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# Henry Corbin and D.T. Suzuki: On Theophanic Imagination as *Imaginatio vera*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the concept of the Imagination of Henry Corbin (1903–1978) in relation to Daisetsu T. Suzuki (1870–1966). Besides being a renowned orientalist and scholar of Islamic thought, Corbin was a philosopher par excellence whose original thought deserves to be studied. So, I present this paper as a contribution to the evaluation of Corbin as a philosopher. In doing so, I shall shed light upon the philosophical affinity between Corbin and Suzuki, which has thus far rarely been discussed in depth. Their ideas, in fact, resonate with each other—or Corbin is sympathetic to Suzuki—at a deep level, especially on the argument of Imagination, through Swedenborgian thought, into whom both channel their interests. An exploration of this relationship of influence with Suzuki shall make a great contribution to a better understanding of Corbin’s own concept of Imagination, which could shake up our taken-for-granted idea of “imagination.”

## KEYWORDS


Henry Corbin; D.T. Suzuki; Swedenborg; Suhrawardi; Imagination; Theophany

## Introduction

This paper analyses the thought of twentieth-century French philosopher Henry Corbin (1903–1978) in relation to Daisetsu T. Suzuki (1870–1966). Besides being a renowned orientalist and scholar of Islamic thought, Corbin was a philosopher par excellence whose original thought deserves to be studied. I present this paper as a contribution to the evaluation of Corbin as a philosopher. Attempts to study Henry Corbin as a philosopher and thinker have not been as substantial as the importance of his ideas, although there has been some accumulation so far. Notable examples include the works of his direct disciples, Jambet (1983) and Shayegan (2011). Corbin’s original concept of “imaginal,” which characterizes a special ontological status other than the “imaginary,” has also attracted much attention from modern scholars, including works on transpersonal psychology and Jungian psychology.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing upon and further developing this body of scholarship, studies of Corbin as a philosopher are now becoming increasingly popular.<sup>2</sup> However, the relationship between

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<sup>1</sup>E.g. Hillman 1975; Avens 1980. Apart from Jungian and Transpersonal psychologists, some French thinkers who are contemporary with him cite his thought.

<sup>2</sup>Cheetham is one of the earliest scholars to focus on the originality of Corbin’s own thought and has been a persistent explorer of it (Cheetham 2003; idem 2015). In addition, Daniel Proulx should be mentioned as a leading recent scholar of Corbin’s philosophy (Proulx 2017; idem 2019). In cooperation with Camilleri, he has also made a valuable contribution to the scholarship of Corbin’s thoughts through his editing of Corbin’s documents related to Heidegger

Corbin and Suzuki is rarely discussed in depth in such studies. At first glance, there does not appear to be a direct relationship between Corbin, a scholar of Islamic thought, and Suzuki, a scholar of Buddhism, especially Zen. Although it is clear that they were acquainted with each other, as both were present at the Elanos conference held in Ascona, Switzerland, and Corbin describes in his works, including his magnum opus, a conversation with Suzuki as a “memorable conversation” (Corbin 1983, 44, n. 4), there is no source to indicate that they, both being specialists in different fields, were close friends.<sup>3</sup> As will be discussed below, their ideas seem to resonate with each other—or Corbin seems to be sympathetic to Suzuki—at a deep level. It may be this resonance that motivated Corbin to mention his brief interaction with Suzuki in his magnum opus.

Furthermore, and more importantly for this paper, which is a study of Corbin’s philosophy itself, Suzuki can be a clue to a clearer understanding of the *prima facie* arcane thoughts of Corbin. In order to connect the two, however, a third item is needed: Swedenborg’s thought.<sup>4</sup> Islamic mysticism of Corbin and the Buddhism of Suzuki, at first glance having no connection with each other, intersect in Swedenborg, whom I shall take to be, as it were, a catalyst to determine the impact of Suzuki’s thought on Corbin. First, I shall examine Suzuki and his acceptance of Swedenborg in the following section, which is followed by a description of the encounter between Suzuki and Corbin. In doing so, I shall single out a certain sort of Imagination in which both share. Finally, I shall discuss Corbin’s own thoughts regarding Imagination.

## Suzuki and Swedenborg: Correspondence and Imagination

Although Suzuki’s interest in Swedenborg has not always been a central issue in scholarship on Suzuki, some scholars, such as Shin’ichi Yoshinaga, have persisted in this regard, and there has been a gradual increase in attempts to decipher Suzuki’s thought in terms of Swedenborg or theosophy in general.<sup>5</sup> I shall review Suzuki’s interpretation of Swedenborg to clarify the resonance with Corbin, albeit the present paper is a study of Corbin’s philosophy.

Apart from his earlier works, Suzuki has not published many specialized books or articles on Swedenborg during his career. He published a total of five books on Swedenborg: *Heaven and Hell* (*Tenkai to jigoku*, 1910), *Swedenborg* (*Suedenborugu*, 1913), *The*

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(Camilleri and Proulx 2014). Another recent Corbin study worth mentioning is Elmarshafy’s work on three French scholars of Islamic mystical thought, Massignon, Corbin, and Jambet, and their impacts on contemporary French thoughts (Elmarshafy 2021). Moreover, Hallward’s study is also interesting in that it treats Corbin’s philosophy and his study of Islamic philosophy in the context of contemporary French philosophy, especially Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy (Hallward 2006).

