *phenomenology*...to the Persian speaking students as *kashf al-mahjub*, literally "rending asunder of the veil to reveal the hidden essence," and considered his method...to be spiritual hermeneutics as understood in classical Sufi and Shi'ite thought.⁵

His attachment to Iranian Shi'ism was profound. Nasr says,

When speaking of Shi'ism, he usually spoke of 'us' and considered himself to be identified with Shi'ism in spirit as well as mind... Corbin displayed an attachment to Shi'ism which was not only that of the usual western scholar engaged in the subject of his research. Rather, it was participation in a spiritual world in which it can be said that Corbin possessed faith.⁶

Yet he was quite aware that there are significant differences between his own faith and that of the traditional believer. He was a proponent of a theology of the Holy Spirit rooted in what he regarded as the common core of the mystical traditions in all of the prophetic religions. His version of Christianity would be unrecognizable to many Christians since he denied the central doctrine of the Incarnation, yet he was not a convert to Islam. He was neither Jew nor Christian nor Muslim but rather something both very ancient and radically new. There is even something "post-modern" in his fondness for the margins of religion and his willingness to effortlessly cross cultural, historical and spiritual boundaries that others find inviolable. But there is nothing "relativistic" or nihilistic in his spirituality. Late in life he said,

To be a philosopher is to take to the road, never settling down in some place of satisfaction with a theory of the world, not even a place of reformation, nor of some illusory transformation of the conditions of this world. It aims for self-transformation, for the inner metamorphosis, which is implied by the notion of a new or spiritual rebirth. The adventure of the mystical philosopher is essentially ... a voyage which progresses towards the Light.⁷

Corbin's project is philosophical and theological, rather than historical and descriptive. He was a phenomenologist of religious consciousness. This sets him apart from many of his peers in Islamic studies. His colleagues are perhaps more likely to be found among the ranks of theologians than orientalist or even philosophers. But even there the company is scarce. As a friend and colleague commented, "He lived in a world in which, he used to say with irony, most of his contemporaries had been dead for a thousand years."⁸ He was a Platonist in a world where such metaphysics has long gone out of style. And his thoroughgoing dislike for historicism made him truly the odd man out in the company of historically minded scholars.

Above all else, Henry Corbin was a partisan of the freedom of the Imagination and an implacable enemy of fundamentalisms and totalitarianisms of all kinds. He stands as a champion of the individual human spirit against the power of social institutions of every sort – religious, scientific, political and academic. His work provides us an example of how we might live the Mosaic prohibition against idolatry. Every time we find a new truth, cling to a new fashion, believe in a new

⁵ Nasr, Hossein, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, 26, n. 13.

⁶ Nasr, Hossein, "Henry Corbin: The Life and Works of the Occidental Exile in Quest of the Orient of Light," Ch. 17, in *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, 1987, Kegan Paul International, London, 28.

⁷ Corbin, Henry *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy*, trans. Joseph Rowe, North Atlantic, Berkeley, 1998, 140.

⁸ Bosnak, Robert, *Tracks in the Wilderness of Dreaming*, New York: Delacorte Press, 1996, 48

idea, a new savior – whether in science, in art, in politics, in the life of the mind, or in religion – we erect another idol. Corbin’s entire metaphysics denies us the false security of putting faith in anything fixed and immobile. The imagination never stops. His message is powerful and urgent:

Idolatry consists in immobilizing oneself before an idol because one sees it as opaque, because one is incapable of discerning in it the hidden invitation that it offers to go beyond it. Hence, the opposite of idolatry would not consist in breaking idols, in practicing a fierce iconoclasm aimed against every inner or external Image; it would rather consist in rendering the idol transparent to the light invested in it. In short, it means transmuting the idol into an icon.⁹

The Major Themes of Corbin’s Thought

Creative Imagination and the Mundus Imaginalis

Corbin’s theory of knowledge centers on the claim that the kind of consciousness that has increasingly dominated Western culture since about the 12th century is characterized by a critical disconnection between thought and being. The rupture came about when the Neoplatonic hierarchies of Avicenna were supplanted by the Aristotelianism of Averroes. The Western world lost its angels, and we have been wandering, as he puts it, “in vagabondage and perdition” ever since. Perhaps the clearest example of the end result of this schism is Descartes’ distinction between extended substance and thinking substance – *res extensa* and *res cogitans*. There are two kinds of things – physical and mental; and two modes of knowing – sense perception and the categories of understanding. Descartes avoided the question of how these two substances could interact by saying essentially that “God does it” somewhere in the pineal gland. That is probably a bit unfair to Descartes, but the fact is that much of Western philosophy has presumed that what we think and how we know has no *ontological* effect on us. The epistemological goal has been to have clear and distinct ideas about the ontologically uniform physical bodies that make up the universe. This is the kind of metaphysics that until the 20th century underwrote science and technology, and in more sophisticated forms it still does.

