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Transnational Orientalism

Henry Corbin in Iran

Matthijs van den Bos

Abstract. – A convergence of German, French, and Iranian interests cast the career of French Orientalist, philosopher, and theologian Henry Corbin (1903–1978). Corbin's Orientalism was in crucial respects a transnational project. This fact stands in contrast to Edward Said's thesis, which portrays Orientalism as unilateral imposition. The reality of collaboration in the construction of a "mystical East" is reinforced by another paradox: whereas "Corbinism" emerged in conjunction with the prerevolutionary polity in Iran, some of his pupils developed it towards Islamic Republican ideology. Thus, antihistoricist hermeneutics merged once more with indigenous representations of the self. *[Iran, Shiism, transnationalism, hermeneutics, Orientalism, representation]*

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Henry Corbin's presence in Iran from 1945 figured in a confluence of interests, ideas and passions, both French, German, Iranian, secular, and religious. The present essay explores the full complicity of "Easterners" and "Westerners" in the creation of Corbin's Orientalism, and thereby counters the paradigm that reduces the construction of "the Orient" to Western hegemony.

Two of Corbin's preoccupations in particular, the critique of the Western loss of "tradition" and religiously inspired hermeneutic analysis, linked up seamlessly with Iranian concerns for the legitimacy of Shiism in the face of modernity. The modern construction of Shiism by Corbin and several Iranian intellectuals had Shiism as a mystical and essentially nonpolitical project. But since the Islamic revolution of 1978–1979, Corbin has paradoxically retained a presence in pro-regime representations of the self in the Islamic Republic. Thus, Corbin's transnational Orientalism assumed a second life after his demise in 1978.

These instances of transnational Orientalism elude the conceptualisation of scholarship on Islam by Edward Said (1991 [1978]). In his analysis, Orientalism has been conceived of as a Western discourse, which stems from an unequal world order, helps sustain it, and reflects its contexts of production rather than its object.

What has been termed "Orientalism in reverse" (al-ʿAzm 1981) – the representation of the self in "the Orient" in terms of Orientalist constructions – is a concept that similarly documents Western presence and Eastern absence. "Oriental Orientalism" thus constitutes a residual category that bespeaks precisely the terms of passivity and the defiance of "agency" (Ortner 1995) that Said confronted, as both projection and imposition, in Orientalism.

The denial of an interactive, constructive imagination in "Oriental Orientalism" as much as in the "Occidental" variety, compares to what critical anthropology posits – although with inverse political sentiments and implications – as the "denial of co-

evalness" (Fabian 1983): there is a neglect, in these concepts, of historical complicity and cooperation, and the transnational dimension thereof.

Said's thesis has been contested by several authors on various grounds – most importantly: the paradoxical essentialism of both the Orient and the Occident (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Richardson 1990: 18) – but few have examined the alleged unidirectional logic of Orientalism in concrete cases. Van der Veer has observed that in the case of modern Indian thought one should not ignore the *interaction* between Orientalists and Indian scholars (1994: 133). His argument points to a larger, powerful transnational strain in Orientalism, which defies precisely this unidirectional logic. Contacts between Seyyed Jamal al-Din al-Afghani al-Asadabadi and Ernest Renan (1883), and ʿAli Shariʿati's training by Louis Massignon (in the early 1960s) may be mentioned as important examples not dealt with in Orientalism. Afghani and Shariʿati, not quite docile recipients of Western wisdom, have been undisputed heroes of an innovative Islamic activism. In a later essay (1983), Said ignored these transnational relations once more, as he exclusively fixed the identities of Renan and Massignon in French culture.[1]

The present discussion deals with a third example that is by many accounts even more significant: the transnational life and works of Henry Corbin (14 April 1903 – 7 October 1978) – ignored, it was observed, in Orientalism (Lewis 1982: 7). Corbin, who in one sense may paradoxically be regarded as a precursor of Said (cf. Landolt 1999: 484; Algar 1980: 85) – namely, in his fundamental critique of the Western (Orientalist) academic tradition – was one of Massignon's most gifted pupils, who would fundamentally redefine the study of Iranian Shiism.

1 "Un univers spirituel à comprendre"

Corbin, while demonstrating the originality of the intuitive method says:

Western anthropology, sidetracked by the fables of the positivist ideology of objectivity, has quite recently dis-

covered the notion of understanding (Verstehen) whereas the Muslim gnostic from the very beginning [...] has placed this existential internalization in the forefront of the sociological or historical event (Naraghi 1976: 96).

The question why it was Iranian, Shiite spirituality that Corbin chose to explore, to become its "foremost Western student" (Nasr 1982: 9),[2] brings into focus a series of early preoccupations. In the 1920s, he had become interested in learning Oriental languages as a student of medieval philosophy under Etienne Gilson (Landolt 1999: 485). Subsequently, it had been through Massignon's lectures on Shiism that "the flame of mysticism" was reportedly kindled "in Corbin's soul" (Shayegan 1990: 16). Massignon (d. 1962), the renowned scholar of Islamic mysticism, had also been a priest and a dedicated member of a small but international Catholic group of mystics (whose Algeria-based leader was Charles de Foucauld).

While Massignon remains renowned above all through his scholarship on the tenth-century mystic al-Hallaj, he inspired Corbin's study of the twelfth-century mystical philosopher Shihaboddin Yahya Sohravardi (d. 1191), by presenting him with a lithograph edition of the latter's "Oriental Theosophy," *Kitab Hikmat al-Ishraq*, in 1928. (A compendium of Corbin's translations and annotations of the text and of commentaries appeared posthumously (Sohravardi 2003 [1986]).)

The relation between master and pupil, who shared elementary attitudes in that both made science the vehicle for larger intellectual projects, both were personally involved with mysticism, and both "believed the East to be the possessor of the spiritual elements the West had lost" (Marcotte 1995: 66), would remain mutually respectful. Corbin's appointment in 1954 at the religious sciences section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, had been partly due to Massignon, who had spoken out in favour of Corbin as his successor (cf. Shayegan 1990: 28 f.).