<sup>3</sup>To the best of my knowledge, Suzuki, unlike Corbin, makes little substantial mention of Corbin in his writings. His letters, of course, record Suzuki’s meeting with Corbin. See SDZ 37: 421, 422. In a letter, Suzuki asked his student Shoukin Furuta to send his English translation of *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* to Corbin, so perhaps Corbin told Suzuki that he wanted to read it. Incidentally, Suzuki also once used the term “creative imagination (*kuriēthibu imajinēshon*),” although he does not mention Corbin’s name then. See Suzuki SDZD 1: 163–164.

<sup>4</sup>Besides their interest in Swedenborg and their attendance at Elanos, they also have in common that they were involved with Heidegger. While it is well known that Corbin is a researcher of Heidegger and translator of his works and even corresponds with him, Suzuki also met Heidegger in person. Suzuki and Heidegger are shown together in a photo taken in Freiburg on July 8, 1953, with Mrs. Heidegger and Mr. and Mrs. von Dürckheim. For a record of Suzuki’s meeting with Heidegger, see SDZ 37: 412.

<sup>5</sup>The basic literature that must be read to understand the influence of Swedenborg in Suzuki’s thought is Yoshinaga 2014; idem 2016, 280–312. For an exposition of Suzuki’s reception of Swedenborg, see also Bernstein 1996; Darling-Smith 1999; Okajima 2009; Sgarbi 2020.

*New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine (Shin-Erusaremu to sono kyouseitu, 1914)*, *Divine Love and Divine Wisdom (Shinchi to shin'ai, 1914)*, and *Divine providence (Shinryo-ron, 1915)*. Of these, except for *The Swedenborg*, which provides an overview of Swedenborg's thoughts and biographies, the other four books are Japanese translations of Swedenborg's works. However, Swedenborg's influence should not be underestimated because Suzuki sometimes mentions Swedenborg in other writings as well, including his treatises on the Pure Land, which are closely related to one of Suzuki's central ideas.

As is evident from his following statement: "Although to properly understand Swedenborg's theory of spiritual sphere, one needs to know the theory of Representation (*Hyoushou*), of Correspondence (*Souou*), of Degree (*Do*), of Influx (*Ryuunyuu*), and so forth, ..." (SDZ 24: 62), one of the most magnificent features of Suzuki's interpretation of Swedenborg is his focus and emphasis on the theory of Correspondence. Suzuki finds importance in the notion that the sensory and spiritual realms correspond and that the former in some way reflects the latter. In his *Swedenborg*, he describes the theory as follows:

In the spiritual realm, Divinity is manifested as the sun, whose heat is Love (*ai*) and whose light is Knowledge (*chi*). Our earthly sun receives its heat and light from this spiritual sun and thereby has the power to generate all things and nurture them. The End [or Goal] エント目的 of the creation of the universe is to attribute all things to its source, the Creator, or Divinity, and thereby to cause Correspondence 相応 and Conjunction [or Interpenetration] コンジャンクション 互入 between this one and that one. (SDZ 24: 35. Cf. also SDZ 24: 52)

Suzuki also explains, "Things on earth have corresponding things in heaven or hell." (Suzuki 2002, 101) Suzuki, echoing Swedenborg, asserts that the everyday world around us is in some way a reflection of the spiritual world and, hence, that this world is in a sense the other world.<sup>6</sup> To anticipate what will be discussed in the next section, Suzuki's impressive words to Corbin, "We are *now* in Heaven," are related to this notion, which characterizes in turn the confluence between his thoughts and Corbin's. In our daily lives, however, we perceive sensory things and not so much spiritual things. Although Suzuki and Swedenborg state that the spiritual realm overlaps with the sensory world, we usually perceive only sensory things. Why is this so? How can we, who are surrounded by sensory objects, overlook the spiritual dimension in everyday phenomena? Through the following statement, Suzuki answers the question thus:

In the final analysis, the earth is a great Symbol (*Shouchou*), which, as Swedenborg puts it, is a Representation (*Hyoushou*). You can interpret it only through an art of mind, Sympathetic Imagination (*Doujouteki-souzouryoku*). Without Imagination, you cannot touch the great primordial force (*dai-gendouryoku*) hidden in it through various states of things, that is, symbols. Then, once touched by this force, one comes to perceive the workings of the force in all kinds of symbols, even though they remain as they are. Each symbol is in harmony with each other, and there is no barrier between them. Mountains are mountains, water is water, and Buddha is Buddha, but they are also magical to the fullest[.] (SDZ 18: 322)

Our world corresponds to and represents the spiritual dimension, by virtue of which we are able to perceive the spiritual dimension in worldly events. There is only one way, Suzuki says, to know the spiritual dimension: "Sympathetic Imagination." This is,

<sup>6</sup>See Yoshinaga 2014, 137–138; idem 2021, 305–307.

according to him, a faculty of imagination that allows one to experience the primordial force embedded in the various symbols that fill the world, which is itself a great Symbol, and anyone who is once in contact with this force will find it in everything in the world around him. It is through this imagination that one perceives a dimension in which mountains remain mountains and water remains water and can be magical at the same time. This faculty is a thoroughly sympathetic and mental resonance with the world itself, which is an accumulation of Divine symbols, namely, with the Divine Mercy that God has bestowed upon the world. Immediately before the previous quotation from Swedenborg on Correspondence, Suzuki clearly states the inseparability of Love and Knowledge in Divinity thus:

Divinity has a distinction between *esse* [or essence] エッセ 性 and *existere* [or being] エキジステレ 相, and these are two but one. Love is the essence, and Knowledge is the being. Love derives from Knowledge, and Knowledge derives from Love. Divinity is formed by the combination of these. (SDZ 24: 35)

Knowledge in the world created by God is inseparable from His Love. Hence, Divine Love is indispensable to comprehend this world more deeply at the spiritual level. Knowledge that pertains to God is, therefore, a gift of His Love. One can only know the Divine Work by perceiving and resonating with Divine Love. Sympathetic Imagination is the mode of perception through the experience of the Love, and it is only through the Imagination that one can approach the spiritual dimension.