Corbin rejects this utterly. But there is some truth in Descartes’ claim that God arranges the interaction between the two sources of knowledge, because the phenomena of religious consciousness are indeed known by means of a third source of knowledge that does mediate between sense perception and the intellect. We have primary access to spiritual and religious phenomena, neither through conceptual reason nor through sense data, but rather by means of a third source of knowledge. Corbin says,

between the sense perceptions and the intuitions or categories of the intellect there has remained a void. That which ought to have taken its place between the two, and which in other times and places did occupy this intermediate space, that is to say the Active Imagination, has been left to the poets.¹⁰

⁹ Corbin, Henry “Theophanies and Mirrors: Idols or Icons?” trans. Pratt & Donohue, Spring Journal, 1983, 2.

¹⁰ Corbin, Henry, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi’ite Iran*. Translated by Nancy Pearson. Bollingen Series XCI: 2. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, (5th Printing, 1989, with Prelude to the 2nd Edition,), vii.

There has been no metaphysics in Western thought that has taken the activity of the imagination seriously for a very long time. The 20th century Greek philosopher and psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis puts it this way,

[P]hilosophers almost always start by saying: “I want to see what being is, what reality is. Now, here is a table; what does this table show to me as characteristic of a real being?” No philosopher ever started by saying: “I want to see what being is, what reality is. Now, here is my memory of my dream of last night; what does this show me as characteristic of a real being?” No philosopher ever starts by saying “Let the Requiem of Mozart be a paradigm of being”, and seeing in the physical world a deficient mode of being...¹¹

In the cosmology that Corbin defends, the Imagination provides access to the world where “the conflict between theology and philosophy, between faith and knowledge, between symbol and history, is resolved.”¹² The Imagination is an organ of perception which is required to enact a mode of being and of consciousness. Without it, all the phenomena of religious experience are impossible. It is the means by which we perceive symbols.

The Active Imagination guides, anticipates, molds sensory perception; that is why it transmutes sensory data into symbols. The Burning Bush is only a brushwood fire if it is merely perceived by the sensory organs. In order that Moses may perceive the Burning Bush and hear the Voice calling him 'from the right side of the valley' - in short, in order that there may be a theophany - an organ of trans-sensory perception is needed.¹³

This is a momentous claim. It means that for centuries Western philosophy, and philosophical theology, have lacked the means of making any sense of religion, and art as well, since the imagination has been “abandoned to the poets” who along with all other artists are thereby marginalized and entirely misunderstood by everyone else. A metaphysics that includes the Active Imagination is required to validate the reality and understand the meaning of vast regions of human experience including dreams, visions and the realities of prophetic revelation. The Imagination as an organ of perception gives us access to a realm of real being, an objective world that Corbin came to call the *mundus imaginalis*, the imaginal world. This is his neologism for the Arabic term *alam al'mithal* used by Ibn ‘Arabi and many others.

But the active imagination is also *creative* imagination. The exploration of the subtle realm requires participation between the human and divine and is at once discovery *and* creation. This is yet another instance where the third mode of knowing heals a schism that we have come to think of as normal. This double structure, the *syzygy* between the soul and its divine counterpart, is a central theme of Corbin’s cosmology. And it is in *prayer* that the creative imagination most perfectly accomplishes its role in human life. Corbin tells us

prayer is not a request for something; it is the expression of a mode of being, a means of existing and of *causing to exist*... Prayer is the highest form, the supreme act of the Creative Imagination. By virtue of the sharing of roles, the divine Compassion... is the *Prayer of God*

¹¹ Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Imaginary Creation in the Social Historical Domain”, in: *Disorder and Order. Proceedings of the Stanford International Symposium (Sept. 14-16, 1981)*, Edward P. Livingston, ed., Saratoga: Anma Libri, 1984, 146-161, this is from p. 148. I thank Todd Lawson for drawing my attention to this quote.

