

THE TEMENOS ACADEMY

“Henry Corbin and the Secret of the Grail”

Author: John Carey

Source: Temenos Academy Review 14 (2011)

pp. 159-178

Published by The Temenos Academy

Copyright © John Carey, 2011

The Temenos Academy is a Registered Charity
in the United Kingdom

www.temenosacademy.org

Henry Corbin and the Secret of the Grail*

JOHN CAREY

Henry Corbin was one of the past century's greatest interpreters of esoteric Islam; but he was also considerably more than this. The sages of whom he wrote with such learning, and with such inspiring insight, were not for him mere subjects for research. They were teachers from whom he—and, through him, we—could learn; guides back into a kingdom to which we have lost the key. Corbin's curiosity, accordingly, extended to wherever the transcendent realities described by his Sufi or Shī'ite masters have been glimpsed or pursued—in the East or in the West, long ago or in more recent times.

It is in these terms that we can understand Corbin's interest in the Grail, which came to occupy an increasingly prominent place in his thought in the course of the last fourteen years of his life. Corbin regarded the Grail legend as representing, in the West, something comparable to the Shī'ite esotericism of Iran. As a part of European literature, it belonged to the cultural background of his French readers in a way that Islam did not—even though traditionally minded Iranians could, for their part, find that various of the Grail romances 'seem indeed to speak the same language as their own'.¹ Thus Corbin spoke of 'the Holy Grail of our Western traditions',² of 'our Grail cycle in the West',³ or simply of 'our Grail cycle'.⁴

Corbin believed that the Grail legends enshrine a mystery of supreme importance. He wrote that 'the esoteric theme of our Grail cycle

* This essay is based on the text of a lecture presented to the Temenos Academy on 2 September 2010; and again as part of the study day 'Henry Corbin, Islam and the Imagination' at Rewley House, Oxford, 9 October 2010.

1. *En Islam iranien: aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 28.

2. *Temple and Contemplation*, trans. Philip and Liadain Sherrard (London: KPI, 1986), p. 222.

3. *Face de Dieu, face de l'homme: herméneutique et soufisme*, with a preface by Gilbert Durand (Paris: Entrelacs, 2008), p. 216.

4. *The Concept of Comparative Philosophy*, trans. Peter Russell (Ipswich: Golgonooza, 1981), p. 14; *Temple and Contemplation*, p. 344; cf. *Philosophie iranienne et philosophie comparée* (Teheran: Academie Imperiale Iranienne de Philosophie, 1977), p. 32.

encloses, perhaps, the secret of the truly Western spiritual tradition',⁵ and spoke of 'the cycle where the West perhaps deposited its most profound mystical secret, when men had become incapable of sustaining it—that is, the cycle of the Holy Grail'.⁶ The story of the Grail is 'the mystical epic of the West'.⁷ But what is the 'most profound mystical secret', the 'essential mystical secret',⁸ the 'ultimate secret',⁹ of which Corbin believed the Grail to be the repository?

When a question like this is approached by someone with an academic background—and I am such a person—several further questions immediately suggest themselves. When did Corbin begin to refer to the Grail, and are there any indications that his ideas concerning it developed over time? What earlier writers on the Grail seem to have influenced him, and what was the extent of his familiarity with the Grail romances themselves? Are his ideas about the Grail legends consonant with the views of specialists in the field, and with the findings of recent researchers in particular? Have his ideas had any impact on Arthurian scholarship?¹⁰ These issues are not unimportant; but it is crucial to be aware that they would, from Corbin's own point of view, have been entirely secondary. He was interested in the Grail in so far as it may mediate another realm of being—not as an episode of literary history, or as the focus of erudite debate. We can apply to Corbin his own words concerning his great departed master Suhrawardī, with reference to one of the latter's mystical treatises:

... It is not this question of dating which matters to us, first and last. It is not our task to reconstruct the psychology of the young *shaykh*.

5. *L'homme et son ange: initiation et chevalerie spirituelle* (Paris: Fayard, 1994), p. 202.

6. *En Islam iranien*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 140. Later in the same essay, 'peut-être' has become 'sans doute': p. 184.

7. *En Islam iranien*, vol. 4 (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 391.

8. *En Islam iranien* ii.143. 9. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

10. Although I shall not be addressing the other questions in this paragraph, mention must be made in this connection of the brilliant scholar Pierre Gallais, who dedicated to Corbin his book *Perceval et l'initiation* (Paris: Éditions du Sirac, 1972), and contributed an essay 'La "maison" du Roi-Pêcheur' to *Mélanges offerts à Henry Corbin*, ed. S. H. Nasr (Tehran: Institute of Islamic Studies, 1977), pp. 629–49. Extensive use is also made of Corbin's work by Michelle Reichert in her study *Between Courtly Literature and Al-Andalus: Matière d'Orient and the Importance of Spain in the Romances of the Twelfth-Century Writer Chrétien de Troyes* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006); neither she nor Gallais, however, follows Corbin in his interpretation of the Grail itself.

What does matter to us, because it is what mattered to him, is the entirety of the spiritual realities which he undertook to show us. It is for each person who takes him as a guide to follow their own path.¹¹

There is a challenge implicit here, and in doing my best to face it I am keenly aware of my own inadequacies. I hope that what I have to say may succeed in conveying something of what Corbin believed to be important about the Grail—and may, in so doing, cast some gleams of reflected light upon the path of each of you.

