

Within This Darkness: *Incarnation, Theophany and the Primordial Revelation* by Tom Cheetham



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"The *black* color, if you follow me, is *light* of pure Ipseity;
 within this Darkness is the Water of Life."

Shams al-Din Lahiji's Commentary on
 Shabestari's *Rose Garden of the Mystery*

- I. Faces of Darkness, Faces of Light: Mystical Poverty and the Silent Clamor of Beings**

Listen to this haunting meditation, written by Henry Corbin in 1932 at the edge of Lake Siljan in Sweden when he was 29 years old. He called it *Theology by the Lakeside*:

Everything is but revelation; there can only be re-velation. But revelation comes from the Spirit, and there is no knowledge of the Spirit.

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 would be richer than if pulling all the organ stops in recital. It must be heard seated, very close to the Earth, arms crossed, eyes closed, pretending to sleep.

For it is not necessary to strut about like a conqueror and want to give a name to things, to everything; it is they who will tell you who they are, if you listen, yielding like a lover; for suddenly for you, in the untroubled peace of this forest of the North, the Earth has come to Thou, visible as an Angel that would perhaps be a woman, and in this apparition, this greatly green and thronging solitude, yes, the Angel too is robed in green, the green of dusk, of silence and of truth. Then there is in you all the sweetness that is present in the surrender to an embrace that triumphs over you.

Earth, Angel, Woman, all of this is a single thing that I adore and that is in this forest. Dusk on the lake, my Annunciation. The mountain: a line. Listen! Something is happening! The anticipation is immense, the air is quivering under a fine and barely visible rain; the houses that stretch out along the ground, their wood red and rustic, their roofs of thatch, are there, there on the other side of the lake.

Something will begin this evening, something promised, in that I believe. Ah! This evening? When, then, this evening? If it were truly in a few hours, it would never be, because it would be necessary to finish and then begin again, and that would always end and never begin. Do you know what it means to wait, and do you know what it means to have faith?

The Mystery of Holy Communion where you will be ushered in, where all the beings will be present, yes, you can only say it in the future. Because at each moment where you read *in truth* as now what is there before you, where you hear the Angel, and the Earth and Woman, then you receive Everything, Everything, in your absolute poverty. But as soon as you have read and have received, as soon as you consider, as you want to understand, as you want to possess, to give a name and restrain, to explain and recover, ah! there is only a cipher, and your judgment is pronounced.

For at every instant you are judged, and someday you will die. So you die, when your existence is decided and realized, for then its is over: what was is not, you want without renouncing, renounce without wanting.

No, you are the poor one, you are man; and he is God, and you cannot know God, or the Angel, or the Earth, or Woman. You must be encountered, taken, known, that they may speak, otherwise you are alone, and perhaps it is better thus, and will be *always* thus, always, that is, there would be no eternity for you. Because you were born in a sin that was sinned before you, and Thou you have had fear, great fear, and you have cried, cried because the Earth is immense, cried because the Woman was too beautiful, cried because the Angel was invisible, and because Thou you were Adam, and Adam would want to live.

Adam established Love, poetry, religion, for he wanted life, he wanted that is, to be God, and then to speak as he would want to three beings. To Question; Alas! and he alone responded. To listen; Alas! to give a concert to himself alone.

But then, surely comes surging suddenly from this lake a cortege of beautiful beings. They sing the funeral chant of Adam; and because Adam is dead, it will be sung in a chorale where more voices will be raised than there is anguish in all its guises: "Christ is born! Christ is Risen!"[1]

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With these words Corbin presents the vision that ruled his life. They were written when he was in Sweden to visit the philologist and historian of religions Georges Dumézil and the orientalist H.S. Nyberg. Earlier that year he'd traveled to Germany to meet Karl Barth. The previous year he had gone to Freiburg to speak with Martin Heidegger whose "What is Metaphysics?" he was translating. Three years before, in Paris, Louis Massignon had given him a copy of *The Philosophy of Illumination* by the 12th century Persian mystic and philosopher Suhrawardi. Corbin wrote many years later, "through my meeting with Suhrawardi, 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." [2]

In the imagination of this remarkable man, just beginning his long life's work, we find an astonishing variety of influences: Christian theology, Heideggerian phenomenology and Islamic mysticism fused with Zoroastrian angelology; all united by a deep reverence for what in Islam is called the Primordial Revelation: the book of nature.

