

# The Theory of Visionary Knowledge in Islamic Philosophy

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The visionary literature of Islam, both Arabic and Persian, is considerable. The versions and commentaries which exist of the *Mi'rāj*, of the Prophet's celestial assumption on the night of that visionary experience which all Islamic mystics have aspired to reproduce and to relive – these versions and their variants alone run to considerable numbers. From the Shiite point of view, there is in addition a vast body of visionary literature relating to the appearances of each of the twelve Imams and of her who is the originator of their line, the Prophet's daughter Fatima.<sup>1</sup>

However, this is not an aspect on which I can dwell in the present short essay. The question to be asked, solely and essentially, is how the visionary fact itself appears to certain Islamic thinkers, how they explain it, and how it is that they do not question what we call the objectivity of these facts, even though it is an objectivity different from that which is commonly designated such by our human sciences.

From the start, Islamic prophetology postulates and expresses a gnosiology, a doctrine of knowledge which must be taken into consideration before embarking on any enquiry into the phenomenology of visionary experience among the Islamic spirituals. The reason for this is that Islam, youngest of the three branches of the Abrahamic tradition, is essentially a prophetic religion, and it inherited the theology of the *Verus Propheta* which was professed by early Judaeo-Christianity. The influence of this inheritance is still evident in Shiism, where Imamology is the necessary complement of prophetology and raises problems which are inherited from Christology.

The necessity we speak of arises because the conviction which characterises our Islamic philosophers, especially in Iranian Islamic philosophy, is that the Angel of knowledge and the Angel of revelation

are one and the same Angel, designated in the Koran as Gabriel and as the Holy Spirit. The theory of knowledge that Avicenna and Suhrawardi inherited from the Greek philosophers underwent a transposition in relation to their prophetic philosophy, which enabled it to account simultaneously for the revelation vouchsafed to the prophets, for the inspiration imparted to the holy Imams, and for the knowledge imparted to the philosophers. The work of Suhrawardi in the twelfth century is especially significant in this connection, and is echoed by the ecstatic confessions and doctrines of Ibn 'Arabī in the thirteenth century. To this the work of Mullā Sadrā Shīrāzi (seventeenth century) in Ispahan and Shiraz provides the necessary complement. Finally, the Shaikhie School at Kerman, during the last century and even today, has continued to contribute in a profound and original manner to the theory of visionary knowledge, to what we might call visionary optics. These are the great themes with which I will be concerned in the course of this brief talk.

The body of *hadīth* or Shiite traditions contains the most comprehensive account, giving rise to equally lengthy commentaries, of the gnosiology postulated by the concept of *nubuwwat*, the prophetic vocation or mission. There exists among others a long lesson on this theme, given by the sixth Imam Ja'far al-Sādiq.<sup>2</sup> The condition of *nabī* or prophet consists of four levels, from that of the *nabī* pure and simple, herald of a didactic prophecy, to that of the messenger *nabī* (*mursal*), and, most important, that of messenger *nabī* (*rasūl*) as the herald of a legislative prophecy – that is to say, the *nabī* who is charged with revealing a new Book, a new religious Law. The prophetic revelation thus comprises six great periods: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad – seven if we include David, the psalmist king. We should remember that in practice, the condition designated in Shiism as *walī Allāh*, the Friend of God (the word 'saint' is inadequate) is equivalent to the spiritual condition of the ancient *nabis* of Israel, who were not charged with the mission of revealing a Book. The *walayāt* which invests the Friend of God is defined as the inner, esoteric aspect of the prophetic message.

