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 imperial imposition. The reality of collaboration in the construction of a “mythical East” is reinforced by another paradox, whereas “Persianism” emerged in conjunction with the pre-revolutionary policy in Iran, some of his pupils developed in towards Islamic Republican ideology. Thus, anachronistic 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 practices, both French, German, Iranian, secular, and religious. The present essay explores the full complexity 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-Azm 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 defacement of “agency” (Ornert 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 anthropologists posit — although with inverse political sentiments and implications — as the “denial of co-
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evaluates" (Pahlin 1983): there is a neglect, in these concepts, of historical composition 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 Oriental 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 intersection between Orientalism 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 Junal-al-Din al-Afghani al-Asadabadi and Ernest Renan (1883), and Ali Shari’ati’s training by Louis Massignon (in the early 1960s) may be mentioned as important examples not dealt with in Orientalism. Afghani and Shari’ati, 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 the French culture.

The present discussion deals with a third example that is by many accounts even more significant: the transnational life and works of Henry Corbin (1 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 definitive gifts, who would fundamentally redefine the study of Iranian Shisism.

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 distinctly lost its notion of understanding (Verstehen) whereas the Muslim gnostic from the very beginning […] has placed this internalization as the forefront of the sociological or historical event (Narahgi 1976: 96).

The question why it was Iranian, Shi’ite spirituality that Corbin chose to explore, to become its “foremost Western student” (Nazi 1992: 98);1 brings into focus a series of preconditions. In the 1920s, he had become interested in learning Oriental languages as a student of medieval philosophy under Einstein (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: 160). 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 Suhrawardi (d. 1191), by presenting him with a lithograph edition of the latter’s “Orbital Theosophy,” Khah Hikmat al-Ishraq, in 1928. (A compendium of Corbin’s translations and annotations of the text and of commentaries appeared posthumously (Suhrawardi 2003: 153-21))

The relation between master and pupil, who shared elementary attitudes in that both made science the vehicle for large, universal themes, both were personally involved with mysticism, and both “believed the East to be the possessor of the spiritual elements the West had lost” (Marco 1995: 60), would remain mutually respectful.

Corbin’s appointment in 1954 at the religious sciences section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études, had been partly due to his studies in Iran, who had spoken out in favour of Corbin as his successor (cf. Shayegan 1990: 28f).

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

1 Tellingly, Said referred to Al-Afghani’s (passive) “response” to Renan (1983: 308) not to their (interactive) “correspondence.” Precising their correspondence, the two had met in person. Renan once wrote, in recognition of Al-Afghani’s “Essentials” influence on him: “It is in large measure the conver- sation 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” (Kotzile 1968: 92).

2 Studies on Sufi (Sufi) spirituality were scarce when Corbin began addressing the topic. “Writers on Sufism have sought shay of dealing with the […] relations of Sufi/Shi’i. L. Massignon was concerned with the relations of Shi’i with al-Hallaj, but others […] the only scholars who have attempted to deal with it have approached it from the Shi’i viewpoint – we may mention Corbin, W. Ivanov, and Sayyid Husain Nasir” (Trimminger 1971: 135).

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tologist, and particularly a philosopher with an economical mind.

Corbin’s four-volume monument on Iranian Shiism, “En Iran 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 Hei-
degger (d. 1976), another early friend and source of inspiration to this project. In Germany travels (1930–1936), Corbin had first discovered numerous Protestant thinkers and mystics and influenced by the radical Pestisology and her in- form of Karl Barth, whose “Die Not der evangelischen Kirche” (1961[1931]) he translated into French in 1932 (Shayegan 1990: 17f). 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 transla-
tion of “Was ist Metaphysik?” (1929), published in 1938 – with fragments of “Sein und Zeit” (2001 (1927)) – as “Qu’est-ce que la métaphysique.”2” In France, Heidegger’s heritage remained important since Corbin’s introduction, first in existentialism, and, to the present, for postmodernism (cf. Jani-
caud 2001). One observes Heidegger’s influence on Corbin in three interrelated themes: The fate of the West (that nowadays also mutated the East) in the face of the alienating hegemony of a technological mode of life, which destroyed the autarchic universe, Corbin posè des questions sous lesquelles on est perçu une certaine incertitude. L'Orient risque de perdre son aire par suite d'une technologie envahissante et d'une occidentalisation […] Cependant […] l’Orient peut scientifique sans substance qui ternissent le dos la Tradition dont ils se croient les représentants (Brun 1981: 77).

