



REVIEWS

HENRY CORBIN AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF LIGHT. (*The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, by Henry Corbin; translated from the French by Nancy Pearson; Shambhala, Boulder & London, 1978; paper, 174 pages; 6.95 U.S. dollars)

Henry Corbin, who died just before the Iranian Revolution, was no orientalist — though he made unparalleled contributions to the study of the Iranian traditions — nor was he a philosopher in the degraded sense of the word we have grown accustomed to. Persians make a distinction between *baftan* and *yaften*, 'weaving' and 'certainty'. Corbin had no interest in mere idea-spinning; if he must be labelled, call him a 'theosopher' (in the traditional meaning of that term, not the Blavatskian). His profound orientalism and his equally profound philosophizing were subordinated to a central project, the construction of a system of thought at once poetic and rigorous, at once individual and universal, which is 'speculative': a mirroring of divine wisdom.

Fortunately for those whose French is not equal to Corbin's difficult style, there now exist in English more or less adequate translations of four of his major works: *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, and, most recently, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*. A translation of his four-volume collection of essays, *En Islam Iranien*, is being carried out at McGill University; when this finally appears, English readers will have access to Corbin's principal works.

Readers who find the Iranian traditions impenetrably alien will miss Corbin altogether; his system, if it can be called that, is constructed out of his readings in pre-Islamic and Islamic Persian mystical literature, with only passing references to Western philosophy. These last are always illuminating, but not extensive enough

to orient the occidental reader. Needless to say, his works as a whole contain sufficient data to reveal the specific totality of the system but it must be said that without background reading in other areas of Persian thought it remains difficult, if not impossible, fully to appreciate the originality of his achievement. One must have consumed some Sufi literature, some orientalist scholarship and some philosophy in order to grasp how radically, and at the same time how traditionally, Corbin is behaving: radical in relation to the cautious incomprehension of the scholars and the dessication of the philosophers; traditional in relation to the body of Iranian mystical thought, which in recent centuries has been aimed at a metaphysics to be attained through synthesis and comparative study. In this latter sense, Corbin is a genuine heir of the seventeenth century School of Isfahan, which undertook the reconciliation of Ibn 'Arabi, Sohrawardi and Avicenna. Corbin has added further perspectives — Zoroastrianism, Gnostic-Dualism, Ismaelianism, Sufism of various sorts — but his technique is a logical and necessary continuation of his models.

Yet the effort of reading Corbin is certainly worthwhile; if western philosophy is moribund and bankrupt, then the future of genuine thought can be only in the direction of a 'world philosophy' (in Toshihiko Izutsu's phrase), which in turn must depend on the sort of discoveries and comparative studies made by Corbin. The importance of the Orient for us lies not so much in cults or conversions (however vital these may be for individuals) but in the new dimensions to our perception. 'The jewel which remains in the mine is worthless, like a man who never travels', says Sa'adi. If Western thought has become a catacomb, littered with sacred bones, then a voyage to the East has become both a duty and a pleasure.

Immediately it must be added that this 'East' is not to be found on maps, as Corbin never tired of repeating; the true Orient is a spiritual dimension. A genuine revitalisation of our own neo-Platonic tradition, our own 'Orient', is as vital as the experience of any Eastern body of thought. The preoccupation with 'roots' is

admirable — self-knowledge, like *caritas*, begins at home — but only in conjunction and in balance with a true cosmopolitanism.

If the arts are both a cause and an indication of a culture's strength, then the modern world in general is in even worse trouble than modern philosophy. Rationalism has landed us in the mire of nihilism; realism has dumped us into the cesspool of the cult of ugliness. Satanic mills have blotted out the sky of Romanticism, which was the last flowering of a western tradition that belonged to both a genuine Christianity and a genuine paganism. The hot coals are still there, buried under the ashes of the gods' funeral pyre; only a breeze from Corbin's East will make them flame up again, like a phoenix. Corbin's work relates centrally to the arts, not because the artist wishes to paint Persian miniatures or write Persian literature, but because Corbin can help him to rediscover the Imagination.

The concept of the Imagination and the *mundus imaginalis* — and the clear distinction between the 'imaginary' and the 'imaginal' — constitute one of Corbin's major contributions, and certainly the one of deepest interest to the creative mind. This contribution is not 'original' (except in the sense that S. H. Nasr likes to use the word, to mean 'relating to the [divine] origin'). Corbin has in fact rediscovered a traditional doctrine, or rather resurrected it, given it a new body which can live and breathe *for us*, and *now*.

