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Henry Corbin, 1903–1978: Between Philosophy and Orientalism

Henry Corbin was a French *engagé* “Orientalist” inspired by German philosophical phenomenology and existential theology. His scholarly work on Islamic philosophy and Iranian culture implies a fundamental critique of “Orientalism,” which reflects his philosophical background and differs in nature from Edward Said’s, although the reactions to both were sometimes similar. The article attempts to highlight the connection between Corbin’s philosophical thought and his prodigious scholarly work, and to assess the impact of the latter in light of the former.

1

The conventional way to study the Islamic philosophical tradition, in so far as one was recognized to exist, has been decidedly eurocentric. By and large, it was assumed that the only reason why so-called “Arabic philosophy” should be taken into consideration at all was a historical one: the fact that it was thanks to the Arabs that the Greek philosophical tradition had survived through the Middle Ages; and it was taken for granted that this tradition had found its last major exponent in twelfth-century Spain with Dante’s “great Commentator,” Averroes, i.e., Ibn Rushd. Once these “Arabs” (meaning Christian and Muslim Arabs, Turks like al-Fārābī, and Iranians like Avicenna [Ibn Sīnā], all living under Islamic rule and writing mainly in Arabic) had done their due, as it were, by transmitting this tradition to the Jews and Latin Christendom, they were no longer interesting. This eurocentric attitude among students of philosophy was, moreover, reinforced by Orientalism which, for reasons of its own, had appropriated al-Ghazālī as “the most original thinker that Islām has produced and its greatest theologian.”¹ Accordingly, the verdict passed by al-Ghazālī upon the Islamic philosophical tradition was accepted as final. Whatever philosophy the Muslim East continued to produce after Ghazālī was generally either ignored, or dismissed as “Oriental syncretism,” or confused with some sort of degenerate Sufism.

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¹ Duncan B. Macdonald, “al-Ghazālī,” *The Encyclopædia of Islam*, II (1927): 146; idem, “al-Ghazzālī,” *Shorter Encyclopædia of Islam* (1961): 111. Note that this categorical assessment has been significantly modified by W. Montgomery Watt, “al-Ghazālī,” *The Encyclopædia of Islam: New Edition*, II (1965): 1038.

It is partly as a reaction to this typically Western and “Orientalist” perception of things that the work of Henry Corbin and his life-long concern to give “Oriental” philosophy its due place must be understood. As Muhsin Mahdi has noted, “Corbin distinguished himself from most of his contemporaries by the effort to think both historically and philosophically when dealing with Islamic philosophy”—a distinction which has opened him, Professor Mahdi added, to “one of the strangest criticisms” from “some of the representatives of the older, historical and philological tradition of Islamic studies in the West.”² Now, in the case of Henry Corbin, “to think philosophically” about Islamic philosophers clearly meant something more than a simple methodological device. It meant, to put it in a nutshell, that the Muslim philosophical tradition, and specifically the post-Ghazalian variety, had something interesting to offer to the West precisely because it was different, because, having preserved vital elements of the Gnostic tradition, it did not go along with the radical separation between “reason and revelation” that had informed mainstream Western thought at least since the Renaissance. Not unlike the Presocratics in the case of Martin Heidegger (whom Corbin greatly admired, especially in his student days), the oriental Gnostics offered Corbin a way leading directly to the very sources of true philosophical thinking. By the same token, Corbin’s scholarly work was to imply nothing less than a fundamental critique of the Western academic tradition. Indeed, one might say that the critique of “Orientalism” which we now owe to Edward Said’s eloquence was in a sense already voiced much earlier by Corbin; and although the reasons and motivations for such challenging of habitual ways of thinking about Islamic thought and culture were of course quite different in the two cases, if not opposite in some respects, the reactions to both, coming as they did

² Muhsin Mahdi, “Orientalism and the Study of Islamic Philosophy,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 1 (1990): 93.