Two distinct but complementary experiences had been significant to Corbin by his French and Ger-
man teachers. In Massignon, he had seen a person-
ally motivated and scientific probing of mysticism which was universal, i.e., both Islamic and Christian. In Heidegger, he defined the boundaries of Corbin’s (spiritual universe) – in the midst of a secularising society. The heritage of Massignon is simply another, “ocidentalisation” of the Islamic Shi’i tradition (1971a: 128; cf. Meyer 1977: 553). In Heidegger, Corbin had found a theoretician who had philo-
sophically rationalised the tragic loss of “Traditio” in the West.

In addition, Heidegger’s work had shown Corbin a way to engage in his own hermeneutical studies (cf. Shayegan 1990: 43f.). It was from Hei-
degger’s worldview, however, that he gradually took a distance (Corbin 1981a: 31). Heidegger’s existen-
tial analyses centred on a Dasein, which was circumcised by the prospect of death and made no provisions for the hereafter. This is found paralleled in Corbin’s acuity of a funda-
mental problematic in Christianity. This concerned Jesus’ incarnation, through which God had “fallen into history,” the realm of finitude.3

After having explored the possibilities of Hei-
deggerian analysis and stumbled upon its rigid limits, Corbin once again turned to Suhrawardi. He adopted, expounded, and would cherish for a lifetime Suhrawardi’s hermeneutical phenomenology: a purely religious method, unimpressed by death, and in full recognition of the symbolic space of the mona
deal imaginal. This is to say: Corbin wished to assign primary importance to the imagi-


Thus, an outline had taken shape in “the Oc-
id home,” to use Heidegger’s phrase, the “Dasein,”

Iranian, Shi’ite universe that Corbin set out to comprehend. He then brought the new hermeneutical phenomenology “back to Iran” to lead Western criticism of the mod-
erness self, formulated in the terms of an Eastern tradi-
tion – which in turn made a lasting impact on Iranian Shisites.

2 Nowhere Place

Corbin was on a state mission to Turkey in 1939, on behalf of the Bibliothèque nationale, to accompanied by his colleagues 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. To these years in exile, Corbin acted as guardian of the French Institute of Archaeology (Corbin 1981a: 46).

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this occasion, and on 14 September 1945, Corbin arrived in Tehran (de Boyer Sainte Suzanne 1981: 287; Shayegan 1990: 23); to “meet Suhrawardi in his


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nized his "patric spirituelle" (Nae 1971:2536/1397:8). 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 intention to document Shiite spirituality from its canonic. His account was marked by the negation of Shiism's social historicity, and he died in 1998 from his revision against sociology and антисемитизм. 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. Trimmingham 1971: 134; Ahmad and Ah-

These mystical notions and sentiments – exterior to Western preoccupations, concentrated in Sufism but radiating beyond mystical poetry, from Iran; its poetry, art, and thought were a defining Iranian society at large (cf. Ahmad and Ahmad 1998: 107) – made up the primary Iranian context for the transnational configuration of Corbin and his circ-

their scientific, cultural, and religious enter-
prises, (Iranian) Shiism became defined as Islam's strongest transhistorical and esoteric tradition. During the late 1990s, I noted this ideational structure in the context of Sufism. Many who either propagate or denounce Sufism, I suggested, engage with it in its origins. One pervasive tradition attributes the origins of Iranian Sufism to national resistance against the "Arab assault" (hama-le ye arab),5 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.6 Origins could be alluded to in contexts such as the Arab invasion, but they were not often thought to occupy a sociocultural locus constrained by temporal and spatial categories. They were rather seen as manifestations of an essence, and "Iran," "Shiism," and "Sufism" were conceived as preord-

ized qualities rather than as decipherable units, manifest to the surface of their appearance (cf. Ahmad and Ahmad 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 con-

sciousness where one draws oneself 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 meta-
history; the "realms of spiritual events" (Jambet 1983:266).