It is the Correspondence that allows man to interpret the spiritual, since it ensures conspiracy (*σύμπνοια*; *ham-dami*),<sup>7</sup> an interaction between them, which is accomplished through “Sympathetic Imagination.” Notably, Suzuki uses the terms “Sympathetic” and “Imagination” as a function for the interpretation of the symbol, namely the trace of the spiritual sphere. It alludes to a nodal point of communication between Suzuki and Corbin; the notion of imagination as a method of hermeneutics connects their thought.

Now, since the spiritual and sensory realms are entirely different, it is impossible to equate them, though they are related. Such a relationship is, in fact, instrumental in the consideration of the Pure Land in Buddhism. Suzuki has acquired from Swedenborg a term for describing this relationship: Correspondence. Indeed, in the context of discussing the Pure Land, Suzuki refers to Swedenborg and argues that his thoughts are helpful in understanding the concept of the Pure Land.<sup>8</sup> The two realms connected through Correspondence are the same and different in a way that goes beyond logical contradictions. They are contradictory yet congruent; that is to say, there is a continuity of discontinuity (*hirenzoku no renzoku*) between them. This leads to his notion of the “logic of *Sokuhi*,” which boils down to the following proposition: “To say ‘A is A’ is to say ‘A is not A’; therefore, ‘A is A.’”<sup>9</sup> Although the concept of *Sokuhi* itself stems from his study of Zen, such as the *Zen of the Diamond Sūtra* (*Kongoukyou no Zen*), such a logic of contradictory identity is not unrelated to our context, since it represents, for Suzuki, the fundamental character of Mahayana as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup>This terminology of “conspiracy,” “*σύμπνοια*,” or “*ham-dami*” is Corbin’s. For his descriptions of the term, see e.g. Corbin 1958 61, 83, 116, 117–118, 124, 131–132, 180, 211, 249, n. 88, 264–265, n. 139, esp. 116.

<sup>8</sup>SDZ 6: 75. See also Darling-Smith 1999, 233.

<sup>9</sup>SDZ 5: 380–381. See also SDZ 5: 387, 6: 80, 286. See also Mori 2014; Yusa 2019; Hasunuma 2020, 249–292.

The fact that we, who are in the sensory realm, are also in the spiritual realm is not routinely noticed because the spiritual dimension cannot be perceived by the senses, by thought, or even by rational logic. In logical terms, the discrepancy between the spiritual dimension and the sensory dimension can be reduced to a mere logical contradiction. Therefore, to decipher sensory events as symbols of the spiritual dimension, we need to apprehend them in a different way, one that is not based upon rational logic, which, as previously mentioned, Suzuki calls the faculty of perception the Sympathetic Imagination. The Imagination is not so much a human being's own power, but rather *Tariki* as the Great Compassion (*Daihi*) or redemptive mercy of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, which makes *Ouchou*, namely a direct type of the *Oujou* or soteriological transcending, possible.<sup>11</sup> Suzuki states:

If human beings should be saved and Amitābha's fundamental Vow (*Hongan*) is actually working, then *the Pure Land must be this earth by all means. It is not after rebirth in the Pure Land but in this earth that we behold Amitābha.* That having been said, the Pure Land must not mean this earth, and Amitābha must not be identical with the masses. ... They are indeed two different things, but *the Pure Land is the mundane world (Shaba), and the mundane world is the Pure Land.* (SDZ 6: 283–284, emphasis mine)

This earth is, as such, the Pure Land or the heavenly realm in the sense that they correspond to each other through the logic of *Sokuhi*, namely, the supra-logical logic of contradictory identity.<sup>12</sup> However, one cannot experience the Pure Land simply by living in the mundane world; rather, one can see Amitābha or the Divinity via the Imagination, which Divine Love or Mercy donates. It is for this reason that Suzuki described Swedenborg as the “Buddha of the North,” as we shall see shortly.

## Encounter and Resonance between Suzuki and Corbin

In one of his major works *L'imagination créatrice* (English title of the republished version: *Alone with the Alone*), Corbin describes his encounter and conversation with Suzuki at the Elanos conference thus:

Here I should like to mention a conversation, which strikes me as memorable, with D. T. Suzuki, the master of Zen Buddhism (Casa Gabriella, Ascona, August 18, 1954, in the presence of Mrs. Fröbe-Kapteyn and Mircea Eliade). We asked him what his first encounter with Occidental spirituality had been and learned that some fifty years before Suzuki had translated four of Swedenborg's works into Japanese; this had been his first contact with the West. Later on in the conversation we asked him what homologies in structure he found between Mahāyāna Buddhism and the cosmology of Swedenborg in respect of the symbolism and correspondences of the worlds ... . Of course we expected not a theoretical answer, but a sign attesting the encounter in a concrete person of an experience common to Buddhism and to Swedenborgian spirituality. And I can still see Suzuki suddenly brandishing a spoon and saying with a smile: “This spoon now exists in Paradise ... [*Cette cuiller maintenant existe dans le Paradis ...*]”<sup>13</sup> “We are now in Heaven [*Nous maintenant dans le Ciel*],” he explained. (Corbin 1958, 275, n. 200, tr. by Manheim, modified, emphasis original)<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup>SDZ 1: 304–305. Suzuki, indeed, applies a type of contradictory identity to his argument on Shinshu and the Pure Land. Cf. SDZ 6: 239, 10: 16–17, 20: 354.

