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## Act One to the End: Ask the Ayatollah, a Play (with Henry Corbin)

Roxanne Varzi

University of California, Irvine, CA, USA

### ABSTRACT

This play is based on the author's ethnographic and archival research on the French philosopher Henry Corbin's years in Tehran, Iran. Corbin taught in Tehran between 1947 and 1978 (the eve of the Iranian Revolution) at the Institute of Philosophy, which he founded. The play is a dialogue between a fictional university student, Ali, and his mentor, the French philosopher Henry Corbin, with interjections from the angel of history. Ali is trying to come to grips with his love of Islamic mystical philosophy and its dangerous appropriation by political actors of the time, as well as with a deeply personal mourning. This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution.

### KEYWORDS

Revolution; mysticism; belief; theory vs. practice; war; theater

*Iran 1979*

*The stage is divided in two.*

*One side has the sparse look of a wood-walled parlor in a mountain cabin; a pair of wing chairs are separated by a fireplace; a small coffee table is set before the fireplace. A large picture window to the left shows an expanse of snow and mountains.*

*Far stage right and downstage is a different set with a card table on which sits a television set.*

*The television set will be made use of as a screen to show footage of the revolution and war.*

Characters:

Henry Corbin, philosopher, in his seventies, wears a wool suit and tie.

Ali, university student, in his late twenties, is dressed in a white oxford and baggy black sweats.

Angel, in her late twenties, is dressed as a maid with a feather duster and broken angel's wings.

*Play opens with Spotlight on angel; everything else is blacked out.*

*The angel is dusting the television set, when Corbin begins to speak. She turns to look behind her.*

*It's never quite clear if Corbin is privy to the conversation between Ali and the angel, or if he can actually see her.*

Corbin: “In Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*, an angel is mesmerized by something she is about to move away from. Her eyes are staring, her mouth is open, her wings are spread. She is the angel of history. Her face is turned toward the past. ... Where *we* perceive a chain of events, *she* sees one single catastrophic event which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of her feet.

*Angel dusts at her feet.*

The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise.”<sup>1</sup>

*Snow starts falling outside the cabin window.*

Ali to Corbin: “You’re in danger.”  
 Angel: “Everyone’s in danger.”  
 Ali: “I’m serious.”  
 Corbin: “Whatever for?”  
 Ali: “An idea.”  
 Corbin: “An idea? Just one?” *He chuckles.*  
 Ali: “Ideas are dangerous.”  
 Angel: “Ideas can kill.”  
 Corbin: “Not if you don’t voice them.”  
 Angel: “You did. Quite deafeningly.”  
 Corbin: “Yes, but not *those* ideas.”  
 Angel: “Your mistake is to think that when ideas circulate, they don’t change. Take me for example. I was born the new angel in Switzerland, a happy and spritely painting by Paul Klee. But then a *German* philosopher came along and bought me, and turned me into a dark and depressing angel of history...”  
 Ali: “That’s what philosophers do. He’s protected.”  
 Angel: “By whom? No one is protected. Haven’t you learned that yet?”  
 Ali: “Protected.”  
 Corbin: “By a defense of angels.”  
 Angel: “Sometimes what protects us kills us. Ask the angel of history. God, all that time wasted on German philosophy. Where did it get this poor boy? Here, that’s where.”  
 Ali: “You called Islamic philosophy angelology.”  
 Angel: “You’ve gone mad. Too much time alone is bad for the soul.”  
 Corbin: “Ahh, a little magic.”  
 Angel: “Magic is forbidden for a reason.”  
 Ali: “Dark magic is forbidden.”  
 Corbin: “Some mistakenly think all magic is dark magic.”  
 Ali: “Or that religion is dark magic.”  
 Angel: “No! That’s your problem. You’re throwing the baby out with the bathwater.”  
 Ali: “You think they’re the same?” *Still looking down.* “Were you in search of magic when you went to Scotland?”  
 Corbin: “Scotland?”  
 Angel: “He was in search of Masons.”

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<sup>1</sup>See Benjamin (1968).

Ali: "Why Masons?"  
 Corbin: "The answer is up there floating like a careless alphabet . . ." <sup>2</sup>  
 Angel: "Is that what passes for poetry in English?"  
 Corbin: "Wanting and yet revisiting form."  
 Ali: "Claudius in penitent prayer. 'My words fly up,'" <sup>3</sup>  
 Corbin: "My thoughts remain below."  
 Angel: "'Words without thoughts never to heaven go.'"  
 Ali: "Hamlet couldn't kill a man in a state of prayer."

*Angel gestures to the card table.*

Angel: "There are others who would not have that problem."  
 Corbin: "Life is a state of prayer."  
 Ali: "Really?"  
 Corbin: "Don't you feel it now?"  
 Angel: "Alone with the alone?" *she says sarcastically.*  
 Corbin: "So you've read my books."  
 Ali: "That's how I ended up here. Alone, with you as my only company.  
 Most times I even feel like I'm alone with myself."  
 Angel: "Sounds like fabulous company."  
 Ali: "I imagine that I can hear the snow gently falling outside."

*Ali rubs his arms. Corbin dozes off.*

Angel: "But not the protests . . . must be really transporting."  
 Ali: "Corbin didn't just cultivate silence as a spiritual practice, he was born into it."  
 Angel: "How romantic."  
 Ali: "Imagine life in a soundproof room. Not everyone knew that Corbin was partially deaf."  
 Angel: "That explains a lot."  
 Ali: "He didn't miss much though. It's that people misunderstood him."  
 Angel: "Really, is that what the problem was?"  
 Ali: "It's hard to articulate when you can't hear."  
 Angel: "Not in the end. In the end it was all mumbled into a megaphone, or have you forgotten?"  
 Ali: "That was Michel Foucault."  
 Angel: "What's the difference? They were both French philosophers who made a playground of our politics."  
 Ali: "He wasn't playing. He wasn't political."  
 Angel: "Foucault was. What the hell did a philosopher need a megaphone for? Seriously, aren't they supposed to sit in their leather armchairs and smoke pipes and keep to themselves? Persian lectures with heavy Persian poesis—misinterpreted or reinterpreted, you be the judge."  
 Ali: "He couldn't hear himself and therefore never learned to articulate."  
 Angel: "Hard to tame the sounds of a careless alphabet."  
 Ali: "Thought you didn't like English poetry?"  
 Angel: "I don't mind American poetry, it's their ideas I could do without."  
 Ali: "Professor?"