from the same academic profession, whose ethos was thereby being called into question, were sometimes strikingly similar. To be sure, Corbin was himself an "Orientalist" in the sense that his scholarly work deals for the greater part with things "oriental." Like other "Orientalists," too, he evidently was what Edward Said would probably call an "essentialist" since the "Orient"—though not necessarily the geographic "East"—meant something different to him than the "West." Yet he was clearly an outsider to the profession and made no secret of the fact. He preferred to see himself as a "born Platonist," a philosopher at heart and a theologian in his own way, a "desperate believer" fighting his lonely battle for the unity of philosophy and theology and against agnosticism, historicism, positivism, psychologism, and sociologism—all being forms of reductionism deeply rooted in the Western academic tradition. An excellent bibliography covering more than three hundred titles as well as much pertinent information on Corbin's biography and personality can be found in the volume *Henry Corbin* of the series *Les Cahiers de l'Herne*, edited by Christian Jambet, published in Paris, in 1981.³

II

It was as a student of medieval philosophy under Étienne Gilson in the early twenties that Corbin first became interested in learning oriental languages. While subsequently pursuing Islamic Studies under Louis Massignon, he remained essentially a philosopher—soon to become a noted avant-garde intellectual who introduced such

names as Karl Barth and Martin Heidegger to the French scene. His translation of a collection of essays by Martin Heidegger, published in 1938, titled *Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?* is still a classic.⁴ Yet there was another philosopher whose originality and depth of thought had really touched Corbin before, and who was to remain his true philosophical hero to the end of his life. That philosopher was the Iranian contemporary of Averroes, Shihābuddīn Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī, whose "Oriental-illuminative" (*ishrāqī*) interpretation of Avicenna's philosophy Corbin found so much more refreshing than Averroes' "Western-dualistic" reductionism.⁵ This Suhrawardī (not to be confused with the Sufi of the same name) is generally referred to by Orientalists as *al-maqtūl*, the "one killed," because he was indeed executed in 1191 for having claimed allegedly that God can create prophets at any time. Corbin adopted him, on the contrary, as the one whose ontology of the "rising Light" (*ishrāq*) was intended to bring the wisdom of the ancient Sages of Persia to new life in the "present." According to Corbin's own account, it was actually Heidegger's phenomenology, the search for the *logos* of the *phainomenon* that "shows itself," that gave him the hermeneutic key to his new understanding of Suhrawardī's "Orient of Light."⁶ He also acknowledges that his discovery of this spiritual Orient was greatly helped by his long experience of the geographic East, his personal encounter with many scholars and philosophers, first in Turkey and then, for a period of more than thirty years, in Iran, where scholars such as Mohammad Moʿin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr and eminent representatives of the *ḥikmat*-tradition such as ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī and Jalāluddīn ʿĀshṭiyānī offered him their precious friendship and collaboration until the end in 1978.

³ The following are also of interest: Christian Jambet, *La Logique des orientaux: Henry Corbin et la science des formes* (Paris, 1983); *Mélanges offerts à Henry Corbin*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Wisdom of Persia Series*, vol. 9 (Teheran, 1397/2536/1977); Darius Shayegan, *Henry Corbin: La topographie spirituelle de l'islam iranien* (Paris, 1990); Thomas Widmer, "Der französische Philosoph und Iranist Henry Corbin (1903 bis 1978): Eine kritische Lektüre seines Werks vor dem Hintergrund der Orientalismus-Debatte" (thesis, University of Berne, 1990); Egbert Meyer, "Tendenzen der Schiaforschung: Corbins Auffassung von der Schia," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, suppl. III.1 (1977): 551–58; Hamid Algar, "The Study of Islam: The Work of Henry Corbin," *Religious Studies Review* 6 (April 1980): 85–91; Charles J. Adams, "The Hermeneutics of Henry Corbin," in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard C. Martin (Tucson, Ariz., 1985), 129–50; Roxanne Marcotte, "Phenomenology Through the Eyes of an Iranologist: Henry Corbin (1903–1978)," *The Bulletin of The Henry Martyn Institute of Islamic Studies* 14 (January–June 1995): 55–70.

⁴ Corbin's 1937 lectures on Johann Georg Hamann, published with an introduction by Jean Brun (Paris, 1985) under the title *Hamann philosophe du luthéranisme*, should also be mentioned in this context.