<sup>11</sup>SDZ 6: 113–114, 6: 236–237, 6: 254; SDZ 6: 276, 6: 283–284, 8: 106–107.

<sup>12</sup>SDZ 8: 55–56.

<sup>13</sup>French texts between parentheses are Corbin's original ones.

Suzuki's statement would have been a total enigma if we were unacquainted with his thoughts and his interpretation of Swedenborg. His most memorable phrase, "We are now in Heaven," is familiar to us by now. Here, we can see the concept of Correspondence between heaven and earth that Suzuki found in Swedenborg, which has already been mentioned in the previous section. Rather, I would like to shift the focus of analysis from here to Corbin's thought. Why was Corbin's mind stimulated by Suzuki's remark so much that he even notes it in one of his best works? As I shall describe below, Corbin's theories on Imagination will make this clear.

The significance of Corbin's reference to this memorable but brief encounter with Suzuki should not be underestimated, as it was included in a book that is representative of his career. It is highly relevant in evaluating the relationship between the two philosophers. As will be discussed below, the above episode expresses what both found in Swedenborg and shows the nexus of their thoughts as well. Indeed, Corbin, in discussing one of the most important concepts in the book, "transfigured world," notes that "it may not be irrelevant to mention the importance which, in the ensuing conversation, Suzuki attached to the Spirituality of Swedenborg, 'your Buddha of the North'." (Corbin 1958, 275, n. 200, tr. by Manheim) He also quotes Suzuki's words in another note as follows:

Concerning the vanity of the discrimination effected before the *fanā'* and authenticity of the discrimination effected once the consciousness is awoken, we might compare this aphorism: "Before a man studies Zen, to him mountains are mountains and waters are waters; after he gets an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, mountains to him are not mountains and waters are not waters; but after this when he really attains to the abode of rest, mountains are once more mountains and waters are waters." (Corbin 1958, 276, n. 209, tr. by Manheim, modified)

From Suzuki's interpretation of Swedenborg, especially his concept of Correspondence, Corbin embraces the notion of contradictory identity, according to which the Pure Land is the mundane world and vice versa. Moreover, the above quotation contains one of the core ideas of Corbin's philosophy, which seeks to introduce the problem of the subject into hermeneutics, which I shall discuss in the next section. Furthermore, Corbin also mentions Suzuki's Swedenborg interpretation elsewhere, which again shows his correct understanding of Suzuki's interpretation and its significance. Corbin expounds that there is a parallel between the Buddhist eschatology described in *Bardo Thödol* and the spiritual experiences reported by Swedenborg, especially in *De Caelo et Ejus Mirabilibus et Inferno*, going on to say:

We will put forward here the term *apparentiae reales* so as to avoid the ambiguous and inadequate term "illusion," the use of which would bring to light an inadequate analysis of what phenomenon is. This is one of the technical terms of Swedenborg's lexicon used to characterize the Forms that appear externally as correspondences of a "lower" that, precisely, manifests necessarily in these Forms. These Apparitions are incommensurably more real than what we call the phenomena of our sensory world. This parallelism is not something I can dwell on here—a whole other book would be needed. The more or less convincing comparisons between Buddhism and Christianity have barely touched the surface of this "real" parallelism of which I am speaking. It seems significant to us in this regard that such an eminent master of Buddhism as D. T. Suzuki appreciated Swedenborg to the point of translating his work into Japanese and commenting on it. Did not our Balzac

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<sup>14</sup>The same episode of Suzuki is also cited in Corbin 1983, 44, n. 4.

call Swedenborg “the Buddha of the North”? Already here, we would have indication that the discovery of the “Giver of data” does not justify the alarm that the sensing of him causes in the natural consciousness. The naïve, philosophical realism of this consciousness estimates that, in this case, God and the whole of metaphysical truth have been torn away from it. However, it is certainly acceptable that, for any realism instituting duality of thought and of being, and undergoing the dilemmas that the principle of noncontradiction opposes to it, an insoluble enigma posed by Buddhist piety, which, at all degrees, is addressed to the multitude of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. It is their compassion that has made this piety descend from their holy paradises. The pious cannot see a contradiction in this. (Corbin 2014, 71, tr. by Cain, modified; emphasis original)

Here, Suzuki’s “*doujou*” is paraphrased as “compassion”—the Japanese word “*dou-jou*” (同-情) literally corresponds to the European word “com-*passion*”—but if we consider this as his *Daihi* or the Great Compassion, then Corbin now has found the exact reason for Suzuki’s exaltation of Swedenborg.<sup>15</sup> Our sensory world is itself only lower, but it has Correspondence with the higher world; that is why, like the spoon, we are here and there at the same time. However, to be there requires interpretation of the world through a particular form of imagination, which Suzuki refers to as Sympathetic Imagination.<sup>16</sup> As Corbin rightly fathoms out, the Imagination is made by the power of the Great Compassion. This structure of Imagination resonates with Corbin’s *Imaginatō vera* (true Imagination), as we shall discuss.