¹² *Creative Imagination*, 13.

¹³ *ibid.*, 80.

aspiring to issue forth from his unknownness...whereas the *Prayer of Man* accomplishes this theophany because in it and through it the “Form of God” becomes visible to the heart...¹⁴

The form of God that appears is not of course God “in His essence” – the *Deus absconditus* – but rather is the form which he reveals uniquely to each soul. The individual nature of these theophanies is a constant theme in Corbin’s work. He cites the description of the Transfiguration of Christ in the Gnostic *Acts of Peter*:

...[T]he Apostle Peter evokes the event of the Transfiguration. Of this event, which was visible only to some and, even then, not to their bodily eyes, he can say but one thing: *Talem eum vidi qualem capere potui* (I saw him as I was able to perceive him)... Each time, the soul has attained, or is on the way to attaining, its state of perfect individuation.¹⁵

And it is in this transformation of perception that we find the healing of that great schism that split the West – the rift between thought and being. It is by means of the creative imagination in this specific sense that we discover that the mode of perception depends upon the mode of being of the perceiver. We are changed utterly, *ontologically: in our very being*, by the exercise of the active imagination – and this allows us to see things that we otherwise cannot see. Our great task is “to make ourselves capable of God”¹⁶ The American poet Hilda Doolittle, who wrote as H.D., put it succinctly: “What can be seen is at stake.”¹⁷

It is of course true that all through history there have been defenders of the Imagination, but they have been relegated to the margins of the mainstream culture. Corbin likes to point to mystics, and alchemists and Neoplatonists, and figures like Boehme, Goethe, Henry More and the Cambridge Platonists, Hamann and Swedenborg. There has been a battle to keep alive the realities of the imagination and to combat the rising tide of instrumental rationalism that has overtaken the modern world. Corbin writes,

Our western philosophy has been the theater of what we may call the ‘battle for the Soul of the World. ... Is it a matter of a battle that has finally been lost, the world having lost its soul, a defeat whose consequences weigh upon our modern visions of the world without compensation? If there has been a defeat, a defeat is still not a refutation.¹⁸

Hermeneutics: Ta’wil and the Exegesis of the Soul

The active, creative imagination is an organ of both perception and creation. In so far as we participate in the divine realm, it is creative. To the degree that we are separate creatures, it is perceptive. The organ in question is the heart. And its action is the thought of the heart. Corbin tells us that in the doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabi, and in Sufism in general, the power of the heart is known as *himma*,

a word whose content is perhaps best suggested by the Greek word *enthymesis*, which signifies the act of meditating, conceiving, imagining, projecting, ardently desiring - in other words, of having (something) present in the *thymos* which is vital force, soul, heart, intention,

¹⁴ Corbin, Henry, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, Trans. R. Manheim, Princeton: Princeton University Press, Princeton/Bollingen Series XCI, 1969, 248.

¹⁵ *Avicenna*, 92-93.

¹⁶ *Creative Imagination*, 290, n. 10.

¹⁷ Rothenberg & Joris, v. 2, p. 449, v. 1, p. 378.

¹⁸ *Spiritual Body*, xiv.

thought, desire... [It is] the force of an *intention* so powerful as to project and realize ('essentiate') a being external to the being who conceives the intention...¹⁹

The action of imagination is shared by all of us, and it creates perfectly real images, as in dreams and visions and in waking life as well. These can be given body and a public life through the creation of works of art, or indeed of science. Corbin tells us that for the gnostic however, the force of *himma* is capable of directly creating objects and producing changes in the "outside world," which however are only visible to other mystics. Such events are the domain of parapsychology in the modern world.²⁰

The heart, as the organ of the active imagination "at once produces symbols and apprehends them."²¹ The apprehension, the *reading* and understanding of these symbols is not merely an intellectual exercise but an exegesis that transforms the soul – it is spiritual exegesis, spiritual hermeneutics. Corbin adopts his idea of this hermeneutic act from the Ismaili Shi'ites, and the Arabic word for it is *ta'wil*. He says that it is the central principle in *all* spiritual disciplines. The *ta'wil* is

the mainspring of every spirituality, in the measure to which it furnishes the means of going beyond all conformisms, all servitudes to the letter, all opinions ready-made... [It is] a procedure that engages the entire soul because it brings into play the soul's most secret sources of energy.²²

