

BETWEEN HEIDEGGER AND THE HIDDEN IMAM: REFLECTIONS ON HENRY CORBIN'S APPROACHES TO MYSTICAL ISLAM

NILE GREEN

A quarter century after his death, the shadow of Henry Corbin (1903-78) covers a vast domain in the study of Shi'ism, Sufism, Islamic philosophy and the wider spiritual traditions of Iran. As the author of some two hundred published studies, this is partly due to the prolific and energetic nature of his work. But it is also due to the sheer monumentality and ambition of his scholarship: the breadth of its field of reference, both within and without Corbin's particular area of study, was frequently startling. Few would challenge the claim that Corbin opened uncharted territory in the area of Shi'ite and Iranian thought to Western scholars, and his work as an editor of unpublished Arabic and Persian manuscripts and director of the *Bibliothèque Iranienne* series alone would have secured him this reputation. Corbin's career led him from Paris and Germany in the 1930s, to war years spent in the imperial libraries of Istanbul and then to post-war travels throughout the Middle East (Shayegan n.d.). In 1946 he organized the Department of Iranology at the Franco-Iranian Institute in Tehran, before becoming the successor to Louis Massignon as *directeur d'études* at the Sorbonne's *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Études*.

Since Corbin's death, there has been a widespread tendency to brush aside what are undoubtedly the more remarkable elements of his approach to his subject. Unfashionably earnest, uncomfortably continental in the empiricist world of Anglo-American scholarship, Corbin's presence has for the most part been one to be politely ignored, like that of an elderly relative acceptable only during his occasional lucid moments. In a sense, there is little importance in this, for Corbin's work is in itself complete, his vision clearly presented in volume after volume of densely argued text, with little need for continuation or commentary by later generations. However, the fact remains that in ignoring Corbin we overlook one of the most remarkable chapters in the long centuries of intellectual and spiritual exchange between the civilizations of Christianity and Islam.

What makes Henry Corbin at once so interesting and so awkward is the fact that he was a philosopher standing in a field dominated by

historians. It is important to be clear about these definitions, because they are fundamental in analyzing Corbin's legacy and the disputes surrounding it. Corbin sought to approach Islamic philosophical and mystical thought as a philosopher and thinker. In a world where the subject is examined and taught almost exclusively by historians (the distinction intellectual historian, orientalist, etc. is irrelevant), this inevitably causes conflict. Although more recently we have begun to see Islamic philosophers themselves, such as Mehdi Haeri Yazdi, presenting their own ideas in English, the vast majority of serious studies in Western languages of Islamic thought belong to the category of the history of philosophy and so concern themselves with the presentation of Islamic philosophy almost exclusively from the perspective of ideas-in-time. As a philosopher rather than a historian, Corbin sought out only the idea *an sich*, the idea in itself. Unrepentantly ahistorical in his own approach, Corbin believed passionately that ideas are always potentially alive and remained ever suspicious of what he saw as the dustbin of history.

Corbin's "way in", for himself in his own work and for the outsider as an interpreter of it, is to be found in the writings of Martin Heidegger. Corbin's early studies in Paris were almost exclusively in the field of philosophy, leading him to spend several years in Germany in the mid-1930s, where he met Heidegger, Jaspers, Cassirer and Barth among others. Indeed, his early reputation was secured not as an orientalist but as the first foreign translator of Heidegger's work. It is notable that he achieved the same distinction with regard to the writings of Karl Barth and, with the Protestant "spirituals" remaining a theme throughout his life's work, it is important to bear in mind this Protestant element in his thought. But what attracted Corbin to Heidegger in the first place was the latter's emphasis on ontology, on the study of being. In *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), Heidegger argued that since Descartes Western philosophy had lost its way in its increasing concentration on epistemology. For Heidegger, epistemology is not only the less essential and easier issue, but insofar as it lacks an ontological grounding, it is, in a sense, also a false issue. In the retreat to *Dasein*, Heidegger's label for the Being-of-being, we are in fact moving forwards, for only through encountering *Dasein* can we hope to genuinely encounter anything (that is, "any-being") else. As Corbin remarked in the last years of his life,

The phenomenon of the senses, which is fundamental to the metaphysics of *Sein und Zeit*, is the link between the signifier and the signified. But what is this link, without which the signifier and signified would remain objects of only theoretical consideration? This link is the subject, and this subject is the presence, presence of the mode of being within the mode of under-

standing. Presence, 'being there' (*Da-sein*). (Jambet 1981: 25-26, author's translation.)