<sup>2</sup>See Blaser (2008).

<sup>3</sup>From William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

*Corbin sleeps.*

"Corbin relied on a hearing aid which he was known to turn off when bored. ... He would signal interest by turning it up."

Angel: "Like les Americaines."

*Corbin opens his eyes and straightens. He fiddles with his ear.*

Corbin: "I remember you from the lectures. You're a doctoral student?"

Ali: "Was. I almost got to spend a night alone with you. I was sent to drive you to Qom; unfortunately, the road was closed ahead of me. There'd been an avalanche. And then the road was closed behind me."

Angel: "Due to a little political avalanche was it? Why Qom, Ali? Did you know where you were taking him?"

Ali: "Of course, everyone knew he was debating clerics."

Angel: "Did I hear critics?"

Ali: "Clerics," *he says adamantly.*

Angel: "At the seminaries in Qom. You know who his students were?"

Ali: "Who didn't?"

Angel: "The ayatollahs Corbin debated would become famous in the Islamic Revolution. ... Some survived that fame, others did not."

Corbin: "We had a wonderful discussion about the revival of traditional philosophy in Persia and its continuation."

Ali: "Well, here's the continuation my friend," *Ali says under his breath and sweeps his arm around the room.*

Angel: "What did you expect? His philosophical fathers are Hegel and Martin Luther—one likes the idea of a Christian *state* and another wants religious *reform*. Put the two ideas together and voilà."

Ali: "Hegel was the Rumi of the West."

Angel: "Rumi's turning in his grave. As is Walter Benjamin. Turns out Paul Klee painted me on the back of Friedrich Müller's 1838 copper-plate engraving of no other than, that's right, you guessed it, Martin Luther."

Ali: "I don't believe in coincidences."

Angel: "Let's call it Zeitgeist. Another nice German word that's colonized the English language."

Ali: "You know, despite Benjamin's reputation as a Marxist, his good friend Gershom Scholem claims he was really a mystic."

Angel: "History will teach us that ne'er the two shall meet."

*Corbin startles awake.*

Corbin: "What? What are you on about?"

Ali: "Rumi and Hegel, mysticism and Marxism mixing. Opiates and sheep."

Angel: "Interesting, two of Iran's largest consumables. Both used as a form of slaughter, both a kind of offering."

Corbin: "Politics does not hold my interest."

Ali: "Good, see that's the problem. Some might think you used this philosophy politically. See my concern? See the danger?"

Corbin: "Symbology was my life."

Angel: "And you can honestly say that politics has nothing to do with symbols?"

*She turns to Ali.*

- Ali: "He stole the idea of a collective unconscious or a symbolic dream world from Ibn Arabi."<sup>4</sup>
- Corbin: "And then Jung stole it from him."
- Angel: "Carl Gustav loved the idea."
- Corbin: "Bet he did, made him rather famous no?"
- Angel: "Jung was always reading symbols. He thought it helped his patients to use tarot cards to coax and loosen the hard edges of reason."
- Corbin: "Reason does have a rather funny way of keeping us from seeing what's right in front of us."
- Angel: "We can miss a lot if we don't know how to read the signs."
- Corbin: "And what was it *you* missed Herr Professor? What was right in front of *you*?"
- Angel: "The problem is in the interpretation, no? Is it cultural? Universal? An owl in Iran is bad luck, but in other countries, like France, it is wise and protective."
- Corbin: "Yes, good luck in the West has always meant bad luck in the East."
- Ali: "Hmmm ..."
- Angel: "And the future? Can it predict the future?"
- Corbin: "What's with this obsession with the future?"
- Ali: "For some. Again, it's an interpretation that is often left until after the fact. Take the hang man—a betrayal in love? N'est-ce pas?"
- Corbin: "Or a man being hung."

*A silence falls over them.*

- Ali: "Jung may have liked the tarot for other reasons, no?"
- Corbin: "How so?"
- Ali: "It tells the secret history of the Masons."
- Corbin: "Ah, the Masons again."
- Ali: "Did you ever feel like Jung plagiarized you?"
- Corbin: "Plagiarism? It doesn't exist in the imaginal realm. We give each other hints."
- Angel: "Funny how all of your hints come from our philosophers."
- Corbin: "We decode the world together; each of us has his own little piece of the puzzle. We must share if we are to see the whole picture. If scientists didn't share, we would discover nothing. Yes, academia in the West is a petty sport, but intellectual and spiritual pursuits are a vital endeavor."
- Angel: "Ask him if revolution is an intellectual pursuit, a spiritual one or a petty sport? Do revolutionaries plagiarize or are they just inspired?"
- Corbin: "What I really learned from Ibn Arabi was to emphasize the imagination."
- Angel: "I'll bet. It's all play to a philosopher isn't it?"
- Corbin: "Imagination is the ultimate means by which to engage the world."
- Pause
- Corbin: "Maybe you're imagining me, Ali?" He laughs.

*Ali looks disturbed. Corbin lights his pipe.*

- Corbin: "Prayer is the supreme form of the creative imagination; the ultimate means toward human liberation."

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<sup>4</sup>See Corbin (1969).