As participants in the catastrophically destructive modern world we need to understand what makes possible this vision of the earth and its creatures. In the attempt, we will find ourselves at the heart of difficult questions regarding Gods, both hidden and revealed, language, imagination, sensation and matter. We begin with an outline of Corbin's understanding of the gnostic quest and the cosmology underlying it. Then we turn to an examination of the dominant tradition in Christian theology to see why he saw it as the result of a failed initiation that has had disastrous consequences for Western culture. Finally I will take some liberties with Corbin's vision and with the Islamic perspective that he so ably represents to suggest a view of the place of humanity in the natural world that is, I hope, in keeping with the spirit of Corbin's passionate personal quest.

We begin with the phenomenology of the Earth of the Primordial Revelation, an earth where beings announce themselves and tell us who they are in the twilight of the setting sun. In accordance with Corbin's vision, we look to Heaven as it was conceived in the imagination of the Zoroastrians of ancient Persia.

In the cosmology of the Avesta the supreme being Ohrmazd is surrounded by six celestial Persons of Light whose holiness takes the form of "an activating Energy that communicates being, establishes it, and causes it to superabound in all beings." [3] These seven Presences provide for the existence and the salvation of the world of creatures, and by cooperating with them all creatures can participate in the ascent towards the heaven from which they originally descended. There is reason to struggle for this return because the world of creation is a world of mixture and conflict, where the powers of Darkness ruled by Ahriman, battle with the powers of Light. But in this battle the creatures are not abandoned. Between them and the Archangels of Light there are arrayed countless intermediary celestial beings. Among them is the feminine Angel of the Earth whose image is Sophia, the feminine figure of Wisdom. And there are the Fravartis, whose name means "those who have chosen," chosen that is to fight against the powers of Darkness. Every being belonging to the world of Light has a Fravarti, a celestial counterpart, in the world of Light. And so every being has a dual structure that defines its orientation in the struggle towards the Light. The quest to unveil this heavenly twin defines the moral and spiritual destiny of the soul of every human being, and of the soul of the world itself. The task is to actualize, on this earth, the "Energy of sacral Light" that transforms, transfigures and glorifies the souls of all beings. This transformation is an alchemical process: the very substance of things is the locus of the work, both container and content, and the goal is the transmutation of each being into a more subtle, more definite, more real state.

Corbin discovered this ancient cosmology imagined anew in a context fundamentally in harmony with it, in the work of the 12th century Persian mystic and Master of Illumination, Shihab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardi. Suhrawardi's project was to fuse Zoroastrian angelology with Platonic and Neoplatonic cosmology and with the prophetic revelation of Islam. It was Suhrawardi who first articulated a clear grasp of the world of the Imagination, the world intermediary between sensation and intellect that Corbin was to call the *imaginal* world. It is by means of imaginal perception that the Zoroastrian Light of Glory can be perceived. It is in the imaginal world that the alchemical transformation takes place. It is the place of the visions of the prophets. The Presence of God in the Burning Bush, the apparitions of Gabriel to Mary and to Mohammad, all the events of sacred history are perceived by means of organs of perception that open onto this world and its myriad beings of light.

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In order to experience the Earth as an Angel, to hear the voices of beings calling to us in the twilight, to encounter another *person* in any sense at all, we have to be able to perceive at least the vestiges of the light of Glory, of the Presence at the summit from which they all descend. All of us, however dimly, perceive events in the imaginal world, and the task of transformation requires the development of the senses that open us into that world.