⁵ See, e.g., Henry Corbin, "En Orient, après Averroès," in *Multiple Averroès: Actes du Colloque international organisé à l'occasion du 850^e anniversaire de la naissance d'Averroès, Paris 20–23 septembre 1976*, ed. Jean Jolivet (Paris, 1978), 323–32.

⁶ See Henry Corbin, "De Heidegger à Suhrawardī, Entretien avec Philippe Némó," *Cahiers de l'Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. C. Jambet (Paris, 1981): 23–37. Also see Martin Heidegger, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs* (Frankfurt am Main, 1979), 110ff. Note, however, that Corbin's phenomenology may be understood as closer to Husserl's than to Heidegger's, as was suggested by C. Jambet in his introduction to *Itinéraire d'un enseignement*, *Bibliothèque iranienne*, vol. 38 (Teheran and Louvain, 1993), 26 ff.

To begin with, Corbin was commissioned in 1939 by the Bibliothèque nationale to catalogue and photograph manuscripts in Istanbul for a period of three months starting in September of that memorable year; he eventually found himself as the sole guardian of the French Institute there during World War II. As a result of this prolonged residence in Istanbul, which provided an excellent opportunity for Corbin to make good use of that city's marvelous manuscript libraries, the first volume of Suhrawardī's *Opera metaphysica et mystica* was published in 1945 as part of the series *Bibliotheca Islamica*, directed by Hellmut Ritter. The second volume of the *Opera*, containing Suhrawardī's famous *Hikmat al-ishrāq* plus two shorter treatises, followed in 1952 from Teheran as part of the Bibliothèque iranienne, the important series of texts on Islamic philosophy and mysticism which Corbin himself had founded in the meantime, and which he directed for many years.

Corbin moved to Teheran for the first time directly from Istanbul in September 1945 to "meet Suhrawardī in his own homeland," as he put it, returning to Paris only in 1946. One year later, the Département d'Iranologie of the newly founded Franco-Iranian Institute was officially inaugurated, with Corbin as its director. From that time on until his death, Corbin returned almost every year to Teheran for a term or so, while also lecturing, from 1949, at the yearly Eranos Conferences in Ascona, Switzerland, and teaching, from 1954, as successor to Louis Massignon at the Ecole pratique des hautes études in Paris. After his administrative retirement from the French university system, he continued for the last four years of his life to teach both in Paris and Teheran, returning there as before, but now as a guest of the then Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy. The most tangible result of this activity is, of course, the series Bibliothèque iranienne, of which twenty-three volumes, many of them by Corbin himself, were published during his lifetime.⁷ These critical editions with detailed analytical introductions and sometimes translations of hitherto unpublished philosophical, Gnostic and mystical texts certainly reflect Corbin's concept of Irano-Islamic philosophy in a most direct and concrete way. Focusing from the beginning on the "oriental" interpretation of Avicenna, Corbin in due course was to discover nothing

less than the existence of a whole, virtually unknown continent of philosophical thought and spirituality, a specifically Iranian Islamic tradition that had not only survived Ghazālī's attacks but actually developed a distinct and culturally significant character of its own, a movement that culminated perhaps in the magnificent structures of the "Shī'ite Renaissance" of seventeenth-century Isfahan, although it continues to exercise a certain influence even up to our day.

While establishing the first critical edition of Suhrawardī's *Hikmat al-ishrāq* for the Bibliothèque iranienne, Corbin also translated its most important metaphysical section, together with Quṭbuddīn Shīrāzī's helpful commentary and the extremely interesting yet difficult glosses by the great seventeenth-century Shī'ite philosopher, Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī, which were (and still are) available only in the scarcely legible margin of the traditional lithograph edition. This difficult translation work, which Corbin himself revised several times before his death, was published posthumously in France, thanks to the meticulous editorial work of Christian Jambet, one of his students, under the title *Le Livre de la sagesse orientale*.⁸ The perhaps somewhat old-fashioned term *sagesse*, "wisdom," was deliberately chosen in order to avoid all-too-frequent misunderstanding of Corbin's own preference for the term *théosophie*, although Corbin himself had already made it abundantly clear that he used this term in an etymological sense only, corresponding literally to *ḥikma ilāhīya* and meaning a peculiar type of philosophy that is *both* rational and inspired. There can be no doubt that this work on Suhrawardī, Quṭb Shīrāzī, and Mullā Ṣadrā together occupied a central place in Corbin's own thinking, for, as we shall see, Mullā Ṣadrā's critical yet admiring attitude towards Suhrawardī, his existential interpretation of *ishrāq*, his philosophy of permanent upwards "resurrection" rather than downwards emanation, his original concept of "substantial motion" culminating in a new eschatology—all this played a decisive role in leading Corbin to his own critical stance vis-à-vis Heidegger's version of existential philosophy.