- Angel: "Ever seen Corbin pray?"  
 Ali: "Christians pray alone, in their heads."  
 Angel: "This man seems to live entirely in his head. So anti-social. Community. Religion is about community."  
 Corbin: "To be without a form is not to be without a God."  
 Ali: "Exactly! Why tame the great cosmic world into one ideology?"  
 Angel: "Why indeed? Why not instead write endlessly about symbols in some far away religion that you can play with and then just leave in a strange and tangled web for the natives to decipher? Ask those of us who have lost our form, it never works out well."  
 Corbin: "Things shouldn't be too clear or too accessible."  
 Angel: "True, then we wouldn't have the fun of living with ignorance."  
 Corbin: "Spirituality needs the seeker to seek."  
 Ali: "To seek what?"  
 Angel: "That is the question."  
 Corbin: "With what? Mystery. With the Unknown."  
 Angel: "Yes, well look what happens when a philosopher can't be bothered to clean up his mess."  
 Corbin to Ali: "I prefer the term theosopher. ... Theosophy was a sentiment I shared with Scholem, my good friend."  
 Angel: "Theosophy? Please."  
 Ali: "Theosophy, Corbin thought, was both rational and inspired."  
 Angel: "Not sure that rational and inspired idea worked out too well."  
 Ali: "We're both."  
 Angel: "Speak for yourself. I'm definitely post-Cartesian."  
 Corbin: "The imaginal world is a fundamental reality between mind and matter."  
 Angel: "So trans-Cartesian. So Sufi."  
 Corbin: "My Sufi teacher, Ibn Arabi, taught me that life's journey moves on a vertical scale."  
 Ali: "Then how do we progress?"  
 Corbin: "Our progress is marked by our capacity for love and our ability to perceive beauty."  
 Angel: "Beauty? Guess what has become the most beautiful thing on this vertical path professor? Blood, a dead body, a grave."  
 Ali: "Why Sufism?"  
 Angel: "Because it makes it all so easy to justify."  
 Corbin: "People in Paris said I liked Sufism because I was disillusioned with Heidegger. Even before Heidegger ever taught me a thing about phenomenology, my life's passion was to unveil, to see, what is hidden."

*Angel pretends to hide behind her feather duster.*

- Angel: "Claudius behind a curtain?"  
 Corbin: "Unveiling of the inner meaning of things."  
 Ali: "Unveiling the hidden."  
 Angel: "Yes, how noble. But manifesting the occulted, how dangerous. His teacher liked hidden objects, too. Alethia. Heidegger loved this Greek notion of revealing while concealing. Sufi poetry is full of it, the seeker must unveil all that obscures us from truth and beauty. This plays into the Ayatollah's very good use of the Shiite belief in a hidden, occulted imam who would appear one day to lead his people. A vast majority of the population came to believe that the

Ayatollah was the hidden Imam; it was a brilliant move. But then again, maybe philosophers should stick to their age-old practice of obscuring reality while trying to explain it. The world was a much safer place in those days.”<sup>5</sup>

- Corbin: “A philosopher’s campaign must be led simultaneously on many fronts, otherwise philosophia no longer has anything to do with Sophia, with wisdom.”
- Angel: “How lofty, Herr Professor. Is that from Hegel or Heidegger or does it really matter once it leaves the academy? Speaking of academy, I think we can blame this on your attendance at Kojève’s lectures on Hegel.”
- Ali: “At the Sorbonne? What does Kojève have to do with anything?”
- Corbin: “Kojève’s seminar concentrated heavily on the aspects of transcendence, of death in Hegel’s work.”
- Angel: “So, I wonder, I ask you, was it a misinterpretation for him to suggest that martyrdom isn’t really death but merely a philosophical-spiritual transcendence?”
- Corbin: “Existence for French and German philosophers leads to death, whereas in Shiite philosophy existence leads to transcendence; death always leads to higher levels of being.”
- Ali: “You learned that from Kojève?”
- Corbin: “From Massignon. It changed my worldview completely.”
- Angel: “And that of a million other people.”

*The angel turns on the TV, images of Iran-Iraq war propaganda play on the screen.*

- Angel: “Every night it’s the same thing on TV. Propaganda about spiritual transcendence. He calls the men to the front by telling them that they will get closer to god. He says, this is not death, but life. He tells them that they will find salvation, release in death.”
- Corbin: “Hegel shows us how the slave finds freedom in the master-slave dialectic.”
- Angel: “Freedom? Murder. Nightly, shows coax young men to the battlefield to martyr themselves by confronting a death that promises to transcend life.”
- Ali: “Iran is at war with Iraq?”<sup>6</sup>
- Angel: “No, we are at war with ourselves.”
- Corbin: “Suhrawardi was executed in 1191 for having claimed allegedly that God can create prophets at any time.”
- Angel: “A very important and legitimizing idea for Ayatollah Khomeini.”
- Ali: “Some say Suhrawardi chose you.”
- Angel: “Did Corbin choose the Ayatollah?”
- Corbin: “Suhrawardi’s brought the wisdom of the ancient sages of Persia to the present. This is the problem with Qom.”
- Angel: “He speaks so freely, Ali, when he’s only just met you. He hasn’t a clue where your loyalties may lie. He seems protected by more than just

<sup>5</sup>*Kashf al-mahjûb*, a revered Persian treatise on Sufism, signifies precisely “the unveiling of that which is hidden.” Is that not precisely the activity of the phenomenologist, an activity which – in unveiling and in bringing the hidden meaning, occulted beneath the outward appearance, beneath the phenomenal, out into manifestation – fulfills in its own way the program of Greek science: *sôzein ta phainomena* (to save the phenomena)? *Kashf* is the unveiling (*Enthüllung*, *Entdecken*) which causes the true meaning itself, initially occulted by that which is the apparent, to emerge into manifestation, the *phainomenon* (here we might do well to call to mind what Heidegger has said about the concept of *alêtheia*, or truth). We are ourselves the veil so long as we abstain from the “act of presence,” so long as we are not being-there (*da-sein*), at the hermeneutic level in question.

<sup>6</sup>See Varzi (2006).



angels. Anyone else would have been more careful in those days. Everyone was being watched by Savak, the Shah's secret police, and then before our own eyes Savak became the Komite; different regime, same system. Careless alphabet re-ordering itself."

