

Guardian of the Temple

Temple and Contemplation by Henry Corbin (translated by Philip Sherrard with the assistance of Liadain Sherrard). Islamic Texts & Contexts, series of the Institute of Ismaili Studies; KPI, London & New York, in association with Islamic Publications, London, 1986. 413 pages; £25 hardback, paperback £8.95.

Some years ago in Teheran I had the opportunity to join a discussion group on Ismaili gnosis organized by a genuine Ismaili gnostic from Bombay. When I asked him, 'Who is the greatest living mystical authority in Ismailism?', he answered . . . Henry Corbin!

Corbin himself (who died in 1978 shortly before the Iranian 'revolution') never embraced outward Islam – but in his long career he did more to revive, inspire, encourage and delight the devotees of Iranian spirituality than most birth-right Moslems. The Ismailis are not alone in considering him 'one of ours'; sufis, Shaykhis, Shiite gnostics, Zoroastrians and Christians all drank deep at the well of his scholarship, philosophy, sympathy, imagination and sheer unbounded love of the spirit.

In a festschrift published for Corbin shortly before his death, one of his French admirers contributed an essay which began with the words, 'Heretics of the world, unite!' Of course, Corbin's work is also valued by many who consider themselves bastions of various orthodoxies and upholders of 'Tradition'. Corbin looked for beauty and truth and took it where he found it; he engaged in no polemics on behalf of any one dogma or creed. This refusal to accept Authority disturbed certain of Corbin's readers amongst the hyper-orthodox 'right-hand' mystics and ultra-Traditionalists. They believed that Corbin's thinking opened the way to radical antinomian heresy, that at root he was something of a spiritual anarchist.

'The map is not the territory': no single definition will suffice to pigeon hole Corbin, who was no mere map-maker but rather a cartomancer, a shaman, explorer of n-dimensional realms, too high to worry himself with the boundary-disputes of Flatlanders, mystagogues, ideologues and other bureaucrats of the spirit.

If this in itself constitutes heresy, then perhaps Corbin would have accepted the badge with some pride – and not without a touch of irony – like those who gloried in being called 'blameworthy' by dull, pious bigots, and finally adopted the name as their own.

For the readers of *Temenos*, defenders of the Imagination not only against modernism but also against hyper-orthodoxy, Corbin's project needs no defense. And among Corbin's books, the latest above all demands attention from this journal because it takes as its theme the *temenos* itself:

In speaking of the *Imago Templi*, I intend to remain at the level of phenomenology, a 'temenology' if I may risk the word (from the Greek *temenos*, a sacred precinct), which exists at the level of the imaginal world ('*alām al-mithāl*), the world in-between (*barzakh*), at 'the meeting-place of the two seas' . . .

[This] implies a situation which is above all speculative, in the etymological sense of the word: two mirrors (*specula*) facing each other and reflecting, one within the other, the Image that they hold. The Image does not derive from empirical sources. It precedes and dominates such sources, and is thus the criterion by which they are verified and their meaning is put to the test.

According to our philosophers' premisses of the metaphysics of the imaginal, the *Imago Templi* is the form assumed by a transcendent reality in order for this reality to be reflected in the soul at 'the meeting-place of the two seas.' Without such a form, this reality would be ungraspable. However, the *Imago Templi* is not allegorical but 'tautegorical'; that is to say, it should not be understood as concealing the Other whose form it is. It is to be understood in its identity with that Other, and as being itself the thing which it expresses.

(p. 276)

The essays in *Temple and Contemplation* appeared separately between 1950 and 1974, but the consistency of Corbin's preoccupation (or perhaps obsession) with the image of the temple graces this collection with a fluid coherence. On one level or another all Corbin's work deals with a central theme, that of the *Mundus Imaginalis*. In the present work (elegantly translated by Philip and Liadain Sherrard) he offers the Temple as a sort of quintessence of the Imaginal, a synthesizing into one 'spatial' complex of many a-temporal (or 'hierohistorical') modes. Elsewhere he gives us the topography of the *barzakh* (or Borderland) – here he unfolds its architecture, and elucidates the contemplative point or omphalos where the heavens and the human coincide – the sacred space.

The book begins with a prime example of Corbinian bravura, a pyrotechnic study of 'The Realism and Symbolism of Colours in Shiite Cosmology According to the 'Book of the Red Hyacinth' by Shaykh Muhammad Karim-Khan Kirmani (d. 1870).' Until Corbin, most scholars considered the Shaykhis a mere late and derivative sect of little interest save as a precursor of Babism – but Corbin discovered the brilliance of the sect's teachers and revelled in their alchemistic subtleties. In this exquisite essay about an essay about the colour red, Corbin divulges a teaching that outshines even the prismatic splendours of his *Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, a hermeneutic so advanced, hermetic and yet clear, that it justifies Shaykh Kirmani's boast of having revealed secrets never before openly discussed.

Kirmani came to write the essay literally on a dare. One of his disciples was challenged by a 'troublesome man' to explain the esoteric significance of the red dye in a carpet woven in Kerman, the Shaykh's home town. Not content with divulging the most altitudinous esoterisms to abash this troublesome fellow, the Shaykh even went so far as to include a secret Kermani recipe for the red dye used in carpets! The whole essay is a delight: the sort of thing one imagines Magicians and Angels reading for sheer pleasure as they lounge in the emerald palaces of Jabulsa and Jabulqa, the cities of the Imaginal World.