Equally decisive for Corbin was still another aspect of Suhrawardī's thought, which was actually developed and brought to full philosophical and theological relevance by Mullā Ṣadrā as well, namely, the notion of the *imaginal world* as a fundamental reality between mind and matter. On the one hand, this basically anti-Cartesian, or rather trans-Cartesian, position led Corbin directly to Sufism and especially to Ibn 'Arabi. In this regard, I

⁷ First editions of twenty-two volumes were published jointly by the Département d'Iranologie of the Franco-Iranian Institute, Teheran, and Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient Adrien-Maisonneuve, Paris. Vol. 23 appeared as part of a new series published by the Iranian Academy of Philosophy (see also below, note 20).

⁸ Lagrasse: Verdier, 1986.

should at least mention his *L'Imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi*,⁹ first published in Paris in 1958—a work which not only clarified, for the first time in “Orientalist” literature, the fundamental originality of Ibn 'Arabi's notion of “theophany,” that is, his central notion of *tajallī*, in contrast to a thoughtless usage of the term “incarnation,” but also highlighted the “situation of esotericism” in general, as opposed to “unilateral monotheism.”¹⁰ On the other hand, Corbin was also the first to realize fully the esoteric and Gnostic significance of Suhrawardī's own creative writing, his symbolic tales or narratives, which were written mostly in Persian. Corbin coined the technical term *récits d'initiation* or “tales of initiation” for this genre, signaling thereby his outspoken refusal to regard such tales as mere *allegories* to be simply decoded and reduced to popular versions of so-called systematic philosophy—a point which, as is well known, stirred up much debate, particularly since Corbin applied it not only to Suhrawardī but also to Avicenna's “Visionary Recitals,”¹¹ and to the Ismā'īlī “Book of the Sage and the Disciple” (*Kitāb al-ʿālim wa al-ghulām*).¹² The Suhrawardian “tales” were eventually published in 1970 as a collection of fourteen treatises forming the third part of the Suhrawardian *Opera*, thus being the second volume devoted to Suhrawardī in the Bibliothèque iranienne (vol. 17), edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, with Corbin's introductions. Still a few years later, in 1976, Corbin's own fully annotated translation of this volume, including in addition Suhrawardī's Persian

translation of the Avicennian *Recital of the Bird*, appeared separately in Paris under the title *L'Archange empourpré*¹³—a title which sounds perhaps disturbing to those who realize that the corresponding Persian title (*ʿaql-i surkh*) of one of the fifteen texts means literally “red intellect,” but which very well illustrates Corbin's art of rendering Suhrawardī's true intentions, for the “Red Intellect” of this tale is at once Gabriel, the Angel of Revelation, the Active Intellect of the philosopher, and the archetypal figure of the initiatory guide of the Gnostic. Besides, this title also alludes to one of the most intimate themes of Corbin's own spiritual quest, that of the “heavenly partner,” which is the subject of his phenomenological study on *L'Homme de lumière dans le soufisme iranien*.¹⁴ Given that Corbin's relationship to Carl Gustav Jung was one of friendship and mutual respect, it should perhaps be pointed out that Corbin there emphasizes the difference between this “heavenly partner” and Jung's notion of the “collective unconscious.”¹⁵ Despite his friendship with Jung, Corbin did not share what he used to refer to as “*l'optimisme zurichois*.”