In order to understand the critique of Western civilization that Corbin proposes, we have to outline the

process of approach to the Light of Glory that illuminates the Earth. Our being derives from the Light of Heaven. In Zoroastrianism this is *Xvarnah*. In Islam it is the light of Allah, who is "light upon light." The supreme human science is the physiology of the "body of light" that derives from Him. And it is this physiology that is the chief concern of the Central Asian Sufism of the order known as the *Kubrawiyyah*. [4] Suhrawardi himself refers to the lights that a mystic sees in the imaginal world, but it is in the work of Najm al-Kubra[5] that a detailed phenomenology of lights and colors is first developed. Among his followers two stand out, Najim Dayeh Razi[6] and 'Ala al-Dawlah al-Semnani.[7]

The details of this physiology of light are complex and beautiful. We can barely present its skeleton here. It describes a process of transformation in the body and soul of the gnostic during the journey towards God. The fundamental doctrine is that "like can only be known by like." What is known corresponds to the mode of being of the knower. You can only know what you *are*. There are different modes of being for both the soul and the worlds it inhabits. These worlds are arranged in a hierarchical series ascending towards the divine. But to speak of the soul and the world as if they were two things can be misleading because it emphasizes a sharp distinction between them. But this is just what must be discarded. We never have knowledge of an "objective" reality. The soul can only know what it *is*. Corbin writes,

"[U]ltimately what we call *physis* and 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." [8]

It only seems to us that the soul and the world are distinct. That is because we are not sufficiently conscious. Najm Kubra says:

"Know that the soul, the devil, the angel are not realities outside you: you *are* they. Likewise Heaven, Earth and the Throne are not outside you, nor paradise nor hell, nor death nor life. They exist in you; when you have accomplished the mystical journey and have become pure you will become conscious of that." [9]

The gnostic journey is a process of becoming conscious. It accomplishes the interiorization of the world. This does not mean swallowing it, taking it into the ego. That is what modern culture is trying to do. It is instead a "coming out towards oneself," an *exodus* out of the narrow and constricting world of literal, public materiality and a resurrection of the psychocosmic unity that is the soul and its world.

This epistemology is founded on a doctrine of participation. We can only know by virtue of our participation in the being of the thing known. In Najm Kubra's words,

"You can only see or witness an object by means of some part of that same object it is only the mine whence it came which a precious stone sees, desires, and yearns for. So when you have vision of a sky, an earth, a sun, stars or a moon, you should know that the particle in you which has its origin in that same mine has become pure. The more pure you become, the purer and more radiant will be the sky that appears to you, until in the last stages of the journey you travel within the Divine Purity. But Divine Purity is limitless, so never think that there is not something more exalted still ahead." [10]

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The principle that like can only be known by like is the fundamental principle of alchemy. Coming to consciousness, coming to *know* is an alchemical procedure because it can only occur by means of a transformation of the body and of the world. It requires the development of a subtle, imaginal body, a resurrection body, as a refinement, not a rejection, of the literal, material body perceptible by the common senses. This can only take place in and through the imaginal world. For Najm Kubra and his followers the achievement of the subtle body can be recognized and accomplished by means of the imaginal perception of "photisms," of colored lights. They mark the stages on the path. They originate in the public world. They occur *in* and *to* the traveler and are realizations of the mode of being attained. They are interior, but not subjective. They occur in the *mundus imaginalis* and are perfectly real, just as the Burning Bush is

real, but are not thereby visible to all: they are *too real* to be visible to everyone. What we call objective reality isn't precisely false, but it is the lowest form of reality.

Alchemy requires a method.[11] The method *par excellence* in Sufism is the *dhikr*, the "remembrance" of God. *Dhikr* is "meditative recitation of the Qur'an, ritual prayer, the names of God." [12] Islam is based upon the Revelation of the Word of God. The Qur'an was and is experienced first and foremost an oral phenomenon.[13] It is the spoken word that is primordial, and the written text spoken and memorized for recitation. The embodiment of the Word of God is fundamental to Islamic spirituality. God has spoken through the prophets, but He also sings, speaks and bodies forth his signs in the Heavens and in the souls of the believers. Thus the meditative, interiorizing recitation of the Word can bring forth tremendous energies for drawing creation towards the divine. But this is too abstract. The energies released by *dhikr* don't just raise the soul: they transform it by enabling it to attain a new mode of being. And this includes the transformation of the organs of perception that give form and body to the soul and its world, and the growth of a subtle body in harmony with the attributes that characterize the state of the soul and the world it now inhabits. Among the *Kubrawiyyah* the *dhikr* embraces an array of techniques of posture and breathing that serve to emphasize that this remembrance is grounded in the body.