The action of *ta'wil* "is essential symbolic understanding, the transmutation of everything visible into symbols."²³ It involves "carrying the symbol back," towards the divine ground from which it derives and which it symbolizes. But the energies that drive the reversion to the source carry not only the symbol, but also, in one unified movement of awakening and revelation, the soul of the interpreter: "the *ta'wil* enables men to enter a new world, to accede to a higher plane of being."²⁴ So hermeneutics and ontology are inseparably joined. The schism between thought and being is healed by spiritual hermeneutics. As Corbin is fond of repeating: like can only be known by like. Your mode of understanding corresponds to your mode of being. This is a fundamental precept of alchemy, and Corbin tells us that alchemy is a special case of *ta'wil*.²⁵ It was the first Imam of the Shi'ites who said that Alchemy is itself the sister of Prophecy and thus indispensable for spiritual growth.²⁶ The alchemical operation of the *ta'wil* accomplishes what Mulla Sadra calls the intensification of being, and so transforms the human soul.

We have records of this transformation, Corbin says, in the writings of two Islamic philosophers whose works were central for his own development, the 12th century Persian Suhrawardi, and Avicenna. Both have left short spiritual romances, which Corbin calls *récits*, or visionary recitals. In the cases of these philosophers what we find there is the transformation of rational cosmology into drama, into spiritual poetics as story-telling. Here persons and symbols take the place of abstract ideas. The recitals are the record of the opening of an inner world that reveals the transcendent individuality of the human person. Corbin says of Avicenna's recitals that they reveal a spiritual universe

¹⁹ *Creative Imagination*, 222.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 223.

²¹ *ibid.*, 14.

²² *Avicenna*, 28.

²³ *Creative Imagination*, 13.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 28.

²⁵ "Cyclical Time," 36.

²⁶ *Spiritual Body & Celestial Earth*, xi.

not as an abstract magnitude, transcended by our 'modern' conceptions, but as the repository of an Image that the man Avicenna carries in himself, as each of us also carries his own... Each of us carries in himself the Image of his own world...and projects it into a more or less coherent universe, which becomes the stage on which his destiny is played out. He may not be conscious of it and to that extent he will experience as imposed on himself and on others this world that he himself or others impose on themselves. This is also the situation that remains in force as long as philosophical systems profess to be 'objectively' established. It ceases in proportion to such an acquisition of consciousness as permits the soul triumphantly to pass beyond the circles that held it prisoner.²⁷

This is revolutionary – it turns the world inside out: philosophy, and indeed rational thought of any sort, only reaches its proper culmination in a “rupture” of plane, a profound event of the soul in which the image of reality so carefully and reasonably established is seen finally to be a product of the soul – the soul’s own projection of its own inmost reality. The world is our projection and to become conscious of this and to realize the symbolic and “personal” nature of reality allows us to escape the bondage which so-called objective truths can impose. “Each of us carries in himself the Image of his own world, his *Imago mundi*, and projects it into a more or less coherent universe, which becomes the stage on which his destiny is played out.”

After Freud and Jung we are perhaps accustomed to accepting that our emotional and social lives are permeated by our “projections” – by our maddening and often tragic inability to relate to other people except through the distorting lenses of our internal images of mothers, fathers, sisters, sons and lovers. But Corbin is saying that all our rational schemas and systems are also products of the soul and that even there we have no privileged access to universal objective Truth. C.G. Jung would say that we are always in the psyche, and that psychic contents of all kinds are grounded in instinct – there is a spiritual instinct as there are instincts for food and sex and even philosophy. I am reminded of the great Oxford philosopher FH Bradley who said in the preface to *Appearance & Reality* that “metaphysics is the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct, but the finding of those reasons is no less an instinct.”²⁸ Corbin would have said that such an instinctual philosophy is a necessary prolegomenon to a spiritual struggle that is equally instinctive. The prisoner’s escape is accomplished not by an appeal to an impossible universal Objectivity, but rather by a journey towards self-consciousness that at first appears inward, but opens onto the infinite and personal realm of the soul. He writes,

...[F]or all our esotericists, the interior world designates the spiritual reality of the supersensible universe which, while a spiritual reality, is that which encircles and envelopes the reality of the external world... 'To leave' that which we commonly call the exterior world is an experience not at all 'subjective' but as 'objective' as possible, but it is difficult to transmit this to a spirit wanting to be modern.²⁹

In the spiritual birth that this coming-to-consciousness engenders, the soul finds that it was a stranger in the world in which it had lived, and that now it has come home:

...[I]t is a matter of entering, passing into the interior and, in passing *into the interior* of finding oneself, paradoxically, outside... The relationship involved is essentially that of the external,

²⁷ *Avicenna*, 8.