Corbin's profound attraction to Suhrawardī's esotericism may also explain the fact that his research from the earliest times turned decidedly towards Shī'ism. After all, it was Shī'ism, and particularly Ismā'īlism, which best represented within Islam the tradition known in late Antiquity as *gnosis*. The transformation process of ancient Gnostic, hermetic and Neoplatonic wisdom into an original form of Islamic thought through Ismā'īlism was, in fact, the major focus of the very first volumes of the Bibliothèque iranienne. During the early years from 1949 onwards, a number of important texts documenting the existence of classical Ismā'īlī Gnosis were in this way made available for the first time (vols. 1 [1949]; 3 [1953]; 6 [1955]; 9 [1961]), besides, of course, Suhrawardī's *Hikmat al-ishrāq* (vol. 2 [1952]) and Avicenna's “Visionary Recital.” Corbin's broadly conceived study of the Avicennian narratives and their respective destinies in the East and West also included, in the version published in the Bibliothèque iranienne (vols. 4 and 5

⁹ English by Ralph Mannheim as *The Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, Bollingen Series, vol. 91 (Princeton, 1969).

¹⁰ Corbin's “apparent distaste for monotheism” has been critically examined by Lenn Evan Goodman in his review in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 2 (1971): 278–90. Corbin himself later redefined his position in *Le Paradoxe du monothéisme* (Paris, 1981), first published in *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 45 (1976) [Leiden, 1980]: 69–133.

¹¹ For a relatively recent, refreshingly un-polemical discussion of this issue see Sarah Stroumsa, “Avicenna's Philosophical Stories: Aristotle's *Poetics* Re-interpreted,” *Arabica* 39.2 (1992): 183–206. Also see Peter Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā), with a Translation of the Book of the Prophet Muḥammad's Ascent to Heaven* (Philadelphia, 1992). Note that Corbin did not regard the *Miʿrāj-nāma* as an authentic work of Avicenna's, mainly because it seems to contradict Avicenna's true position regarding the role of the Active Intellect.

¹² Discussed and partly translated by Corbin in “L'initiation ismaélienne ou l'ésotérisme et le Verbe,” *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 39 (1970) [Leiden, 1973]: 41–142.

¹³ *Shihāboddīn Yahyā Sohravardī, L'Archange empourpré: Quinze traités mystiques traduits du persan et de l'arabe*, annotés et présentés par H. Corbin (Paris, 1976).

¹⁴ First published as “Physiologie de l'Homme de lumière dans le soufisme iranien,” in *Ombre et lumière*, Académie septentrionale, Paris (1962): 135–257. Subsequently published in book form as *L'homme de lumière dans le soufisme iranien* (Paris, 1971; and Sisteron, 1984). English by Nancy Pearson as *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism* (Boulder, 1978).

¹⁵ For more details, see my review in *JAOS* 102 (1982): 213–14.

[1954]), an edition of the Arabic text of, and an ancient Persian commentary upon, the famous Avicennian tale depicting the figure of the philosopher's guide, the Active Intellect, *Ḥayy b. Yağzān*.¹⁶ A little later, Corbin turned more towards Sufism. In two volumes of the Bibliothèque iranienne (vols. 8 [1958] and 12 [1966]), he presented the Sunni Sufi Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 1209), analyzing in particular the latter's subtle theory of the ambiguity or "ambiboly" (*iltibās*)¹⁷ of Love and of divine/human Speech (*shāth*); two other volumes, on Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, done in collaboration with Osman [ʿUthmān] Yaḥyā (vols. 16 [1969] and 22 [1975]) documented the all-important reception of Ibn ʿArabī in the Iranian Shīʿite milieu of the fourteenth century and beyond. Among other things, the discovery of this historical reception process led Corbin to his unconventional, phenomenological view of the history of Sufism in general, about which I shall say a word shortly. But the later volumes of the Bibliothèque also include those which, from a strictly philosophical point of view, are perhaps the most important, especially Mullā Ṣadrā's *Kitāb al-mashāʿir* or *Le Livre des pénétrations métaphysiques* (vol. 10), published in 1964 with the original Arabic text, a Persian translation and commentary written by that remarkable Qājār philosopher-prince, Badīʿ ul-Mulk Mirzā ʿImādudawlā,¹⁸ a fully annotated French translation of the main text, and a long bibliographical and philosophical introduction. In the latter, Corbin reveals much of his own thinking on "Being and Time" and also explains in what way the seventeenth-century Iranian classic of the philosophy of pure existence differed fundamentally from Heidegger's "existentialism"—as