The gnostic journey is not without risk: it is easy to get lost in an infinite world. It is no sojourn into a vague Paradise of disembodied forms. The closer to divinity, the more infinite, the more real and more individual the soul becomes. Infinite because God is the All-Encompassing. More definite because God is the Unifier, and it is His Oneness that grounds the uniqueness of every being. As William Blake knew well, things in the world of imagination are *more* detailed, *more* definite than anything in the public world. The ascent through the modes of being is the ascent of the self towards the Angel that defines its individuality. The status of personhood is not given: it must be *won*. We are born with the freedom to become demons or angels or anything in between. Our task is to travel toward the Light that emanates from our celestial counterpart, our Fravarti, our Angel, through whom the Light of the Divine is transmitted to us.

The stakes are very high and the opportunities for losing one's way are great. That is why a guide is required. You *cannot* raise yourself: that is the reason for Revelation. That is why there are prophets. Islam is not a religion of salvation as is Christianity. It is a religion of guidance. There is no doctrine of original sin in Islam. Though we are surely free to descend to the level of demons, and are prey to the temptations of Iblis (Satan), our fundamental trouble is ignorance, and we need constant reminders of who we are and where we should be heading. The Qur'an says that for every people there have been sent messengers. The lineage of their followers provides for guidance after they are gone. For the Peoples of the Book, there is of course the sacred text. For everyone there is the Primordial Revelation of Nature, though we forget, and lose sight of the signs placed there. Corbin was himself suspicious of human masters. He gave pre-eminence in his writings to the role of the Paraclete in both Christian and Islamic eschatology as the Figure who ushers in the Reign of the Spirit, the True Religion of the Eternal Gospel. The goal for Corbin is to be able to seek freely the teachings of all the masters, but to be bound as no one's slave. Nonetheless the gravity of the work must be acknowledged. One does not trifle with the alchemy of the soul. Corbin says:

"The seriousness of the role of the Imagination is stressed by our philosophers when they state that it can be 'the Tree of Blessedness' or on the contrary 'the Accursed Tree' of which the Qur'an speaks, that which means Angel or Demon in power. The imaginary can be innocuous, the *imaginal* can never be so." [14]

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The pilgrim must trust in the Guide, the Word and the method. Suhrawardi has said "only the heart that holds fast to the cable of the Qur'an and the train of the robe of the *dhikr*" can escape from the snares of darkness and evil.[15]

For an account of the stages of the quest we turn to the doctrines of 'Ala al-Dawlah al-Semnani. It is in his

work that the correspondences between prophetic religion and luminous physiology is most clearly outlined, and it is his insight into the significance of Christ that provides a pivot point for Corbin's critique of Christian civilization.

For Semnani the stages correspond to the modes of being of the major prophets in the lineage of Abraham as it is known in Islamic tradition. To each prophet, each stage, there corresponds a light of a characteristic color that appears to the mystic, as well as specific moral and psychological attributes. The correspondences occur because the soul's mode of being *is* its mode of understanding and its mode of perception. The soul's self knowledge is its knowledge of its world. But since the Word of God takes the form of the signs in the world and in the soul as well as the Revealed Text, the soul "reads" itself and the world in accordance with its stage in the process of coming to consciousness. This means that the depths of meaning that can be discerned in the exegesis of the Qur'an must correspond to the spiritual hermeneutics that the soul is able to perform upon itself and on the world of Nature. Recall Corbin's meditation. He says there that one may "read *in truth* what is there before you." When we read Nature in this way we perceive her as a person, an Angel. There are profound correspondences among spiritual alchemy, the hermeneutics of the Sacred Text and of the Book of Nature, and the structure of prophetic religion as it takes form in the physiology of the body of light. There is a perfect correspondence between the birth, initiation and growth of the soul on its journey to God and the cycle of prophecy in the Abrahamic tradition. It is because of this that the Imam Jafar could say: "Alchemy is the sister of prophecy." [16]

In Semnani's mystical physiology there are seven levels on the path towards the divine and they are homologous to the seven "prophets of your being." [17] First there is Adam. The color that dominates this stage is a smoky grey-black. The physical organ or center with which this resonates is the "subtle bodily organ" or the "mold." This derives directly from the *anima mundi* and is "the embryonic mold" providing the basis for the growth of the resurrection body.

