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Author: Tom Cheetham

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The Prophetic Tradition and the Battle for the Soul of the World*

An Introduction to the Work of Henry Corbin

TOM CHEETHAM

INTRODUCTION

A wise friend of mine, hearing of my work on Henry Corbin, said, 'I see that you have become the student of a student of Sufism.' I claim to be no more. I stand in awe of Corbin's scholarship, but I am not myself a scholar of anything in particular. Yet I have spent some time trying to make Corbin's work clear to myself, and I hope that the results of the effort are useful to others. All I can do here is provide a sketch of what I take to be some of the main themes of his work, in the hope of persuading you to read his work for yourselves.

I first became aware of Corbin because of an interest in the work of Carl Jung. They shared a profound respect for the importance of the imagination, and it was this common thread that drew me into the labyrinth of Corbin's world. An essay by James Hillman, full of praise for Corbin the man and for his work, prompted me to read *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī*. I found myself in very unfamiliar territory and was immediately entranced. On the very first page Corbin writes that 'with the help of phenomenology'

we have learned to register and to make use of the intentions implicit in all the acts of consciousness or transconsciousness. To say that the Imagination (or love, or sympathy, or any other sentiment) *induces knowledge*, and knowledge of an 'object' which is proper to it, no longer smacks of paradox.¹

I was familiar with phenomenology, but this seemed to me a radical transformation of the kind of philosophy I had been taught. I wanted to know who this man was, who could speak this way.

* A Lecture for the Temenos Academy, The Lincoln Centre, London, 25 October 2004.

1. Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī*, tr. R. Manheim (Princeton/Bollingen Series XCI, 1969), p. 3.

I think that even a few minutes' attention to some of the details of his life can help orient us as we try to enter the world he inhabits. And even a quick sketch of his life reveals a capacity for philosophical research and a breadth of spiritual interest that are breathtaking. He was born in Paris on 14 April 1903, to Henri Arthur Corbin and Eugenie Fournier. His mother died six days later. His health was fragile in his early years, and he was frequently forced to interrupt his studies. As a young boy he revealed the profound sensitivity to music so evident in all his work, and he studied both organ and theory. Corbin attended the monastery school at St Maur, later the Seminary school of Issy, and received a certificate in Scholastic Philosophy from the Catholic Institute of Paris in 1922. In 1925 he took his 'licence de philosophie' under the great Thomist Étienne Gilson at the Sorbonne, with a thesis entitled 'Latin Avicennism in the Middle Ages'. Corbin was entranced by Gilson's scholarship and his ability to bring medieval texts to life. Gilson was then beginning his own study of the role of Islamic philosophy in the development of Scholastic thought in the West. Corbin admired him immensely and took the master interpreter as his model. In an autobiographical essay written in the last year of his life Corbin wrote,

This was my first contact with Islamic philosophy. I discovered there a complicity between cosmology and angelology . . . and this angelological concern has not, I believe, left me during my entire life.²

During the same period he attended Emile Bréhier's lectures on the relation between Plotinus and the Upanishads: ' . . . how could a young philosopher avid for metaphysical adventure resist this appeal: to study deeply the influences or traces of Indian philosophy in the work of the founder of Neoplatonism?'³ What he called a 'notorious period of mental asceticism' followed on his decision to undertake the simultaneous study of Arabic and Sanskrit.

In 1928 Corbin encountered the powerful figure of Louis Massignon, Director of Islamic Studies at the Sorbonne. The contrast with Gilson's methodical and rigorous style was startling. Corbin comments,

2. *Henry Corbin*, edited by Christian Jambet, Cahier de l'Herne, no. 39. Consacré à Henry Corbin (Paris, 1981), p. 39. 3. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

It used to happen that a lesson would commence with one of the flashing intuitions of which the great mystic Massignon was unsparing. And then a parenthesis would open, and then another, then another . . . Finally the listener found himself stunned and bewildered, arguing with the master about British politics in Palestine . . .⁴

Corbin's attraction to the mystical element in oriental studies was confirmed by contact with Massignon. He said,

There was no escaping his influence. His soul of fire, his bold penetration into the arcana of mystical life in Islam, where no one had before penetrated in this way, the nobility of his indignations at the cowardice in the world, all of this inevitably made its imprint on the spirit of his young listeners.⁵

It was Massignon who first turned his student's attention to the writings of Suhrawardī, the twelfth-century Persian mystic and philosopher whose work was profoundly to affect the course of Corbin's life. Of this decisive moment Corbin said,