I expect that everyone here has some familiarity with the story of the Grail; but since there are several versions of that story, together with a great many theories concerning its origin and meaning, a brief sketch of the legend's history may be helpful. The first Grail romance was the incomplete *Story of the Grail* of Chrétien de Troyes, composed toward the end of the twelfth century. Here it is related that the young knight Perceval, who has been offered hospitality in a mysterious castle, sees a series of strange objects being carried through the feasting hall: a golden vessel accompanied by a dazzling blaze of light (this being the Grail itself); a bleeding spear; and a silver platter. Perceval does not venture to inquire what all of this means, and wakes next morning to find the castle empty. Later, he learns that the Grail is a 'holy' thing which contains the wafer of the eucharist; had he asked concerning it, his crippled host would have been healed, and his lands restored to order. Perceval vows to find the Grail again, and to pose the fateful question; but Chrétien did not live to bring the story to a conclusion.¹²

The next thirty or forty years saw the composition of a multitude of sequels, foretales, retellings and adaptations of the story, only a few of which need concern us directly here. Thus Chrétien's near contemporary Robert de Boron accounted for the Grail's sanctity by claiming that Christ had used it at the Last Supper, and that his blood had been collected in it after his death; it is in Robert's telling that the Grail is first described as a cup rather than as a serving dish (the normal

11. *L'archange empourpré: quinze traités et récits mystiques* (Paris: Fayard, 1976), p. 11.

12. The definitive edition of the text is Chrétien de Troyes, *Le roman de Perceval ou le Conte du Graal: édition critique d'après tous les manuscrits*, ed. Keith Busby (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1993); for a translation, see e.g. *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*, trans. Nigel Bryant (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982), pp. 1–97.

meaning of the Old French word *graal*), and that it comes to be associated with Joseph of Arimathea.¹³

In the early years of the thirteenth century, the German poet Wolfram von Eschenbach composed a greatly expanded version of Chrétien's story, which he claimed to have 'corrected' on the authority of a Provençal poet named Kyot, who had drawn in turn on an old manuscript discovered in Toledo, itself the work of a pagan sage named Flegetanis, who had found an account of the Grail written in the constellations. Wolfram's *Parzival* ('Parzival' being the German form of Perceval's name) is a work of extraordinary imaginative vitality, which portrays the Grail as a magical stone brought to the earth by angels, and guarded by a secret order of knights in a fortress hidden in the wilderness.¹⁴ The *Parzival* inspired other German Grail narratives, in which the Grail is said to have been taken away at last into India, and the fabulous empire of Prester John.

There were also further developments in France. The introduction of the Grail, regarded as a relic of Christ's Passion, into the chivalrous world of Arthur's Round Table served as an occasion for reflecting on the tension between the Christian ideal of ascetic sanctity and the knightly ethos of courtly love. Perceval, portrayed by Chrétien and Wolfram as a lover and husband, is in other versions made to remain celibate even in marriage, or to end his days as a hermit; eventually, in the prose romance *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, his place as ultimate Grail knight is taken by the virginal Galahad. In the *Quest*, Galahad and his companions journey to the mysterious city of Sarras in the vicinity of Egypt, where Galahad dies after beholding ineffable mysteries within the Grail. The Grail itself is taken up into heaven, never again to be seen by mortals; and Arthur's kingdom, of which the Grail quest had been the undoing, collapses amid catastrophe.¹⁵

13. Robert de Boron's *Joseph* exists in verse and prose forms, for both of which see Robert de Boron, *Joseph d'Arimathe: A Critical Edition of the Verse and Prose Versions*, ed. Richard O'Gorman (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1995). For translations, see *Joseph of Arimathea: A Romance of the Grail*, trans. Jean Rogers (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1990) for the verse; and *Merlin and the Grail—Joseph of Arimathea, Merlin, Perceval: The Trilogy of Romances Attributed to Robert de Boron*, trans. Nigel Bryant (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2001), pp. 15–44 for the prose.

14. For the text, see *Wolfram von Eschenbach*, ed. Karl Lachmann (6th ed.; Berlin and Leipzig: W. de Gruyter, 1926); a recent translation is *Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival, with Titular and the Love Lyrics*, trans. Cyril Edwards (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002).

15. The standard edition is *La Queste del Saint Graal: roman du XIII^e siècle*, ed.

This rapid and selective overview is as uncontroversial as anything can be in Grail studies, largely because I have deliberately avoided the question of what source or sources lay behind the texts which have come down to us. Here there are a myriad conflicting opinions, the mere enumeration of which would outstrip the limits assigned to this talk.¹⁶ One striking indication of the distinctiveness of Corbin's approach is his near indifference to this highly charged, and apparently inexhaustible, debate concerning origins.

To be sure, Corbin's own most extended discussion of the Grail legend was inspired by two contributions to that very debate.¹⁷ These were, first, the arguments of Henry and Renée Kahane that several elements in Wolfram's *Parzival*, and the word 'grail' itself, derive ultimately from the corpus of writings associated with the legendary sage Hermes Trismegistus;¹⁸ and, second, the even more speculative—and considerably less well known—contention of Sir Jahangir Coyajee that analogies in the Grail legends with aspects of Iranian epic tradition could be explained by the exposure of Celts to the Mithraic mysteries—whether in Roman Britain or in the Celtic territory of Galatia in Asia Minor.¹⁹ But Corbin, although his familiarity with both Hermetic thought and Iranian legend inclined him to view these theories with sympathetic interest, did not see them as having any primary bearing on the question of the Grail's true origin—for the simple reason that that origin was, for him, not situated in historical time at all. This apparent paradox reflects concerns central to his thought.

Taking as a point of departure Coyajee's attempts to see the Grail cycle, and Iranian accounts of the supernatural 'Glory' or *Xvarnah*, as sharing a single historical source, Corbin observed that

from the standpoint of phenomenology, the proposition seems both to go *too far* and nevertheless to remain *on this side* of what is truly

Albert Pauphilet (Paris: E. Champion, 1923); the most recent translation is *Lancelot-Grail: 6. The Quest for the Holy Grail*, trans. E. Jane Burns (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2010).