To each of these levels of *nabī* there corresponds a mode of visionary knowledge, characterizing his vocation. The two first levels of *nabī*, who are not messengers, communicate with the *Malakūt* or spiritual world in dreams. This communication may take the form of a vision, or it may

simply consist of hearing, of the perception of a voice unaccompanied by the perception of the face and form of the celestial speaker. In principle, this was also the mode of visionary perception granted to the holy Imams of Shiism. The messenger *nabī*, *mursal* as well as *rasūl*, is distinguished by the fact that he is able to have visual and auditory perception of the Angel not only in dreams but also in a state of waking – or, as it is probably more accurate to say, in the intermediary state between sleeping and waking. On this foundation, the Shiite philosophers (Sadrā Shīrāzī, Qāzī Sa'īd Qummī, and others) built up a complex system of prophetic gnosiology, examining in detail the conditions of vision, the organ of visionary perception, and the 'place' where the visionary event occurs, literally 'where it takes place'. This is why we believe that their enquiries constitute as it were the first chapter of any phenomenology of visionary awareness in Islam, and by this I mean the actions whereby the human being is aware of entry into another world, a world that we will call the *Malakūt*. These entries into another world are facts to which the visionaries of Judaism as well as of Christianity and Islam bear witness, and the task of phenomenology is to demonstrate the validity of their testimony. All so-called positive critiques, therefore, which postulate or conclude with the nullity of vision, are destructive of the very *phenomenon* which they are concerned with 'establishing', and they remain, quite simply, alien to it.

On the other hand, and for the fundamental reason which I have explained, a work of Islamic philosophy always ends with an account, occupying at least the final chapter, of this essential theme of 'prophetic philosophy', of which the Arabic term *hikmat nabawwīya* is an exact rendering. A distinguished, not to say pioneering, position in the tradition of this prophetic philosophy is occupied, it seems to us, by the person and work of Shihābuddīn Yahyā Suhrawardī, known as the *Shaykh al-Ishrāq*, through whom the existence of an Iranian Islamic philosophy properly speaking was assured.

Suhrawardī came from Azerbaidjan (the Arabicised form of the name of the north-eastern province, which is nowadays called by its old Iranian name of Azerābādḡān, the country of the Temple of Fire). His boldness led to his death as a martyr for his cause at the age of thirty-six, at Aleppo, on the 29th July 1191. In spite of his premature departure from this world, in the flower of his youth, the work he left behind him is substantial enough for its main themes to be distinguished with ease,

and for us to understand the influence it has continued to exercise in Iran up to the present day. The philosopher refers over and over again in his work to his great life project, which is deliberately and unabashedly outlined in one of his treatises. This project was the reviving of the philosophy of Light professed by the Sages of ancient Persia – a project, as he was well aware, in which he had no predecessor.<sup>3</sup> This is the first distinguishing aspect of this doctrine.

The second distinguishing aspect is the fact that he considers philosophical inquiry as inseparable from spiritual experience, particularly the mystical experience known as *ta'alluh*, which is the equivalent in Arabic of the Greek *theosis*. A philosophy which does not lead to spiritual fulfilment is a fruitless waste of time; yet mystical experience which is not founded on a solid philosophical education is open to all the vagaries of what goes today by the name of schizophrenia.

Broadly speaking, these are the two characteristics of Suhrawardī's doctrine of the *Ishrāq*. The word signifies the light of the star when it rises in its 'Orient', and it qualifies such knowledge as 'oriental' (*ishrāqī*), of which the nearest Latin equivalent is *cognitio matutina*. Traditionally, the catalogues oppose the 'Orientals' to the Peripatetics (the *Mash-sha'ūn*), and consider them the 'Platonists of Persia', the *Ishrāqīyān-e Irān*.

The second of these two characteristics bears out immediately the identification, mentioned at the beginning, between the active Intelligence of the philosophers and the figure from the archangelic pleroma who is known to the theological tradition as Gabriel, the Angel of revelation. To see in this identification anything resembling a rationalisation of the Spirit is totally to misunderstand the significance of the Arabic terms 'Aql (the equivalent of the Greek *Nous*, Intelligence) and Rūh (Spirit). It is actually the concept of the Word (*Kalimā*) in Suhrawardī which effects the union between the Angel of knowledge and the Angel of revelation, enabling us to see them as one and the same figure. This figure is known by other names, especially by the Persian name of *Jāvidān Kharad*, the literal equivalent of *Sophia aeterna*.<sup>4</sup> We should recall here that the faithful lovers surrounding Dante spoke of 'Madonna Intelligenza', who is not to be confused with the 'Goddess Reason'.