Thus it was that one day, it was, I think, in the year 1927–28, I spoke to him of the reasons that had led me as a philosopher to the study of Arabic, questions that posed themselves to me concerning the connections between philosophy and mysticism, and that I knew, through a scanty resumé in German, of a certain Suhrawardī . . . Then Massignon had an inspiration from Heaven. He had brought back from a trip to Iran a lithographed edition of the major work of Suhrawardī . . . With commentaries, it formed a large volume of more than five hundred pages. 'Take it,' he said to me. 'I think there is in this book something for you.' This 'something' was the company of the young Shaykh al-Ishrāq, who has not left me my whole life. I had always been a Platonist (in the broad sense of the term); I believe that one is born a Platonist as one is born an atheist, a materialist, etc. Unfathomable mystery of pre-existential choices. The young Platonist that I was then could only take fire at contact with the one who was the 'Imam of the Platonists of Persia . . .'

4. Ibid. 5. Ibid.

through my meeting with Suhrawardī, my spiritual destiny for the passage through this world was sealed. Platonism, expressed in terms of the Zoroastrian angelology of ancient Persia, illuminated the path that I was seeking.⁶

There were no longer any doubts about the direction the main lines of Corbin's research would take and he began in earnest the study of Turkish, Persian and Arabic.

But his quest extended well beyond the vast landscapes of Western scholasticism and Islamic mysticism. During the 1920s and the early 1930s he simultaneously pursued studies that in and of themselves would have clearly marked him as a brilliant and eclectic *Protestant* theologian. He became deeply engaged with the German theological tradition, what he would later call the 'lineage of hermeneutics': Luther, Boehme, Hamann, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Barth. In 1931 he was a co-founder, along with two Protestant pastors, of a short-lived journal for theological renewal inspired by the early writings of Karl Barth. He lectured and delivered papers on Luther, Kierkegaard and Hamann, at the same time publishing translations of Suhrawardī in 1933, 1935, and 1939. He was also the first to translate the early works of Barth into French.

In 1930 a second defining encounter in Corbin's spiritual odyssey took place. This was his reading of Martin Heidegger's foundational work of phenomenology, *Being and Time*. It gives us some sense of the unique perspective of this truly catholic philosopher to note that his copy of the notoriously difficult and very German work was marked throughout by glosses in Arabic.⁷ The two men met for the first time in Freiburg in 1931. Corbin travelled there again in 1936 to submit the first French translation of any of Heidegger's works, which was to appear in 1939 as *Qu'est ce que la métaphysique?*

He tended the Oriental collection at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris beginning in 1928. In 1933, he married the woman who was to be his lifelong companion, Stella Leenhardt. In 1939 they travelled to Istanbul for what was intended as a six-month stay, to collect manuscripts for a critical edition of Suhrawardī. Corbin served as the only member of the French Institute of Archaeology there until the end of the war. When his replacement arrived in September of 1945, the

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 40–41. 7. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Corbins travelled for the first time to Teheran where he was to teach as a member of Teheran University for many years. Corbin came to love Iran, which he called a country 'the colour of heaven'. In November 1945 he was instrumental in launching a project to create a Department of Iranology in the new Institut Française in Teheran. They returned finally to Paris in July 1946 after an absence of seven years.

In 1949 Corbin first attended the Eranos Conferences in Ascona, Switzerland, where he became a major figure along with Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, Gershom Scholem, Adolf Portmann and others. In 1954 he succeeded Massignon in the Chair of Islam and the Religions of Arabia at the Sorbonne, and it was during the 1950s that the three major works upon which his reputation rests in the English-speaking world were first published in French: *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabī* and *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*. The work which is generally regarded as his *magnum opus*, as yet untranslated into English, is the four-volume *En Islam Iranienne: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, which appeared between 1971 and 1973. From the 1950s on Corbin spent autumn in Teheran, winter in Paris and spring in Ascona. His life was taken up with teaching, writing, lecturing, and editing critical editions of Persian and Arabic manuscripts. His published work comprises over two hundred critical editions, translations, books and articles. He presented his last paper in June 1978, 'Eyes of Flesh, Eyes of Fire: the Science of Gnosis'. He died on 7 October of that year at the age of seventy-five.

Corbin's approach to Islamic mysticism is unusual for at least two reasons. On the one hand it is supported by a profound and wide-ranging knowledge of Western philosophy and Christian theology. This makes possible his attempt to provide the groundwork for what he called 'comparative spiritual hermeneutics' – the attempt to understand the common themes that lie at the heart of the three great monotheisms. On the other hand, his vision of Islam is in one sense quite specific: Corbin had a very special attachment to the Persian version of Shi'ism. Dr Hossein Nasr, who was his friend and colleague at the University of Teheran, has written:

When speaking of Shi'ism, he usually spoke of 'us' and considered himself to be identified with Shi'ism in spirit as well as mind . . . Corbin displayed an attachment to Shi'ism which was not only that

of the usual Western scholar engaged in the subject of his research. Rather, it was participation in a spiritual world in which it can be said that Corbin possessed faith.⁸

He was not a convert to Islam in any simple sense, and yet clearly he had made a place for it in himself. Yet the fundamental theme of his work is entirely ecumenical: to reveal the common bonds that unite the Peoples of the Book into a single destiny. His perspective is trans-cultural; perhaps 'pan-Abrahamic' is a useful term. His work provides a powerful vision of the entire prophetic tradition from Abraham to the present.