- Ali: "Corbin had me figured before I even opened my mouth."  
 Angel: "Shall we add mind-reader to his philosophical unveilings?"  
 Ali: "It wouldn't take much unveiling to see that I am not a fan of martyrdom."  
 Angel: "But *your* teacher was. He was a big fan of martyrdom."  
 Ali: "Shariati was also a student of Massignon's *and* of Corbin's."  
 Angel: "And therefore, of Hegel. He read his Kojève, he believed the absolute master was not God but death."  
 Corbin: "You see, where I differ from my clerical friends teaching in Qom is that I desire deeply that Islam become updated and made relevant for life in this rapidly modernizing and secularizing society. Paris lost its spiritual center. We can't allow that to happen in Tehran."<sup>7</sup>  
 Angel: "Just wait."  
 Corbin: "Some insinuate that I have "mixed up" Heidegger with Suhrawardi. To use a key to open a lock is not at all the same thing as to confuse the key with the lock."  
 Angel: "Why would they say that?" *she winks at Ali.*  
 Corbin: "It wasn't even a question of using Heidegger as a key, but rather of making use of the same key. It's a key which is at everyone's disposal. There's a great deal a philosopher could say about the 'false keys' of historicism."  
 Ali: "History, now there's another wasp's nest." *Glares at angel.*  
 Corbin: "Look, my education is originally philosophical; I am neither a Germanist nor an Orientalist, but a Philosopher pursuing his Quest wherever the Spirit guides him."

*Pauses.*

- Ali: "If it has guided me towards Freiburg, towards Tehran, towards Isfahan, they're merely symbols of voyage."  
 Angel: "Voyage where, though?"  
 Angel: "We all end up in the same place."  
 Corbin: "I set off in search of a spiritual guide, not a human guide."  
 Angel: "Humans always seem to get in the way."  
 Corbin: "When I was a child, I had a school notebook with a drawing of Mount Damavand on the cover."  
 Ali: "Really? In France they printed notebooks with Mt. Damavand on the cover?"  
 Angel: "Orientalism. Admit it, I know you have a copy of the new book by that Palestinian-American."  
 Ali: "Edward Said defends philologists. He wrote that for all his faults, the Orientalist was often driven by a deep love—a filial regard for his object of study."

*Corbin dozes, oblivious to the bickering.*

- Angel: "This love, at heart, was still an Orientalist practice."

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<sup>7</sup>See Filippani-Ronconi (1954).

- Ali: "Love of language. Corbin read Greek, Latin, German, Persian, Hebrew, Arabic, and these are only the few I've seen in the marginalia of his books."
- Angel: "Ali the pure peeked at his professor's books?"
- Ali: "One day I went to see him, but he wasn't in his office. I had a little look around."

Corbin, *as if still dreaming, eyes closed*: "Damavand beckoned to me, I fell in love with Iran before we'd ever met."

- Ali: "When did you finally meet?"
- Corbin: "It was Massignon. He knew. He was a seeker."
- Ali: "Did he convert all of his students?"
- Corbin: "He converted us to universal love. When Paris was cold, his office was always warm and comfortable ... dusty and crowded to the gills with books, but a refuge. One evening he had a heavy volume waiting for me on his desk—he knew I'd come. He handed me the book and said, 'Corbin, this has what you seek.'" See Cheetham, (2003)
- Ali: "What was it?"
- Corbin: "It was ancient, Gnostic. Leather-bound. A reproduction of Suhrawardi's work on light. The war was biting at our heels. The world was growing dark. Massignon knew we needed light. Islam and Western philosophy have met many times throughout history—but never like this. So beautifully, so stubbornly intertwined in ink on the fading pages of that old Arabic manuscript."
- Ali: "Light."
- Corbin: "It was 1939 and Massignon found me a translation job at a university in Istanbul. I took the book and Stella, and we went by ship to Turkey."
- Ali: "To translate Suhrawardi?"
- Corbin: "During the day I worked for pay, but at night I entered Suhrawardi's world."
- Ali: "Where is that work now?"
- Corbin: "It perished in the war."
- Ali: "Perished?"
- Corbin: "You see I made the mistake of sending the finished manuscript to Massignon."
- Ali: "He disposed of it?"
- Corbin: "No. no. That work, that translation wasn't for him. It was for me. ..."
- Ali: "Perished? How?"
- Corbin: "I sent it from Istanbul by boat to Paris. The boat was bombed by a German submarine."
- Ali: "Prophetic."
- Corbin: "Turkey only made me thirstier for Iran."
- Ali: "Massignon was a Catholic. Did he know Iran?"
- Corbin: "He was a mystic. Yes, he knew Iran intimately through its books."
- Angel: "Orientalist. Dangerous. Ali, philosophers never get it do they? Books, this is how they experience people. Keep your damn thoughts in your head or in your books but please for God sake don't mix them with a practice, do not make them *relevant* to religion. Ever seen a virus spread?"
- Ali: "This is why Corbin is in danger?"
- Angel: "Viral infections change the identity of the host, or is it vice versa? You realize that Al-e Ahmad wrote *Westoxification*, right when Corbin was

publishing some of his best work on Islam and Iran. Al-e Ahmad blamed Western influences in Iran for destroying Iranian society. He likened it to wheat rotting from within but with help from pests, outside invaders. Colonizers.”

Ali: “Technically not.”

Angel: “Invaders, like viruses. We love medical terminology to explain our demise. Whenever the BBC or the VOA shortwaves are cut, we blame it on an interfering virus. Medical metaphors and religious politics. Dis-ease. Nope, philosophy should stay put.”

Ali: “He knew Iran in the flesh. He lived it. He spent years here exploring religion, debating the highest Ayatollahs to the lowest talebs. ...”

*Corbin mutters something incomprehensible and immediately dozes off.*

Ali: “What? A clue.”

Angel: “It’s all clues. Haven’t you been listening?”

*Pause*

Angel: “It’s prayer time.”

*Ali arranges his rug and stone.*

Angel: “Wasn’t he a Moslem?”

Ali: “Did he convert to Islam?”

Corbin wakes: “Who, Massignon? No. Converts are the worst kind of fundamentalists. He was a practicing Catholic. He believed that we were all protected by the same God.”

Angel: “Ask Corbin if he himself converted. The word around the center of philosophy was that he had.”