²⁸ Bradley, F. H. *Appearance and Reality*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1916, xiv.

²⁹ IS, v.1, p. 82

the visible, the exoteric..., and the internal, the invisible, the esoteric, or the natural and the spiritual world. To depart from the *where...is* to leave the external or natural appearances that enclose the hidden realities... This step is made in order for the Stranger, the gnostic, to return *home* - or at least to lead to that return.

But an odd thing happens: once this transition is accomplished, it turns out that henceforth this reality, previously internal and hidden, is revealed to be enveloping, surrounding, containing what was first of all external and visible, since by means of *interiorization* one has *departed* from that *external* reality. Henceforth it is spiritual reality that...contains the reality called material.³⁰

The records of such transitions are the dramas that make up the visionary recitals. I think that is in terms such as these that we may most adequately understand the nature and function of poetry, literature and indeed all art.

If the arts use the kinds of symbolic language that are required to articulate the realities of the soul, then we might benefit from a conception of language that is adequate to this vision. Late in his life Corbin articulated such a sweeping view of the nature of language as it might be understood by those whose lives have been formed by the religions of the Abrahamic tradition:

The drama common to all the 'religions of the Book' ... can be designated as the drama of the "Lost Speech." And this because the whole meaning of their life revolves around the phenomenon of the revealed holy Book, around the true meaning of this Book. If the true meaning of the Book is the interior meaning, hidden under the literal appearance, then from the instant that men fail to recognize or refuse this interior meaning, from that instant they mutilate the unity of the Word... and begin the drama of the 'Lost Speech.'³¹

It is the function of the *ta'wil* as spiritual hermeneutics to recover this Lost Speech. And it is crucial to understand that the "Book" and the "texts" that are at issue encompass all of creation. For the religions of the Book, all of reality can be understood as the word of God. The *ta'wil* operates on more than literal texts. Corbin writes,

The *ta'wil* of texts supposes the *ta'wil* of the soul... Reciprocally the soul takes its departure, accomplishes the *ta'wil* of its true being, by basing itself on a text—text of a book or cosmic text—which its efforts will carry to a transmutation, raise to the rank of a real, but inner and psychic Event.³²

It seems to me that this spiritual vision provides one way to understand the meaning and the function of all artistic acts.

The Paradox of Monotheism

I have somehow managed to get this far without saying anything much about angels. This is partly because I am a little bit wary of them. It is too easy to misunderstand what Corbin means by angels

³⁰ "Mundus Imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imaginal," in *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 6.

³¹ Corbin, Henry, "L'Initiation Ismaélienne ou l'Esoterisme et le Verbe," in *L'Homme et Son Ange: Initiation et Chevalerie Spirituelle*, Paris: Fayard, 1983, 81.

³² *Avicenna*, 31.

and therefore to misinterpret and dismiss this part of his work as hopelessly unsophisticated and tainted by some vague New Age spirituality. But there is nothing unsophisticated about Henry Corbin. And the angels are central to his theology. We have already heard him say "...through my meeting with Suhrawardi, my spiritual destiny for the passage through this world was sealed. Platonism, expressed in terms of the Zoroastrian angelology of ancient Persia, illuminated the path that I was seeking." One way in to his angelic world is to think of Rilke's angels. Corbin, whose knowledge of German theology, philosophy and literature was astonishingly broad and deep, believed that the *Elegies* "formulate exactly, literally" the central themes of the mystic vision which he defended.³³ But let me suggest another way to see what he means. For Corbin the Person is *the first and final reality*. This view of reality is neither idealism nor realism, not materialism, and certainly not historicism, but rather "personalism." The person "can neither be deduced nor explained." He writes,

For us, the first and last *fact*, the initial and final event, are precisely these persons, without whom there could never be anything that we call "event." Hence we must reverse the perspectives of the usual optics, substitute the hermeneutics of the human individual for the pseudodialectic of facts, which today is accepted, everywhere and by every one, as objective evidence... *Hermeneutics as science of the individual* stands in opposition to historical dialectics as alienation of the person.³⁴

But the person, the human individual, must then not be reducible to history or sociology, genetics or physiology, or indeed any subsidiary aspect of reality. The individual can only be amplified, not reduced, and the locus of the amplification towards which the person is to be raised, is the celestial, eternal counterpart, the partner in heaven, the archetype of each of us that guarantees the possibility of our eternal individuality – the locus, the *telos* of that spiritual motion is the Angel.