Through this identification of the Angel of knowledge with the Angel of revelation, the theory of visionary knowledge which is imparted to prophets and mystics is shown to be inseparable from the gnosiology postulated by the philosophers; for the same Angel or Holy Spirit leads

prophets and philosophers alike to the attainment of that supreme condition of the intellect of the human soul which is designated by the term *'aql qudsī, intellectus sanctus*. It follows that any attempt to impose upon Islamic philosophy a conception and a limit which deprive it of all that is nowadays considered irrational or trans-rational, amounts to a brutal mutilation of this philosophy, the imposition on it of a concept originating, perhaps, in the 'Age of Enlightenment' (*Aufklärung*), but which is out of context here. In the absence of this concept, we are in a better position to understand the schematisations which associate the vocations of philosopher and prophet, as in the work of the seventeenth century Iranian philosopher, Mir Abū'l-Qāsim Fendereskī, and of many others.<sup>5</sup>

In this way, the second distinguishing aspect of *Ishrāq* makes us aware of the context within which the theory of visionary knowledge takes place. The first distinguishing aspect of the doctrine – the return, as we observed above, to the Sages of ancient Persia – brings us to the same conclusion. What the Shaykh al-*Ishrāq* actually envisages when speaking of the philosophy of Light of the ancient Persian Sages is the doctrine practised by a community of Chosen people who are different from the dualist Magi. This community centres on the line of the ecstatic sovereigns of ancient Iran, part of the Kayanid dynasty, which is of interest in that it oversteps the boundaries of chronology. Its greatest representatives are Fereydūn and Kay Khusraw,<sup>6</sup> after whom the *Khusrawāniyūn* are so named. These gnostics and visionary Sages were seen by our Shaykh as the precursors of the *Ishraqiyūn*, 'Oriental' philosophers in the metaphysical sense of the word.

Two new points emerge here which are of capital importance for our inquiry. The first of these is that the vision vouchsafed to these ecstatic sovereigns of ancient Persia was the vision of the Light of Glory which is designated in the Avesta by the term *Xvarnah* (Persian *Khurrah*). In this *Xvarnah* or Light of Glory, Suhrawardī perceives what he elsewhere calls the *Sakina*, the equivalent in Arabic of the Hebrew *Shekhina*. The *Sakina* is the descent of the divine Lights into the soul-temple of the mystic, there to dwell forever. The second point is the conjunction of the *Xvarnah* with the 'Muhammadan Light' (*Nūr muhammadi*), whose transmission from prophet to prophet in Islamic prophetology corresponds to the epiphanies of the *Verus Propheta* in Judaeo-Christian prophetology. Iranian prophetism is thus integrated to Semitic prophetism,

both Biblical and Koranic. The significance of these two points cannot be overestimated in any account of the integral heritage of the Abrahamic prophetic tradition.

Such is the background from which the *ishraqī* doctrine of visionary knowledge, or hierognosis, emerges. Its two distinguishing aspects make it plain to us why one of Suhravardī's main concerns was the establishment of a cosmology and an anthropology in which an essential, even a dominant, position would be occupied by the optics of vision, since it fulfils an indispensable function. Hence his continual concern to establish the ontology of the three worlds, designated respectively as the *Jabarūt*, the world of pure cherubic Intelligences; the *Malakūt*, the intermediary world of the Soul; and the *Mulk*, the material world of sense perception.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, these three worlds are designated respectively as the world of the 'greater Words', the pure Intelligences – the *Angeli intellectuales* of Latin Avicennan tradition; the world of the 'intermediary Words', the *Angeli* or *Animae caelestes*; and the world of the 'lesser Words', the human souls.<sup>8</sup> Of these three worlds, the intermediary world of the *Malakūt*, of the Soul, plays an essential part in the theory of visionary knowledge. The world of the Soul is intermediary between our world of sense perception and the higher world of the *Jabarūt*, of the pure archangelic Intelligences. The means whereby we may penetrate this intermediary world is neither through the faculties of sensible perception, nor through the *virtus intellectualis*, but is properly through the active Imagination. Similarly, the *Animae caelestes*, who do not possess sensible perception, possess pure imaginative perception.