It was this same connection between being and knowing that first led Corbin to the study of Islamic philosophy. This orientation, to use a term whose dual senses Corbin was very fond of, is fundamental to understanding Corbin's important contribution to oriental studies in general. For long before Edward Said, Corbin was unhappy with the term "orientalist". When asked to describe himself, he would reiterate that he was "neither a Germanist nor even an orientalist, but a philosopher pursuing his quest wherever the spirit guides him" (Jambet 1981: 24, author's translation). At a time when Western academe is increasingly uncertain of its ability to interpret or even comprehend the phenomena of other cultures, Corbin's premise that there is neither truly east nor west in the geographical sense, that there is no dichotomy of 'Western philosophy' and 'Islamic philosophy', but only philosophy, only phenomena, can come as a welcome relief, and indeed escape. And not an escape that is either naïve or simple, but one that is based in the principle (Heideggerian or otherwise) that Being is the only thing that can know being. Drawing on the mystical traditions of the Sufis, Corbin's version of Heidegger's hermeneutics sought to put this into practice.

Some time during the early 1930s, the great French scholar of Sufism, Louis Massignon presented his young student Corbin with a gift of an early copy of the Persian philosopher-mystic Shihabuddin Suhrawardi's *Kitāb Hikmat al-Ishrāq* (*Book of Oriental Illumination*). This gift, which Corbin characteristically regarded as a personal initiation, was to change the subsequent course of his career. While even a thumbnail sketch of Suhrawardi's vast spiritual and philosophical synthesis is beyond the scope of the present article, what is important to note is the presence of certain common and fundamental themes in the work of Heidegger and Suhrawardi, the very themes that lie at the heart of Corbin's own philosophical enterprise. For as a philosopher, Suhrawardi addressed the issue of the validity of human knowledge and ultimately sought to show how this was intimately connected with being. In Suhrawardi's system, humanity experiences two kinds of knowledge, *'ilm al-husūlī* (derived knowledge) and *'ilm al-huzūrī* (immediate knowledge, literally 'knowledge by presence'). The second form of knowledge is higher, rarer and purer than the first, and may be most simply demonstrated in the difference between *knowing about* love and *being in* love. Only through our essential Being, then, can we hope to achieve knowledge. It is at this point, however, where Suhrawardi the philosopher ends

and Suhrawardi the mystic begins, and where the obvious similarities with Heidegger end. For Suhrawardi, the discursive intellect and its abilities (such as philosophy) can only take us so far. At that point it becomes necessary to simultaneously retreat and proceed into our Being, the journey that is most easily labeled mysticism. Yet both Suhrawardi and Corbin would argue with this designation. For Corbin, the dichotomy mysticism/philosophy is misleading, since as for Suhrawardi they are different parts of the same journey. Thus, in his work Corbin rarely referred to either term and preferred the word *theosophy*. As a translation of the Persian term *khudādānī* and the Arabic *ḥikma ilāhiya* it is strictly appropriate and fitting, but be it by naïveté or hauteur his use of such terminology, redolent of Madame Blavatsky and her ilk, has only served to add to the glee of his critics.

Corbin and Heidegger differed vastly in the directions which they took from their point of recognition of the identity of knowing and being. Heidegger's "existence until death" (*Sein zum Tode*) was not a feature of Corbin's work. Instead, Corbin's studies presented a universe where bodily death is merely one stage of a grander journey. He pursued the subjects of his research, not only Suhrawardi but almost all of the major names of the Persian Sufi and Shi'ite traditions, to their every conclusion. Here lay the essence of Corbin's method, the hermeneutics that he drew from Heidegger and used throughout his work as a means of unveiling the world of his chosen theosophists. Corbin referred to himself as a phenomenologist, in the Heideggerian sense of bringing to light or manifesting the *real experiences* of his subjects. In this we witness simultaneously the strength and weakness of Corbin's approach, for in his phenomenological identification with his subjects, it becomes difficult to separate Corbin from his subjects, his own thought from that of, say, Ibn 'Arabi or Ruzbehan Baqli. To his supporters, his method of "spiritual hermeneutics" (Corbin 1978: 121) manifests the world of his subjects; to his detractors it manifests only the peculiar world of Henry Corbin.