The discourse on colour – a physical phenomenon and yet of the nature of light – prepares us for the rest of the book and its exploration of the Temple, the physical/Imaginal *topos* of the ritual of light. First, in 'The Science of the Balance and the Correspondences Between Worlds in Islamic Gnosis', Corbin approaches his familiar ground – the hierarchy of 'worlds' and 'paradises' – from a new perspective, making use of the 14th century Shiite/sufi theologian Haydar Amuli, as well as the early Ismaili alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan and his science of 'arithmosophic' correspondences. Using these divine geometrical laws as guides he develops his theory of spiritual chivalry, of the 'horsemen (or knights-errant) of the Invisible' – guardians of the Temple – those 'absolutely free' gnostics who cross the bridge to meet the Angels and the Spirit descending into our world at the meeting-place of the two oceans, the Temple's site.

In 'Sabian Temple and Ismailism' (the earliest essay) he links the mysterious 'Sabians' of the Koran with pre-Islamic star-cults, the 'philosophic ritual' of the Brethren of Purity (*Ikhwan al-Safa*) of Basra, the angelology of the Illuminati (*Ishraqiyyun*) and the esoteric hermeneutics of Ismailism. Another dazzling display – ending with another of Corbin's subtle evocations of what might be heresy:

... the Ismaili Order could not break the discipline of the arcane during a Cycle of occultation. One does not expose the subtle, gentle light of the angelic world to the crude and glaring day of ready-made facts and social norms. It is not through addressing the multitude that one calls human beings to the 'potential Paradise' of the esoteric community. Far from it if the Call is thus betrayed in the false light of day, it provides men with the surest means whereby to aggravate their earthly Hell, for then the image of Paradise is bound to be a provocation, stimulating their fury of perversity and mockery. If, that is, they do not find it boring in the extreme, for this image is indeed the image of a *Paradise lost*. The history of Ismailism may be no more than one long paradox: it was harder for it to survive its triumph than to recover from its setbacks. More than once, Ismaili writers have captured the image of their great and noble dream in striking terms. They were perfectly aware of its opposition to the law which is the curse of this world, the urge to dominate, the ambition and vanity of power which make the soul the veritable habitation of Hell and which are truly the

'punishment of the black stone by the black stone. The famous eleventh-century Iranian Ismaili, Nāṣir-i Khusraw, in his Persian translation of a Koranic verse (82:19) to which he gives an unexpected force, prefigures in this way the future Reign of the Spirit: 'There will come a day when no soul will have command over any other soul, and on that day, yes, the Order will belong to God.'

(pp. 181–2)

As an aside, I would like to repeat my old belief that those scientists who are currently approaching mysticism through Quatum and other frontier aspects of physics and biology would do well to broaden their scope beyond the Far Eastern traditions (as in *The Tao of Physics*, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, etc.) and delve into sufism, and into Corbin. The next essay in *Temple and Contemplation*, 'The Configuration of the Temple of the Ka'bah as the Secret of the Spiritual Life', contains this description of 'qualitative space':

... spaces which are measured by inner states presuppose, essentially, a qualitative or discontinuous space of which each inner state is itself the measure, as opposed to a space which is quantitative, continuous, homogeneous, and measurable in constant measures. Such a space is an existential space, whose relationship to physico-mathematical space is analogous to the relationship of existential time to the historical time of chronology.

(p. 187)

It seems to me (in my admitted diletantism) that a meditation on the Uncertainty Principle or Bell's Theorem might have produced the precise same paragraph.

Here, making use of the 17th century Shiite gnostic Qadi Sa'id Qummi, Corbin produces a hermeneutic of space (not without parallel in Bachelard's poetics of space) in its way as rigorous as any topology-mathematics – a specific architecture of the Borderland between visible and invisible: spiritual food not only for mad scientists but for all artists. 'It is in the *malakūt* [the Soul-plane]

that the essential work of man is accomplished, for the phenomenon of the world, as man reveals it to himself, depends above all and in the final analysis on the vision he has of his own *malakūt*. One can only act upon the external form assumed by the phenomenon of the world by acting upon the inner form or *malakūt* and such action is only possible where there is an affinity of ardent desire.

(pp. 261–2)

The last fifth of *Temple and Contemplation* consists of 'The Imago Templi in Confrontation with Secular Norms'. The Templars, the Temple of Jerusalem, its destruction and the millenial expectations of its reappearance, Ezekiel, Qumran, Philo, Eckhart, Fludd, Swedenborg, Masonry, the Grail – even Balzac and Solzhenitsyn! – here Corbin's Orient rejoins Corbin's Occident, the

Mysterious West . . . and here perhaps he comes closest to a description of his own particular path, which never diverged from an esoteric Christianity, 'the Church of John', Docetist, heretical and chivalric. Here – perhaps – is his manifesto:

No! the Temple is not destroyed forever. This was known to Suhrawardī also, with whom we began this discussion and with whom it is right that we should end it. Suhrawardī composed an entire 'Book of hours' in honour of the 'guardians of the Temple', who are unknown to the majority of men. They guard a secret Temple, and those who find their way to it can join in the invocation which returns, like a refrain, in one of the most beautiful psalms composed by Suhrawardī: 'O God of every Good Make the litany of the Light arise. Make the people of Light triumphant. Guide the Light towards the Light. Amen.'

(p. 390)

Corbin the Traditionalist, enemy of all secular norms; Corbin the heretic, even spiritual anarchist – which is the 'real' Corbin? Like his mentor and guide Ibn 'Arabi, Corbin produced such a sea of thought that a great variety of souls may fish therein with profit. He reconciled and saw similarities where others see only contradiction (for example, between Gnostic Dualism and Radical Monism) – and this is a puissant definition of genius, is it not? And yet . . . he was no Prometheus, no Beethoven, no Heidegger – nor was he simply a scholar, a sifter of dust. Perhaps the term 'contemplative metascholarship' needs to be coined for him; in any case, the pen falters, mere labels seem obnoxious. A saint of the Imagination.

Peter Lamborn Wilson