Objective geography is contested by Sufis who head for "nowhere place" (na-ka'ba-abad), whereas Corbin subhed objective spatiality in references to "emblematic cities" or "spiritual horizons."7 Where Corbin invoked Sohravardi's beloved symbol of na-ka'ba-abad, see, especially, 1971b), it reflected not "the Orient's absence" (Said 1991: 184), but the sensibility of a "Western-

er" to an "Eastern" context, 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 per-

secution 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 ob-

served: "La mission des 'orafa [...] opère une désocialisation" (1971a: 185).

A second Iranian context for this late twentieth-

century configuration was a state interest in Suf-

ism, which was beneficial to the definition of national identity and as a counterweight to political Islam. Moreover, while 50% of the total Sufi's of the various Shi'a and Sufi orders in Iran, Shiism has become the latest national consciousness, of self, however, the elite nationalistic in particular, but Islamists ones as well.

6 Stating back to back after a Sufi Sufi Tawfik in Tehran, in May 1986, the Sufi Mohammad spoke to me in a secretistic voice: "Now I will tell you something. Pay attention." He then softly proclaimed: "The Arab 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 Ali-Akbar extended royal patronage to Sufis and was initiated into the Sufi/al'ishiya 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, which also figure in the Shah's autobiographical literature (Pahlavi 1966:10, 20, 127).

It will be unjustified to portray him as an ideo-

logue of the Iranian monarchy, but Corbin has frequently talked in cultural policies for the Iranian government to provide him with a philos-

ophic chair (de Boyer Sainte Suzanne 1981:287). "Corbinism" tapped prevalent notions of Shiism mysticism, but beyond these, it supplied the needs of elite varieties of Islamic experience by linking up quietist religiosity with a transhistorical "Ira-

nianness" – 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 Shi'a tradition deliberately left unexplored by Conbr, confronted the centre stage. The convergence of these French and Iranian interests and ideas challenges the unidirectional notion that (Western) "perception is determined by Orientalism rather than Orientalism [. . .] by perception of orient" (Said 1970: 104). This oriental view of orientalism thesis holds the "real Orient" to be largely irrrel-

evant to Orientalist representations, but Corbin's making of an "Oriental object" involved its active collaboration. 8 Cf. Chahalaki 1982:2361:60; Graudich 1965:50; Elliot 1977:323.

From an historical point of view, or even the facts of geography, the Sufis of the world are a matter is clearly a misrepresentation (cf. Algar 1980:89). Corbin's representation was authentic to Western Iran. Shi'ite notions of self, however, the elite nationalistic in particular, but Islamists ones as well.

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3 Exteriority

Corbin's exploration of Shi'ism became a lauda-

ry definition of it, blurring boundaries between sympathetic scholarship and exegetic participa-

tion.5 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 idees" in Corriere della Sera and Nouvel Observateur, however, remained located in French poststructuralist concerns, and the project ended in a "superficial" (1981a: 202, 127)

The configuration of Iranians that provided him with access to Iran may shed light on the sud-

der of Interiority. While Corbin's circle largely reflected the ancient regime, Foucault was taken along by a kindred soul: the secular, Persian revolutionary Ahmad Salarani (cf. Chubahi 1990:200), who was to become the Islamic Republic's vice foreign minister (until 1981) (Stauth 1991: 5). When the horrors of funda-

mentalist republican violence became inescapably clear, Foucault's passion for "political spirituality" and the "spirit of a world without spirit" in Iran abruptly erupted.

The relations between Corbin and Foucault, intellectual and other, have remained largely unexplored. It seems obvious, though, when in-

ferring from the similarities 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.