16. I have myself been responsible for some speculation along these lines: *Ireland and the Grail* (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2007).

17. 'La Lumière de Gloire et le Saint Graal', *En Islam iranien* ii.141–210.

18. *The Krater and the Grail: The Hermetic Sources of the Parzival* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1965).

19. *Studies in Shāhnāme* (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons, 1939).

in question. It goes too far, because this theory of material identification is extremely vulnerable: at a stroke, we risk losing the benefit obtained from the analogies which it has brought to light. And precisely in causing us to lose them, it remains on this side of the consequences of these analyses, in so far as the latter permit us to glimpse the field of a spirituality common to the idea of the *Xvarnah* and the idea of the Grail To doubt this material identification does not by any means entail a refusal to see the analogies which it brings to light; but it is necessary to valorize them in the fashion that they require To be sure, the historian who can only judge material facts shakes his head before a *fact* which escapes the categories of positivist science, and which cannot be accounted for by going back causally from like to like.²⁰

Historical comparatism, in seeking to derive one phenomenon from another, or both from a third, runs the perpetual risk of flattening or indeed of denigrating its materials:²¹ a thing is 'nothing but' its purported source; or two objects of comparison are understood solely in terms of their least common denominator. How far Corbin was removed from this perspective can be seen not only in such programmatic statements as that which I have just quoted, but also in those Grail texts which held the greatest significance for him. His writings reflect knowledge, whether at first or second hand, of Chrétien, of Chrétien's continuators Wauchier, Manessier and Gerbert; of Robert de Boron; of the prose *Lancelot*; of the so-called 'Vulgate cycle', in particular the already mentioned *Quest of the Holy Grail* and its fore-tale *The History of the Holy Grail*; of the German versions, primarily Wolfram's *Parzival* and its continuations; of the Dutch *Lancelot* and the Welsh *Peredur*. Apart from mentioning them, however, Corbin has next to nothing to say about the earliest French Grail writers, such as Chrétien and Robert. Rather, he returns again and again to the Vulgate cycle romances, especially the *Quest*; and to the German branch of the

20. *En Islam iranien* ii.164–5. Here and below, the emphasis in quoted passages is Corbin's own.

21. Thus Corbin, despite his admiration for much of what the Kahanes had to say concerning the analogies between the *Parzival* and the *Corpus Hermeticum*, could not agree with their view of the relationship between them: 'Une telle explication néglige, semble-t-il, tout ce qui est inspiration prophétique, création poétique, sentiment et perception visionnaires, irruption d'une dimension nouvelle' (*ibid.*, p. 192).

legend – not only to Wolfram but also, repeatedly, to passages from the later *Younger Titirel* and *Lohengrin*.²²

Corbin is not the only scholar to have found such versions particularly meaningful, a proceeding which has led one Arthurian expert to complain of analyses in which 'it is not simply a matter of ignoring the existing chronology, but of *replacing it by another*', and a second to pose the rhetorical question 'Why is it . . . that the primitive myth only shows up in later narratives?'²³ Such an approach is indeed misguided in any inquiry which takes chronology as its framework, and which has the recovery of a 'primitive myth' as its goal; but these were not the terms within which Corbin operated. For a clearer understanding of his stance we can briefly consider two key Corbinian concepts: 'hierohistory', defined by Tom Cheetham as 'events in the eternal time of the soul';²⁴ and the 'recital' or initiatory narrative.

For Corbin, the mere presence in medieval France of both Arthurian tales and legends of Christ's Passion cannot explain such an epiphany as the Grail. The two bodies of narrative

could have coexisted materially (in libraries, for example) in the Western world, without any knight ever departing in quest of the Grail revealed at the Last Supper . . ., had the *event* of their encounter not taken place. Where and how? . . . Suhrawardī tells us of events which take place—that is to say, which *have their place*—in [the imaginal realm of] the *Malakūt*. The spiritual event 'happens', in fact, elsewhere than in social history, literary history, the history of ideas, etc. It is, without doubt, the sort of event which it is most difficult, not to say impossible, for certain epochs to imagine and to apprehend.²⁵

22. The definitive edition of the former is Albrecht von Scharfenberg, *Jüngere Titirel*, 4 vols, ed. Werner Wolf and Kurt Nyholm (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1955–95); for the latter see Thomas Cramer, *Lohengrin: Edition und Untersuchung* (Munich: Wilhem Fink Verlag, 1971).

23. Eugène Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 62; R. Mark Scowcroft, 'The Hand, the Child and the Grail', in *Crossed Paths: Methodological Approaches to the Celtic Aspects of the European Middle Ages*, ed. Benjamin T. Hudson and Vickie Ziegler (Lanham/New York/London: University Press of America, 1991), pp. 115–39: p. 127.

24. *The World Turned Inside Out: Henry Corbin and Islamic Mysticism* (Woodstock, Connecticut: Spring Journal Books, 2003), p. 132.

25. *En Islam iranien* ii.166–7.

The Grail belongs to that category of 'spiritual facts, always in the present', which 'break the irreversibility of time; it is not simply a conjecture which results from reconstituting the fading material traces of a vanished past'.²⁶

If the true source of the Grail legends is, accordingly, to be sought beyond the plane of sequence and causation, a plane which it enters 'like the light of a sanctuary, illuminating the outer darkness through a stained glass window',²⁷ then it follows that it is not the oldest and most 'primitive' accounts which are necessarily the truest, any more than the latest and most 'evolved'. Each teller of the tale may (or may not) have glimpsed a different aspect of what exists timelessly in the *Malakūt*—and some will surely have apprehended more than others. What we must seek to learn, in phenomenological rather than in conventionally historical terms, is what the tales *reveal*.