Suhravardī has different names for this intermediary world, which is properly that of visionary knowledge. It is the 'eighth clime' in relation to the seven climes known to classical geography. It is designated by a Persian term coined by Suhravardī: *Nā-kujā-ābād*, the country of Non-where – not a utopia but a real country, a real place, which nevertheless cannot be placed or located in any clime of the world which is accessible to external perception.<sup>9</sup> It is also the 'meeting-place of the two seas' (Koran 18:60), the sea of the senses and the sea of the intellect. Even more commonly, it is called the *'ālam al-mithāl*, which I have had to translate by the Latin *mundus imaginalis* in order to avoid any confusion of its imaginal reality with the unreality of the imaginary.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the dual aspect of the function of the active Imagination as

perceived by Suhravardī leads to the differentiation, established by Paracelsus, between the *Imaginatio vera* of the visionary contemplatives in the true sense of the word, and the 'phantasy' (*Phantasey*) which is the touchstone of madness. The *mundus imaginalis* is not the world of phantoms shown on the cinema screen, but the world of 'subtle bodies', the world of the sensible-spiritual.

In this way, Suhravardī set himself the task of ensuring the ontological status due to the *mundus imaginalis*, because he was well aware that if this world were to disappear, if all trace of it were lost, then all the visions of the prophets, all the visionary experiences of the mystics, and all the events of the Resurrection would lose their place – would literally 'have no place', because their place is neither the sensible world nor the intelligible world, but the intermediary world, the 'eighth clime', the world where the corporeal is spiritualised and the spiritual takes on body. The disappearance of this world resulted, for example, in the disappearance, with the advent of Averroism, of the hierarchy of the *Animae caelestes*. Once this world has disappeared, we are reduced to making an *allegory* of it, because *eo ipso* the function of the active Imagination has been degraded and reduced merely to the production of what is imaginary. For this reason, the ontology of the *mundus imaginalis*, as the world of visions and of visionary experiences, induced the Shaykh al-Ishrāq to found a metaphysics of the Imagination which was later expanded by Mullā Sadrā Shirāzī, the great *ishraqī* philosopher of seventeenth century Ispahan. In short, the ontology of the *imaginal world* presupposes a metaphysics of the active Imagination, and in the absence of such a metaphysics there can be no theory of visionary knowledge.

This metaphysics of the active Imagination finds expression in a schema which derives from the Aristotelian schema of the faculties of the soul, although it differs from it in that Aristotle probably did not have in mind a theory of prophetic knowledge as visionary experience. Furthermore, in his great 'Book of Oriental Theosophy' (*Hikmat al-Ishrāq*), Suhravardī simplified the schema by reducing – rightly – the representative or passive imagination, the estimative faculty, and the active Imagination to one faculty possessing different functions. This reduction had been preceded by a phenomenology of the *sensorium* (the *hiss mushtarik*), in which the latter is described as a mirror which reflects both the images deriving from sense perception and the images

proceeding from the perception of the *intellectus sanctus* ('intellective images', 'amthila 'aqliya or metaphysical images). This also illustrates the ambiguity of the active Imagination, the dual function which Suhrawardi was so careful to distinguish, since on it depended the very validity of visionary perception and experience.