This doctrine, with all that it implies for the experience of and certainty about the archetypes, is precisely what the arts now need in order to recover their proper purpose and usefulness (as opposed to mere utility). The lack of Imagination gives the modern world its virus-like power in relation to traditional societies, some of which are so fragile that the smallest contact with materialism — in the form of a deadly cargo of anti-images — suffices to destroy them like a plague. But this lack is also directly related to the decline of the West (as Elémire Zolla, Gilbert Durand and others have shown) in those areas of human experience which are governed by the soul. The individual soul, which mirrors the *mundus imaginalis*, thus serves as the bridge between the material and spiritual realms.

By its inability to use the Imagination, therefore, the modern world not only cuts itself off from spirituality (metaphysical reality) but also from any positive contact or identity with physical reality. We have constructed an empire of the senses devoid of all positive sensuality — for if beauty cannot be seen as rooted in the archetypes, it finally cannot be seen at all.

But this doctrine of the Imagination, for all its importance, is not the only nor even the central aspect of Corbin's project. In effect, the Imagination is a means to an end, both in the realm of art, and in what might be called an 'Imaginal Yoga', a spiritual path based on the contemplation of the archetypes and of a symbolism to be understood by means of spiritual hermeneutics. All of Corbin's astounding angelology (a science which is uniquely Corbinian), his analyses of the theophanic vision, cosmology, 'spiritual geography' and alchemy — all these aspects of his work — are aimed at a goal which is the same goal all mystics share in one mode or another: realization, liberation.

In no one of the four books mentioned above does Corbin make this point quite so clearly as in *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*. As usual, the framework is 'imaginal' — in this case, a study of the 'Witness in Heaven' who is at once our personal Angel, our Theophanic 'twin', our liberated Self, our Beloved — the very *person* of our realization — and who is to be attained through a meditational experience rooted in light and colour. Thus in orientalist terms, Corbin takes up a number of topics, some of which are treated more extensively elsewhere in his works, others of which are particular to this book. In the former category: the concept of orientation in relation to a Celestial Earth in Hermeticism, Gnosticism and the works of Sohrawardi and Ruzbehan Baqli; in the latter, the systems of Najmoddin Kobra and the Central Asian School of Sufism which he represents and which includes also Najm Razi and Alaoddawleh Semnani. The core of the book consists of a comparison of different colour-systems and the way in which they relate to the Heavenly Witness or Angel; thus there are sections dealing with the Midnight Sun, the *visio smaragdina*, the Black Light, and

other 'coloured photisms' experienced by the visionary. In his conclusion, Corbin deals with a comparison between his oriental systems and the 'physiological colours' of Goethe.

Besides this scholarly framework, however, he is concerned as usual with the unveiling of a single 'message', a metaphysical position. This aspect of the work holds a great fascination for the student of Sufism, for the following reason: most informed writing on Sufism available to the reader of Western languages deals with a line of transmission which includes Hallaj, reaches a peak with Ibn 'Arabi and is fully developed by Ibn 'Arabi's School, his spiritual descendants. The central term of this School is *wahdat al-wajud*, the Oneness (or Transcendent Unity) of Being, which describes a metaphysics radically and fundamentally non-dualist. The School of Kobra and Semnani, however, does not quite fit into this scheme. Some scholars have asserted, following certain Indian extremist followers of Semnani, that these two Schools are opposed to each other, and have used the term *wahdat al-shubud* (Unity of Witness) to describe those Sufis who remained outside the almost overwhelming influence of Ibn 'Arabi. Corbin does not use this term, for the very good reason that the relationship between the Ibn 'Arabi School and the Central Asian School is not simply one of opposition. Nevertheless, without any specific polemic against *wahdat al-wajud*, Corbin definitely takes sides; his polemic names no names, but it does present a severe criticism of radical non-dualism. *The Man of Light*, in effect, is the only serious work on Sufism I know of in any European language which does not belong to the School of *wahdat al-wajud*; hence its unique value.

This makes clear something which is not always understandable in Corbin's other works: the ease with which he compares Gnostic-Dualist systems with Islamic systems (which by definition must be non-dualist). The results of the comparisons are always highly revealing, but to the reader whose sympathies lie with radical non-dualism they are sometimes deeply disturbing as well. Dualism, despite its precision in offering an analysis of the psychic situation of man (alienated from his true Self, exiled from spiritual felicity, and

so on) also presents a metaphysics which cannot be accepted by anyone who is convinced of the fundamental identity of matter and spirit. A modified non-dualism such as Corbin here proposes, however, will find itself much more in sympathy with the Gnostic critique of Nature, which amounts in extreme cases to an overt disgust with the world.

Thus Corbin confesses that 'it is difficult . . . to read with equanimity certain interpretations of the *coincidentia oppositorum* where complementaries and contradictories are apparently indiscriminately lumped together under the head of *opposita* . . . Complimentary elements can be integrated, but not contradictory ones' (p.47). 'To say that what is below is an imitation of what is above is not to say that what is below is what is above. The *night* of rejected demonic depths, or on the contrary the horror of the *day* inspired by the fascination of these depths — these perhaps are the two impotences to which occidental man succumbs' (p.49).