### Swedenborgian/Suzukian elements in Corbin: Hermeneutics

Before examining how Suzuki’s interpretation of Swedenborg has influenced onto or been symphonious with Corbin’s creed about Imagination, let us investigate Corbin’s intention in drawing upon Suzuki’s episode in *L’imagination créatrice*, so as to closely observe where their ideas intersect. Following the quotation of Suzuki’s remark, Corbin writes, “This was an authentically Zen way of answering the question; Ibn ‘Arabī would have relished it.” (Corbin 1958, 275, n. 200, tr. by Manheim. Cf. also Corbin 1958, 278, n. 219) Corbin sees in the words of this Zen master an affinity with his own interpretation of Ibn ‘Arabī, especially of the notion of the double dimension of beings, in which other great Ṣūfis share.

First, I shall address the fact that Corbin sees in Ibn ‘Arabī (and other great mystics) Suzuki’s notion that this world is at the same time also heaven. He introduces the notion of recurrent creation (*ḥalq ḡadīd*), namely, renewed, successive creation of the beings, by Ibn ‘Arabī and says:

This renewed, recurrent creation is in every case a Manifestation (*izhār*) of the Divine Being manifesting ad infinitum the possible haecceity in which He essentializes His being. If we consider the creature in relation to the Creator, we shall say that the Divine Being descends toward concrete individualizations and is epiphanized in them; inversely, if we consider these individualizations in their epiphanic function, we shall say that they rise, that they ascend toward Him. . . . That is why the other world already exists in this world; it exists in every moment, in relation to every being. (Corbin 1958, 159–160, tr. by Manheim, modified)

<sup>15</sup>Indeed, Suzuki himself clearly states that both “compassion” and “sympathy” have almost the same meaning as *Daihi*. Cf. SDZ 28: 455–456. See also Corbin 1958, 131–132.

<sup>16</sup>As will be mentioned shortly, Corbin, in fact, states, “because there is Imagination, there is *ta’wil*: because there is *ta’wil* [i.e., spiritual hermeneutics], there is symbolism[.]” (Corbin 1958, 161, tr. by Manheim)



We can easily find the notion of Correspondence, which we have already found in Suzuki, in the above quote from Corbin, according to which his world in some way symbolizes the spiritual dimension, and therefore what *is* here *is* there at the same time. But even more important is Corbin's point that in the recurrent creation, the descent of God and the ascent of the individual occur. In other words, the field of Imagination, or rather Imaginal realm, rises up through God's steps toward us and our steps out to God, that is, through their spiritual *conspiration*. On this point, he states:

In short, *because there is Imagination, there is ta'wīl: because there is ta'wīl, there is symbolism; and because there is symbolism, beings have two dimensions*. This apperception reappears in all the pairs of terms that characterize the theophany of Ibn 'Arabī: Creator and Creature (*Ḥaqq and Khalq*), Divinity and humanity (*Lāhūt and Nāsūt*), Lord and vassal (*Rabb and 'Abd*). *Each pair of terms typifies a union for which we have suggested the term unio sympathia. The reunion of the two terms of each pair constitutes a coincidentia oppositorum, a simultaneity not of contradictories but of complementary opposites, and we have seen above that it is the specific function of the Active Imagination to effect this union which, according to the great Ṣūfī Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz, defines our knowledge of the Divinity. But the essential here is that the mysterium conjunctionis which unites the two terms is a theophanic union (seen from the standpoint of the Creator) or a theopathic union (seen from the standpoint of the creature); in no event is it a "hypostatic union." ... Thus each being, as a totality, has two dimensions. It is not possible to say Ḥaqq-Khalq or Lāhūt-Nāsūt with the implication that the two dimensions are equivalent. The two dimensions refer indeed to the same being, but to the totality of that being; one is added to (or multiplied by) the other, they cannot negate one another, one cannot be confounded with, or substituted for the other.* (Corbin 1958, 161–162, tr. by Manheim, modified; emphasis mine. See also Corbin 1958, 163–164, 165)

*Ta'wīl* stands for spiritual hermeneutics in Islam, especially in Shī'ite mystic thought. It is the interpretation of the forms (of God) by sending them back to their source, the true realities, as its etymology indicates: *ta'wīl* is the gerund of *awwala/ya'awwilu*, whose original meaning is "to send something back" as well as "to interpret."<sup>17</sup> This type of hermeneutics, *ta'wīl*, according to Corbin, requires a special kind of perception or knowledge, *Imaginatio vera*. Indeed, he states, "because there is Imagination, there is *ta'wīl*."<sup>18</sup> This is Theophanic Imagination, namely an act of Creation (*ḥalq*) in itself, of which the sequence manifests a world as, in a manner of speaking, a bundle of apparitions. Corbin's Active or Creative Imagination is, therefore, one that is accomplished by cooperation or union of God and man.<sup>19</sup> The Active Imagination is the organ of theophany, Corbin states, because it is the organ of the act of creation, which is essentially theophany; the Imagination we each exercise is also God's.<sup>20</sup> "Our being manifested *is* this Divine Imagination; our own Imagination *is* Imagination in His Imagination." (Corbin 1958, 148, tr. by Manheim, modified; emphasis original.) As we shall see at length in the next section, God manifests Himself as an act of creation, and the human mind reflects the manifestation as if it is a mirror, in which the reflected and the reflecting become one thing while being essentially different things. In the human mind, as the site of theophanic union, the creation successively occurs. Since the

<sup>17</sup>Corbin 1958, 160; idem 1986, 31–32.

<sup>18</sup>Corbin 1958, 161.

