



Henry Corbin

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Born in Paris on April 14, 1903, Henry Corbin died in the same city on October 7, 1978. As with so many other scholars and thinkers, his biography seems at first to be circumscribed by his studies, bibliography, and teaching. After having obtained the Licence ès Lettres and the Diplôme d'Etudes Supérieure de Philosophie from the Sorbonne in 1926, Henry Corbin studied at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, Séction des Sciences Religieuses, at which he completed his thesis and received a degree in 1928, and at the Ecole des Langues Orientales from which he received a degree in 1929. He mastered Greek, Latin, Arabic, and Persian at a young age and applied himself to the study of Western and Arabic medieval philosophy. He subsequently resided in Germany and familiarized himself with phenomenology and the thought of Heidegger. (It was Corbin who, in 1939, was the first to translate and publish *Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?* including long sections from *Sein und Zeit*.) Etienne Gilson and, above all, Louis Massignon were his mentors. By acquainting him with a lithographic edition of *Hikmat al-ishrâq* [The oriental theosophy of light] of the Persian philosopher and mystic Sohrawardî, Massignon in effect determined the direction of Corbin's research.

The war caught Corbin in Istanbul, where he remained until 1945. By studying the Arabic and Persian manuscripts of the rich libraries of Istanbul, he acquired the expertise for the careful editing of these texts. In 1945 he published the first volume of Sohrawardî's *Opera metaphysica et mystica* in volume 16 of

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Bibliotheca Islamica (81 + 511 pp.). The second volume (104 + 350 pp.) was published in Teheran in 1952.

Corbin's first trip to Iran in 1945 played a decisive role in his life. As S. H. Nasr explains, "He immediately recognized his spiritual homeland." The next year he was assigned to organize the Department of Iranology of the French-Iranian Institute which was to be established in Teheran. Corbin founded the *Bibliothèque Iranienne*, a famous collection of Persian and Arabic philosophical texts which were edited, introduced, and occasionally translated by him. Among the sixteen volumes which have already appeared, *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire* (Teheran-Paris, 1954), which was translated into English as *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (New York, 1960), deserves special mention. In 1954 he was appointed professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, assuming the chair of Louis Massignon. His first course was devoted to the *Talwihât* of Sohrawardî.

Henceforth, Corbin's life followed a pattern which he preserved until his last days. In autumn he pursued his own research in Teheran; in winter and spring he taught at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in Paris; the summer was reserved for writing his own works and for the Eranos lectures which he regularly gave since 1949 in Ascona. Monographs and books on Islamic philosophy and mysticism followed one another with a tempo that only Georges Dumézil displayed. Among his more important publications we may note *L'Imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn Arabî* (Paris, 1958; 2d ed., 1976); *Trilogie ismaélienne* (Paris-Teheran, 1961); *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, vol. 1, *Des origines jusqu'à la mort d'Averroes* (Paris, 1964); the four volumes of his magnum opus, *En Islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques* (vols. 1 and 2, Paris, 1971; vols. 3 and 4, Paris, 1973) and his translations of the fifteen mystical tracts of Sohrawardî, *L'Archange empourpré* (Paris, 1976) which he annotated and introduced. A complete bibliography of his works up to 1977 was published in the volume edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Mélanges offerts à Henry Corbin* (Teheran, 1977, pp. iii-xxxii).

Corbin's *oeuvre* had as great an impact in Europe as it did in Iran. On the one hand, Corbin demonstrated the importance of Isma'ilism and Shi'ism for the understanding of Iranian Islam, revealed the real grandeur of Sohrawardî and his disciples, and proved the vitality of Iranian religious thought in the last four centuries. On the other hand, Corbin was the first to develop a

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hermeneutic capable of deciphering the hidden, esoteric meaning of Islamic religious texts. This is not the place in which to describe Corbin's hermeneutical method. (We will have the opportunity to return to this in an article on *Theosophia perennis* which will appear in a forthcoming issue of *History of Religions*.) For the moment it may be said that his teaching at the Sorbonne, his publications, and his lectures at Ascona and the University of St. John of Jerusalem, which he founded in France in 1970, helped to integrate certain problems of Eastern studies and history of religions (Ismailism, Islamic esotericism, gnosticism, etc.) into Western cultural experience. From this point of view, the significance of his work may be compared with that of Ernest Renan or Sir James Frazer.

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