Each of us has a counterpart in Heaven, and if our access to this essential component of our being is severed, our heart is broken and we are crippled and incomplete. Corbin says of Ibn 'Arabi that he was

and never ceased to be, the disciple of an invisible master, a mysterious prophet figure to whom a number of traditions, both significant and obscure, lend features which relate him or tend to identify him, with Elijah, with St. George, and still others. Ibn 'Arabi was above all the disciple of Khidr.³⁵

Few of us are powerful enough or graced enough to have easy access to our personal guide, but we all have one. And Khidr is one manifestation of this figure. The function of Khidr is

to reveal each disciple to himself... He leads each disciple to his own theophany...because that theophany corresponds to his own 'inner heaven,' to the form of his own being, to his eternal individuality... Khidr's mission consists in enabling you to attain to the 'Khidr of your being,' for it is in this inner depth, in this 'prophet of your being,' that springs the Water of Life at the foot of the mystic Sinai, pole of the microcosm, center of the world."³⁶

³³ Corbin, "Destin comparé de la philosophie iranienne après Averroës," in *Philosophie iranienne et philosophie comparé*, Teheran: Académie Impériale Iranienne de Philosophie, 1977, 136.

³⁴ "The Time of Eranos," in Joseph Campbell (Ed.) *Man and Time: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1957, xiv-xv, xvii. My italics.

³⁵ *Creative Imagination*, 32

³⁶ *ibid.*, 61.

Perhaps the main feature to emphasize about this archetypal person is the erasure of the hard and fast distinction between polytheism and monotheism. We have instead what Corbin called *kathenotheism*, a term he borrowed from Max Müller, for whom it meant the worship of one god at a time in the religions of the Vedas. For Corbin it means that the Angel of humanity, often appearing as the Angel Gabriel, can only appear uniquely to each human soul and never as a literal King ruling over a collective, institutional “church.” This underlies Corbin’s Angel Christology. He denied the doctrine of the Incarnation, making him a difficult figure for most Christians to warm up to. Recall the *Acts of Peter*. The apostle speaks to a group of the faithful of the Transfiguration he had witnessed on Mount Tabor. All he can say of it is “I saw him in such a form as I was able to take in.” As they began to pray Peter told them to perceive in their mind what they do not see with their eyes. The hall became filled with an invisible light that shone into the eyes of some women who stood amidst the prostrate group. When they were later asked what they saw, some said an old man, others a youth, still others a child.³⁷ This phenomenon lies at the heart of Corbin’s theology. It tells of the phenomenological manifestation of that central theme in all Corbin’s work, which he calls the paradox of monotheism. The paradox is this, put simply: the single, unique Supreme God can only appear by means of a multitude of theophanic forms. You can never have the God beyond God, only the form of God that is revealed to you. We are to conceive of the Uniqueness of God, as a *verbal* description. God is the Unique because God *singularizes* each thing He touches – He is unique in the sense that He makes each thing and each person unique. To do this He must infinitely pluralize and scatter Himself in the manifold individuals of creation. Paradoxically this relativizes without denying the absolute nature of the theophanies. This much at least Corbin seems to have derived directly from Ibn ‘Arabi. William Chittick, who as many of you will know is one of the premier scholars of Ibn ‘Arabi in the West, puts it this way:

[Ibn ‘Arabi] affirms an ultimate ground that must present itself through relativity and, more important for human destiny, he stresses the personal dimension of this absolute ground, a dimension that is oriented towards human happiness. In short the Shaykh provides a way of seeing religious teachings as both historically relative and personally absolute.³⁸

It should be said though that Corbin’s democratization of the traditions goes further and is more liberal in modern terms than Ibn ‘Arabi would ever have countenanced. Corbin distances himself wherever possible from those in any tradition whom he calls the Doctors of the Law and his version of Ibn ‘Arabi ignores or at least minimizes any references to the literal dictates of the Holy Book.