Radical non-dualism does not of course make any simple equation of divine and demonic such as Corbin seems to accuse it of proposing. It recognizes, on the psychic level, the importance of the 'Thou-ness' of the Divine Reality. But on the metaphysical level, which it asserts is accessible to the soul, it *does* speak of the coincidence of opposites, of seemingly contradictory poles of dark and light. It insists *absolutely* on the theophanic nature of material creation: '*Samsara is Nirvana*'. This identity, and not merely a confusion of psychic and spiritual levels (as Corbin maintains), leads the followers of Hallaj to defend his 'outrageous' assertion, 'I am the Truth' (i.e., God). Moreover, Hallaj specifically outlines, in his astonishing 'defense of Satan' (carried out in the *Tawasin*), a coincidence of shadow and light such as Corbin attacks.

From this point of view, Corbin appears to side with Gnosticism (and even makes use of Manichaeism and Valentinian metaphysics in doing so) when he speaks of the 'material darkness' which must be conquered by the Man of Light rather than alchemically transformed through a vision which can go so far as to consider Satan a prototype of the mystic, the 'Perfect Lover'. In *The Man of Light*

all this is carried out in terms of light and colour symbolism. In Mahmud Shabestari's *Rose Garden of the Mystery*, for example, the final stage of the mystic is typified by a 'Black Light' in which the I-thou, material-spiritual dichotomy is erased in the apprehension of the Oneness of Being. In Semnani, however, another stage is mentioned, one which follows the Black Light and reasserts the 'Thou' (the Angel, the Divine Witness, etc.) from a transcendent perspective. This 'smaragdine' stage elicits Corbin's approval to such an extent that he joins Semnani in accusing both Hallaj and Orthodox Christianity of 'incarnationism', which confuses the theophanic nature of reality with an actual corporeal identity of Man and God.

For the radical non-dualist, the material 'Shadow' is simply illusion. Once its psychic chains have been shed, the shadow or reflection of God in the world, His theophany, is seen to be one with the Principle. From this point of view one might criticize a type of Christian theology which emphasizes the 'once and for all times' interpretation of the Incarnation in opposition to the assertion that 'God became man in order that man might become God'. If historical Christianity has suffered an excess of the first influence, this cannot be taken in itself as a *final* condemnation of what — from the Hallajian point of view, at any rate — is a perfectly adequate symbolism, expressed by the second equation.

I must confess that this opposition between what I have called 'radical' and 'modified' non-dualism (despite the inadequacies of these labels) is a serious problem for me — but by no means serious enough to compromise the value of Corbin's work. On the contrary, hearing — for the first time — a thoroughly informed and even brilliant criticism of the first in terms of the second, has enabled me to better define my own position. Corbin has the effect of inspiring his reader with the sense of sharing his every discovery; his brilliance demands participation: as he presents each image, each fact, each text, each argument, one feels it become a part of oneself, whether one accepts it or rejects it.

This might well be so for anyone who takes the trouble to enter Corbin's world — though I perhaps have entered it so thoroughly

that I can no longer understand how an intelligent reader could fail to feel the attraction of the nearly-tangible reality of the 'cities of emerald' he invites us to inhabit. Within the walls of that luminous metropolis, one might even go so far as to argue with an angel; Corbin, in any case, never 'sets up shop' or tries to convince anyone that his ideas are the only ones which lead to liberation. On the level of the *mundus imaginalis* — where he is the guide *par excellence* — he always stresses the individual nature of the experience of the symbolism to be encountered. Like all valuable thinkers, he is an ocean where one dives after the pearls one needs, and with which one may purchase entry to the palace of the Simorgh. Like the writers he has introduced into our universe of culture, Corbin presents an invitation, in the words of the Angel to Avicenna and to Sohrawardi: 'Follow me.' The path by which we follow may not make use of all the landmarks which Corbin used to 'orient' himself. But without his map, our navigation would be confused by the darkness of a *terra incognita*, rather than illuminated by the radiance of that *mundus imaginalis*, that pleroma of sacred imagery which he has opened up for us: 'Light upon Light'.

Peter Lamborn Wilson

A CONSIDERATION OF SOME VERNON WATKINS MATERIAL

I am writing this article in a room on the third floor of Padelford Hall at the University of Washington in Seattle. Many well-known poets have been its occupants — William Stafford, Elizabeth Bishop, and, in 1966-7, Vernon Watkins, who in 1967 collapsed and died after a game of tennis.

There are many people here who remember Vernon Watkins, recall him briskly walking about the paths, his sudden pausing as he thought of something important, remember him standing, smiling and silent, in the coffee shop. There are many reasons in this city