Corbin used the term 'recital' to render Arabic *ḥikāyat*, which he characterized as connoting

simultaneously the sense of narrative, account, *history*, and that of imitation (μίμησις), as though to signify for us that the art (or the style) of the narrator, the historian, is basically that of mime . . . A *ḥikāyat* is, therefore, an imitation (a *mimēsis*), a repetition, a *history* certainly, but a history that is essentially an image or symbol . . . This meaning cannot be anything other than the spiritual truth (the *ḥaqīqat*) of that history, and this spiritual truth cannot be glimpsed without placing oneself within a perspective altogether different from the one familiar to our modern mythology of the 'meaning of history'.²⁸

A 'recital' in this sense is accordingly, as Corbin repeatedly emphasized,²⁹ neither chronological history, recounting physical occurrences; nor an allegory, in which the narrative is only a sort of masquerade of abstract concepts. Rather, it describes an 'event of the soul'. The implications of this are far-reaching. Corbin tells us that

26. *Ibid.*, p. 155. 27. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

28. *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, trans. Leonard Fox (West Chester, Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995), pp. 35–6.

29. E.g. *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 34.

the mystic does not recount a story. He *is* that story, but it is a story which *breaks* visible history, since it is the passage to that which is *hidden* from the appearances of this world. The mystic is the *object* of this 'metahistoric story', because it is in him that it takes place; and this is why he is at the same time its *agent*, the actor and active *subject*.³⁰

Elsewhere, he cited the lapidary formulation of Shaykh Aḥmad Aḥsā'ī that 'the reciter, the deed recited and the hero of the recital . . . are one sole and single reality. And this takes place in every being, according to the measure of each being. Meditate and meditate again!'³¹

It is only through such recitals, so understood, that 'the doctrine becomes a real event': 'The mystical recital says precisely what cannot be said, or make itself known, otherwise than under the form of the visionary symbols perceived by the reciter'.³²

Corbin devoted a long essay to the process by which 'heroic epic' becomes 'mystical epic', 'oriented' toward the spiritual dimension,³³ and also produced studies of the initiatory recitals in which Avicenna and Suhrawardī expressed their experiences of the visionary realm.³⁴ Esoteric Islam has preserved a tradition of understanding such narratives; we no longer have such a tradition in the West, but Corbin believed that 'recitals' can be identified in the Western literatures as well. As examples he cited the apocryphal text *The Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Romance of the Rose*, *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreuz*, Wagner's *Ring* – and the cycle of the Grail.³⁵ All such writings he regarded as 'initiatic tales', to be read 'with new eyes, those eyes which have long been shut in the philosophy and civilisation of the West, and which our "Oriental" theosophers have kept open to the *mundus*

30. *Face de Dieu*, p. 227. Here and elsewhere, the fact that the French word *histoire* means both 'history' and 'story' renders translation difficult.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 197; cf. *En Islam iranien* ii.203. 32. *En Islam iranien* ii.190.

33. 'De l'épopée héroïque à l'épopée mystique', *Face de Dieu*, pp. 175–243.

34. *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital; L'archange empourpré*.

35. To this list he later added J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, holding that its publication marked the first time since the Grail romances that there had appeared in the West 'an epic at once heroic, mystic and gnostic, the events of whose narratives will enchant the wise both young and old because they will recognize its hidden meaning' ('The Dramatic Element Common to the Gnostic Cosmogonies of the Religion of the Book', *Studies in Comparative Religion* 14:3–4 [1978] 199–221: p. 217).

imaginalis'.³⁶ Among all these texts it is, as we have already seen, the Grail cycle which is 'our mystical epic in the West' *par excellence*; and it is only when read in this light that it 'delivers to us the secret of its spiritual chivalry'.³⁷ Writing a year before his death, Corbin affirmed that

... in fact these events can only be perceived and recognized by an organ of perception different from that of empirical cognition, physical or historical. These are the events which fill the sagas of the heroes of epic (those of the *Avesta* and of the *Shāh-Nāmeḥ*, for example, or those of our cycle of the Grail). They are, again, the events of the inner, secret history which inspires the genius of parables, the truest stories of all.³⁸

I hope that these quotations give some impression of the level on which Corbin believed that it is necessary to encounter the Grail romances. But what does such an encounter bring us? What *is* the 'secret of the truly Western spiritual tradition' which the Grail conceals?

By its very nature, the reality of this secret could not be disclosed in any of Corbin's writings; nor could I utter it here even if I possessed it—and I most certainly do not. Let us remember that the recital represents, and for some enacts, an *initiation*. It is a door from here to somewhere else, a door which we are all considering from its hither side. As Corbin said of Suhrawardī, 'It is for each person who takes him as a guide to follow their own path'; and that path must lead far beyond the lecture hall. Suhrawardī himself invoked the statement of an earlier sage that 'Whoever does not experience, does not understand'.³⁹ What we can do here, however, is to look at those aspects of the Grail legend in which Corbin found the greatest significance, those things which persuaded him that that legend is indeed 'our mystical epic of the West'.

Essential to the whole of Corbin's enterprise—'the great project of a life', to borrow again his own words concerning Suhrawardī—was his conviction of the indispensable importance of esotericism. Esoteric

36. *En Islam iranien* ii.365.

37. 'Youthfulness and Chivalry in Iranian Islam', Part II, trans. Christine Rhone, *Temenos Academy Review* 12 (2009) 71–90: p. 84.