5 A further Foucauldian interpreta-

tion of Islam" took "the challenging work of French Orientalists like Massington and Corbin as a counterweight to the idea of inspiration being culturally specific." Rather than observed that "[the [...] characteristic principle of Shiism, for Foucault, is that the normal and external submission to the religious code, even in its other content, does not influence the self or spiritual life, an idea, that was largely elaborated by Henry Corbin" (1981:33). 6 A third reason for suspecting Corbin's influence, 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 tran-

scendental history (1969) and after the revolu-

tion, and gave in to Foucault's "orientalist" (1980:90–92) was the state interest in Sufism attained more intimate features also.

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5 According to Stauth, "there existed a historically evident verse, back in the ceramic, [of] the internal experiences. In the case of Iran a topology of such techniques evolved through Sufism and Islamic mysticism" (1993:34. Picto-

muses (Neoplatonism) emanation doctrine involves "desire" and "perception," analogous to Shitet Sufi nolad and so/f. Like Iranian Sufis, Pictum "located" emanation outside time and space in a mystical "nowhere" (de Gandillac 1958:13). 6 Stating back to back after a Sufi Tawfik in Tehran, in May 1986, the Sufi Mohammad spoke to me in a secretistic voice: "Now I will tell you something. Pay attention." He then softly proclaimed: "The Arab 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. 
that is so striking in Corbin’s work (cf. Marzotte 1995:67).

Corbin’s exegetical participation of Iranian Shiism involved a heterogeneous mixture of hermeneutical phenomenology (cf. Marzotte 1995:55 ff.), which he explicitly opposed to historical materialism and historicism (which were two comparable branches, in his mind, of the same intellectual tradition) as 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 “reconstruire 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 ff.). In addition, Corbin exchanged his “Occidental,” Heideggerian view of hermeneutical phenomenology (1981a: 32) for the perception of his “Orientali,” 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 all Abrahamic religions. Scripture’s religious interpretation was not just a “technique,” as in Western hermeneutics, but the religious community as such. Scripture was the primary text (1971a: 136; 1973a: 222). Its main genre of hermeneutical phenomenology consisted of too’til, esoteric (Qur’anic) exegesis, whose principal interpreters are Mawlawi Shams al-Din (1203–1260 or 1235; cf. Adams 2000: 143 ff.); Ta’wil, which had “unitary faith” (tawhid) as its objective, was a cornerstone in Suhrawardi’s “Oriental” theosophy also (Jambet 1983: 100, 120).

“Reconstructing phenomena,” Corbin followed Shiite interpretations to arrive at the Shiite “fatt religieuse,” which transcended Heidegger’s finite Daesin. That is, the distinct temporality of the religious mode of being-in-the-world was not circumscribed by determinism but signified the “Now of the Jenseits des Todes.”13 This understanding of temporal

12 Historicism, for Corbin, did not consist 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.


nally distinct religious being-in-the-world have all pervaded his studies of the philosophers Qazi Sai’id Qommi (d. 1619) (Corbin 1973b: 123–201; cf. Janbent 1983:266–274) and Suhrawardi. (Before Corbin introduced them, the names and oeuvres of Mir Damad, Mir Abo’l-Qasem Fendereski, Qazi Sai’id Qommi, and Molla Sadra had been by and large unknown to Western scholarship [Algar 1980:87].) 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 kasrif al-mahjub — “unveiling of the hidden,” a key concept in Persian Sufism (Nasr 1977:2536/1979:13). His search ignored discontinuous political incursions — one would search in vain for an expose 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 Corbianheritage 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 point of discontinuity to (Heideggerian) hermeneutics and (Husserlian) phenomenology (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983: 57). It allows “authenticity” 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-


15 Cf Corbin 1971a (i–xxii) for explicit statements of hermeneutical phenomenology in contradiction to positions of exteriority.14

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 verbal fact. The principle product of this exteriority is of course representation” (Said 1991: 201). But Jambet characteristically observed of Jami: “il n’existe pas de descript des, il n’abonde pas l’univers perçu par les philosophes iraniens comme une représentation” (1981a: 14; cf. Meyer 1977:551; Adams 2000: 137; Nasr 1977:2536/1979:13).