THE GREAT REFUSAL

If there is a single first step on the path that Corbin invites us to travel, it may be the simple refusal to accept the understanding of ourselves that dominates modern secular consciousness. The foundations for this worldview are historicist and materialist throughout. All of the major modern means of understanding converge upon a single unified vision of reality. All of the 'human' and all of the 'natural' sciences are based on laws of historical causality in a world composed entirely of matter in space.

In a world so conceived, nothing can be more real than anything else. In such a world consciousness is explicable in terms of physical, biological, social and historical forces. Such a world is radically incompatible with the existence of persons. This is nihilism. As long as we feel alienated and exiled in such a world there is hope. But the danger is that we will abandon ourselves to those impersonal forces and in doing so, we will disappear: there will no longer *be* persons.⁹

Corbin refuses all of this. He makes use of Heidegger's analysis of the human person to clarify his standpoint. In *Being and Time* Heidegger writes:

Looking at something, understanding and conceiving it, choosing access to it—all of these ways of behaving are . . . modes of Being

8. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'Henry Corbin: The Life and Works of the Occidental Exile in Quest of the Orient of Light', Ch. 17, in *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (Kegan Paul International, London, 1987), p. 28.

9. Henry Corbin, *Le Paradoxe du Monothéisme*, Ed. de l'Herne, 1981, p. 240.

for those particular entities which we, the inquirers, are ourselves . . . This entity which each of us is . . . we shall denote by the term 'Dasein'.¹⁰

Dasein is Heidegger's way of naming that about us that has 'ontological priority over every other entity'.¹¹ *Dasein* is, literally translated, 'being-there'. Corbin says that the *da* of *Dasein* is the 'act of Presence'.¹² Any analysis of human existence must begin with Presence as the fundamental given. Not with a thinking subject as for Descartes, or with energy or matter as in modern science; not indeed with any kind of 'thing' at all. What is central here is the suggestion that *Dasein* is, as a philosopher might say, 'ontologically complex' and can exhibit many 'modes' of being.

As with *Being*, so Heidegger's treatment of *Time* was pivotal for Corbin, who understands Heidegger's analysis of the relation between them in this way: it is the mode of being, the mode of Presence, of the human person that determines the nature of time, not the other way around. We are not the product of the vagaries of History; the relation between history and the human being is not one-way. More primordial than the time of Universal History is the time of the soul. The meaning of history has little to do with the unfolding of events in time, and everything to do with what Corbin calls 'hierohistory', the events in the eternal time of the soul.

There is a sense in which we can tear ourselves out of the flux of historical events. We are not irrevocably bound by the intellectual assumptions and the spiritual possibilities of 'our time'. It is possible to resurrect the spiritual universe of another time, or equally, of another culture. This is because the past and the future, 'are not attributes of exterior things; they are attributes of the soul itself. It is we who are living or dead, and who are responsible for the life and death of these things'.¹³

Corbin does not claim that escaping the terrors of history is easy. On the contrary, it requires 'spiritual combat' of the highest order. Indeed it is the *magnum opus* of the alchemical transformation of the soul. But once we acknowledge the possibility, we are not irrevocably bound

10. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Harper San Francisco, 1962), pp. 26–7. 11. *Ibid.*, p. 62. 12. Jambet, *Henry Corbin*, p. 32.

13. Henry Corbin, *En Islam Iranienne: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, 4 vols. (Gallimard, Bib. Des Idées, vol. 1: *Le shi'isme duodécemain*, 1971), p. 37.

by the deepest, most far-reaching presuppositions of 'our time'. We are not doomed to be ciphers in the great impersonal flux of events. Rather 'The decision of the future falls to the soul, depends upon how the soul understands *itself*, upon its refusal or acceptance of a new birth.'¹⁴

MUNDUS IMAGINALIS

Such a new birth is a metamorphosis, and such a transformation requires a kind of death. The Prophet Mohammed said, 'You must die before you die!' Corbin writes: '. . . to leave this world, it does not suffice to die. One can die and remain in it forever. One must be living to leave it.'¹⁵ To be born is to leave the world of historical, public events. This is an awakening to the Presence of the World and takes place by a kind of inversion; it is a process of *turning inside out*. It is worth quoting Corbin at length:

[I]t is a matter of entering, passing into the interior and, in passing *into the interior* of finding oneself, paradoxically, outside The relationship involved is essentially that of the external, the visible, the exoteric . . . , and the internal, the invisible, the esoteric To depart from the *where* . . . is to leave the external or natural appearances that enclose the hidden realities This step is made in order for the Stranger . . . to return *home*

But an odd thing happens: once this transition is accomplished, it turns out that henceforth this reality, previously internal and hidden, is revealed to be enveloping, surrounding, containing what was first of all external and visible, since by means of *interiorization* one has *departed* from that *external* reality. Henceforth it is spiritual reality that . . . contains the reality called material.¹⁶

And thus, just as we are not merely objects *in* historical time, so we are not primordially *in* quantitative space. It is truer to say rather that we 'spatialize' a world. Corbin writes:

14. Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, tr. W. Trask (Princeton/Bollingen series LXVI, 1960), p. 10.

15. Henry Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, tr. R. Manheim, J. Morris (Kegan Paul International, London, 1983), p. 58.

16. Henry Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, tr. L. Fox (Swedenborg Foundation, 1995), p. 15.

Orientation is a primary phenomenon of our presence in the world. A human presence has the property of spatializing a world around it, and this phenomenon implies a certain relationship of man and the world, *his* world, this relationship being determined by the very mode of his presence in the world.¹⁷

The kind of space we occupy depends upon our mode of being. Our orientation in the world is not given by coordinates on a map, but by our spiritual state. If the only space were quantitative space, there could not be persons at all, merely objects. We achieve our personhood to the degree that we come home to ourselves in a world that is not alien and impersonal.

The space of the soul, which is the location of visionary events, is known by an Arabic word that Corbin rendered in Latin as the *mundus imaginalis*, or the *imaginal* world. The existence of this imaginal world implies a hierarchic cosmology that disappeared from the dominant currents in Western philosophy with the demise of Neoplatonism. In this cosmos there are three 'worlds' and three sources of knowledge. In the modern West we admit only two of these: on the one hand sense perception gives us knowledge of the world of material objects, and on the other, concepts of the understanding give us knowledge of the abstract laws governing these objects. But the person limited to this choice must remain forever trapped in one mode of presence and the objects of knowledge must remain in one mode of being. What is lacking in this scheme is the recognition of the creative power of the Imagination. The cosmology that underlies the metaphysics of Presence, and so makes possible the existence of persons, gives a privileged place to Imagination.

While we encounter in other philosophies or systems a distrust of the Image, a degradation of all that properly belongs to the Imagination, the *mundus imaginalis* is its exaltation, because it is the link in whose absence the schema of the worlds is put out of joint.¹⁸

The world of the Imagination is an interworld because it shares

17. Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, tr. N. Pearson (Omega Publications, New Lebanon, N.Y., 1994), p. 1.

18. Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, tr. N. Pearson (Princeton/Bollingen series XCI: 2, 1977), p. ix.

aspects of both the world of sensation and the world of intellectual forms. The world of the imaginal is a place where 'the spiritual takes body and the body becomes spiritual, a world consisting of real matter and real extension, though by comparison to sensible, corruptible matter these are subtle and immaterial'.¹⁹ The organ of cognition that gains us access to this universe is the Active Imagination. It has a cognitive function just as fundamental as sensation or abstract thought, and, like them, it must be trained. There is therefore perfectly objective imaginative perception, imaginative knowledge and imaginative consciousness.

In the absence of the fully functional Active Imagination all the phenomena of religious consciousness lose both their meaning and their location: '[the Active Imagination] is the *place* of theophanic visions, the scene on which visionary events and symbolic histories *appear* in their true reality.'²⁰

The cognitive function of Imagination is neither passive reception, nor unconstrained fantasy. It is the organ of transmutation of intellectual or sensible forms into *symbolic forms*.

The Active Imagination guides, anticipates, moulds sensory perception; that is why it transmutes sensory data into symbols. The Burning Bush is only a brushwood fire if it is merely perceived by the sensory organs. In order that Moses may perceive the Burning Bush and hear the Voice calling him 'from the right side of the valley' – in short, in order that there may be a theophany – an organ of trans-sensory perception is needed.²¹

The consequences of the constriction of reality that results from the loss of the realms of the Imagination are impossible to overestimate. The Western world has been struggling to escape the terror of that claustrophobia ever since. This goes a long way towards explaining our rush to the Future and any New World, whether it is America, the Moon or the virtual realities of the Internet. We can never, after such a loss, have enough space. In our drive to recover the spaces of the Imagination we have taken refuge in the public Image. Television, movies, video screens in every classroom, magazines, billboards – the world is full of Images, all coming to us from Outside, according to

19. Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, p. 4. 20. *Ibid.* 21. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

someone else's agenda. This is precisely the opposite of that Interiorization of the world that is one goal of the spiritual quest. It is in fact the latest, perhaps the last, step in the exteriorization and objectification of the soul. We are driven to it by a kind of perverse necessity: the more we need space for the things of the soul, the more we seek Images to fill the space that we no longer create for ourselves. And yet fewer and fewer of us know the source of this panic, or where to turn in response. And so we continue to search for 'new disciplines of the imagination' and are caught by each in turn, disoriented and confused in a world that will not cohere.

IDOLS AND ICONS

It is characteristic of Henry Corbin that he held in high regard a figure nearly forgotten in Western philosophy except among specialists. The Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus, born in Constantinople in the year 412, had an enormous influence on Platonist thought both East and West. Corbin draws on his work in passages where he describes the movements of the flower, the *Heliotrope*, as it keeps its face turned towards the sun. Proclus writes:

each thing prays according to the rank it occupies in nature, and sings the praise of the leader of the divine series to which it belongs . . . ; for the heliotrope . . . [produces] a hymn to its king such as it is within the power of a plant to sing.²²

In this vision Proclus saw the essential connection between visible and invisible things. Corbin writes:

This common essence . . . is the perception of a *sympathy*, of a reciprocal and simultaneous attraction between the manifest being and his celestial prince . . . Taken as a phenomenon of sympathy, this tropism in the plant is at once *action* and *passion*: its action . . . is perceived as the action . . . of the Angel . . . whose name for that very reason it bears . . . And this passion . . . is disclosed in a prayer, which is the act of this passion through which the invisible angel draws the flower toward him . . .

22. Cited *ibid.*, p. 106.

But since sympathy here is also a condition and mode of perception . . . we must also speak of the poetic or cognitive function of sympathy . . .²³

The cognitive function of sympathy is necessary for the elevation of the soul to a mode of being which transcends the literalisms and dogmas in which we so easily become trapped and entangled. It is only through such sympathy that we can recognize what Corbin calls 'the angelic function of a being',²⁴ the function of the Angel's mediation. It is this function of the Angel, acting through sensible things, and of beings so experienced, which makes possible 'a life in sympathy with beings, capable of giving a transcendent dimension to their being, to their beauty, to the form of their faith . . .'.²⁵ A spiritual life is not therefore a life turned away from this world. Rather it is only through this world that such a life can be lived.

In one of the most vital passages in his book on Ibn 'Arabī, Corbin tells us that the primary importance of the angelic function of beings is that it protects us against *idolatry*. In Corbin's words, idolatry is

that two-faced spiritual infirmity which consists in either loving an object without transcendence, or in misunderstanding that transcendence by separating it from the loved object, through which alone it is manifested. These two aspects spring from the same cause: in both cases a man becomes incapable of the sympathy which gives beings and forms their transcendent dimension.²⁶

Sympathy is the ability to open oneself to the Presence of things and of persons; this is equivalent to what Corbin calls the Angel of the Earth; it is the 'Personhood' of the world. The inability to experience such sympathy may come from two sources: on the one hand, it may come from a fear of the infinite vastness of Reality, and the powerlessness of the ego to dominate and control it.

The cause may be a will to power . . . that wishes to immobilize beings and forms at the point where man has immobilized himself—

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 106–7.

24. The phrase is Etienne Souriau's. Corbin devotes a long note to his work in *Creative Imagination*, pp. 290–94. Also see *ibid.*, p. 155ff.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 134. 26. *Ibid.*

perhaps out of a secret fear of the infinite successions of perpetual transcendences . . . and [the knowledge that] . . . to be faithful to the Angel is precisely to let ourselves be guided by him towards the transcendences that he announces.²⁷

We have been led to believe that the pre-Copernican, pre-modern world of angelic hierarchies was anthropocentric, cramped and stifling; a 'closed world'. But it is not so. It is *our* world of endless material extension, dominated by a merely human reason that is the snare and the deadly delusion.

On the other hand, Corbin says, the failure of sympathy may be due to a cramped and narrow ascetic puritanism. Such a soul, because it is itself frozen, cannot see the 'dialectic of Love' by means of which the soul is led from human love towards the celestial Image of the Beloved itself. Such an asceticism can see only the carnal passion directed toward the human lover. It can see, that is, only idolatry, only profane love, and so, by cutting off the sensible from the spiritual it is blind to theophanic Presence.