38. *Philosophie iranienne*, p. 32.

39. From the treatise *The Incantation of the Simorgh: L'archange empourpré*, p. 461.

and exoteric are not alternatives, as things can be which exist on the same level. The esoteric, by connecting the manifest with its hidden Source, brings Divine and mortal face to face and thereby fulfils not only the supreme human aspiration but also God's purpose in granting being to the universe. Without this secret dimension, without initiation, the world itself would fade and fail.

The place of the esoteric encounter, where the human face meets the Face of God, is not the exoteric community of institutional religion; rather it is an initiatic circle, at the heart of which is each individual's unique service of a unique Lord. To see this discipline, this adventure of the soul, as existing in rivalry or opposition to the claims of exoteric religion is wholly to misconceive its nature: it belongs to a different plane, and has no concern with aspirations to spiritual—let alone secular—authority.

In this context, Corbin was profoundly struck by the fact that the Grail romances posit a hidden succession of Grail keepers who neither challenge Rome nor defer to it.⁴⁰ In one of his first references to the Grail, he spoke of the way in which 'the dynasty of the guardians of the Grail, in our Western tradition, projects over the official hierarchy of the Church'.⁴¹ Corbin's ideas on this subject were strongly influenced by A. E. Waite's book *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal*,⁴² an influence which can be clearly seen in his repeated references when speaking of the Grail to 'the Way of "the secret Church" . . . concealed in the "secret shrine" of the soul',⁴³ to an *Ecclesia spiritualis*,⁴⁴ and to a hidden 'Johannine church' transcending the church of Peter.⁴⁵ But Corbin made Waite's vision his own, perceiving in the Grail dynasty an analogy to the doctrine that the succession of the Imāms, believed

40. Thus *Temple and Contemplation*, p. 361: 'The Temple of the Grail is not a building of ecclesiastical inspiration or finality. It is not a church among the other churches of Christianity. Likewise, the Grail cycle, whether its origin lies in the person of Titurel or in that of Joseph of Arimathea—the first Christian bishop—appears to know nothing of the Roman hierarchy.'

41. *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 22.

42. *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal: Its Legends and Symbolism, Considered in their Affinity with Certain Mysteries of Initiation and Other Traces of a Secret Tradition in Christian Times* (London: Rebman, 1909), especially pp. 615–87. The ramifications of this book's impact on Corbin's ideas concerning the Grail literature as a whole, and indeed on his thinking generally, could be the fruitful subject of a considerably more extended study.

43. *Temple and Contemplation*, p. 254. 44. *L'homme et son ange*, p. 202. 45. *Loc. cit.*

by Shī'ites to be the true heirs of the Prophet, is an esoteric lineage apart from, because existing beyond, the politics of the world. Thus he could write that

Parzival-Prester John is henceforth for the Johannine Church, the secret Church of the Grail, the equivalent of the one whom Shī'ite gnosis calls the Celestial Pole, the hidden Imām, summit of a spiritual hierarchy unknown to men.⁴⁶

The human institution in which Corbin found the closest analogy to the mystical encounter was not priesthood but knighthood, an initiatory order centring upon each individual's fealty to his lord—an intimate and reciprocated relationship of total dedication. To this corresponds what Corbin called 'spiritual chivalry': the soul's relationship to the Angel of the Face, the unmanifest Godhead's unique self-manifestation to each single being. In Shī'ite mysticism, this relationship can be expressed as devotion to the hidden Imām, 'the divine Face for man and the human face looked upon by God'.⁴⁷ And, as Corbin noted, such devotion is in fact described in this tradition as 'knighthood' – *futuwwat* in Arabic, *javānmardī* in Persian.⁴⁸

You may remember my mentioning that Wolfram von Eschenbach described the Grail as being guarded by an order of knights. He called them 'Templars', alluding to a great knightly order of his own day whose secrecy, together with its links with the East and especially with the Temple in Jerusalem, can only have been powerfully suggestive for Corbin.⁴⁹ Wolfram also portrayed 'heathen'—that is, Muslim—heroes as being perfect knights; while *The Quest of the Holy Grail* affirms that 'from all lands where knighthood dwells, whether of Christendom or heathendom (*paiennie*), the knights come to the Round Table'⁵⁰—statements which inspired Corbin to speak of 'ecu-

46. *Face de Dieu*, p. 222; cf. *Temple and Contemplation*, p. 368.

47. *En Islam iranien* ii.205.

48. For Corbin's fullest treatment of this theme, see his 'Youthfulness and Chivalry in Iranian Islam', a translation of which by Christine Rhone appears in two parts in *Temenos Academy Review* 11 (2008) 54–71 and 12 (2009) 71–90.

49. On Templars and the Temple, see in particular Corbin's essay 'The *Imago Templi* in Confrontation with Secular Norms', *Temple and Contemplation*, pp. 263–390.

50. The outstanding example of 'heathen' knighthood in the *Parzival* is Parzival's own half-brother Feirefiz. The passage cited here from the *Quest* appears on p. 76 of Pauphilet's edition.

menical chivalry' and of a 'universal elite'.⁵¹ Sworn to celibacy as long as they guarded the Grail castle, Wolfram's Templars might also be summoned to go forth into the world if they were needed there. They could then marry, but must keep their identity an absolute secret even from their wives:⁵² a 'strict incognito' in which Corbin saw a counterpart to the 'mystical order of knights, which surrounds the Hidden Imām'.⁵³ Elsewhere, he observed:

We can say, I believe, that on either side a single spiritual chivalry is expressed in two symbols whose outer form may perhaps differ, but which indicate and guide the same inner *geste*.⁵⁴

One of Corbin's fundamental symbols was that of the 'Orient', conceived not as a direction in three-dimensional space but as the perennial wellspring of Light. He took this image from his master Suhrawardī, who called his own teaching 'the Oriental theosophy' and whose followers were designated the *Ishrāqiyūn*, the 'Orientals', in this metaphysical sense. Not only was the Grail already described by Robert de Boron as having been brought to Britain out of the East,⁵⁵ but the 'Vulgate cycle', culminating in *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, linked its destiny as we have seen with Sarras on the borders of Egypt: it is from Sarras that the Grail was conveyed to Britain, and it was in the 'spiritual palace' in Sarras that Galahad gazed into it before it was withdrawn from the world for ever. In Germany, the *Younger Titurel* and *Lohengrin* speak of the Grail being taken yet further: its final resting place is India, the utmost East in the eyes of medieval Europe.