17 Corbin’s prolific writings are listed in Christian Jambet’s bibliographic Jambet (ed.) 1981.

18 Shayegan 1990: 25,27; Corbin 1971a: 6; 1973a:201 ff., 223. Nasr felt the influence of Corbin in Iran to have been quite limited and to have not produced “masses and millions of true Sufis” in Tehran — most noticeably the renowned Zoro-Rastaneye Nematollahi master Javad Nurbakhsh (cf. Nasr 1977:2536/1979:8, 25). In so far as Nasr setiment against historism and historical materialism is formulated in explicit theories of transcendental history, it often directly contradicts Corbin’s work.

19 In the beginning of the 1960s, Corbin met with Sanskritist Daryush Shayegan, whom he superintended on Hinduism and Saivism 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 bridges between the Islamic and modern (1990: 25). But beyond the French intellectual influence, Shayegan’s “Markaz-e Irani-ye Motale-e-ye Farhangha” was materially enabled by and established under the Iranian supervision of the Farah Pahlavi Foundation (Boroujerdi 1996: 148). In the 1970s, the Iranians sociologist and court-intimate Ehsan Naraghi (who had matrilineal ties to the queen) brought “Eastern and Western civilization” into his Heideggerian focus on the "reality" he spoke of was of Western science and technology, whereas the "truth" alluded to by the French-Indian Institute had been issued directly by the Cultural Relations Department of the French Foreign Ministry (Boroujerdi 1996: 125; Nasr 1977:2536/1979:13).

A circle of Shiite scholars and notables as assembled around Corbin in Tehran from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, with the professor of theology Jalaloddin Ashiyani, the professor of Islam and court-intimate Seyed Hossein Nasr, the diplomat Hushang Besharat, and philosopher and Koran commentator Allama Tabataba’i. But Corbin’s influence reached far beyond this immediate circle, for instance Sufi leaders in Tehran — most noticeably the renowned Zoro-Rastaneye Nematollahi master Javad Nurbakhsh (cf. Nasr 1977:2536/1979:8, 25). In so far as Nasr setiment against historism and historical materialism is formulated in explicit theories of transcendental history, it often directly contradicts Corbin’s work.

His foreign in the post-1941, he headed the newly founded Department of Iranology of the Franco-Iranian Institute, while he succeeded Massignon in Paris in 1954. From 1955 to 1973, Corbin was President of the Iranian academy, in charge of the French-Iranian Institute’s Iranology section, and teach in Paris from January to June (Jambet 1981a). It refers to the quality of his faithfulness (he declared) “the French-Iranian Institute had been issued directly by the Cultural Relations Department of the French Foreign Ministry (Boroujerdi 1996: 125). Corbin’s colleague Seyed Hossein Nasr has also been remarked that he, after an “occidental exile,” the reinstatement of the Islamic tradition, could now “relate to Molla Sadra’s metaphysical [Verstehen]” after which he came into his own, as “author of the fundamental book on the history and worldview” (Boroujerdi 1996: 122 ff.). In 1974, “under securing the queen’s patronage,” Nasr founded the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, which was collaboratively closely with the Franco-Iranian Institute (Boroujerdi 1996: 125). Corbin’s continued teaching in Iran after his retirement in France, during the last years of his life, which had been arranged through the mediation of Prime Minister Amir ‘Abbas Hoveyda (cf. Nasr

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ic: 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).

So, it’s outlook has been typified as "not that of an Islamic mystic unaware of the West." He reported was influenced by Corbin and "exposed" to Heidegger and his "prison of self" idea (Bourjouzi 1996:106, f. 114). Shari’ati had come to consider Sufism as a "central element in that obscurantism which represented a re-trap from the necessary active struggle to establish an Islamic Order" (Sirriyeh 1998:164). His overall perspective, however, had not been without Sufi mystic. Only, his "Mysticism, if it can be so-called, [was] communal as much as [ ... ] individual" (Sirriyeh 1998:167, cf. 165 f.). Dahabi observed: "it is as if the mystical truth of the Sufi masters, the stuff of Massignon’s scholarship [ ... ] is somehow transferred into the ideological truth of Shari’ati’s claim to a political agenda" (1997a:23).