In one sense, however, the dichotomy is a false one. From the historicist perspective, Corbin may well be guilty of misrepresentation. But, as Corbin frequently reiterated, he was not working within the scheme or tradition of historicist scholarship. He spoke of his research being within the realm of vertical as opposed to horizontal time, and made reference to the Persian Sufi 'Ala' al-Dawla Semnani's conception of *zamān āfāqī* ("time of horizons", i.e. outer time) and *zamān anfūsī* (psychic or inner time) (Corbin 1978: 123). As a philosopher, Corbin's hermeneutics aim at bringing the phenomena of his subjects to life,

and since that means bringing them to being (as opposed to an historicist *having been*), there is only *presentation*, since the categories of representation and misrepresentation belong to the linear or “horizontal” time of history. Corbin would argue that to work within this schema means to admit that the past and all that belongs to it is dead. Reflecting Heidegger, he claimed that the past is alive when we summon it in the present. In studying the ideas of the historical past, the philosopher brings them to being in the living present. For such a philosopher, the ideas which he studies “do not succeed one another in a homogenous time; they *are*, each of them, their own time” (Corbin 1977: 52). He found a parallel to his own hermeneutics in the Sufi/Shi‘ite practice of *ta‘wīl*, the interpretation of symbolic communication (be it in a dream or in the language of scripture) whose literal meaning is “to bring back” data to their origin or archetype. He described *ta‘wīl* as “preeminently the hermeneutics of symbols . . . a matter of *harmonic perception*, of hearing an identical sound . . . on several levels simultaneously” (Corbin 1977: 53-54). In this way, he attempted to transpose his methodology from being an eminently modern tool to being a fundamental and trans-historical feature of the human quest.

In works like *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism* (Corbin 1978), Corbin’s hermeneutic method allowed him to step into the rich visionary world of the Sufis whose texts he had so carefully read. But while it is all too easy to scoff at Corbin’s enthusiasm for this visionary literature, if we are to realise its value it is nonetheless important to see his approach in the context of the time. In the Anglo-Saxon world in particular, the generation of Persian scholars before Corbin had been very reticent about delving too deeply into the visionary texts which made up so important a part of the epistemology of premodern Islam, from the Quran itself through the writings of medieval visionary-theorists like Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1265) to the private journals of nineteenth century modernists like Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) (Green *forthcoming*). The failure to reckon with this important and in some senses fundamental dimension of Muslim religious experience was the price which historicist and otherwise positivist scholarship had to pay for its methodological framework. Through adopting a hermeneutic method based on an entirely different paradigm from that of historicism, Corbin was able to bring the discussion of such experiences and the texts which mediated them into the realms of serious scholarship. His enthusiasm for the visionary basis of Islamic epistemology could sometime lead him astray, as in his work on the meager symbolic treatises of the great peripatetic philosopher Ibn Sina (d. 1037) in his *Avicenna and the Visionary*

Recital (Corbin 1960). Yet in his finest works like the volumes of his *En Islam Iranien* (Corbin 1971), his approach allowed the reader to enter the radically different world of the Persian mystics without ever quite abandoning the guiding terms and references of their own. But while work on the plethora of Islamic visionary texts has exploded in the decades since Corbin's death, the hermeneutic tightrope that he laid out has generally been ignored for safer methods of transit between the two epistemological worlds. If the resulting scholarship has provided few spectacular falls as a consequence, it has also brought an inability to enter the estranged mental world of the mystics in the same way as Corbin's work.