Ali: “They insisted that he had not. He has an appreciation for Islam.”

Corbin: “One should avoid belonging to a group that professes thinking on one’s behalf.”

Angel: “Finally some seriously profound wisdom. Ask him, you’re right there.”

Ali: “I couldn’t, that would be rude.”

Angel: “And the Masons? They’re as group as it gets.”

Ali: “What do I say? I was looking at your private letters and I’m wondering, why the Masons, Professor Corbin?”

Angel: “Was he attracted to the secrecy? Had he found something out? He became very sick after his trip to Scotland, and why the Masons? Did they kill him?”

Ali: “How do you know so much?”

Angel: “One does in my situation.”

Corbin: “Tehran in 1947.”

*Ali looks at Corbin, distracted.*

Ali: “What?”

Corbin: “The roads were dusty and built for donkeys back then. But they were lined with new trees and a lot of hope.”

Ali: “Hope?”

Corbin: “The country was going through a major upheaval even though it was still occupied by allied forces. Everyone was glued to the radio.”

Angel: "Prime Minister Mossadegh."

*The angel turns on the television and shows footage of one of his English interviews ...*

Corbin: "What eloquence in one so young."

Angel: "The only decent royal. French-educated unfortunately, like the lot of them."

Corbin: "Monarchy, money, influence, and, yes, French education, just like the last Shah. But he was a good man. He didn't use his wealth on parties and cars like the young Pahlavi Prince. No, he used his money and position to passionately fight for the people. I witnessed the first democratically elected prime minister rally the Iranian population against foreign control."

Angel: "Let's not forget that his ancestors had sold every concession possible to the Europeans—tobacco, oil, even the telegraph lines were sold to Reuters."

Ali: "You need to let go of history and move on."

Angel: "It's not that easy; history needs to let go of us."

Corbin: "Yes, he made great strides."

Ali: "Right, and where did that get him? Straight to house arrest."

Corbin: "From where he gave his best speeches."

Angel: "Like the Imam, nothing will stop a great leader."

Ali: "Except the Americans, apparently."

Angel: "Not the Imam. But poor Mossadegh. Yes, what did he get? The Americans paying off thugs to riot against him. The Americans returning the deposed Shah in the backseat of a shady sedan—an American-made Cadillac, not some gas-choking Paykan. In short, a very American Coup D'état."

Corbin: "Iranians were overdue for a democratic movement."

Ali: "Still are. This was before the American Coup?"

Corbin: "Of course. The Americans only came in later."

Angel: "When the British could no longer handle their puppet regime."

Ali: "You think the Shah's a puppet?"

Corbin: "His father certainly was."

Ali: "But he funds the center. He makes your work possible."

Corbin: "Yes, he has. Things are more difficult now. But then, in the midst of all the excitement and possible nationalization of oil, of a democratic movement, I just set about my work as a professor."

Angel: "I bet you did."

Ali: "The building is amazing."

Corbin: "The Shah had no use for an old Qajar estate. He was modernizing and moving north. Imagine coming upon the door in an alleyway behind the hustle and bustle of the university district, expecting some old four-walled brick and mortar building and being delighted instead by a courtyard with streams and poplars, birds and roses, all hidden from view."

Angel: "This man loves hidden objects."

Ali: "The wall was certainly formidable."

Corbin: "We were protected, yes."

Angel: "Really? What from exactly? What exactly could this man have *needed* protection from?"

Ali: "Why do you think the Shah supported you?"

Corbin: "French philosophy meant enlightenment and modern thinking in those days."

- Ali: "But you're an Islamic philosopher."  
 Corbin: "And a continental one. I was French and that's what mattered. And I spoke Persian."  
 Ali: "You gave the French stamp of approval to Islamic philosophy."  
 Angel: "See, it's always the European who has to approve."  
 Corbin: "The Shah chose to ignore what did not please him. He was naïve, but not stupid. Young, yes, twenty-eight, forced into adult responsibilities by the British when they made his father abdicate the crown to him."  
 Ali: "You met him?"  
 Corbin: "Oh yes! He was my patron. Of course we met. In the opulence of the Golestan Palace we ate teacakes on Médard de Noblat porcelain."  
 Ali: "Really?"  
 Corbin: "He insisted on making his case for why a well-known French philosopher should teach Western philosophy in Tehran. For him religion had no utility in modern life, especially Islam."  
 Ali: "But he didn't stop you?"  
 Corbin: "I was irrelevant really; he thought it looked good to have a center for philosophy. I was French and a well-trained continental philosopher; he chose to ignore my leanings."  
 Ali: "And those of others."

*Pause.*

- Ali: "Was that Corbin's purpose? To discover the utility of Islam for modern Iranian life? And did he? Shall we ask the Ayatollah?"  
 Angel: "That was not his intended outcome."  
 Ali: "Really? How can you be so sure?"  
 Corbin: "There's no such thing as certainty. And, my son, if you are to be an intellectual, you will see that principles and money don't always align. But there is a great spiritual world above this one and below and all around us that is at work creating justice all the time."  
 Angel: "'Justice?' Perhaps that's the problem. People, trying to create justice with only parts of the puzzle."  
 Ali: "He speaks of God's perfect justice."  
 Angel: "Does he? The country was beginning to go through a massive upheaval. Did he feel it? My God, he trained some of the architects of the Revolution."  
 Ali: "Inadvertently."  
 Angel: "Is that what happened?"  
 Ali: "He never lived to comment."  
 Angel: "His comment was to die."

*Pause.*

"On October 7th, 1978 Ayatollah Khomeini *arrives in Paris*. On October 8th, 1978, Henry Corbin *dies in Paris*. Prophetic or planned? That is the question."

*Corbin wakes up.*

- Corbin: "I admit to being a strong promoter of Shiism."  
 Angel: "Corbin's *Introduction to Islamic Philosophy* was a huge defense of Shiism and completely earth-shattering. It is still sold in Tehran bookstores today."  
 Corbin: "And yet I see no place in these practices for idolatry and dogma."