Corbin was not only, however, a mystically inclined French Orientalist who had studied Sanskrit – until the discovery of Sohravardi – in addition to Arabic and Persian. He soon developed into a Parisian avant-garde intellectual, into a Protestant

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[1] Tellingly, Said referred to al-Afghani's (passive) "response" to Renan (1983: 308); not to their (interactive) "correspondence." Preceding their correspondence, the two had met in person. Renan once wrote, in recognition of al-Afghani's "Eastern" influence on him: "It is in large measure the conversation I had with [al-Afghani] that decided me to choose as a subject for my lecture at the Sorbonne the relations between the scientific spirit and Islam" (Keddie 1968: 92).

[2] Studies on Shiite (Sufi) spirituality were scarce when Corbin began addressing the topic: "Writers on Sufism have fought shy of dealing with the [...] relationship of Sufism and Shīʿism. L. Massignon was concerned with the relations of Shīʿīs with al-Ḥallāj; but otherwise the only scholars who have attempted to deal with it have approached it from the Shīʿī viewpoint – we may mention Henri Corbin, W. Ivanow, and Sayyid Husain Nasr" (Trimingham 1971: 135).

theologian, and particularly a philosopher with an ecumenical mind.

Corbin's four-volume monument on Iranian Shiism, "En Islam iranien" (1971a, 1971b, 1973a, 1973b), was a philosophical endeavour to restore lost spirituality, and explicitly a critique of modernity that betrayed the influence of Martin Heidegger (d. 1976), another early friend and source of inspiration as much as Massignon. During his German travels (1930–1936), Corbin had first discovered various Protestant thinkers and mystics and was influenced by the radical Protestant theology of Karl Barth, whose "Die Not der evangelischen Kirche" (1961[1931]) he translated into French in 1932 (Shayegan 1990: 17 f.). Corbin's contact with Heidegger dated back to 1931, when the two met in Freiburg (cf. Jambet 1981b: 17).

Heidegger entrusted to Corbin the French translation of "Was ist Metaphysik?" (1929), published in 1938 – with fragments of "Sein und Zeit" (2001 [1927]) – as "Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique."[3] In France, Heidegger's heritage remained important since Corbin's introduction, first in existentialism, and, to the present, for postmodernism (cf. Janicaud 2001). One observes Heidegger's influence on Corbin in three interrelated themes: The fate of the West (that nowadays also mutilated the East) in the face of the alienating hegemony of a technological mode of life, which destroyed the authentic life:

Corbin pose des questions sous lesquelles on sent percer une certaine inquiétude. L'Orient risque de perdre son âme par suite d'une technologie envahissante et d'une occidentalisation [...] Cependant [...] fleurissent en Occident de pseudo-esoterismes sans substance qui tournent le dos it la Tradition dont ils se croient les representants (Brun 1981: 77).

Two distinct but complementary experiences had been conveyed to Corbin by his French and German teachers. In Massignon, he had seen a personally motivated and scientific probing of mysticism – which was universal, i. e., both Islamic and Christian (monotheism defined the boundaries of Corbin's spiritual universe) – in the midst of a secularising society. The heritage of Massignon is similarly evident in Corbin's conception of Iranian Shiism as Islam's strongest esoterical tradition (1971a: 128; cf. Meyer 1977: 553). In Heidegger, Corbin had found a theoretician who had philosophically problematised the tragic loss of "Tradition" in the West.

In addition, Heidegger's work had shown Corbin a way to engage in his own hermeneutical studies (cf. Shayegan 1990: 43 f.). It was from Heidegger's worldview, however, that he gradually took a distance (Corbin 1981a: 31). Heidegger's existential analyses centred on a *Dasein*, which was circumscribed by the prospect of death and made no provisions for the hereafter. One finds parallel concerns in Corbin's acuity of a fundamental problematic in Christianity. This concerned Jesus' incarnation, through which God had "fallen into history," the realm of finiteness.[4]

After having explored the possibilities of Heideggerian analysis and stumbled upon its rigid limits, Corbin once again turned to Sohravardi. He adopted, expounded, and would cherish for a lifetime Sohravardi's hermeneutical phenomenology: a purely religious method, unimpressed by death, and in full recognition of the symbolic space of the *monde imaginal*. This is to say: Corbin wished to assign primary importance to the religious imagination as a reflection of the religious mode of existence (cf. Corbin 1971a: 136; Marcotte 1995: 57, 63).

Thus, an outline had taken shape in "the Occident," in France and Germany, of the "Oriental," Iranian, Shiite spiritual universe that Corbin set out to comprehend. He then brought the new hermeneutical phenomenology "back to Iran" – accompanied by his Western criticism of the modern self, formulated in the terms of an Eastern tradition – which in turn made a lasting impact on Iranian Shiites.

2 Nowhere Place

Corbin was sent on a state mission to Turkey in 1939, on behalf of the Bibliothèque nationale, to search for manuscripts of Sohravardi in the libraries of Istanbul. He had planned to stay for three months in Istanbul, but his visit lasted until 1945 because of the war. During these years in exile, Corbin acted as guardian of the French Institute of Archaeology (Corbin 1981a: 46).

In August 1944, the Bibliothèque Nationale issued another "ordre de mission," for Persia this time, and on 14 September 1945, Corbin arrived in Tehran (de Boyer Sainte Suzanne 1981: 287; Shayegan 1990: 23), to "'meet Suhrawardi in his own homeland,' as he [himself] put it" (Landolt 1999: 486). In Tehran, he immediately recog-

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[3] Heidegger 1938; cf. Corbin 1981a: 24; Shayegan 1990: 21; Jambet (éd.) 1981: 348; Jambet 1981b: 17 (erroneous year).