In this East, Corbin recognized Suhrawardī's 'Orient': the spiritual palace in Sarras is built in 'the invisible Orient, the Orient which is the soul',⁵⁶ and the India of the Grail is that which pseudo-Abdias situated at 'the edge of the world'.⁵⁷ It is an Orient which, to use one of Corbin's favourite phrases, 'cannot be situated on our maps':⁵⁸ 'an interworld

51. 'Youthfulness and Chivalry', Part I, p. 65; Part II, p. 84; *En Islam iranien* iv.416.

52. *Parzival* 494–5; cf. 825–6. 53. *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 23.

54. 'Youthfulness and Chivalry', Part II, pp. 89–90.

55. Robert evidently had himself a keen sense of the symbolism of the East. Thus he places the Grail's transit to Britain in a universal context: 'Even as the world goes forward, diminishing every day, it is needful that all this people should go toward the west' (*Joseph*, lines 3351–4, citing my own translation in *Ireland and the Grail*, p. 148).

56. *Face de Dieu*, p. 226. 57. *Ibid.*, p. 222.

58. E.g. *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 23; cf. 'Dramatic Element', p. 218.

that is self-sufficient',⁵⁹ 'on the border . . . between the *Malakūt* and our world',⁶⁰ 'at the same time quite close and very far'.⁶¹ Sarras is a 'sister-city' of Hūrqaḷyā, one of the cities of Suhrawardī's imaginal 'Land of Non-where'.⁶² The quest of the Grail knights leads to the same goal as that of the *Ishrāqiyūn*: 'as Galahad shows us the direction of Sarras, Suhrawardī's recital shows us the direction of the mountain of Qāf. Nothing less, and nothing other'.⁶³

In the romances, the Grail's principal characteristic is its hiddenness: this is, of course, the basis of the quest. The Grail castle lies no one knows where, and can only be found by those destined or chosen, or by those who have made themselves worthy; even when one is in its presence, it is invisible to unbaptized eyes.⁶⁴ And at the end its withdrawal into the Orient, or into heaven, has removed it yet further from mortal gaze. As Corbin commented:

Whether one says that Parzival conveys the Holy Grail into the Orient, or that it is conveyed by Galahad to Sarras whence it is taken up into heaven, the event signified . . . is the same; for 'Orient' and 'Sarras' are, like Hūrqaḷyā, places of the 'eighth climate', invisible to the senses of those who have not been 'baptized in the Cup'. This transfer is the transfiguration of the mystic, anticipating his personal eschatology.⁶⁵

Here too Corbin found an analogy to the hidden Imām of Shī'ism, whose 'occultation' has taken him into a realm beyond the physical senses—although he may from time to time appear, unanticipated and usually unrecognized, to one or another of his devotees. For Corbin, indeed, the questions 'Where is the Imām?' and 'Where is the Grail?' are only a single question framed in varying terms.⁶⁶ The Imāmate 'has

59. *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, pp. 28-9. 60. *Temple and Contemplation*, p. 254.

61. *En Islam iranien* ii.175. 62. *Face de Dieu*, p. 221.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 241. The mythical mountain of Qāf, situated on the edge of the world, is compared by Corbin with the mountain on which Wolfram locates the Grail castle: *En Islam iranien* ii.154.

64. *Parzival* 813,17-22.

65. *Loc. cit.* The phrase 'baptized in the Cup' alludes to an image in the Hermetic treatise which the Kahanes regarded as the primary source of the Grail legend: *Corpus Hermeticum* iv.4.

66. 'Youthfulness and Chivalry', Part II, p. 90.

been "lifted" from this world, just as, in our Western traditions, were the Grail and its guardian'.⁶⁷

That these two supreme symbols abide in concealment is essential to their nature, a nature belonging to that level of being whose key, Corbin insisted, is esotericism:

. . . This passage to the reality of the *Malakūt* can be envisaged in many ways: as the celestial hand which, in Sarras, as it withdraws the Grail renders it invisible to men; as the taking back of the Grail into the 'Orient' . . . It is always the exodus out of a world subject to the laws of the exterior senses and to the physical, an exodus achieved through the *quarta dimensio*.⁶⁸

Thus, when Wolfram states that the Grail 'is still hidden',⁶⁹ Corbin comments: 'We know what he means: it is hidden to all eyes of the flesh. The epic of the Grail ends in occultation.'⁷⁰

Together with the analogy between the Grail and the hidden Imām, Corbin followed Coyajee in affirming the Grail's identity with the *Xvarnah*, the 'Glory' which Iranian tradition portrays as being bestowed on those rulers or champions who enjoy divine favour. This was one of the ancient mythologems which Suhrawardī incorporated in his 'Oriental theosophy'. Corbin summarized the parallels as follows:

There is, on both sides, the idea of a mysterious virtue or potency of which a marvellous Object, talisman or theurgy is the form or manifestation, which is surrounded by an *aura* of sacrality like the most holy of relics. This marvellous Object, whether it be a form of the *Xvarnah* or the Grail, dispenses the food of immortality and the illumination of understanding. He who holds the plenitude of the *Xvarnah* possesses, together with gifts corresponding to the 'hieratic' perfections, the victorious force of the knight. The *Xvarnah* passes in succession from one hero to the next, without there being any need for the intervention of a visible agent . . . Like the Grail borne to earth by the angels and entrusted to knights who are the most pure of men, the *Xvarnah* has its origin among the potencies of Light.⁷¹

67. *Face de Dieu*, p. 125. 68. *En Islam iranien* ii.189. 69. *Parzival* 786,12.