The second level is that of Noah - the Noah of your being. Its color is blue, and to it corresponds the *nafs ammara*, the extravagant lower soul or *ego* of the natural human. It is passionate and prone to evil, and must be overcome through self-consciousness.

The third level is that of Abraham. The organ is the heart (*qalb*). This is the embryonic form of the celestial Self, the eternal Individual. Its color is red. This is the "pacified soul" and is the organ of perception of the imaginal world.

Fourth is the Moses of your being. The organ is the mystery, secret, or threshold of supraconsciousness (*sirr*). It is the place of intimate conversation between Persons. The color is white.

Fifth is the noble spirit (*ruh*). Yellow is the color of the David of your being.

The sixth level marks the stage of Jesus. It is what in Latin west was called the *Arcanum*, through which help and inspiration from the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, may come. Its color is black.

The final level is of course that of Mohammad. It is the stage of the truth, the reality of your being, the true Self whose embryo is found at the origin, at the stage of Abraham. The journey, Corbin writes,

"ends by actualizing, in the human microcosm, the truth of the meaning according to which the religion of Mohammad originates in the religion of Abraham, for 'Abraham was neither Jew nor Christian, but a pure believer, a *Moslem* (Qur'an 3:60)" [18]

In accordance with Islamic iconography, the color of the final stage is emerald green. For Corbin this stage marks the meeting with the heaven Guide, the perfectly individuated and individual Angel of

Humanity and Angel of Knowledge that is the biblical Angel of the Face. This is the Figure of whom Mohammad could say: "I have seen my Lord in the most beautiful of forms." It announces the truth that beauty is the supreme theophany. The Qur'anic source for this Person is Sura XVIII. The figure that came to be interpreted as *Khidr* in Islamic tradition appears in an enigmatic episode. Moses and his servant travel to "the meeting place of the two seas." There they meet an unnamed messenger, a personal guide who initiates Moses into "the science of predestination He reveals to Moses the secret mystic truth...that transcends the *shari'a*, and this explains why the spirituality inaugurated by Khidr is free from the servitude of literal religion." [19] The seeker is born into his true self through the encounter with Khidr, the interpreter of a law beyond the Law, the divine hermeneut.

Now we come to the crux of the matter. The penultimate stage, that of Jesus being, the herald of the Paraclete, is known by the appearance of the color Black. The experience of this Darkness is common to all the Sufis of the Central Asian school and to others as well. [20] To understand the significance of this "darkness at the approach to the pole" we must be oriented in the scheme of a tripartite psychocosmology. There is first of all the realm of consciousness, the daylight of the normal human being and the world of common, public and objective things. This is the clear and distinct world of literalists of all kinds: scientists, religious dogmatists, anyone who relies on the "plain and simple facts" that all can see. But this world is in reality a world of mixture, of chiaroscuro, of colors shading off into the shadows. Pervading all things, penetrating every truth, every *ego*, every "object" there is a shifting infinitude of half-known or unknown powers, presences and correspondences that prevent our knowing anything with precision and certainty. But notice! There are two kinds of darkness, two sources of bewilderment. There is the Darkness that is only Darkness, a darkness that refuses Light and is demonic, thick and heavy in the extremity of its distance from the Light. This is the darkness of un-consciousness emanating from the counterpower, the darkness of Ahriman, of Iblis, of Satan. It is easy to confuse this active Darkness that is evil, with the passive and unconscious darkness of matter as unformed potential. The material state *per se* is neither evil nor even inherently dark. [21] The active darkness of evil is the darkness and confusion to which the *nafs ammara*, the lower soul, is susceptible. It is a realm marked by contamination and confusion and lack of discrimination of qualities and of one thing from another; it is the task of the alchemical hermeneutic to put each thing in its proper place. We are filled with the indiscriminated darkneses of Earth, Air, Water and Fire, and we are thus buried underneath them. Najm Kubra says:

"The only way to separate yourself from [these darkneses] is to act in such a way that every rightful part in you comes together with that to which it rightfully belongs, that is, by acting in such a way that each part comes together with its counterpart: Earth receives the earthly part, Water the watery part, Air the etheric part, Fire the fiery part. When each has received its share, you will finally be delivered of these burdens." [22]