[4] Widmer 1990: 86; Corbin 1973a: 272; cf. Jambet 1983: 17, 21.

nized his "patrie spirituelle" (Nasr 1977[2536/1397]: 8).

The main result of his Iranian sojourn was the monumental, four-volume essay "En Islam iranien" (besides a breathtaking number of other writings), which had as its mission to document Shiite spirituality from its canon. His account was marked by the negation of Shiism's social historicity, which derived in part from his revulsion against sociology and antihistoricism. But what is more important as an explanation for its success in Iran, his views matched the essentialism in mystical, Iranian visions of the self, which were influenced by Neoplatonism as much as Corbin was (cf. Trimingham 1971: 134; Ahmadi and Ahmadi 1998).[5]

These mystical notions and sentiments – exterior to Western preoccupations, concentrated in Sufism but radiating beyond mystical poetry, from Iranian prose texts and permeating Iranian society at large (cf. Ahmadi and Ahmadi 1998: 107) – made up the primary Iranian context for the transnational configuration of Corbin and his circle. In their scientific, cultural, and religious enterprises, (Iranian) Shiism became defined as Islam's strongest transhistorical and esoteric tradition.

During fieldwork in Iran in the late 1990s, I noted this ideational structure in the context of Sufism. Many who either propagate or denounce Sufism, I observed, equate Sufism with its origins. One pervasive tradition attributes the origins of Iranian Sufism to national resistance against "the Arab assault" (hamle-ye ʿarab),[6] while an inverse account has Sufism from the outset as a stronghold of alien power in Iran – whether this be Arab, Turkish, Mongol, Afghan, or British.

Origins could be alluded to in contexts such as the Arab invasion, but they were not often thought to occupy a sociohistorical locus constrained by temporal and spatial dimensions. They were rather seen as manifestations of an essence, and "Iran," "Shiism," and "Sufism" were conceived as preordained qualities rather than as decipherable units, manifest to the surface of their appearance (cf. Ahmadi and Ahmadi 1998: 121–123). Many Sufis would resist historical contextualisation of spiritual experience, which has been variously described as a transcendence of time; reaching the place where time is no longer; or as the point in consciousness where one drowns in the state of the "now" that shatters past and future by absorbing all. For Corbin, the phenomenology of Iranian consciousness would open the doors of metahistory; the "realm of spiritual events" (Jambet 1983: 266).

Objective geography is contested by Sufis who head for "nowhere place" (na-koja-abad), whereas Corbin subdued objective spatiality in references to "emblematic cities" or "spiritual horizons."[7] Where Corbin invoked Sohravardi's beloved symbol of na-koja-abad (see, especially, 1971b), it reflected not "the Orient's absence" (Said 1991: 184), but the sensitivity of a "Westerner" to an "Eastern" concept, that is: representation, loyal to dominant presentations of self.

As much as Sufis have resisted secular, historical chronology, they often abhor sociological categories. Although consciousness of violent persecution pervades Shiite Sufi reflections on self – and Sufi-jurist tension has been a recurrent feature of modern Iranian history – this awareness has not often led to explicit, elaborate objectivations that would identify and circumscribe social positions, actors, and factors involved in the conflict. The enemies of Sufism have rather been understood, primarily, as a geographically and historically indistinct, universal psychological type of "spiritually lesser endowed creatures." Corbin observed: "La mission des ʾorafâ [. . .] opère une désocialisation" (1971a: 185).

A second Iranian context for this late twentieth-century configuration was a state interest in Sufism, which was beneficial to the definition of national identity and as a counterweight to political Islam. Moreover, while his oeuvre amply demonstrates that Corbin's "particular vision of 'Iranian Islam' corresponded nicely to the cultural policies of the Pahlavi regime" (Algar 1980: 90; cf. Mahdi 1990: 92 f.), the state interest in Sufism attained more intimate features also.

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5 According to Stauth, "there existed a historically present vernacular, a ceremonial [. . .] of the internal experiences. In the case of Iran a disposition of such techniques evolved through Shiism and Islamic mysticism" (1991: 34). Plotinus' (Neoplatonist) emanation doctrine involves "descent" and "procession," analogous to Shiite Sufi nozul and soʿud. Like Iranian Sufis, Plotinus "located" emanation outside time and space in a mystical "nowhere" (de Gandillac 1952: 19). In 1941–42 a Sufi leader of the Soltanʿalishahi-Neʿmatollahi order wrote a laudation on Plotinus (Falsafa-ye Flutin. Raʾis-e Aflatuniyan-e Akhir).

6 Driving back home after a Sufi congregation in Tehran, in May 1996, the Sufi Mohammad spoke to me in a secretive voice: "Now I will tell you something. Pay attention." He then sadly proclaimed: "The Arabs came by the sword, subjecting neighboring peoples and violating their ways of life." Only the Iranians had retained their language and culture. "But we saw the virtue of the Message, and we saved it from them."

7 See, for instance, his autobiographical remarks in 1981b, 1981a, 1981d, and 1981c.

The Shah's brother ʿAli-Reza extended royal patronage to Sufis and was initiated into the Safiʿalishahi order (cf. van den Bos 2002: 121, fn. 49), the Shah and the Empress Farah had Sufis in their entourage – as religious teachers and advisors – and several observers have pointed at their mystical tendencies,[8] which also figure in the Shah's autobiographical literature (Pahlavi 1960: 20; 1979: 20, 127).

It will be unjustified to portray him as an ideologue of the Iranian monarchy, but Corbin was sufficiently useful to state cultural policies for the Iranian government to provide him with a philosophy chair (de Boyer Sainte Suzanne 1981: 287). "Corbinism" tapped prevalent notions of Shiite mysticism, but beyond these, it supplied the needs of elite varieties of Islamic experience by linking up quietist religiosity with a transhistorical "Iranianness"[9] – which is particularly evident in his studies of Sohravardi. Corbin's brand of esoterism remained central to elite cultural perspectives in Iran until the Islamic revolution (Fischer 1980: 139–147), when political Islam, a Shiite tradition deliberately left unexplored by Corbin, conquered the centre stage.