<sup>19</sup>Corbin 1958, 165–166.

<sup>20</sup>Corbin 1958, 148.

recurrent creation acted on the stage of human mind constitutes Imagination, Imagination is theophany on the side of God and theopathy on the side of man; he, then, becomes *mazhar* (locus of *zuhūr* or *izhār*), a place of *theophany*, which is neither hypostasis nor substance, namely that *in* which something is, but a mirrorlike locus, of which itself becoming X (a form) implements the manifestation of X.<sup>21</sup>

However, it is impossible for those who live in the mundane world to make themselves *mazhar* and bear God's form in their soul in His original reality while being in the mundane dimension of consciousness as such. Between the double dimensions of beings, Divinity and humanity, there is a relationship of coincidence of opposites, that is to say, complementary opposition that cannot be reduced to a logical contradiction. Or, one can express it as "Identity in the difference (*Identité dans la différence*), of the One who reveals himself and of the one to whom he reveals himself." (Corbin 1973, 16) To traverse that continuity of discontinuity, or to lift the human into the realm of the Divine and connect the two dimensions through interpretation, requires the particular approach of Active or Creative Imagination.

Insofar as this sort of Imagination is realized in cooperation with God and we humans alone cannot exercise the Imagination, a special relationship or communion must be established between Divinity and humanity. In other words, Corbin, along with Suzuki, holds that it is the product of His Mercy, Compassion, or Wish. God instead wishes to be known by human beings.<sup>22</sup> According to Corbin, the Imagination, as it were, the Providential Imagination by the theophanic Subject, which is *creative* in the proper sense of the word and therefore can be neither fiction nor fantasy—but *Imaginal*—, is made by God's Mercy or Wish, which Suzuki would call Amitābha's *Hongan*.

### Corbin's Hermeneutics: Imagination and Subjectivity

Since this world is already the other world, we in this world should inherently be able to read spiritual meaning—by drawing upon the Creative Imagination to interpret it—into this world. However, given that the Imagination can be realized through the conspiracy of a man with God and making himself the place of His epiphany, it is difficult to believe that such interpretation is immediately possible for those who are solely living in the mundane world without any qualms. Consequently, Corbin's hermeneutics requires an inquiry into the subjectivity of the one who interprets things through Imagination. On what ontological level can one perceive the Divinity in the world?

Corbin describes the relationship between knowledge of Divinity and its subject as follows:

Now, it is this metamorphosis of the knowing Subject which is the real voyage for these gnostic Islamic philosophers. It means that one must bridge the entire gulf which separates the certainty of theoretical knowledge (*'ilm al-yaqīn*) and the certainty of personally lived and realized gnostic knowledge (*haqq al-yaqīn*). As long as there is an *I*, withdrawn into its egoity, confronting an abstract Divinity which is withdrawn into its unknowability, there can be no satisfactory knowledge of such an object, regardless of the Divine names

<sup>21</sup>Corbin 1958, 168.

<sup>22</sup>Corbin 1958, 148, tr. by Manheim: "The Divine Being is a Creator because He wished to know Himself in beings who know Him."

and attributes associated with it. The only way knowledge can satisfy the demands of Divinity is when the object is no longer regarded dialectically, but revealed to the knowing subject by the subject itself. This very epiphany is itself a replacement of the primitive subject by the *absolute* Subject, which the former had been trying to comprehend as if it were an object of its knowledge. God cannot be known by *another*, as if God were an object which is *other* than oneself; God can only be known by God as absolute Subject, which is *absou*s of all illusory objectivity. It is this Divine Subject which is in fact the active Subject of all knowledge of God; it is God himself who is thinking himself through the thought which the enlightened human intellect has of him. (Corbin 1990, 152–153, tr. by Rowe, modified; emphasis original)

Although imagination and interpretation—and even “creativity”—are, nowadays, regarded as the outward manifestation of what is inside a person, what Corbin refers to as Imagination or Creativity is quite different: only God can perform the act of Creation, and cooperation of humanity with Divinity constitutes the true Imagination that far transcends the “imagination” and “creativity” that are contrived out of the meager human reality.

In order to imagine God and interpret Divine forms, according to Corbin, the metamorphosis of the subject is indispensable. It is this metamorphosis, he believes, that great theosophists, such as Šihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d. 1191), have thus far depicted in their narratives of the spiritual trip or occidental exile.<sup>23</sup> We can gain theoretical knowledge of Divine things by reading books in the library or attending lectures at the university, which will lead us to certain knowledge (*‘ilm al-yaqīn*) but not to certain Reality (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*). One cannot attain ultimate knowledge of God by grasping Him as an object because God cannot be known through something else. If we wish to know the Divine as itself, we must metamorphose our subject itself into an Absolute Subject, which is the theophanic subject that transcends all objectivity. The following *Ḥadīṭ Qudsī*, or Divine Saying, which Corbin quotes just before the above quotation to refer to the ontological state of a person who reaches Divinity, clearly conveys such a situation: “Henceforth, I [= God] am the looking through which he sees, the listening through which he hears, the hand with which he touches, the foot with which he walks, ... etc.” (Corbin 1990, 152, tr. by Rowe) According to this *Ḥadīṭ* saying, when Imagination is realized, and *ta’wīl* is performed, and one can interpret spiritual forms in their original state, his “seeing,” “hearing,” “touching,” and so forth are all God’s ones too. To put it another way, he is in a state in which, as it were, he perceives something through God; the human subject is, then, replaced by the Divine subject, which is the scene of God’s epiphany. This is what Corbin describes as a stage at which the human subject is substituted for the theophanic subject.<sup>24</sup>

Divine Imagination is the faculty of God to imagine/create.<sup>25</sup> Human beings can operate it in the way of Active or Creative Imagination. However, they do not use Divine Imagination by appropriation of it; rather, they use the Imagination in the Otherness, as it belongs to the One, or, more precisely, it is not a matter of “using.” Between the

<sup>23</sup>Corbin 1986, 298–302. For a discussion of the transformation of the subject in Suhrawardī’s philosophy, see Miyajima 2023, 99–127.