fundamentally as the ultimately religious idea of "presence" differs from the German philosopher's notion of *das Sein zum Tode*.¹⁹ Last but certainly not least, I should mention Corbin's projected six-volume *Anthologie des philosophes iraniens depuis le XVII^e siècle jusqu'à nos jours*, to be carried out in collaboration with Jalāluddīn Āshtiyānī. Four parts of this *Anthologie* were actually published, but Corbin himself was able to write introductions only to the first three.²⁰ However, his introductions and notes, revised by himself and published posthumously as *La philosophie iranienne islamique aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles*²¹ constitute a unique source work and an indispensable supplementary volume to his well-known major works, *En Islam iranien*²² and *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*.²³

III

To be fair, it should perhaps be pointed out that Corbin was not, in fact, the first European scholar to recognize the philosophical importance of both Suhrawardī and Mullā Ṣadrā. In the first two decades of this century, Max Horten, another philosopher finding himself somehow lonely among the Orientalists, first attempted to make this Eastern philosophy available to his colleagues.²⁴ Yet unlike Corbin's strongly text-oriented and in-depth analyses, Horten's supposedly systematic presentations of Suhrawardī's and Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophies were quite summary indeed. His *Philosophische System von Schirāzi* gives, contrary to expectations raised by the words added on the title page, *übersetzt und erläutert*, a mere indication of some of the contents of Ṣadrā's magnum opus, the *Four Journeys*. Moreover, Horten's approach to Iranian philosophy and mysticism in general was still marred by

¹⁶ English (without the Arabic and Persian texts) by W. R. Trask, Bollingen Series, vol. 66 (New York, 1960). A separate edition of the French translation of the Arabic text of *Ḥayy b. Yağzān* and the Persian commentary was published in 1953 by the Société des monuments nationaux de l'Iran (UNESCO, Œuvres représentatives, série persane).

¹⁷ I am aware of the strictures on Corbin's understanding of this term that have been made by Carl W. Ernst, *Rūzbihān Baqlī: Mysticism and the Rhetoric of Sainthood in Persian Sufism* (Richmond, Surrey, 1996).

¹⁸ The same man who also wrote a commentary on Jāmī's *Durra al-fākhira* (MS Majlis 100, fols. 79b–121b, dated 1308 A.H. as described by Corbin, *Pénétrations*, French introduction, pp. 53 and 58). An apparently later and incomplete version of this commentary has been published by A. Mūsavī Behbahānī under the title *Ḥikmat-i ʿImādiyya*, on the basis of another manuscript written in 1316 A.H., as an appendix to N. Heer's edition of the *Durra*, Wisdom of Persia Series, vol. 19 (Teheran [1980], 115–222; see *ibid.*, pp. lxx ff. and 219, note).

¹⁹ See also "De Heidegger à Sohrawardī" (above, note 6).

²⁰ Vols. 18 (1972) and 19 (1975). Part 3 was originally planned to appear as vol. 23. Published by the Iranian Academy of Philosophy in 1976, according to the title page, it has only a brief introduction by Henry Corbin, dated December 1977.

²¹ Paris, 1981.

²² Four volumes (Paris, 1971–72).

²³ English, by Liadain Sherrard, with the assistance of Philip Sherrard, as *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London and New York, 1993), from the complete second French edition (Paris, 1986). The first French edition (Paris, 1964) contained only the first part, which was written in collaboration with Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Osman Yahya.