The confluence of these French and Iranian interests and ideas challenges the unidirectional notion that (Western) "perception is determined by Orientalism rather than Orientalism [. . .] by perception".[10] A tenet central in the Orientalism thesis holds the "real Orient" to be largely irrelevant to Orientalist representations, but Corbin's making of an "Oriental object" involved its active collaboration.

3 Exteriority

Corbin's exploration of Shiism became a laudatory definition of it, blurring boundaries between sympathetic scholarship and exegetic participa-

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8 Cf. Chahardahi 1982[1361]: 60; Gramlich 1965: 50; Eilers 1977: 323.

9 From an historical point of view, or even the facts of geography, the narrow equation of Shiism and Iranian Islam is clearly a misrepresentation (cf. Algar 1980: 89). Corbin's representation was authentic to many Iranian, Shiite notions of self, however, the elite nationalist ones in particular, but Islamist ones as well.

10 A passage from Christopher Miller's "Blank Darkness" (1985: 15). Nicholas Thomas contended that this passage does not accurately reflect Said's thinking (1991: 5), but it does so very much. It is (Western) motives and interests outside "the Orient," which, throughout Said's thesis, account for representations of "the Orient."

tion.[11] In this sense, Corbin's activities sharply contrasted with Michel Foucault's short excursion into Iranian spirituality in 1978. Foucault had visited Iran in September and November that year as a reporter for Corriere della Sera. His "reportages des idées" in Corriere della Sera and Nouvel Observateur, however, remained locked in French poststructuralist concerns, and the project ended in a public apology.

The configuration of Iranians that provided him with access to Iran may shed light on the sudden extinction of Foucault's infatuation. While Corbin's circle largely reflected the ancien regime, Foucault was taken along by a kindred soul: the secular, Parisian revolutionary Ahmad Salamatian (cf. Chehabi 1990: 200), who was to become the Islamic Republic's vice foreign minister (until 1981) (Stauth 1991: 5). When the horrors of fundamentalist republican violence became inescapably clear, Foucault's passion for "political spirituality" and the "spirit of a world without spirit" in Iran abruptly ended.

The relations between Corbin and Foucault, intellectual and other, have remained largely unexplored. It seems obvious though, when inferring from the similarity of their theme (i. e., Iranian, Shiite spirituality) and from Corbin's fame in France at the time, that the former influenced Foucault's Iranian excursion.

Stauth claims that the "Foucauldian interpretation of Islam" took "the challenging work of French Orientalists like Massignon and Corbin as a source of inspiration" (1991: 32, cf. 20). He further observed that "[t]he [. . .] characteristic principle of Shiism, for Foucault, is that the formal and external submission to the religious code, even in its esoteric content, does not affect the depth of spiritual life, an idea, that was largely elaborated by Henry Corbin" (1991: 33).

A third reason for suspecting Corbin's influence, is the sudden emergence of the theme of "spirituality," which had otherwise remained "practically absent as a concept in Foucault's theoretical work" (Stauth 1991: 4). But Foucault had already spoken out strongly against transcendental history (1969) and after the revolution never gave up this position. This is an additional factor for his exploration not to have lasted and developed into the kind of willed blending of "Western" and "Eastern" perspectives

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11 Corbin's pupil Shayegan, "who like [. . .] Foucault, had come to express his admiration for the spiritual dimension of the Iranian revolution," similarly engaged "in a theoretical autocritique" in 1982 (Boroujerdi 1996: 153 f.).

that is so striking in Corbin's work (cf. Marcotte 1995: 67).

Corbin's exegetic participation of Iranian Shiism involved a heterogeneous mixture of hermeneutical phenomenology (cf. Marcotte 1995: 55 f.), which he explicitly opposed to historical materialism and historicism (which were two comparable branches, in his mind, of the same intellectual tree). Transhistorical spirituality was a universal religiosity, but the predominance of historicism – even in religious studies – had eroded the possibility of relating to it (cf. Adams 2000: 142):[12] historicism was predicated upon a secular existence.

Hermeneutics meant "reconduire une chose à sa source," where "source" has the meaning of an essence, of "the origin of any perspective." To establish that which must be relocated required phenomenology, which meant "sauver les phénomènes," or reconstructing phenomena as they are conceived by the subject (Corbin 1971a: xix, xx; cf. Meyer 1977: 551 f.). In addition, Corbin exchanged his "Occidental," Heideggerian view of hermeneutical phenomenology (1981a: 32) for his perception of the "Oriental," Iranian, and Shiite perspective.

"Relating back to the source," Corbin held the existence of religious communities to proceed from Holy Scriptures, which lay at the basis of Abrahamic religions. Scripture's religious interpretation was not just a "technique," as in Western hermeneutics, but the religious community's uninterrupted "culture" (cf. Corbin 1971a: 136; 1973a: 222). Its main genre of hermeneutical phenomenology consisted of *ta'vil,* esoteric (Quranic) exegesis, whose principal interpreters were the Imams (Corbin 1971a: 135; cf. Adams 2000: 143 f.). *Ta'vil,* which had "unitary faith" (*tawhid*) as its objective, was a cornerstone in Sohravardi's "Oriental theosophy" also (Jambet 1983: 100, 120).