Angel: "Guess again."  
 Corbin: "I was interested in the big questions. *How do we know?* What is this faculty of knowledge? Is it perception, the senses, the imagination, intellect, rationality? Is it subjective or objective?"  
 Ali: "Pandora's box if you ask me."  
 Corbin: "If you asked Joseph Campbell, he'd tell you it was more than that. He thought my work on angelology was significant, groundbreaking."

*The Angel flicks her feather duster around, drawing attention to herself.*

Angel: "Good thing no one asked Joseph Campbell."  
 Ali: "How could he know how much his work in the imaginal realm and angelology would affect Islam?"  
 Angel: "And its conversion."  
 Corbin: "Stay away from organized anything, my boy."  
 Ali to Corbin: "You didn't."

*Pause.*

Angel: "Where did you find that letter from the Masons anyway?"  
 Ali: "On his table. He was pursuing membership in the Freemasons. The Scottish Rite to be exact. Does it really matter whether he converted to Islam?"  
 Angel: "No, probably not. His friend Gershom Scholem was a big fan of belonging. He couldn't stand that Hannah Arendt cared more about people as a whole than Jews in particular. These men wanted people to define themselves. To align themselves with a particular tradition, identity, philosophy."  
 Ali: "You're wrong, not Corbin. The Dean of Tehran Polytechnic claims Corbin called himself a Shiite Protestant."  
 Angel: "A what?"  
 Ali: "Revolutionaries revere him."  
 Angel: "More than ever now that he is dead."  
 Ali: "It's so Shiite to revere the dead more than the living."  
 Corbin: "The point of any religion is for us to find a community of spirit."  
 Ali: "Well we've certainly found one here. Tehran has become a gathering of ghosts, wailing, death, everyone is in mourning for someone."  
 Corbin: "I could sense spirits. I'm told I had a divine gift of contact with the angelic world."

*The angel winks at Corbin; Corbin smiles at her.*

Ali: "I met an American student in the garden of the Institute one day and he told me that he thought you identified with Shi'ism because of your strong Huguenot sympathies ... the feeling of an embattled minority in a sea dominated by a majority religion."  
 Angel: "An American you say? Hmmm. Herein lies the problem of minorities becoming bigoted about their identity. You get stomped on and so your reaction is to pump-up your own identity. It's a vicious circle. And a potentially violent one, Arendt was right."  
 Ali: "I don't disagree."  
 Angel: "Your mentor certainly believed in strong embattled minority identities. Maybe instead of returning to self, he should have espoused transcending the self."

- Ali: "Shariati was everyone's mentor. He brought us all together, Marxists, feminists, Islamists. For God's sake, he studied with your buddy over there."
- Angel: "No, his real teacher was Frantz Fanon. *Return to Self* is basically an Iranian version of *Black Faces, White Masks*. A call to revel in our Shiite identity and throw off the mask of Westernization. The Imam got the word *mustazefin* from Fanon. Great word, downtrodden, wretched of the earth."
- Ali: "He read that?"
- Angel: "Didn't have to, did he, everyone was talking about it. That and Corbin's books on Islam and *Westoxification*." See Al Ahmad (1962)
- Ali: "Returning to self is the whole point of Sufism, really."
- Angel: "No. That's where you're wrong. It's just the opposite. Sufis thought the ego, that nasty thing we call identity, or the self, only gets in between a seeker and God."
- Corbin: "My passion for Shi'ism was a desire for mysticism. Something we lack in Paris. Oh, to see a return to the origin of mysticism."
- Ali: "... not to a political Islamic identity but to a practice. That's very different."
- Angel: "Well, some people take things very literally. The Ayatollah for instance is currently running around purging all of our books of pre-Islamic history and replacing Persian words with Arabic ones. I suppose *mus-tazefin* is Arabic?"
- Ali: "Shariati was a Francophile."
- Angel: "No, he studied in France, there's a difference."
- Ali: "Have you ever noticed the uncanny similarity between our Revolution and the one in Paris in the May of '68?"
- Angel: "Oh what beauty: anti-imperial, anti-authoritarian, and anti-Capitalist students, many who were sympathetic to the Algerian fight for independence, brought down the French government! Iranian students like Shariati who had witnessed the events in Paris returned to Iran to reenact them at home."
- Ali: "The Revolution did not begin as an Islamic movement but as a general revolt against the Shah."
- Angel: "The beauty, the irony is that the Shah had bankrolled those Iranian students in Paris, thinking he was giving them a 'Western' education."

*She laughs.*

- "Oh how he did get caught up in the most unexpected and unwelcome results of education and cultural exchange."
- Ali: "Was Paris what politicized him?"
- Angel: "You make it sound like it was a bad thing? He was your mentor. ... brilliant, top of his class, he was there on a French scholarship. And yet somehow, like so many rogue sociologists before him, he ended up in the faculty of philosophy. This child of May '68 in Paris came home to Iran and founded the Husseiniyeh Ershad—which would become a hotbed of Islamic revolutionary philosophy."
- Ali: "Which the Shah shut down in '78."
- Angel: "It was re-opened after the Revolution and became the Islamic Republic's most important cultural institution.  
The Paris to which Khomeini was exiled was a philosophically and politically committed city as a result of May 1968. And this included the

Iranian students there who came to surround Khomeini. Ayatollah Khomeini attracted not only Iranian students into his orbit but also French philosophers like Michel Foucault.”

Ali: “People will forget the important contemporary Iranian philosophers. You know I’ll bet you when people are taught about philosophy and the Iranian revolution, they’ll only hear about Foucault.”

Angel: “What do you expect? How is it you still have expectations?”

Ali: “Shariati will get no credit.”

Angel: “So you agree that your mentor was a major player. He basically started the whole affair in his fiery speeches at that mosque. *Your mentor*. Was. He was your mentor. He’s dead. Killed most likely. This is how the Shah brought himself down. What’s that animal that eats its own tail? The Shah created Shariati by sending him on his cultural exchange to Paris. Prophetic, you could say the same of Khomeini. Amazing the effect Paris had on Iranian revolutionary history. You still sore you weren’t sent to Paris?”