The *sensorium* is the inner sense upon which all the perceptions of the external senses converge. In its representative and passive capacity, the imagination is merely the treasury in which are preserved the images projected onto the *sensorium*, as onto a mirror, by the perceptions of sense. In its active capacity as *virtus combinativa*, the Imagination is as it were caught between two fires, and becomes itself an in-between. It can serve the so-called estimative (*wahm*) faculty which animals also possess, but which in man's case compels him to make judgements contrary to the demands of the intellect. Reduced to this level, the active Imagination can produce only what is imaginary, fantastic, or even absurd. On the other hand, when it serves the intellect or *Nous*, it is called *mufakkira*, meaning cogitative or meditative. It is the means of entry into the reality of the *mundus imaginalis*, the place of prophetic visions, the level at which visionary perceptions occur. It too projects images onto the *sensorium* – no longer imitative images (*muhākāt*) of sense perceptions, but of the pure intelligible world. These intellective or metaphysical images are in correspondence with the invisible forms of the *Jabarūt*, and make it possible to have visionary perception of them.

The *sensorium*, therefore, being a mirror, ensures not only the 'objectivity' of the images formed as a result of sense perception, but also that of the images arising from supra-sensible perception. This mirror phenomenon leads our philosophers to express themselves in terms of mystical catoptrics,<sup>11</sup> the consequences of which are far-reaching. What may prevent the occurrence of the mirror phenomenon? What may prevent this mirror from reflecting the images of the supra-sensible world? It is, of course, possible for the external senses to keep the *sensorium* entirely occupied with the objects of sense perception, as in the case of the majority of men. Nevertheless, even when the active Imagination is serving the intellect, two cases may arise: that of the philosopher and that of the prophet. In the case of the philosopher,<sup>12</sup> the intellect retains only the mental vision of the forms, without their imitative images being projected onto the *sensorium*. In the



case of the prophet, the forms contemplated are the same, but their imitative images are projected onto the mirror of the *sensorium* in such a way that they become so many events in the life of the soul. It may be said that there is all the difference in the world between these two; but it must not be forgotten that in the conception of Suhravardī and the Ishrāqīyun, the perfect Sage is he in whom the *intellectus sanctus*, illuminated by the Angel-Holy Spirit, is able to combine the vision of the prophet with that of the philosopher. Such a man is truly the Sage of God, the *theosophos*.

In short, we should bear in mind that there is a double symmetrical movement, a fact which led Suhravardī to characterise the active Imagination by the symbol of steam, because steam is both fire and water. The active Imagination fulfils a double function: it causes the sensible to rise to the imaginal state, and it causes the purely intelligible to descend to it. It rarefies and condenses, spiritualises and makes corporeal; and this is what is meant by *caro spiritualis*.<sup>13</sup> To use a word which is current today, we could say that there occurs an *anamorphosis* to the level of the *mundus imaginalis*. This is so when the active Imagination is at the service of the *intellectus sanctus*. But as we know, it is threatened by an ambiguity. Instead of being the instrument of the supra-sensible *mundus imaginalis*, it may remain enslaved to the sensible world and its frenzies. Suhravardī described this ambiguity in terms of arresting symbolism. When serving the *intellectus sanctus*, the active Imagination is the 'blessed Tree' mentioned in the Koranic verse of the Light (24:35). Belonging 'neither to the East nor to the West', it is neither purely intellectual nor purely material. It is the Tree which springs on the summit of Sinai (23:30), the Tree whose fruits are those divine sciences which, says the Shaykh al-Ishrāq, are the 'bread of the soul' as well as the 'bread of the Angels'. This tree is in fact the Burning Bush whose call was heard by Moses in the blessed valley (28:30)<sup>14</sup>, and in which blazed the Angel-Holy Spirit of Revelation. On the other hand, when the Imagination continues to be a slave to the estimative faculty, it is the 'cursed Tree' (17:62), the Iblis-Satan of the soul,<sup>15</sup> he who refuses to bow down before God's Word and caliph, who induces the soul to deny the realities of the spiritual world and to wander in the realm of the imaginary – in short, the 'demon of agnosticism'. In this way, the valorisation of the active Imagination in its spiritual capacity is perfectly balanced by a warning.