"Reconstructing phenomena," Corbin followed Shiite interpretations to arrive at the Shiite "fait religieux," which transcended Heidegger's finite *Dasein.* That is, the distinct temporality of the religious mode of being-in-the-world was not circumscribed by death but signified *Sein zum Jenseits des Todes.*[13] This understanding of tempo-

rally distinct religious being-in-the-world above all pervaded his studies of the philosophers Qazi Saʿid Qommi (d. 1691) (Corbin 1973b: 123–201; cf. Jambet 1983: 266–274) and Sohravardi. (Before Corbin introduced them, the names and oeuvres of Mir Damad, Mir Abo'l-Qasem Fendereski, Qazi Saʿid Qommi, and Molla Sadra had been by and large unknown to Western scholarship [Algar 1980: 87].)[14]

To write "history" from such concerns is to blend with one's subject, and Corbin conceived of the project as an initiation (1971a: 7). When asked how he would translate "phenomenology" into Persian, he brought up *kashf al-mahjub* – "unveiling of the hidden," a key concept in Persian Sufism (Nasr 1977[2536/1397]: 13). His search ignored discontinuous political incursions – one would search in vain for an exposé on state patronage of the seventeenth-century School of Isfahan, let alone public commentary on the coup d'état in Iran in 1953 or the student revolt in Paris in 1968 – which were lacking in eternal essence.

But "En Islam iranien" and the Corbinian heritage at large, which were intended as a timeless understanding of Iranian Shiism, would develop a life of their own and attain temporally distinct political meanings that were exterior to the intentions of their author. "Exteriority," as coined by Michel Foucault, marks a position contrary to (Heideggerian) hermeneutics and (Husserlian) phenomenology (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983: 57). It refers to the quality of autonomy in historical phenomena – that is, beyond the scope of an actor's intentionality or subjectivity – and thus it stands opposed to Corbin's argument for initiatory comprehension.[15]

Said put the concept of exteriority to use in a related but rather different epistemological sense, namely, as "authority" inscribed on the surface of texts. Its principle product, he held, was (the Orient's) *representation,* which presupposed (its) *absence.* Corbin's Iranian enterprise, however, presents one with an Orientalist who was neither "morally" nor "existentially" (as Said had it) dis-

tant.[16] On the contrary, it was Corbin's distance taken from "the West" which enabled the confluence of interests in "the East," and which made for his success. Moreover, one could not begin to comprehend this instance of transnational Orientalism historically without taking into account the postwar political context in Iran.

The most effective way to argue the relevance of this political context is to explore the space from which Corbin's "initiation" was itself exterior (in Foucault's sense) to the Shiite "spiritual universe" it sought to comprehend. This is to say: Corbin's antihistoricist repugnance against sociopolitical analyses in the realm of religion, attained temporally distinct and partial political meanings when Iranian Shiism became politicised in the context of postwar, Pahlavi Iran.

4 Permanent Hermeneutics

From his arrival in Iran, Corbin had engaged in an extraordinary amount of work, an important result of which was the foundation of a series of text editions named "Bibliothèque iranienne" in 1949.[17] From 1946, he headed the newly founded Departement of Iranology of the Franco-Iranian Institute, while he succeeded Massignon in Paris in 1954. From 1955 to 1973, Corbin would be in Tehran each autumn, in charge of the French-Iranian Institute's Iranology section, and teach in Paris from January to June (Jambet 1981b: 18). His appointment in the French-Iranian Institute had been issued directly by the Cultural Relations Department of the French Foreign Ministry (Boroujerdi 1996: 125; Nasr 1977[2536/1397]: 8).

A circle of Shiite scholars and notables assembled around Corbin in Tehran from the late 1950s, among whom were the professor of theology Jalaloddin Ashtiyani, the professor of Islam and court-intimate Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the diplomat Hushang Besharat, and philosopher and Koran commentator ʿAllama Tabata-

ba'i.[18] But Corbin's influence reached far beyond this immediate circle and included, for instance, Sufi leaders in Tehran – most noticeably the renowned Zoʾr-Reyasateyn Neʿmatollahi master Javad Nurbakhsh (cf. Nasr 1977[2536/1397]: 8, 25). In as far as Sufi sentiment against historicism and historical materialism is formulated in explicit theories of transcendental history, it often directly derives from Corbin.[19]

In the beginning of the 1960s, Corbin met with Sanskritist Daryush Shayegan, whom he supervised for his dissertation on Hinduism and Sufism at the Sorbonne. From 1977, Shayegan led the Iranian Centre for the Study of Civilisations, which was preoccupied with the identities of and relations between East and West, modernity and tradition. Paying tribute, after the Islamic revolution, Shayegan remarked of Corbin that he had been "at the origin of a spiritual movement that aspired to establish a bridge between traditional Iran and modernity" (1990: 25). But beyond the French intellectual influence, Shayegan's "Markaz-e Irani-ye Motaleʿe-ye Farhangha" was materially enabled by and established under the Iranian supervision of the Farah Pahlavi Foundation (Boroujerdi 1996: 148).

In the 1970s, the Iranian sociologist and court-intimate Ehsan Naraghi (who had matrilineal ties to the queen) brought "Eastern and Western civilisation" into his Heideggerian focus as well: "The 'reality' he spoke of was of Western science and technology, whereas the 'truth' alluded to oriental faith, mysticism, and esoteric philosophy" (Boroujerdi 1996: 136, 139; cf. Naraghi 1976).

Of Corbin's colleague Seyyed Hossein Nasr it has been remarked that he, after an "occidental exile" and reappropriating the Iranian Islamic tradition, could now "relate to Molla Sadra's metaphysical *[V]erstehen*" after which he "came to view mysticism as the main axis of his thinking and worldview" (Boroujerdi 1996: 122 f.). In 1974, "upon securing the queen's patronage," Nasr founded the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, which collaborated closely with the Franco-Iranien Institute (Boroujerdi 1996: 125). Corbin's continued teaching in Iran after his retirement in France, during the last four years of his life, which had been arranged through the mediation of Prime Minister Amir ʿAbbas Hoveyda (cf. Nasr

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12 Historicism, for Corbin, did not connote Popper's critique of history as prediction, but referred to the explication of the phenomena of the mind and the soul in terms of their temporal and social contexts. Cf. Corbin (1971a: 22–38) for his critique of Marxism and positivism.