<sup>24</sup>Corbin 1990, 153.

<sup>25</sup>For God, Imagination or Will in itself is tantamount to the act of Creation, as mentioned in *Qur’ān* 36:82: “Surely His Command, when He wishes something, He says to it, “Be!” and it is.” (*innamā amruhū idā arāda šay’an an yaqūla lahū “kun” fa-yakūnu*)

One and beings, there is always a gap which cannot be eliminated,<sup>26</sup> but keeping the gap—in contradictory identity, *coincidentia oppositorum*, or *Sokuhi*—we exercise the Divine Imagination as if it is our own.<sup>27</sup> Our Active Imagination, Corbin says,

is certainly that which imagines, and yet it is not it which images [*est bien celle qui imagine, et pourtant ce n'est pas elle qui imagine*]; our Active Imagination is a moment, an instant, of the Divine Imagination that is the universe, which is itself total theophany. Each of our imaginations is an instant among theophanic instants, and it is in this sense that we call it “creative.” (Corbin 1958, 165, tr. by Manheim, modified)

Our Active Imagination is in one way imagination, but it is not in another way, because it is not that we envision or fantasize Divine forms at will, but that we solely reflect them in our hearts (*qulūb*, sg. *qalb*) by making ourselves Subjects as *mazhar*. The Imagination that we exercise by conspiring with the Divine Imagination, which is the act of Creation and is hence the universe itself, is an instant of Creation.

Consequently, the Imagination requires  $\theta\acute{\epsilon}\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$  or *ta'alluh* (making oneself God) of the subject; Active Imagination as a theophanic organ is, as it were, to turn the subject into God, the former of course being an extension of the latter. Such an ontological status of theophanic Subject is often likened by Corbin to a mirror. For example, he simply says, “The Active Imagination is the preeminent mirror, the epiphanic place of the Images of the archetypal world.” (Corbin 1983, 18, tr. by Fox, emphasis original) He also goes back to the etymology of the word “speculation” to prove that the ultimate form of intellection is just “reflection” like a mirror. Corbin writes:

The authentic meaning of “speculative” is lost unless we bear in mind its etymological origin: *speculum* = mirror. The intelligence of speculative theology is in its functioning as a mirror which reflects God, a mirror in which God is revealed. In the words of Franz von Baader, “*Spekulieren heisst spiegeln*.” (“To speculate is to reflect”) (Corbin 1990, 153, tr. by Rowe)

God’s epiphany through human beings rendering his heart a mirror in which He is reflected, and his noetic thinking through God, who is reflected in his heart, are the simultaneous events. It is this dynamic movement of dialectic between Divinity and humanity in the *qalb* as a *mazhar* that is the ultimate form of human speculation or imagination, namely the Theophanic Imagination that Corbin sees as the true Imagination. That is how Corbin sees it. This is precisely what the abovementioned passage from *Ḥadīṭ Qudṣī* states. The subjectivity of the one who truly speculates and imagines is the Absolute Subject, the Divine Subject. The Subject does not perceive and think for himself, but his seeing, hearing, touching, and so forth are all conducted by God; it sees and hears and touches through God. It is only after metamorphosing into the Absolute Subject that one can comprehend the Divinity or Universe. The Subject does not know God by objectifying Him but knows God as Himself purely by reflecting Him. It then becomes God in a manner of speaking. This is what Corbin calls  $\theta\acute{\epsilon}\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$  or *ta'alluh*. To put it in Buddhist framework, there is a complementary dynamic here with *Tariki* and *Jiriki*.

Such an activity of Imagination and spiritual hermeneutics in Divine Subjectivity is now closer to “prayer” or, in Buddhist terminology, *Shinjin* (信心) or Faith. Corbin

<sup>26</sup>SDZ 6: 223: “There is a chasm between worlds of limitless light and complete darkness that cannot be crossed, but in fact, it is precisely because of this chasm that light must spill through from the other side to this side.”

<sup>27</sup>See Jambet 1983, 88–89; Vieillard-Baron 1981, 91.

and Suzuki share in placing the ultimate form of thought or philosophy in an act of *belief* (信). Belief characterizes the mode of being for the subject. Corbin says:

True, this reciprocity becomes incomprehensible if we isolate the *ens creatum* outside the *Ens increatum*. And then too Prayer takes on a meaning which would have been profoundly repugnant not only to Ibn ‘Arabi but to Şufism in general. For prayer is not a request for something: it is the expression of a mode of being, a means of existing and of *causing to exist*, that is, a means of causing the God who reveals Himself to appear, of “seeing” Him, not to be sure in His essence, but in the *form* which precisely He reveals by revealing Himself by and to that form. This view of Prayer takes the ground from under the feet of those who, utterly ignorant of the nature of the theophanic Imagination as Creation, argue that a God who is the “creation” of our Imagination can only be “unreal” and that there can be no purpose in praying to such a God. For it is precisely because He is a creation of the imagination that we pray to him, and that He exists. Prayer is the highest form, the supreme act of the Creative Imagination. (Corbin 1958, 191–192, tr. Manheim, modified; emphasis original)<sup>28</sup>