From the alienating West of homo collectivus to the mundus imaginalis of the East, "En Is- lam iranien" had emerged from and developed in the process of interaction (Corbin 1971a: xvii, xx). East and West, then, represented both spatial duality and symbolic typology for Corbin, and the two had their own meaning. As terms, as in the above example, he juxtaposed Iranian spirituality and "Western" features such as collectivism. Symbolically, "Occident" represented shadow, darkness, physik, underworld, whereas "Orient" stood for the origin of light, illumination, the realm of the soul (Corbin 1971c: 53; 56; Jamet 1983a: 271; cf. 719c). Excluding from his "focus of the Occidental" political readings that were shaping Iranian Shirism, his phenomenology applied to a carefully selected, increasingly isolated, and highly personal set of phenomena (cf. Adams 2000:140). Increasingly surrounded by "Occidental" social ideologies in Iran as he came to recognize the Orient ex alius was called upon the Orientaux de tous les climats, to unite! (Corbin 1972:139). As "[o]thers have spoken of the necessity of a permanent revolution," stated Corbin in 1980, implying his late recognition of the Shi‘ite 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’exaspérait la Révolutio n islamique”, an obituary essay proclaimed (Charnay 1981:279). One reads awareness in this and other passages in the article of the fact that Corbin’s death quickened his endeavours to grasp Islamic Islam’s timeless essence.22

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 antirepresentationalist views of Shiism, receptivity towards them in the Islamic Republic strikes one as an ironic fate; an unintended consequence. In the late 1990’s, bookstores in Tehran held French copies and Persian translations of his work (and that of Tabataba’i), less so Nash, who explicitly disdained his ideas. The upsurge of left-wing politics was, paradoxically, considered equitable.25 Corbin has remained a figure of authority not only for mystical representations of the occult but also for the punk image of the prophet, republican Islam. This comes to the fore unambiguously in a report on Iran News by April 27, 1997:

22 Shoygun, Corbin’s erstwhile pupil and colleague, changed his name as well after Corbin died. “On arrivait ainsi à un paradoxe étrange: pour savoir ‘devenir’ individu, il fallait s’identifier à l’image de l’individualisme occidental, à l’image de l’arm-chair intellectuelle et ‘a progressive Islamic-Marxist attempting to limitate time and space" and the concept of colonizing part in the purging of Nasr and Shari’ati happened around 1970 when upon hearing a lecture in which Shari’ati compared Imam Howl to the Gioursar, Nasr resigned from the Hosneyiyye-ye Einadî (Bourjouzi 1996:126 f.).
21 Corbin wrote: “Or the perpetuation and the transmission de ce message spirituel des fondeurs sans intellectuel ouvrier, si tel est notre principe, pour ‘s adapter au monde moderne.’” [la] code (1970:90).
which could be easily read as a celebration of royalist, Iranian glory (cf. Algar 1980-90). Cultural nationalism had been transformed into revolution ary ideology.

Another student of Corbin, Reza Davari-Ardekani, who has held several 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 'Abdolkarim Soroush (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: 115-173) analysed the newest phase in transnational Orientalism thus:

A [...] German philosopher had to devote some attention to the "historical" stages of Western philosophy, and 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 a result, imagine that the messianic assertions of a German [...] contain the spiritual truth of Islamic renewal.

In "Nietzsche, the genealogist, the histoire" (1971), Foucault elaborated upon Nietzsche's ironical invocation of Ursprung. It is the myth of a man who cannot reconcile himself with discontinuous historicity, or the impossibility of an all embracing "origin." At first sight, this analysis seems to provide one with an apt description of Corbinian transnational Orientalism in Tehran 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 political perspective of Islamic Republican ideologues.

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24 "Westoxification" attained fame through the essay "Gharbzagdeh" by Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1993-1972), which may have inspired the political reorientation of Khome ni’s ideology (cf. Abrahamian 1993: 23). In Al-e Ahmad’s work (1993), the influence of Heidegger has been detected (cf. Boeri 1996: 71).

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