²⁴ Cf. Max Horten, *Die Philosophie der Erleuchtung nach Suhrawardi (1191)* (Halle, 1912; reprint Hildesheim, 1981); *idem*, *Das philosophische System von Schirāzi (1640), übersetzt und erläutert* (Straßburg, 1913).

a typical nineteenth-century flirtation with Indo-Aryan theories—a temptation which Corbin was definitely too Massignonian, or Christian, to fall for. Corbin's perhaps somewhat romantic idea of a continuity “from Mazdean Iran to Shī'ite Iran” was to be understood, in a musical sense, as a “harmonic progression,” as he made clear in *Terre céleste et corps de résurrection: De l'Iran mazdéen à l'Iran shī'ite*.²⁵ Despite appearances, this idea had no inner affinity whatsoever with a political program that could be perceived as aiming to cast fourteen centuries of Islamic history into oblivion. Quite to the contrary, the existence of a specifically Iranian Islam proved to Corbin the validity of Islam as a universal religion, which he simply refused to confuse with Arabism. True to his personalist thinking about religion, he also refused to derive monistic trends in Islamic mysticism from Indian monism, as is evident from one of his latest lectures, *Le Paradoxe du monothéisme*.²⁶ Like Massignon's, his generous concept of “monotheism” was based on the Islamic notion of the “Abrahamic religion,” although he undoubtedly included Zarathustra in this spiritual family and never interpreted this in a historical sense. Most important was what he used to call “the phenomenon of the Sacred Book” and its necessary counterpart, the person of a prophetic figure, the presumed source of spiritual hermeneutics. In the final analysis, I think, it is Corbin's conviction that this personal source can never be “incarnated” once and for all in history, which also explains his profound sympathy for Shī'ism.

Of course, Corbin's well-known thesis that Sufism is really an extension of Shī'ism *in partibus Sunnitarum*—and an incomplete one at that—is highly problematic; indeed it is hardly tenable as a historical statement about the origin of Sufism.²⁷ However, if it is held against the background of those generalizing theories in the History of Religions which would claim that a prophetic religion is by essence incapable of generating genuine mysticism, then Corbin's Shī'ite thesis simply reflects the powerful counter-example provided by the existence of Islam itself—the fact that Sufism cannot be understood without the notion of prophetic inheritance as transmitted by a *shaykh*, and that the notion of prophetic inher-

itance as transmitted by the *imāms* belongs to the very essence of Shī'ism in the first place. From this perspective, it remains significant that Ibn 'Arabī, despite his occasional unkind remarks about Shī'ites, should choose to single out 'Alī b. Abī Tālib as the “closest of all people” to the prophet Muḥammad and to place him, in terms of closeness to the “Light of God,” on the same level as “the secrets of the prophets altogether,” that is, second only to the “Reality of Muḥammad.”²⁸

One of the criticisms frequently made of Corbin's phenomenological vision of the history of Islamic philosophy is that he spiritualized or “re-mythologized” it, as it were, at the expense of its very strong rational side. It is of course true that this rational side, the one almost exclusively taken into consideration in most other presentations, is not the one which caught Corbin's interest. It is also clear that certain pages in his *History of Islamic Philosophy*, for example those on al-Fārābī, who is presented essentially along traditional, Neoplatonizing lines, may have to be revised, particularly in view of the fact that there appear to be more serious grounds to question the authenticity of some famous *Farabiana* than Corbin would allow.²⁹ While Corbin's rather brief dismissal of any “political” interpretation of Fārābī as a “modern” misunderstanding admittedly does not really go to the crux of the question, one does not quite see, on the other hand, why the “political” thinker Fārābī could not also have been a mystic in his own way, provided one accepts the definition of “mysticism” Corbin himself gives in those very pages. In the case of Avicenna, where the evidence is, of course, much stronger, Corbin's enthusiasm for the “Visionary Recital,” and perhaps also his style of writing, seem to have had the paradoxical effect that more recent “Orientalist” literature on the subject shows some disturbing symptoms of acute “Corbinophobia.” To set the record straight, allow me to point out that while much of what Avicenna wrote may

²⁵ Paris, 1961. The second (revised) French edition, titled *Corps spirituel et terre céleste: De l'Iran mazdéen à l'Iran shī'ite*, was published in 1979. English by N. Pearson, Bollingen Series, vol. 91 (Princeton, 1977), as *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shī'ite Iran*.