In identifying the visionary Imagination with the Burning Bush, Suhrawardī points to the source of all perceptions and visions of the immaterial Lights and beings of light. The soul itself becomes this Burning Bush through the fiery presence of the Sakina. Reference should be made here to the descriptions of photisms which occur in almost all the works written by our Shaikh. Sometimes the tone is one of peace: 'The prophets and great mystical theosophers', he says, 'can have knowledge of supra-sensible things while in a state of waking . . . The appearance shown to them can penetrate to the sensorium and hold most delightful converse with them, manifesting itself to them as the most lovely and noble of forms . . . Sometimes they hear someone's voice without seeing the speaker. All these', he says, 'are figures which enter the active Imagination, and which are communicated to the sensorium through the active Imagination.'<sup>16</sup> At times, too, the tone is somewhat dramatic. The visionary, recalling verse 27:63,<sup>17</sup> speaks of the violent wind which precedes the visitation of the luminous host, heralded by the lightning of the *Ishrāq*.<sup>18</sup> Needless to say, all this takes place in the *mundus imaginalis*.

We should now trace the visionary topography of this *mundus imaginalis* in the vast work of Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabī (1240), perhaps the greatest visionary theosopher of all time. There could be no better introduction to this work than what we have just learned of the doctrine of the Shaykh al-*Ishrāq*, for the metaphysics of the Imagination in Ibn 'Arabī is an extension, in more ways than one, of Suhrawardī's, and of it only a brief glimpse can be given in the book that we have devoted to him.\* For him, too, the science of the visionary Imagination arises from the science of mirrors, from mystical catoptrics. He postulated the difference between *muttasil* imagination, united with and immanent within man, and *munfasil* imagination, separable and autonomous, which is the *mundus imaginalis* of the *Malakūt*. 'Absolute Imagination' is the union of the two.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to the simple representative imagination, corresponding to the imagination which is subject to the estimative faculty (*wahm*) and which contains only that which is imaginary, 'the heart's concentration (*himma*) creates something which exists outside the seat of this faculty'.<sup>20</sup> When Ibn 'Arabī uses the word 'creates' in this manner, the

\*Suhrawardī: *L'Archange Empourpré*, Fayard, 1976.

expression in no way connotes the idea of an illusory fiction or of hallucination. It connotes essentially the union, the interdependence which allies them to each other, of the personal Lord (*Rabb*) and him whose personal Lord he is (the *marbūb*). The *Rabb* is not the *Absconditum*. He is at the level of the third theophany in the cosmogony of Ibn 'Arabī. The interdependence of *rabb* and *marbūb* is what the Shaykh al-Akbar calls the *sirr al-rubūbiya*, the secret of the condition of divine lordship. This secret, as such, is the secret of theophanic visions and of all visionary experiences. It corresponds to the arresting phrase which comes in the 'Acts of Peter': *Eum talem vidi qualem capere potui*. I saw him such as it lay within my power to comprehend him.<sup>21</sup> This power in Ibn 'Arabī is revealed in the course of many densely-written pages: recitals of entry into the *mundus imaginis*, sight of the Temple in its spiritual dimension, and many more.<sup>22</sup>

We have already mentioned Mullā Sadrā Shirāzī (1640), the most celebrated exponent of the School of Ispahan in seventeenth century Iran. He was an *ishrāqī* thinker who was steeped in the thought of Suhrawardī (whom he commentated at length), in the meditation of the Shiite traditions of the holy Imams, and in the reading of Ibn 'Arabī. I will only refer here to one of his favourite theses, which he defended particularly in his great commentary on the corpus of Kulaynī's Shiite traditions: the Imagination is a spiritual faculty which does not perish with the physical organism, because it is independent of this organism and because it is as it were the subtle body of the soul.<sup>23</sup> It is easy to perceive the importance of this thesis in relation to the phenomenology of visionary awareness.