In either case, it is literalism, the paralysis of persons and objects into spiritual immobility that prevents the perception of transcendence and produces the death, the hell, of idolatry. Corbin tells us:

Idolatry consists in immobilizing oneself before an idol because one sees it as opaque, because one is incapable of discerning in it the hidden invitation that it offers to go beyond it. Hence, the opposite of idolatry would not consist in breaking idols, in practising a fierce iconoclasm aimed against every inner or external Image; it would rather consist in rendering the idol transparent to the light invested in it. In short, it means transmuting the idol into an icon.²⁸

In the Garden, everything was an icon. After the Fall only those who have achieved some measure of awakening have the sympathy which allows perception of the angelic function of beings. Everyone else sees idols.

This theophanic vision provides an iconology of a transformed world. Far from the static, human-centred world parodied by modern

27. Ibid.

28. 'Theophanies and Mirrors: Idols or Icons?', tr. Pratt and Donohue (Spring Journal, 1983), p. 2.

historical consciousness, the hierarchic Neoplatonic cosmos is in perpetual motion towards infinite suprahuman divinity. There is nothing claustrophobic about this vision of the world. On the contrary, it may induce a kind of vertigo, an intoxication of the heart. It is based on an unending open-ness which prevents the hardening of the heart so characteristic of fundamentalisms of all kinds. This is unsettling to those seeking fixity and the armor of unfeeling certitude. In this world, Corbin says, the movement of the soul is perpetual.

Here we must allude, all too briefly, to one more debt that Corbin owes to Heidegger. Corbin writes: 'The immense merit of Heidegger will always be that he centred the very act of philosophizing on *hermeneutics* It is the art or the technique of Understanding.'²⁹ Now Heidegger, like Corbin, was raised a Catholic, and was deeply immersed in the Christian tradition of Biblical interpretation called 'hermeneutics', and he used this as a central term in his phenomenological analysis of *Dasein*. This kind of Understanding already implies transformation. It is not concerned with language as it is conceived by linguists or analytic philosophers, but with the Language of the Word of the theologians. On this view language is a cosmic phenomenon, not a human creation. A hermeneutic of human presence implies for Corbin a philosophic and spiritual quest for a kind of understanding that is transformative. Thus philosophical and spiritual hermeneutics aim at a transformation of the mode of Presence of the human person, and this, as we have seen, transforms the world. In this way Corbin draws together Heidegger's phenomenology and transformative spiritual practices, including alchemy, as they have long existed in the mystical traditions. Dr Nasr says that

Corbin . . . used to translate *phenomenology* . . . to the Persian-speaking students [by a term meaning] literally 'rending asunder of the veil to reveal the hidden essence', and considered his method . . . to be spiritual hermeneutics as understood in classical Sufi and Shi'ite thought.³⁰

This is the kind of spiritual quest that is definitive of the human vocation in an open-ended and hierarchical cosmos. And this is why the

29. Jambet, *Henry Corbin*, p. 24.

30. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1996), p. 26, n. 13.

movement of the soul is perpetual. In an allusion to the Marxist analysis of human history which was common in France during a good deal of Corbin's adult life, he said this: '[O]thers have spoken of the necessity of a "permanent revolution", I preach the necessity of a "permanent hermeneutics"'.³¹ At the age of seventy he wrote:

To be a philosopher is to take to the road, never settling down in some place of satisfaction with a theory of the world, not even a place of reformation, nor of some illusory transformation of the conditions of this world. It aims for self-transformation, for the inner metamorphosis, which is implied by the notion of a new or spiritual rebirth. The adventure of the mystical philosopher is essentially . . . a voyage which progresses towards the Light.³²

PSYCHOCOSMOLOGY: ALCHEMIES OF THE WORD AND OF THE WORLD

It is not quite right to say that the realm of the imaginal mediates between an exclusively physical realm and one that is purely spiritual. Corbin tells us that 'ultimately what we call . . . the physical is but the reflection of the world of the Soul; there is no pure physics, but always the physics of some definite psychic activity'.³³ Indeed one could say that everything becomes material.³⁴ There is no distinct and disembodied spiritual reality floating off by itself, disjunct from everyday life. There is rather a continuum of reality that extends from the dense to the subtle and which, in doing so, corresponds to an intensification of being. The subtle bodies of the Angels are more substantial than ours, not less. This cosmology, Corbin tells us, allows us to understand that each of us can become more substantial, more individual and more Real. Modern rationalists think of the spiritual, if they think of it at all, as disembodied and otherworldly. Nearly all of us are deeply affected by rationalism whether we wish to be or not. In our daily lives only the material, the manipulable, has importance, any 'substance'.

31. Jambet, *Henry Corbin*, p. 36.

32. Henry Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy*, tr. Joseph Rowe (North Atlantic, Berkeley, 1998), p. 140.

33. Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, p. 81.

34. Christian Jambet, *La logique des Orientaux: Henry Corbin et la science des formes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983), p. 312.

This is the 'matter' of science and technology, and it is best understood by means of abstract laws of nature. On this account of reality, truth is abstract, and the laws we discover confer Power in an impersonal world composed only of objects, never persons. But when priority is given to the imaginal, this entire cosmology collapses. Now it is the person, the individual, that is the most Real being. The spiritual *is* substantial. The aim of understanding is not manipulation but transformation, and the limitless unfolding of our powers of sympathetic perception and poetic creation. The human vocation is simultaneously a spiritual, ethical and physical struggle. The fundamental alchemical dictum that expresses the essence of spiritual hermeneutics is: like can only be known by like. This means that thought and being are inseparable, that ethics and perception are complementary. The form of your soul is the form of your world.

Central to the human vocation to become more Real, and to the perpetual hermeneutics that is its method, is the creative, imaginative power of the Word. In Ibn 'Arabī's cosmology it is the Breath of the Merciful that unites the Cosmos, God and Language into a single extraordinary system of perpetual descent and return. For Ibn 'Arabī '[l]anguage is an articulation of the breath . . . It is an image of the self and of the world outside the self.'³⁵ The imaginal world of the breath and human speech expresses the creative power of the divine because the human self is 'a unique articulation of the divine Breath'. This Breath speaks itself as both the microcosm of the human self and the macrocosm of the cosmos.

The power of the word, its poetic force, is based first of all upon communal vocalization, not internalized, private reading. The Revelation of the Qur'ān to Mohammad occurred as *recitation*, and the revelations, which continued throughout his life, were physically overwhelming. Islamic spirituality has retained this embodied character throughout its history. The position of the ritual prayer is said to have provided the archetype for the design of the human body. Prayer and its orientation towards Mecca as the symbol of centrality celebrate the worshipping body.³⁶

The phenomenology of the imaginal is in full accord with this

35. William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn 'Arabī's Cosmology* (SUNY Press, Albany, 1998), pp. xxxii–xxxiii.

36. Michael Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, edited, translated and introduced by Michael Sells (Classics of Western Spirituality, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 11.

essential embodiment of Islamic spirituality. As William Chittick stresses, 'imagination embodies. It cannot conceive of God or anything else save in concrete terms.'³⁷ For Ibn 'Arabī 'it is in the world's concrete realities that God is found, not its abstractions'.³⁸

The struggle to speak a language adequate to the reality of 'the angelic function of beings' requires guarding against the dangers of abstraction and the dogmas that accompany it. Such an effort could help us to live in what Corbin called a realized eschatology: that is, to live the reality of the Last Things *right now*. Corbin relates a conversation with the great scholar of Zen Buddhism D. T. Suzuki in Ascona in 1954:

we asked him what homologies in structure he found between Mahayana Buddhism and the cosmology of Swedenborg in respect of the symbolism and correspondences of worlds: I can still see Suzuki suddenly brandishing a spoon and saying with a smile, 'This spoon *now* exists in Paradise . . . We are *now* in Heaven . . .' This was an authentically *Zen* way of answering the question. Ibn 'Arabī would have relished it.³⁹

Corbin devoted many pages to the work of Emanuel Swedenborg, who stressed that the *ego* must be opened to the influx of its angel. It must be opened, that is, to the world beyond its narrow personal confines, towards its true Self. In Heaven, whether we achieve it in this life or in the next, the form of your world is what you *are*. For Swedenborg: 'To be spiritual is nothing more than being open to, and thereby united with, the whole . . . We are in heaven right now if our internals are open . . .'⁴⁰

We need to keep our internals open. I can think of no better way to express that freedom from hard-heartedness and dogma that is one goal of the human struggle. It is a psycho-physical Quest to be open to the world. And the breath of our words is essential because they embody the power of the Imagination that is the key to perceiving the angelic function of beings.

37. Chittick, *Self Disclosure of God*, p. xxxvi. 38. *Ibid.*, p. xxxvi.

39. Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, pp. 354–5, n. 41.

40. David Loy, in D. T. Suzuki, *Swedenborg: Buddha of the North*, translated and introduced by Andrew Bernstein, Afterword by David Loy (Swedenborg Foundation, West Chester, 1996), p. 98.

THE LITURGICAL STRUCTURE OF THE COSMOS

For Corbin, it is by the exercise of the Creative Imagination that we participate in the continuously recurrent creation that manifests the theophanies of the Divine. All of reality is theophany. There are no autonomous 'things', only manifestations of the Breath of God, bound together in the great community of beings which is the Creation.