13 Corbin 1981a: 31; cf. Jambet 1983: 20 f.; Shayegan 1990: 17, 44.

14 Sohravardi, 1155–1191 (cf. Corbin 1971b); Mir Damad, d. 1631/2 (cf. Corbin 1973b: 9–53); Molla Sadra, 1571/2–1640 (Corbin 1973b: 54–122); Mir Abo'l-Qasem Fendereski (d. 1640/1) (cf. Corbin 1999: 466 f.); Qazi Saʿid Qommi, 1639–1691 (cf. Corbin 1973b: 123–201).

15 Cf. Corbin 1971a (ix–xxiii) for explicit statements of hermeneutical phenomenology in contradistinction to positions of exteriority.

16 In full, the relevant passage reads: "What he says and writes, by virtue of the fact that it is said or written, is meant to indicate that the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact. The principle product of this exteriority is of course representation" (Said 1991: 20 f.). But Jambet characteristically observed of Corbin: "il n'étudie pas des *objets,* il n'aborde pas l'univers perçu par les philosophes iraniens comme une *réprésentation*" (1981a: 14; cf. Meyer 1977: 551; Adams 2000: 137; Nasr 1977[2536/1397]: 13).

17 Corbin's prolific writings are listed in Christian Jambet's bibliography (Jambet [éd.] 1981).

18 Shayegan 1990: 25, 27; Corbin 1971a: 6; 1973a: 220 f., 223. Nasr felt the influence of Corbin in Iran to have been quite large and to have extended to "tous milieux et tendences" (1977[2536/1397]: 24–26).

19 Fieldwork observation in Tehran in 1996–1997, cf. Nasr (1977[2536/1397]: 25).

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1977[2536/1397]: 26), had been as a guest of the Imperial Iranian Academy (Landolt 1999: 486). Among the Imperial Academy's publications was the bilingual, English and Persian "Sophia Perennis/Javidan-e Kherad," which dealt with gnosis worldwide. In an introduction to a translated compendium on Shiism by philosopher and commentator of the Koran 'Allama Tabataba'i (d. 1981), Nasr defined as the work's – transnational – aim: "presenting Shiism to the Western world from the point of view of Shiism itself" (Nasr 1982: 10).

Tabataba'i's acquaintance with Corbin started in 1958 (Dabashi 1993: 316), and it was through Corbin that Tabataba'i is likely to have acquired most of his knowledge of Western philosophy (cf. Dabashi 1993: 279). The publication in between 1953 and 1976 (cf. Kermani 1994[1373]: 31 f.) of a series of lectures by Tabataba'i, "Principles of Philosophy and the Realistic Method (Osul-e Falsafa va Ravesh-e Re'alism)" or "Principles of the Philosophy of Realism (Osul-e Falsafa-ye Re'alism)," became "the most serious intellectual challenge to Marxism and materialist philosophy within the Iranian context" (Dabashi 1993: 315, cf. 300).

Nasr's, Tabataba'i's, and Corbin's Shiism excluded political definitions, either implicitly or explicitly. In Nasr's view, political Shiism stood opposed to authentic Shiism (Nasr 1982: 11); there is nothing in two renowned Shiite studies of Tabataba'i's (1982, 1981[1360]) that is reminiscent of Khomeynism (but cf. Dabashi 1993: 273–323); and Corbin's explicit statement read: "L'enseignement des Imams [...] n'est jamais un 'programme politique'" (Corbin 1971a: 222).

Following in the footsteps of Massignon, Corbin observed a homologous relation between Christian "Christologie" and Shiite Islamic "Imamologie" (1973a: 271; cf. 1971c), and it was perhaps a sign of the importance accorded to this very ecumenical comparison, that Corbin ignored Shiite martyrdom's "indigenous" revolutionary potential (1971b: 273 f.; cf. Halm 1994: 44 f.). Instead of revolutionising, Corbin, Nasr, Tabataba'i, and their Tehran circle rewrote Shiism into an otherworldly gnosis (cf. Algar 1980: 87), as is seen through an anecdote, reported by Nasr, of a conversation between Corbin and Tabataba'i:

Corbin, who himself was as far removed from "historicism" as possible, once said to Allamah Tabataba'i [...] during the regular discussions they had together in Tehran [...], "Western scholars claim that [Imam] 'Ali is not the author of the Nahj al-balaghah. What is your view and whom do you consider to be the

author of this work?" [Tabataba'i] raised his head and answered in his usual gentle and calm manner, "For us whoever wrote the Nahj al-balaghah is 'Ali, even if he lived [only] a century ago" (Nasr 1982: 9; insertions mine).

Ayatollah Borujerdi, the highest authority in Shiism, remained at a distance from Corbin's circle. There had been a confrontation with Tabataba'i (Dabashi 1993: 281–284) whom he felt was too philosophical and distant from jurisprudence (fiqh) to be respectable, and one imagines that Corbin's ecumenicalism was another universe altogether for Borujerdi. But the gap between the jurists' exoteric Shiism and Corbinian esoterism would widen still further, as twenty years of traditional quietism came to an end with Borujerdi's demise in 1961.

In a development parallel to the evolution of Corbinism in Iran, Iranian Shiism rapidly politicised from the 1960s onwards. In the 1970s, the religious world was flooded with Khomeyni's taped comments on world political events. But more than these, Shari'ati's "Sociology of Islam" caught the national attention. Shari'ati had studied in the West here and now, in Paris, and he had been deeply moved by Massignon. As a consequence of French and German Marxist influences, he endeavoured both to objectify and to revolutionise Shiism. It was these timely exegeses, aiming at the subversion of powerful Weststruck institutions, which led to a clash with Nasr, a principal patron and representative of these institutions.[20]

Both Shari'ati and Corbin, the former reportedly Massignon's research assistant (Rahnema 2000: 120), the latter his student and successor, had striven to regain "authenticity." But Shari'ati's "return to self" (baz gasht be khvishtan) was a sociopolitical ideology, while Corbin's "return to origin" implied a mysticism that wished to remain far removed from petty politics (Shayegan 1990: 280).[21] Massignon had been explicit, that

20 "Nasr's status as a cultural figure of the Pahlavi regime was in total opposition to Shari'ati's antistatist views, leading to the exchange of such mutual accusations as a 'reactionary arm-chair intellectual' and a 'subversive Islamic-Marxist attempting to infiltrate the ranks of religious forces.' The culminating point in the parting of ways of Nasr and Shari'ati happened around 1970 when upon hearing a lecture in which Shari'ati compared Imam Hosein to Che Guevara, Nasr resigned from the Hoseyniyye-ye Ershad" (Boroujerdi 1996: 126 f.).