Ali: “I’d end up in the same place regardless. Paris came to me.”

Angel: “So you admit it. Shariati revolutionized his students.”

Ali: “Shariati didn’t set out to make an Islamic Revolution—a revolution he didn’t even live to see.”

Angel: “Come on, you don’t think May ‘68 didn’t affect him?”

Ali: “After he finished his doctorate with Massignon in Paris what was the first thing he did?”

Angel: “Ate a Madeline?”

Ali: “Funny.”

Angel: “Actually, he didn’t regard pastries the same way your buddy dozing away over there did. He knew a Madeline was French to the last ounce of butter. You forget he also studied with Franz Fanon. He memorized *Black Faces, White Masks*. Ask him, he’d tell you that eating a Madeline was tantamount to wearing a French mask. Like Fanon, he urged people to take off the mask. To return to self.”

Ali: “You think sitting here eating Sangak bread and goat cheese has made all the difference?”

*Pause.*

“You’re not telling me anything I don’t know. I was right there in that hot and steamy mosque.”

Angel: “And here I thought you were just there for the free Sangak and to check out the mini-skirts.”

Ali: “Those women who pressed themselves against the bearded Talebs to get closer to Shariati’s platform went home and bought chadors that same night. Sound familiar?”

Angel: “He was fiery when he spoke of a return to self.”

Ali: “Oh, they were on fire alright, so much so that they didn’t notice when the ‘self’ slowly turned to an ‘Islamic’ self.”

Angel: “What other self could there be? Ask him?” *She points at Corbin.*

Ali: “Leave him out of this.”

Angel: “He’s already at the center of it. You just don’t get it do you? Or do you? Shariati’s *Return to Self* is exactly what Corbin wants in revitalizing Islam—Shiism in particular, as a uniquely Iranian identity. You’re dancing with the devil.”



- Ali: "One moment he's an Orientalist and the next he's formulating revolutions?"
- Angel: "Yup, that's pretty much it. And what's Said's training anyway? Islamic philosophy?"
- Ali: "No, that's the point. Literature. Shakespeare for God's sake."
- Angel: "Literature. Words. Word play. Who cares what they mean, it's how you use them. Did Foucault teach that to Khomeini when he was groveling at his slippers over tea in Paris? Did he tell him a key was not necessary? Who needs to unveil meaning when you can just change it?"
- Ali to Corbin: "It must have been a shock when Khomeini appeared."
- Angel: "Explain to me how a man gifted with prophecy was shocked?"
- Ali: "He wasn't the only one."
- Angel: "The turbaned philosopher-king had listened well and spoke up at first quietly and then deafeningly. Khomeini's Islamic Revolution relied on the words, the discourse of important Western intellectuals."  
(*The storm blows as she moves her feather duster.*)  
"And because the roots of revolutionary philosophy are not just Islamic but have strong ties to postwar European thinkers ..."

*She points her duster at Corbin.*

- Corbin: "... who were interested in radical mystical Islam, dreams and the unconscious, the condition of modernity and postmodernity, postcolonial relationships, and a critique of Western cultural hegemony... all of which are still relevant today... they are difficult to untangle. You know he paved the way for Ayatollah Khomeini."
- Corbin: *startles awake* "I never..."
- Ali: "No! Shariati."
- Angel: "True, his new and radical form of Islamic Marxism uniquely rooted in Iranian Shiism *as espoused* by Henry Corbin *and* Louis Massignon *may* have had some influence."
- Ali: "They named Tehran's largest freeway after him."
- Angel: "Freeway to nowhere, if we're meant to be progressing on a vertical scale."

*Ali takes a deep breath and turns to Corbin.*

- Ali: "Where did you get the notion of a vertical scale?"
- Corbin: "Eranos. Of course. My springs in Ascona... in Switzerland, my other philosophical family."
- Ali: "Who was in it?"
- Corbin: "Carl Jung, of course. Mircea Eliade, whom you must read if you're interested in ritual."
- Angel: "He sees right through you."
- Ali: "There isn't an intellectual within a three-mile radius of this place who isn't interested in ritual."
- Angel: "Call it what you want."
- Ali: "Why didn't people listen to Canetti when they had the chance?" See Canetti (1962)
- Angel: "Apparently they did."
- Corbin interrupts: "No, Canetti wasn't in our midst, smart guy. We were all thrilled when he won the Nobel, but he's much more of a social scientist."

Ali: "Which is perhaps why he had more foresight in these matters? Too bad no one listened."  
 Angel: "I'm telling you, the problem is that some did. They studied him right down to the barely veiled guide to revolt."  
 Ali: "Shh..."  
 Angel: "Why? Nothing you or I say matters anymore, it can't hurt us. It's all out in the open now. No one's waiting around dark alleys looking for clues. Can't you see that?"  
 Ali: "The man is in danger."  
 Angel: "Which man, Ali? Who's after Corbin?"  
 Corbin: "Gershom Scholem, Adolf Portmann. and Joseph Campbell."

*Ali startles.*

Angel: "Maybe that was his Masonic temple, are you listening...?"  
 Ali: "Who? What?"  
 Corbin: "The Ascona gang. You asked who was there."  
 Ali: "And their thoughts on Iran?"  
 Corbin: "We were not political. Our thoughts were ancient, philosophia."  
 Angel: "Seriously? Please. It's not possible."  
 Ali: "Mircea Eliade thought Corbin developed a hermeneutic capable of deciphering the hidden meaning of Islamic religious texts."  
 Angel: "Eliade's your suspect?"  
 Ali: "Everyone's after a code, a cipher, a way to unlock some great mystery. What if there isn't one?"

*Pause.*

Angel: "And why has everyone decided that it's in the East?"  
 Ali: "Of course! The Eastern Star?"