The Creative Imagination reaches its peak of intensity in prayer. 'Prayer', Corbin says, 'is the highest form, the supreme act of the Creative Imagination.'⁴¹ This is so because the *mundus imaginabilis* is the world of the Angelic hierarchies, and these are best understood not as *things* but as *events*. They are not links in the Great Chain of Being, but are rather essentially liturgical dramas. In one account of this cosmology, each Angelic hierarchy celebrates a perpetual celestial liturgy which transmits life and light to the level below, and in turn the lower levels sing upwards and engage in continual hymns of praise, continual doxologies, each of which, it is said, 'plants a tree in Paradise'.⁴²

Far from being a plea sent towards a distant and impersonal God, prayer is the means by which Creator and Creature are irrevocably entwined in mutual sympathy. Corbin writes:

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.⁴³

The deep structure of the cosmos is a dynamic activity, a drama that is liturgical and doxological. If this is so then all properly human activity has elements of liturgy, and we can speak of the liturgical aspect of work and play as well as of love and of prayer. It is through the creative aspects of our actions in daily life and in prayer that we most adequately participate in the theophanic dynamism of Creation. These energies are best symbolized by musical metaphors. Through the action of prayer, Corbin tells us:

41. Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, p. 248.

42. Henry Corbin, *En Islam Iranienne: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques* (Gallimard, Bib. Des Idées, vol. IV: *L'Ecole d'Ispahan – L'Ecole Shaykhie – Le Douzième Imam*, 1973), p. 168.

43. Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, p. 248.

We witness and participate in an entire ceremonial of meditation, a psalmody in two alternating voices, one human, the other divine; and this psalmody perpetually . . . re-creates . . . the solidarity and interdependence of the Creator and His creature . . .⁴⁴

In a remarkable meditation on the Angel of the Earth, written when he was twenty-nine years old, entitled *Theology by the Lakeside*, Corbin wrote:

It will soon be dusk, but for now the clouds are still clear, the pines are not yet darkened, for the lake brightens them into transparency. And everything is green with a green that is richer than if one were pulling all the organ stops in recital. It must be heard seated, very close to the Earth, arms crossed, eyes closed, pretending to sleep.⁴⁵

This is what is meant by the music of the spheres. And it elucidates Corbin's statement that 'Something in the nature of harmonic perception is needed in order to perceive a world of many dimensions.'⁴⁶

Prayer is thus a kind of music. It is an opening of the soul out of its exile, loneliness and abandonment towards the hoped-for Figure, the Angel Who is the ultimate object of its love and its desire. These longings, these powerful songs of the soul, are not epiphenomena of neurotic distress, or biological disturbances. They are modes of being, and therefore they are modes of knowledge that illuminate the Figures they engender. This is the theophanic function of the Imagination. And in prayer this Imagination functions as part of an inner activity that is a dialogue between the creature and the Creator. Corbin writes:

Thus the 'life of prayer' . . . represents the authentic form of a 'process of individuation' releasing the spiritual person from collective norms and ready-made evidences and enabling him to live as a unique individual for and with his Unique God.⁴⁷

44. *Ibid.*, p. 249. 45. Jambet, *Henry Corbin*, pp. 62–3.

46. Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, p. xxviii.

47. Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, p. 268.

CONCLUSION

Henry Corbin's immense work reveals the meditations of a man living a life in sympathy with beings. We desperately need the example of such a life, in a world where, as Kathleen Raine has said, 'the idea of energy has replaced the presence of beauty'.⁴⁸ Corbin understood his primary task as a philosopher to be to aid in the salvation of the Soul, both *anima humana* and *anima mundi*, from two complementary catastrophes: imprisonment in the static and opaque Truths of dogma and a Fall into the abyss of nihilism. He wanted to serve as midwife for a rebirth of possibilities long since abandoned by the dominant ideologies of the West.

Perhaps Corbin's greatest gift to us is the transmission of a tradition in which the principle of individuation is allied with the concept of Imagination. We are ultimately responsible for ourselves, and for making ourselves capable of our God. But more than this: the spiritual birth accomplished by the soul, for the Angel, far outstrips both the bounds of the ego and the bounds of the literal world as well. Every battle for the Angel is a Battle for the Soul of the World, for the transfiguring light that brings into being a transformed and transforming world. It is not that we must escape this world to find salvation in another, for the world too is in Exile and must be returned to Paradise. This journey of Return begins when we realize that 'the other world already exists in this world'.⁴⁹ The human vocation is to give voice to the song of this other world and so bring it into being.

48. Quoted in 'Taking the Side of Things: Notes on Psychological Activism' by Robert Sardello (Spring Journal, Dallas 1984), p. 128.

49. Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, p. 207.