To make one’s entire being a place of God’s Parousia by pure mirroring is a total surrender, or Islam (the gerund of verb *aslama/yuslimu*, “to give up” “to surrender”), of the human as a vassal to the Divinity as Lord. Prayer is such a surrender or delivering up of an entire human being to God, at which time the subjectivity based upon the narrow, ordinary egoity disappears, and in its place comes into being, the Absolute Subject as, so to speak, “Subject without subjectivity” or “Self without ego.”<sup>29</sup> The relationship between Divinity and humanity, however, is not one of mere tyranny and servitude but one characterized, as Corbin puts it, by Compassion and Mercy. It is in the moment when the God to whom we pray prays for us that God manifests Himself. Only in that moment is our prayer a Divine Prayer, a Cosmic Prayer, and we transcend the infinite and insurmountable chasm between Divinity and humanity and unite with Divinity and witness the instantaneous Creation, of which successive recurrence constitutes Creation in its true sense.

Suzuki’s argument on Shinran’s thought is in symphony with this subjectivity of Corbin’s Imagination or Prayer,<sup>30</sup> according to which the mundane world and the Pure Land, in a pattern now becoming familiar, are diametrically opposite but equal in a sense, and it is our Prayer or Faith in God and His response to it by Compassion or Mercy that realizes intercourse between them; our Cosmic Prayer to be fully realized, the subject must be Buddha. Although all human beings are inherently endowed with Buddha-Nature, this does not imply that they are all immediately Buddhas, nor that their prayers are immediately transformed into Divine Prayers. In Suzuki’s wording, Divinity and humanity are not the same thing but are “equal.” However, when one understands the workings of the Buddha or God experientially (not by reason), he becomes the Buddha or God in a way—by making his heart a mirror, as Corbin would say—and the earthly realm becomes spiritual.

<sup>28</sup>This text continues as follows: “By virtue of the sharing of roles, the Divine Compassion, as theophany and existentialization of the universe of beings, is the Prayer of God aspiring to issue forth from His unknownness and to be known, whereas the Prayer of man accomplishes this theophany because in it and through it the “Form of God” (*şurat al-Haqq*) becomes visible to the heart, to the Active Imagination which projects before it, in its *Qibla*, the image, whose receptacle, (epiphany form, *mazhar*) is the worshiper’s being in the measure of its capacity. God prays for us (*yusalli ‘alaynā*), which means that He epiphanizes Himself insofar as He is the God whom and for whom we pray (that is, the God who epiphanizes Himself for us and by us). We do not pray to the Divine Essence in its hiddenness; each faithful (*abd*) prays to his Lord (*rabb*), the Lord who is in the form of his faith.”

<sup>29</sup>Suzuki contends that prayer lies in trying to transcend this mundane world. See SDZ 8: 143.

<sup>30</sup>SDZ 24: 284.

## Conclusion

Corbin was very impressed by Suzuki's remark on Correspondence; to him, it must have sounded like an aphorism. For the idea that a spoon in this world *is* at the same time in heaven and that we, who are here, *are* there was Corbin's as well. He derived it by himself from different sources than Suzuki's, namely from his studies of Sufism as well as Neo-Platonism and Christian mystic thoughts in German, such as Meister Eckhart, Jacob Böhme, and Franz von Baader. This is why Suzuki's brief remark stimulated Corbin's mind to a high degree.

Through Swedenborgian thought, they share the idea that two worlds of different dimensions can exist on the same ontological horizon. And if we accept that premise, *ta'wil*, spiritual hermeneutics, which is the art of perceiving the spiritual things in their original state while being surrounded by mundane things, is the next question. Both Corbin and Suzuki propose their own view on a faculty of imagination only through which, for them, interpretation of Divine Symbols can be accomplished. For them, true Imagination is not an act that is operated within an individual's mind and, hence, not fantasies fabricated by his mind but the act of Creation itself. This Imagination reflects God's Creation in a mirrorlike manner; it is exercised in a situation in which God imagines through man, and man, in turn, imagines through God by making himself the place of God's Epiphany, the *mazhar*. The Subject of the Imagination is the theophanic Subject or Absolute Subject, whose heart purely reflects Divine forms by empathizing with Divine Love or Compassion.

Both Suzuki and Corbin sought to subvert the modern concept of imagination, which is confined in an individual mind or, even worse, the brain, and liberate Imagination from it by inquiring into the ultimate form of our intellect or cognition. Corbin, more than Suzuki, consciously endeavoured to renew the notion of imagination; the terms "imagination" and "imaginary" are used today to refer to a mere fantasy, but this is a misnomer.<sup>31</sup> True Imagination, pertaining to the Imaginal sphere, not the imaginary one, is creative. It is only by the Imagination that we perform *ta'wil* or spiritual hermeneutics of Divine Symbols.

The encounter with Suzuki provided a solid impetus for Corbin and his theory of Imagination. It was nothing short of an encouragement to Corbin that he was on the correct path.

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<sup>31</sup>Corbin's theory of Imaginal Imagination is a crucial and seminal subject for which a book should be written. I would like to discuss it in detail at another time, taking into account the previous scholarship on it. For a brief exposition of the notion of "Imaginal" by himself, see Corbin 1983, 7–40.

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