²⁶ See above, note 10.

²⁷ For critical reviews of this thesis, see notably the articles by Egbert Meyer, Hamid Algar, and Charles Adams, cited above, note 3.

²⁸ *Futūḥāt* (Cairo, 1329/1911), I: 119. For more details, see my review of Michel Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des saints: Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn Arabī* (Paris, 1986), in *Bulletin critique des Annales islamologiques* 4 (1987): 83–85.

²⁹ See especially the recent study by J. Lameer, *Al-Fārābī and Aristotelian Syllogistics: Greek Theory and Islamic Practice* (Leiden and New York, 1994). However, even assuming that Fārābī himself wrote neither the *Gems of Wisdom* nor the *Harmonization of the Opinions of the Two Philosophers*, a point which is still a matter of some debate, Corbin's view may nevertheless find support in such unquestionably authentic works as the *De Intellectu*, which contains numerous Plotinian elements, despite its Aristotelian outlook.

perhaps appear to be “intrinsically alien to the principles of Sufism as it had developed until his time” and “free of any other mystical or esoteric aspect,”³⁰ the fact remains that his famous chapter on *maqāmāt al-ʿarīfīn*, which begins with an explicit reference to the tale of “Salāmān wa-Absāl,” not only has little if anything to do with Aristotelian syllogistics, it does in fact give an excellent description and analysis of Sufi experience, which may be corroborated with other crucial passages from the *Ishārāt* and other Avicennian works. Moreover, there are reasons to think that Avicenna may have learned something about the Sufism of his own time from one of its most reputed teachers, Abū Bakr al-Kalābādī (d. 385/995 in Bukhara), as I have argued elsewhere.³¹ As for recent criticisms of Corbin’s Suhrawardī, there is no real basis in my view for the claim that his *ishrāqī* metaphysics must be reduced to purely epistemological concerns, and that he should therefore be seen as a precursor of Ibn Taymiyya and David Hume rather than Mullā Ṣadrā, as was oddly suggested in a recent study published by Harvard University.³² Such an approach to

Suhrawardī, which is diametrically opposed to Corbin’s, would seem to imply nothing less than the presumption that any philosophy worthy of that name must reflect the concerns of Western empiricist philosophy, and more particularly, its Anglo-American variety; otherwise, it falls into the category of “mysticism.” To this, it might be suggested in reply that the validity of the presupposed alternative “philosophy or mysticism” remains itself unproven, and that there is no good reason to believe that reason is not itself culturally conditioned, as anthropologists would say. Corbin himself would have said that the *modus cognoscendi* depends on the *modus essendi*, not the other way round.

Finally, there is, of course, the criticism of those who feel that Islam is completely misrepresented if the importance of the Shariʿa and the impact of its political ramifications are neglected or underestimated. Well, Corbin certainly did not think that it was his task to “represent Islam” from that angle. He was not a phenomenologist in the derived sense in which this term is used in what is called “Religionswissenschaft,” but in its primary meaning. Being deeply aware of the timeless conflict between the “esoteric” and the “exoteric,” or the spirit and the letter, he created a monument to the former, which stands by itself. Besides, it remains to be seen whether the Iranian tradition of spirituality he did consider it his task to render “present,” has spoken its last word.

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³⁰ Dimitri Gutas, “Avicenna, V: Mysticism,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, I: 79–83. A.-M. Goichon, certainly no “Corbinophile” herself, was somewhat less categorical. See also the more recent discussion in Shams Inati, *Ibn Sinā and Mysticism: Remarks and Admonitions*, pt. 4 (London and New York, 1996).

³¹ “Ghazālī and ‘Religionswissenschaft’: Some Notes on the *Mishkāt al-Anwār* for Professor Charles J. Adams,” *Asiatische Studien/Etudes asiatiques* 45 (1991): 51, n. 125.

³² John Walbridge, *The Science of Mystic Lights: Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī and the Illuminationist Tradition in Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 94. Cf. my review in *Bulletin critique des Annales islamologiques* 11 (1994): 123–25 [Persian version of the same in *Iran-shenasi* (Chicago) 6.4 (1995): 873–76].