Although Corbin's transhistorical approach appears to differ from Heidegger's emphasis on "being in time", in actual fact a great deal remains in common. Heidegger argues in *Being and Time* that "in its factual Being Dasein always is as and 'what' it already was. Whether explicitly or not, it *is* its past" (Heidegger 1994: 63). It is from this perspective that Corbin's writing must be read. In *Spiritual Body and Terrestrial Earth* (Corbin 1977), for example, Corbin saw parallels in the differing cosmologies of Mazdean and Shi'ite Iran where historians could see only diversity and difference. What we witness here is a clash of paradigms. The historicist perspective is based upon the supposition of a materialist view of history (there need be no sense in history); Corbin's world, and/or the world of his subjects, is based on a spiritually immanent view of history (there must be sense in history). Thus, while Corbin went against the tradition of modern historical scholarship, from first principles his rationale has no less validity than the materialist paradigm. As a trained philosopher, Corbin felt that his critics had no greater philosophical basis to their approach to the past than he did himself. Although Corbin was keen to stress the importance of historical awareness on the materialist level, he nonetheless felt that to be aware only on this level was one of the great tragedies of the modern age. A tragedy because such awareness robs humanity of a living connection with its past, a past that on the level of material history is, perforce, dead. Here, perhaps, we might do well to remember the darker side to an earlier generation of Romantic historiography whose dangers were so persuasively if helplessly demonstrated in the work of Ernst Cassirer. But as a scholar, Corbin was equipped better than perhaps any of his generation to write an historicist account of the development of Shi'ite and Sufi thought and his *History of Islamic Philosophy* at least disguised itself as such. But as a philosopher his basic project remained a different one. For Corbin, the ideas of the past are only relevant to

us personally insofar as they are brought back to being, brought back as tools for thinking in the present.

We began by remarking that Corbin's work is in itself a completed project, a remark that is both true and false. At the time of his death Corbin was still at work on a number of studies, and, moreover, the entire push of his writing is an attempt to remind us that there is no "finishing" or "completion", but only something that may be summed up as an eternal renewal. Yet his work was complete in the sense that it presented a fully realized vision. We have also remarked upon his continued interest in Protestant theology. Certainly, it may be argued that he was a thinker in the Protestant tradition: the Islam which he presented was certainly akin to Protestantism in its emphasis on a direct and unmediated experience of Reality, for even the Shi'ite Imams were spiritualized and never presented as having mediators in the institutional manner of the Islamic Republic which he did not live to see in Iran. Critics like Charles Adams (1985) have argued that Corbin's is a gravely distorted Islam, idealized and Shi'a-centric. But there is a lack of sophistication in such criticism itself, working as it does within a paradigm of this or that monolithic Islam when Corbin so clearly saw himself as discussing a religious ideal, a theological reading of Islam rather than an historical or ethnographic one. Even though the vision of Islam pictured by Corbin was hardly the most commonplace, we should hardly be surprised when he was dealing solely with what he expressly saw as an elite corps of mystics. And for better or worse, Corbin's spirituality was one for a gnostic elite, the *fideli d'amore* to use the image he constantly referred back to. For like the cliques at the court of the last Shah whose world Corbin and his acolytes knew so well, Corbin's own notion of mysticism was an elitist one. As such, it was a decisive step away from that of his teacher Louis Massignon, whose own political and religious views were famous for their antipathy towards cabals of any kind.

Yet within the purlieu of his aims, that is outside the realm of historical scholarship, Corbin's phenomenology can offer a vital "way in" for those who desire one and a "way out" of the agnosticism (in its strict sense of general uncertainty) that stifles so many attempts to look at the world as experienced by the other, whether in past or present. It may be said that the greatest strengths and the greatest weaknesses of Corbin's work lie in its very subjectivity, its deliberate opposition to the "objectivity" of historicist writing. With his perpetual recalling of the theme of the *bātin* (esoteric) and the *zāhir* (exoteric) this is perhaps a conclusion with which Corbin himself would not strongly disagree.

But the postmodernist critique of what is claimed as the spurious objectivity of historical narrative has done much to dampen the fires of Corbin's ideological opponents. In some ways, Corbin's greatest academic sin was perhaps the candour with which he expressed his own involvement and personal agenda in his work. His other, of course, was to be overtaken by the forces of history to which he paid so little heed, for the Islamic Revolution of 1979 seemed to suddenly wash away a whole tradition of scholarship that was sympathetic to Shi'ism and reveal it as politically naïve and fanciful if not downright dangerous. Iran's revolutionary changes also served to highlight Corbin's many friendships with people suddenly re-positioned in all the wrong places. Whatever the personal or political morality of Corbin's associations, the destiny of his work is certainly a poignant example of the plight of the intellectual in history. In the current world-climate it seems extraordinary that less than three decades ago Corbin could have attracted scholars like Michel Foucault towards a sympathy with Shi'a Islam. Perhaps the present gigantomachy of those same forces of history which Corbin philosophically advised were so inimical to the search for truth and lasting meaning should now prompt us towards a reconsideration of Corbin's legacy.

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