Now, this thesis accords with the thesis upheld previously by John Philoponus in his commentary on Aristotle's treatise *De Anima*. John Philoponus considered the *sensorium* itself to be incorporeal and as constituting the spiritual subtle body.<sup>24</sup> Without underestimating the differences between the School of Ispahan and the School of Kerman in south-eastern Iran, whose shaikhs have carried on the teaching of Shaikh Ahmad Ahsā'ī (1824) throughout the nineteenth century and down to our day, we may observe that in the case of the latter the subtle body plays a similar part in the phenomenology of visionary experience.

All the shaikhs of this School were prolific, rivalling Ibn 'Arabī in the quantity and scope of their works. A lifetime would be barely long

enough to assimilate them in their entirety! To end this brief account, I must not omit to mention an important work which Muhammad Karīm-Khān Kermānī (1870) devoted to visionary optics, the science of visions. This work, written in Arabic, was expanded in Persian by the author's own son and successor, Muhammad Khān-Kermānī (1906), during a teaching session given to the *shaikhie madrasah* which lasted for several years. Together the two works, which are inseparable from each other, cover a total of more than 1,300 pages in large format in -8°. <sup>25</sup> And this is only one work among many others written by our shaikhs.

I will quote here only a few important lines from this great work on the science of visions. We read: 'the *sensorium* is the Imagination itself (*bintāsiyā*, *phantasis*), that is to say, the subtle body which belongs to the world of Hūrḡalyā'. <sup>26</sup> This subtle body which derives from the mystical city of Hūrḡalyā has been the subject of lengthy research on my part, because it is a characteristic thesis of the *shaikhie* School. Even more than with John Philoponus, it accords with the thesis found in Proclus of the *okhēma*, the subtle vehicle of the soul. <sup>27</sup> This imperishable subtle body is made up of a handful of each of the heavens of the subtle world or *Malakūt*, from its Earth to its Throne, which is the 9th Sphere. These handfuls of heaven, which constitute the heavens of the Imagination, are the supports for the soul's operations and for its illuminating action. <sup>28</sup> The result is an ascent from inner heaven to heaven, at the summit of which may arise the visionary experience, the perception of apparitional forms which manifest the invisible beings of the *Malakūt*.

Here again we have occasion to use the word *anamorphoses*. Indeed, the vast commentary composed of the lessons which were given by Muhammad Khān-Kermānī on his father's work contains the following: 'This science of visionary perception is the same as the science of perspective and of mirrors, except that the latter is concerned mainly with the external modality (the exoteric aspect or *zāhir*), whereas in the case of the former it is the inner aspect (the esoteric aspect or *bātin*) which is the main concern.' <sup>29</sup>

The essential is stated in a few lines. The theory of visionary knowledge and experience derives from mystical catoptrics; it provides every treatise *De perspectiva* with an extension which embraces the perspectives and figures of the *Malakūt*, the spiritual world which is not subject to the senses.

I have done no more here than indicate a few chapter headings.

Nevertheless, I hope that this will give a sufficient idea of the importance that a theory of visionary knowledge has for the spirituality of Islam.