70. 'Dramatic Element', p. 218. 71. *En Islam iranien* ii.161-2.

The Grail, like the *Xvarnah*, can take various forms,⁷² but is associated above all with dazzling radiance.⁷³

While Corbin noted Coyajee's discussion of these similarities with approval, his own understanding of their significance was as we have seen very different from that of the earlier writer. Even if Coyajee were correct in discerning some kind of historical connection between the two—a hypothesis regarding which I find myself considerably more sceptical even than Corbin—this would be of only ancillary importance. It is in the realm of the *Malakūt*, above the flow of mortal time, that the unity of Grail and *Xvarnah* is a matter not of antiquarian conjecture but of spiritual reality.

The same applies *a fortiori* to one of the forms taken by the *Xvarnah*: that of a vessel which, having belonged originally to the primordial sovereign Jamshīd, became a treasure of the fabulous dynasty of the Kayānids and at last of the greatest among them, Kay Khosraw. It was called the *Jām-e Jam*, 'the cup of Jamshīd'; but also, because it had the miraculous property that whoever looked into it could see the entire cosmos, the *Jām-gīti-nemā*, 'the cup which mirrors the universe'. Corbin always refers to this vessel as a 'Grail'; it figures in Firdawsī's *Shāh-Nāme*, and was used as a symbol by various Iranian mystics.

One of these latter was Suhrawardī, who included a recital concerning the 'Grail' of Jamshīd in his collection of parables *The Language of the Ants*. It is apposite to cite this text in its entirety here, inasmuch as Suhrawardī's 'Grail' was for Corbin a manifestation of the same reality as the Grail of medieval Europe:

Kay Khosraw possessed the Grail, mirror of the universe. Everything which could be the subject of his desire, he contemplated it in this Grail. There he beheld the totality of beings; there he was informed concerning the invisible worlds.

This Grail was enclosed in a covering of leather, the form of which had been made like a tower, and which had ten joints. When Kay Khosraw wished to contemplate some mystery of the invisible, he gave this covering a turn (to unfasten it). When he had untied all

72. *Ibid.*, pp. 159–60.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 174 n. 282; cf. the reference to the 'blaze of the Grail' in *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy*, trans. Joseph Rowe (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 1998), p. 192.

the bindings, the Grail was no longer visible. But when all the bindings were tied anew in the workshop, the Grail appeared.

At the moment of the vernal equinox, Kay Khosraw held the Grail exposed to face the sun, and the luminary's radiance came to strike the Grail. And behold! All the lines and imprints of the world were manifested there.

There follow three citations from the Qur'ān (84:3–5, 69:18, 82:5), and then a brief verse:

When I heard from my master the recital of the Grail of Jamshīd, I was myself the Grail of Jamshīd, mirror of the universe. May my own Grail, mirror of the universe, be uncovered. This buried Grail is a burning Flame on which our death is nourished . . .⁷⁴

This remarkable text, which Corbin described as Suhrawardī's attempt 'to *say* the Unsayable',⁷⁵ described for him also the essence of the Grail cycle in the West. This can be the case because both are, again, accounts of a hidden *reality*. As Corbin put it:

The Event which he attempts to *say* must be grasped on the level where it is *literally true*. Now it is not in our world that it is literally true, but 'between Heaven and Earth', between the 'greater Orient' and the earthly Orient. Neither Kay Khosraw nor Parzival nor Galahad has left traces in archival documents; Kang-Dēz,⁷⁶ Hūrqulyā and the spiritual palace of Sarras remain beyond the reach of archaeological excavations. And for all that, the personages are not less *real* than those of history; the places of their deeds are not less *real* than the soil dug up by the archaeologist's pick.⁷⁷

Corbin goes on to compare Kay Khosraw's vision of all things in his Grail with the account in *The Quest of the Holy Grail* of 'how it was

74. *L'archange empourpré*, pp. 423–4; cf. *En Islam iranien* ii.207–8. The recital concludes with a citation from the Sufi master Junayd: 'Nocturnal brilliances blaze when it shows itself. Manifested as occultation, experienced as union.'

75. *En Islam iranien* ii.200.

76. This is the hidden retreat of Kay Khosraw, which Corbin compares elsewhere with the Grail castle (*Face de Dieu*, p. 216; *En Islam iranien* ii.168) and with Avalon (*ibid.*, p. 177).

77. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

given to Galahad, in the spiritual palace of Sarras, to contemplate in the Grail the supreme divine mysteries'.⁷⁸ The resemblance between the two descriptions is indeed a striking one. Here are the words of the *Quest*:

He began to tremble very violently, as soon as the mortal flesh began to gaze upon the spiritual things. Then Galahad held his hands up to heaven and said, 'Lord, I worship you and give thanks that you have fulfilled my desire, for now I see quite openly that which tongue could not describe, nor heart conceive. Here I see the origin of valiant deeds and the cause of prowess. Here I see the marvels which exceed all other marvels. And since, fair sweet Lord, you have thus fulfilled my desire by permitting me to see that which I have always desired, I pray now that you will grant me, at this point when I am in this great joy, to pass from this earthly life to the heavenly one.'⁷⁹

Galahad's prayer is granted almost immediately, and he dies in ecstasy.