21 Corbin wrote: "Or la perpétuation et la transmission de ce message spirituel des Imâms sont indépendantes de [...] savoir si telle ou telle société islamique rejettera ou acceptera, pour 's'adapter au monde moderne,' [le] code civil" (1971a: 90).

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is: left-wing and anticolonialist, politically, and Corbin wrote: "Sur le tard, il fut désolé quand ses amis ne purent le suivre dans ses options politiques" (1981b: 40). Corbin's overall perspective, in contrast to that of his master, has been related to the milieu of France's right-wing colonialist lobby (cf. interview Hermann Landolt, in Widmer 1990: 132).

Shari'ati's outlook has been typified as "not that of an Islamic mystic unaware of the West." He reportedly was influenced by Corbin and "exposed" to Heidegger and his "prison of self"-idea (Boroujerdi 1996: 106 f., 114). Shari'ati had come to consider Sufism as a "central element in that obscurantism which represented a retreat from the necessary active struggle to establish an Islamic Order" (Sirriyeh 1998: 164). His own perspective, however, had not been without Sufi mystique. Only, his "Mysticism, if it can be so-called, [was] communal as much as [...] individual" (Sirriyeh 1998: 167, cf. 165 f.). Dabashi observed: "it is as if the mystical truth of the Sufi masters, the stuff of Massignon's scholarship [...] is somehow transfused into the ideological truth of Shari'ati's claim to a political agenda" (1993: 107).

From the alienating West of homo collectivus to the mundus imaginalis of the East, "En Islam iranien" had emerged from and developed in the opposite direction (Corbin 1971a: xviii, xxi). East and West, then, represented both spatial duality and symbolic typology for Corbin, and the two understandings often merged. In geographical terms, as in the above example, he juxtaposed Iranian spirituality and "Western" features such as collectivism. Symbolically, "Occident" represented shadow, darkness, physis, underworld, whereas "Orient" stood for the origin of light, illumination, the realm of the soul (Corbin 1971c: 53, 68; Jambet 1983: 297–304).

Excluding from his focus the "Occidental" political readings that were shaping Iranian Shiism, his phenomenology applied to a carefully selected, increasingly isolated, and highly personal set of phenomena (cf. Adams 2000: 140). Increasingly surrounded by "Occidental" social ideologues in Iran as in France, he amusingly called upon the "Orientaux de tous les climats," to unite! (Corbin 1977: 139). As "[o]thers have spoken of the necessity of a 'permanent revolution,'" stated Corbin in 1976, in a similarly late recognition of the Shiite likes of Shari'ati, "I will pronounce the necessity of a 'permanent hermeneutics'" (1981a: 36).

5 At the Origin of Any Perspective

In the midst of the Islamic revolution, on 7 October 1978, Corbin died. "Ultime symbole: Henry Corbin est mort alors que s'exaltait la Révolution islamique", an obituary essay proclaimed (Charnay 1981: 279). One reads awareness in this and other passages in the article of the fact that an idiosyncratic unevenness had fatefully characterised his endeavours to grasp Iranian Islam's timeless essence.[22]

Ever since Corbin died, Charnay suggested, the politics, worldliness, theology, latent activism, and legalism of Shiism had caught the eye. Surely, political Shiism was nothing of a novelty, but Corbin's demise did close off an historical chapter in which leading intellectuals such as he himself, Nasr, and (to a lesser extent) Tabataba'i had been in a position to both represent and construct Iranian Shiism as a spiritual project, with the help of the French and Iranian states, in the midst of ever present political exegeses which had gained the stage during their lifetimes.

In a curious sociohistorical course of events, Corbin's oeuvre has not fallen into disrepute in Iran after the revolution. Given his and his circle's quietist and antiactivist representations of Shiism, receptivity towards them in the Islamic Republic strikes one as an ironical fate; an unintended consequence. In the late 1990s, bookstores in Tehran held French copies and Persian translations of his work (and that of Tabataba'i, less so Nasr, who explicitly favoured the Shah), and his definitions devoid of politics were, paradoxically, considered equitable.[23] Corbin has remained a figure of authority not only for mystical representations of self, but also for the political legitimisation of statist, republican Islam. This comes to the fore unambiguously in a report by Iran News on April 27, 1997:

22 Shayegan, Corbin's erstwhile pupil and college, changed his mind as well after Corbin died. "On arrivait ainsi à un paradoxe étrange: pour sauver l'âme et l'individu, il fallait séculariser la société. Car sans la séparation de la foi et du savoir, pas de sujet de droit donc pas de démocratie. Sans le désenchantement du monde, pas d'objectivité, et sans la mathématisation galiléenne du monde, pas de sciences de la nature [...]" (Shayegan 1990: 290).

23 Shayegan's analysis of "cultural schizophrenia" provides several ironic examples of such cultural exchanges, founded upon mutual misunderstanding but giving shape to a reality on their own (1997). They particularly apply to the "Occidentalization" of Iranian Islam. An historical parallel to his curious postrevolutionary reception, Corbin had also been exempted from "a rampant antiorientalist campaign in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s" (Boroujerdi 1996: 143).