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Translated by Liadain Sherrard

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See in particular my book *En Islam iranien: aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, Paris, Gallimard, 1971, 1978 all of Book 7, vol. IV: the dream appearances of Fātima as the spiritual initiator of the princess Narkès, the manifestations of the 12th Imam, etc.
- <sup>2</sup> See *ibid.*, vol. I, p. 238 ff., and vol. IV, general index s.v. prophètes.
- <sup>3</sup> See the statement that he made, both daring and explicit, in his treatise entitled 'The Word of Sufism', trans. in the collection which I have called *L'Archange empourpré: quinze traités et récits mystiques*, translated from Persian and Arabic, with an introduction and notes by H. Corbin (Coll. Documents spirituels), Paris, Fayard, 1976/1986, p. 170.
- <sup>4</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 293, 307, 333, 347.
- <sup>5</sup> See S.-J. Ashtiyānī and H. Corbin, *Anthologie des philosophes iraniens depuis le XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'à nos jours*, vol. I, Bibliothèque Iranienne 18, Teheran-Paris, Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1972, pp. 33-39 of the French part [partic française publiée in: *La philosophie islamique iranienne aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris, Buchet-Chastel, 1981.]
- <sup>6</sup> See the pages translated from the 'Livre des Tablettes dédiées à l'émir 'Imādoddin', in *L'Archange empourpré*, op. cit., pp. 110-112 and the relevant notes.
- <sup>7</sup> See my book *Terre céleste et corps de résurrection: de l'Iran mazdéen à l'Iran shi'ite*, Paris, Buchet-Chastel, 1961/1979, p. 189 ff. (English translation by Nancy Pearson, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: from Mazdean Iran to Shiite Iran*, Bollingen Series XCI, Princeton University Press 1977).
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. *L'Archange empourpré*, op. cit., p. 234 ff.
- <sup>9</sup> See *En Islam iranien*, op. cit., vol. IV, index s.v. Nā-Kojā-ābād.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, index s.v. imaginal, mundus imaginalis.
- <sup>11</sup> See *L'Archange empourpré*, op. cit., index s.v. connaissance visionnaire (théorie de la), Imagination, katoptrique, miroir, etc.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 150-152, notes 17 to 30, and pp. 177-178, notes 34 to 38.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 337, notes 62 and 64.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 113-116, 130-131, notes 87 to 96.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 168 ff. and 177 ff.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, text of the 'Livre des Tablettes', p. 105.
- <sup>17</sup> 'He sends the wind as a herald before his Mercy'.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, end of the 'Livre des Temples de la Lumière', p. 65, p. 86, note 109, p. 88, notes 118, and 119.
- <sup>19</sup> See my book *L'Imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi*, Paris, Flammarion 1958, pp. 162-163; 2nd edition 1977. (English translation by R. Mannheim, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, Bollingen Series XCI, Princeton University Press 1969.)

- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 166.
- <sup>21</sup> Cf. *En Islam iranien*, op. cit., vol. I, p. XXII, 165 note 135. See also my study 'Epiphanie divine et naissance spirituelle dans la gnose ismaélienne', in *Temps cyclique et gnose ismaélienne*, Paris, Berg International, 1982. (English translation by R. Mannheim and J. W. Morris, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, London, Kegan Paul, 1983.)
- <sup>22</sup> See *L'Imagination créatrice*, op. cit., p. 175, p. 255 note 169, p. 277 note 327.
- <sup>23</sup> Cf. *En Islam iranien*, op. cit., vol. I, pp. 243-244, and vol. IV, general index s.v. Sadra Shīrāzī.
- <sup>24</sup> See *L'Archange empourpré*, op. cit., p. 75 note 12.
- <sup>25</sup> Muhammad Karīm-Khān Kermānī, *Kitāb Ta'wīl al-ahādīth fi 'ilm al-rū'ya*, followed by the *Dorūs* (lessons in Persian) of Muhammad Khān-Kermānī, Kermān, 1354 A.H./1975, 2 vols., large in-8°, 62 + 605 pages and 76 + 580 pages.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., vol. I, fasl II, p. 9 of the Arabic text.
- <sup>27</sup> See *Terre céleste et corps de résurrection*, op. cit., pp. 146-164.
- <sup>28</sup> Cf. 'ilm al-rū'ya, I, pp. 16-17.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., I, p. 187 of the Persian text.



The Peacock's Excuse

Next came the peacock, in all its splendour