When Kay Khosraw holds his Grail up to the sun of the vernal equinox, this seems to be a clear counterpart of the return of the Grail to the Orient in the Western romances. A more curious detail in Suhrawardī's recital is that of the covering of leather, with its ten joints, which must be unfastened in order to gaze into the Grail. Corbin was surely correct in understanding this as the physical body, with its five exterior and five interior senses.⁸⁰

But what are we to make of the fact that the Grail is kept *within* the leather covering? Only one interpretation seems possible, and it is given by Suhrawardī's older contemporary Rūzbihān Baqlī Shīrāzī: 'This Grail which shows the universe, it is myself.'⁸¹ Suhrawardī too, as we have seen, says that 'I was myself the Grail of Jamshīd, mirror of the universe.' For Corbin, the same was true of the Grail of the West: he could see 'the *quest* to encounter this celestial "Self" (*ce Moi celeste*)' as 'one of the hidden meanings of our epic of the Holy Grail';⁸² and he

78. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

79. *La Queste del Saint Graal*, pp. 277–8 of Pauphilet's ed., citing my translation of the passage in *Ireland and the Grail*, p. 325.

80. For discussion of the interior senses by Suhrawardī, see *L'archange empourpré*, e.g. pp. 21, 44.

81. Cited by Corbin in *En Islam iranien*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard), p. 134.

82. 'Youthfulness and Chivalry', Part II, p. 89.

could speak of 'the return of beings to their true being (which is the same Grail)'.⁸³

Is this, then, the secret of the Grail after all? There is a sense in which I could say 'Yes', but even in doing so I feel the words dead on my tongue. For words is all they are: the verbal enunciation of a piece of doctrine. *Ta'wīl*, the Shī'ite hermeneutic espoused by Corbin, connects symbols not with mental concepts but with the spiritual realm which is their origin.⁸⁴ In his own words:

Let there be no mistake: it is not a question of merely deriving the imaginal event or the living vision from certain abstract theoretical data. That would be to turn the back on the 'Orient' The event of the soul is itself, itself first of all, the *ta'wīl* which, by leading the theoretical data back to the Orient, renders them true. And there, pre-eminently, is the phenomenon of the *ḥikāyat*, of the recital which is at the same time *history* and *imitation* (*mimēsis*): history because it is the imitation of a higher world, and an imitation which is its *image* (*mithāl*). Here too the *noetic* function of the image and imaginative perception will appear as decisive. At the same time, the reciter, the 'historian', can no longer be regarded as irresponsible, isolated from the facts of the recital; for their part, the hearer or reader only *realize* its meaning on condition that this *ta'wīl*, this *hermeneutic*, is accomplished in themselves.⁸⁵

To find the 'celestial Self' it is necessary to transform the quotidian self, to transform it so utterly that it may be said to be destroyed. This is the application of the first of the passages from the Qur'ān which Suhrawardī attached to his Grail recital:

When the Earth is spread out flat, when it rejects that which is in it and remains empty, when it turns its ear to its Lord and becomes worthy of Him, behold! you will meet Him.⁸⁶

83. *En Islam iranien* iv.391.

84. William Chittick has noted that Corbin's understanding of *ta'wīl* is specifically Shī'ite, and not—as Corbin seems to imply—representative of Islam as a whole: *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn 'Arabi's Metaphysics of the Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), pp. 199–202. I am grateful to Tom Cheetham for calling attention to this point.

85. *En Islam iranien* ii.180–81.

86. Qur'ān 84:3–5, from Corbin's rendering. Shaykh Aḥmad Aḥsā'ī was evidently

Or, as Corbin put it when commenting on another of Suhrawardī's recitals:

It is not simply a question of departing from oneself in order to arrive at oneself anew . . . The 'I' that one finds again beyond, on the summit of the mountain of Qāf, is the higher 'I', 'I' in the second person.⁸⁷

This has always been the path of the mystic: the most difficult thing in the world, and surely impossible if we did not already belong with our truest being to that other realm which calls out to us. Corbin stated:

It is necessary that the summons come from the Imām, just as it is the Grail which summons its Chosen; otherwise, no one can traverse the way.⁸⁸

The task is beyond our mortal abilities, but it is what we have been brought into being to accomplish. At all times and in all places, the first step on the way awaits our tread. A few months before his own departure, Corbin wrote that 'the world in which the Grail is occulted is still visible to the eyes of fire, and that is why there will always be secret Knights-Templar who pursue the Quest for the Grail'.⁸⁹

referring to this image of the flattened earth when he warned that 'the *ḥikāyat* (the mystical recital) does not take on reality until the mountain of one's own *egoity* (or egoism) has been abolished' (*Face de Dieu*, p. 197).

87. *L'archange empourpré*, p. 198. 88. *L'homme et son ange*, p. 133.

89. 'Dramatic Element', p. 218. It is a further testimony to the richness of Corbin's thought that, even in trying to give an account of only one of its aspects, I have been obliged to omit much of importance. Thus I have not discussed his interpretation of the mysterious book at the beginning of *The History of the Holy Grail* in terms of his concept of 'the Lost Speech' (*L'homme et son ange*, pp. 202–5), or the Grail's crucial function as a source of nourishment (see e.g. *L'archange empourpré*, p. 129). Also of great relevance is the text which Corbin translated and analysed in 'A Shiite Liturgy of the Grail', *The Voyage and the Messenger*, pp. 173–204.