Harmonia Abrahamica

I think it is fair to say that all Corbin’s work was at root devoted to illustrating deep commonalities between the mystical and often heretical traditions within Christianity and Islam, and of both with similar movements in Judaism. This effort he understood as akin to the attempts of early Christian interpreters to reconcile the stories in the four canonical Gospels. The original work of harmonization written by Tatian in the 2nd century took its name from Greek musical theory: his *Diatessaron* means “according to four.” The traditional name for the underlying unity of the Gospels is the *Harmonia evangelica*. Corbin suggests that his own work is based upon an underlying *Harmonia Abrahamica*. This requires a Christology radically different from the one that became dogma. It

³⁷ “Divine Epiphany and Spiritual Birth in Ismailian Gnosis,” in *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*. Trans. R. Manheim, J. Morris, London: Kegan Paul International, 1983

³⁸ William Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity*, SUNY Press, Albany, 1994, 11.

requires a return to the Christology of the Ebionites, who had no doctrine of the Trinity, or of the substantial union of the divine and human in Jesus. For these Jewish-Christians, Jesus was a manifestation of the celestial Son of Man, the *Christos Angelos*, who was consecrated as Christ at his baptism. Jesus then takes his place in the lineage of the True Prophets. Corbin writes

for Ebionite Christianity...sacred history, the hierology of humanity, is constituted by the successive manifestations...of the celestial *Anthropos*, of the eternal *Adam-Christos* who is the prophet of Truth, the True Prophet. We count seven of these manifestations, eight if we include the terrestrial person of Adam himself. They are Adam, Noah, Enoch, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jesus... . The fundamental basis of this prophetology is therefore the idea of the True Prophet who is the celestial *Anthropos*, the *Christus aeternus*, hastening from christophany to christophany 'toward the place of his repose.' Now, this is the same structure that Islamic prophetology presents, with this difference, that the succession of christophanies is no longer completed with the prophet Jesus of Nazareth, but with the prophet of Islam, the 'Seal of the Prophets' whose coming Jesus himself announced, and who is the 'recapitulation' of all the prophets... .³⁹

Among the Shi'ites the Hidden Imam is sometimes identified with the Paraclete in the Gospel of John as the final manifestation of the True Prophet, the central figure of the Eternal Gospel. Corbin's Johannine Christianity, lacking the doctrine of the Incarnation and accepting the Hidden Imam as one manifestation of the Holy Spirit would not stop even there, but is in principle eternally open to the influx of the Spirit wherever it may appear.

At Eranos in 1965 Corbin invoked Schleiermacher in a passage that for me both summarizes the spirit of his theology and holds open a future in which we may hope to see it realized,

[I]f ... a general theology of religions is necessary and conceivable...[i]t is not feasible... except as a theology... of the Paraclete... Schleiermacher professes that if...the Sacred Scriptures, the Bible, have come to be considered a closed code of religion, it is because it has been claimed that limits can be imposed on the boundless freedom of the Holy Spirit. ... In contrast, Schleiermacher proclaims: "...The Sacred Scriptures became the Bible by means of their own power; they do not forbid any other book to be or to become the Bible; they would willingly allow anything written with the same power to be added." This page of Schleiermacher could be the charter of all future comparative spiritual hermeneutics.⁴⁰

The Sacred Scriptures as a whole are open-ended – *they* would willingly allow anything written with the same power to be added to the canon. A theology of the Spirit, of the Paraclete, the Hidden Imam, undermines the foundations of the towers that every religion builds – towers that are built in praise of and devotion to the One God, but always end by serving as fortresses defending the Single Vision, the One True Path. The religions of the book depend for their existence as creative sources of human life and society on the continuous presence and creative action of the Holy Spirit who must appear as the always unique angel of the individual human soul.

³⁹ "Harmonia Abrahamica," preface to *Évangile de Barnabé: Recherches sur la composition et l'origine*, par Luigi Cirillo, *Texte et Traduction* par Luigi Cirillo and Michel Frémaux, Éditions Beauchesne, Paris, 1977, 11.

⁴⁰ "Comparative spiritual Hermeneutics," in *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, trans by L. Fox. West Chester, Swedenborg Foundation, 1995, 132-134.

We must hope that Corbin's passionate plea that we listen for the hidden harmonies that bind together the people of the religions of the Book will never be entirely drowned out by the voices of those who would have all humanity speak with a single, all-powerful and dominating voice.