[Ayatollah] Kashani said "velayat al-mutlaqa," or the absolute leadership of mankind, was not the belief of Muslims alone, [as] even Christians, philosophers and gnostics shared the belief that it was "velayat" which guaranteed the objectives of religion and human life [. . .] Kashani, quoting French philosopher Professor Henri Corbin, said that in the same way God sends prophets to guide humanity, there should be some divinely-decreed personages after the prophets to save mankind from pitfalls, since reason demanded that guidance should not abruptly end.

Kashani's inversion of Corbinian thought – in which *velayat* defined Shiism in its otherworldly, esoterical essence – strikes one as odd in a citation of Corbin. But the previously inconceivable idea of a nexus of mysticism and *velayat-e faqih* has emerged as a familiar figure of thought in post-revolutionary, republican Iran.

Corbin had introduced Heideggerian philosophy to Iran, which had come to figure in Iranian discussions of Shiite spirituality. However, some in his audience employed it in unforeseen ways. Ahmad Fardid (d. 1994) coined "westoxication" *(gharbzadegi)*, which was probably derived from Heidegger (Ashraf 1993: 143) and became a token of revolution from the 1960s.[24] A rumour in Tehran had Fardid as the real inventor of Khomeyni's "Rule of the Jurist" *(velayat-e faqih)*.

Furthermore, Fardid's "theories have been adopted by some intellectuals who claim that the policies of the current Islamic regime are manifestations of Eastern spirituality" (Ashraf 1993: 144). One frequently observes the ideological traces in public statements. Conservative member of Parliament Hojjat ol-Eslam Taqavi, for example, told his audience in Isfahan during the twentieth celebration of the victory of the Islamic Revolution in February 1999, that there was no need for cultural exchange – a key notion in Khatami's government – as Iran already had (mystical traditions of) Molla Sadra and Mir Damad.[25] For some time a disciple of the reformist Ayatollah Sangelaji and leading his own circle of intellectuals from the late 1960s, Fardid had paradoxically helped translate Corbin's "Les motifs zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Sohrawardi" (1946) (Boroujerdi 1996: 63),

which could be easily read as a celebration of royalist, Iranian glory (cf. Algar 1980:90). Cultural nationalism had been transformed into revolutionary ideology.

Another student of Corbin, Reza Davari-Ardakani, who has held "several semi-official positions' in the Islamic Republic (Vahdat 2003: 604), referred to Heidegger's lament of the West in order to argue the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic in the face of its critics, such as ʿAbdolkarim Sorush (who preferred Popper). Particularly legendary, Davari and other ideologues of the Islamic Republic often quoted "Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten," one of Heidegger's last, prophetic communications (published in *Der Spiegel* 1976). Bitterly perceptive, Shayegan (1997: 115–117) analysed the newest phase in transnational Orientalism thus:

A [. . .] German philosopher had to devote some attention to the "historical" stages of Western philosophy, and had to interpret it in terms of Occultation of Being [. . .], so that an Iranian, situated as far from that world as it is possible to be, could read it in French translation and believe himself involved in a problem which had nothing to do with him; and, as an ultimate illusion, imagine that the messianic assertions of a German [. . .] contain the spiritual truth of Islamic renewal.

In "Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire" (1971), Foucault elaborated upon Nietzsche's ironical invocation of *Ursprung*. It is the myth of those who cannot reconcile themselves with discontinuous historicity, or the impossibility of an all-embracing "origin."[26] At first sight, this analysis seems to provide one with an apt description of Corbinian transnational Orientalism in Tehrani as much as in Parisian circles. But paradoxically, Corbin's disembodied representations have now become "Shiism from the point of view of Shiism itself" in Iran. That is, Shiism, even from the politicised perspective of Islamic Republican ideologues.

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24 "Westoxication" attained fame through the essay "Gharbzadegi" by Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1993–94[1372]), which may have inspired the political radicalization of Khomeyni's ideas (cf. Abrahamian 1993: 23). In Al-e Ahmad's work, too, the influence of Heidegger has been detected (cf. Boroujerdi 1996: 71).

25 Anonymous report by an observer in Iran that was circulated to the listserv of the Gulf/2000 project at Columbia University (11 February 1999).

26 But strikingly, Foucault himself did not acknowledge transnational Orientalism: "Foucault, in fact, does decline – although being well aware of Shariʿati's French education – any influence of 'global' ideas (e. g., from 1968) on the revolution in Iran" (Stauth 1991: 24). Surely, its recognition would have sharply diminished the mystique which Foucault read into the Iranian revolution. In this sense, one may agree with Stauth's inversion of Said's critique, that "[t]here is [in Foucault's project] – as with all fashionable *commitment* with Islam – a certain objectionable 'Orientalism.' [His] investigation of the phenomena of popular Islamic unrest relates to his notion of 'spirituality' which he offered as a unique and direct route to an understanding of the realities of Islamic life" (1991: 15 f.; my emphasis).

The transnational project that set out to reconstruct Shiism to arrive at "the origin of any perspective" (Corbin 1971a: 143) reached its destination on a path exterior to its author's intentions. It proceeded through quietist, elite definitions of Shiism in the midst of political turmoil, and then became, after the author's death, a token of respectability for political Islam. Ironically, Shariʿati's alternative views fell out of official favour soon after the revolution. But Corbin's hermeneutical phenomenology of Iranian Islam would, because of initiatory comprehension, and exteriority denied, "restore" Shiism to what it socially and historically never had been. "En Islam iranien" was more than anything else an impressive work of art, and an initiation, for believers, into "Islam Corbanien."[27]

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27 Others have preceded my evaluation, in a similar mixture of profound respect and methodological and epistemological unease (see, for instance, Hodgson 1974: 45; Meyer 1977: 552). In prerevolution Iran itself there were critical voices too. In 1972, political scientist Hamid Enayat "criticized the French Islamist Henry Corbin for [. . .] divorcing Shiism from its social and political context" (Boroujerdi 1996: 142).

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