*Pause.*

Angel: "What?"  
 Ali: "A Masonic order."  
 Angel: "You're obsessed."  
*Corbin wakes.*  
 Corbin: "If it's my political friends that interest you, then you should know I had many, but not so much in philosophy."  
 Ali: "Guess that rules out any correspondence with Foucault?"  
 Corbin: "Golestan, Ionesco, Kimiavi. My political friends were the writers, the playwrights, the filmmakers."  
 Ali: "Even more dangerous. Mixing philosophy and drama."  
 Ali: "How did you know them?"  
 Corbin: "Golestan came to the seminars. Both he and Kimiavi were playing with Islamic themes in their films. They wanted me to check some facts."  
 Ali: "That's reverse Orientalism when the native thinks of the European invader as the expert."  
 Angel: "Or, it could be reverse Orientalism to think that just because one is a native, they're an expert. Corbin spent years studying these texts. You think the janitor at the university could help Golestan just because he prays five times a day?"

Ali: "The janitor of the university is running some important foundation right now, you can bet on it. Besides, what's more valuable: practice or theory?"

Angel: "One is certainly more dangerous than the other."

Ali: "Not anymore."

Corbin: "Ionesco did a play here some years back... to great acclaim; you Iranians are far more appreciative of the Avant-garde. Paris has become too political. It's all they think about. Politics, such a waste of time."

Angel: "Or maybe we just prophetically related to the idea of becoming beasts, a herd of mindless sheep."

Corbin: "Rhinoceros."

Ali: "What?"

Corbin: "Ionesco's play."

Angel: "What was a philosopher doing hanging out with a playwright anyway?"

Corbin: "Should there be a separation between philosophy and theater? The Greeks certainly never thought so."

*Pause.*

Ali: "Whatever happened to the angel of history?"

Angel: "Walter Benjamin gave the painting to Gershom Scholem. It's in Jerusalem."

Ali: "That's not what I meant. And how do you know that anyway?"

Angel: "I'm in a particular position, call it the *imaginationis mundi*, the collective imagination. A place where they say things like Muhammad is the bridge between Christ, Dante, and Blake."

Ali: "God help us."

Angel: "We took that option away from him."

Corbin: "Until then, god save us." *Corbin walks off-stage.*

*Ali goes to the floor where there is a prayer rug and stone. He pulls his legs to his chest and stares out at the audience.*

*The angel walks over to the television set and pretends to dust. A man/guard walks over and turns it off.*

Man: "You're paid to clean, not to watch."

Angel: "Can't really clean-up history. Can only watch."

*He shoos her away.*

Ali calls after her: "Don't go."

Angel: "History will provide you no comfort now."

*She walks off stage.*

*Guard turns to the "wall" of the cubicle.*

Guard: "Prisoner 44: Who are you talking to?"

*Ali quickly ties the black blindfold around his head.*

Ali mutters: "Myself."

The guard: "Who?"

Ali yells: "God."

*Pause.*

“I am praying.”

*Ali falls prostrate on his prayer rug.  
Blackout.*

## Postscript

As an anthropologist, my interest in Corbin was initially theoretical. His work helped me make sense of my fieldwork in Iran, which I began in the mid-nineties, shortly after the Iran–Iraq war. Corbin’s network – Hegel, Heidegger, Kojève – was incredibly relevant to understanding the ways in which Khomeini interpreted mysticism, his use of symbols, his revival of martyrdom, and the ways in which he delineated the relationship of the state to the family. Genealogy is incredibly important – for example, that Corbin read Hegel through Alexander Kojève, who had a very particular interpretation of death. The idea of the absolute master became significant later when martyrdom became a key subject of Iranian revolutionary Islam, and this concept became especially apropos when Khomeini’s Islamic Republic began to look a lot like Hegel’s Christian state. Through Corbin I traced the influence of Hegel, Heidegger, and Kojève in Iranian revolutionary notions of martyrdom and religious state-formation. And Corbin’s interpretation of the place of the visual in Islam through his work on Ibn Arabi may have given Khomeini the go-ahead he needed to create the Revolutionary visual space that Iran soon became.

Henry Corbin was born in Paris in 1903, was educated by Catholic monks, and received his license in medieval philosophy under Étienne Gilson from the Sorbonne in 1925. In 1929, he completed his doctorate in Islamic studies under the famous Catholic mystic and director of Islamic studies at the Sorbonne, Louis Massignon. Both men, according to Nasr, “were interested in the revival of traditional philosophy in Persia and its continuation” (Jahanbegloo and Nasr 2010, 103). In Corbin’s words, “I have attempted to understand the whole spiritual culture of Iran in such a way as to give it the fullness of that dimension which is still yet-to-come” (Corbin 1976).

According to Mircea Eliade, Corbin was the first to develop a hermeneutic capable of deciphering the hidden meaning of Islamic religious texts. He helped to integrate certain problems of Eastern studies and history of religions into Western cultural experience (Eliade 1979).

This is a short meditation on the movement of ideas primarily between the Latin quarter of Paris and the Sorbonne, and the University district of Tehran and the holy city of Qom. It is a brief encounter with Orientalist and philosopher Henry Corbin and a fictional student which I hope will illuminate some of the ways in which contemporary esoteric Islamic philosophy became relevant and moved through time and space, from Iran to Paris and back, just before the Islamic Revolution. See Varzi (2011) Henry Corbin’s life was a powerful crossroad that has been mostly overlooked by those who work on popular contemporary religious practice in Iran and the West.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Roxanne Varzi** is a writer, artist, filmmaker and Associate professor of Anthropology at the University of California Irvine. She held the first Fulbright to Iran since the Revolution, and was the youngest Distinguished Senior Iranian Visiting Fellow at St. Antony's College, Oxford University. Her writing has been published in *The London Review of books*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *The Annals of Political and Social Science*, *Feminist Review*, *Public Culture*, *American Anthropologist*, and other venues. She is the author of two books, *Warring Souls: Media, Martyrdom and Youth in post-Revolution Iran*, Duke University Press, 2006 and 2016 Independent Publishers Gold Medal Award-winning *Novel Last Scene Underground: An Ethnographic novel of Iran* Stanford University Press. Her film, *Plastic Flowers Never Die*, 2009 is distributed by Documentary Educational Resources and has been shown in Festivals all over the world.

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