And then the soul and its world, this *psychocosmos*, is freed not merely *from* the Darkness, but *for* the Darkness. Because there is another Darkness, one that is not merely black, but is a luminous Night, a dazzling Blackness, a Darkness at the approach to the Pole. This is the Black Light of what Corbin calls supraconsciousness. If we do not recognize the existence of this second Darkness pervading all things, this Black Light of Divine Night, we will be forever disoriented among the shadows, unable to distinguish one darkness from another, incapable of that transmutation of the soul that has as its goal the meeting with the celestial Self and the genesis of the celestial Earth.

The appearance of Black Light marks a moment of supreme danger. We are surrounded by dangers: God and the Devil both. This dazzling Black Light heralds the annihilation of the *ego* in the Divine Presence. It reveals the unknowable origin of the divine power, glory and beauty. It announces the Nothing that exists beyond all being, beyond all the subtle matter that mirrors its uncanny light. The Black Light marks the region of the Absolute, the *Deus absconditus*, the unknown and unknowable God.

Corbin tells us that one of the paramount differences between the philosopher and the gnostic lies in the way this absent God is encountered and experienced. He writes, "what to a philosopher is doubt, the impossibility of proof, is to [the gnostics] absence and trial." [23] The experience of emptiness and of

human abandonment in a meaningless universe is conceived entirely differently by the philosophers and the gnostics. He continues,

"What we experience as an obsession with nothingness or as acquiescence in a nonbeing over which we have no power, was to them a manifestation of divine anger, the anger of the mystic Beloved. But even that was a real Presence, the presence of that Image which never forsook our Sufis." [24]

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One of the ways in which Divinity appears is by withdrawing, even into nothingness.

Najm Razi relates the supersensory lights of the mystical journey to one of the most fundamental doctrines of Islamic theology, the doctrine of the Names of God. The Names or Attributes of God fall into two great categories: the Names of Majesty and the Names of Beauty. The Names of Majesty express God's wrath, rigor, inaccessibility and sublimity, the Names of Beauty His gentleness, mercy and nearness. For Najm Razi the theophanies of the divine lights are also so divided: Lights of Beauty and Lights of Majesty. The colored lights are the Lights of Beauty. The Black Light is the Light of Majesty. Unlike the Ahrimanian Darkness that can be conquered and banished by the spiritual pilgrim, the Black Light of Majesty is inseparable from the Lights of Beauty. Corbin writes that Majesty and Beauty

"are the two great categories of attributes which refer respectively to the divine Being as *Deus absconditus* and as *Deus revelatus*, Beauty being the supreme theophany, divine self-revelation. In fact they are inseparable and there is a constant interplay between the inaccessible Majesty of Beauty and the fascinating Beauty of inaccessible Majesty." [25]

This duality is the central feature of all Creation: "without the blossoming of Beauty as theophany man could not approach the sublimity of the *Deus absconditus*." [26] And without the *Deus absconditus* there would be no world at all. This hidden deity is the beyond-being of negative or *apophatic* theology. Corbin writes

"Any metaphysical doctrine which attempts a total explanation of the universe, finds it necessary to make something out about *nothing*, or rather, to make everything out about *nothing*, since the initial principle from which the world derived, and which it must explain, must never be something contained in this world, and simultaneously it is necessary for this initial principle to possess all that is necessary to explain at once the being and the essence of the world and that which it contains. It is necessary that this initial principle be at once 'all' and 'nothing' [This] is a *nihil a quo omnia fiunt*, a nothing from which all things are derived. This is the Nothing of the Absolute Divine, superior to being and thought." [27]

The absolute Divine from which everything proceeds provides the energy for the existence of all Creation. It is the source from which everything emanates, and corresponds for Corbin to the Light of Glory, the *Xvarnah* of Zoroastrianism, the power that brings all things into being. The Divinity beyond-being is absolute and absolutely annihilating. Come too close and the human subject disappears: the Black Light "sets the mystic's being on fire; it is not contemplated; it attacks, invades, annihilates, then annihilates annihilation. It shatters the 'supreme theurgy,' that is, the apparatus of the human organism." [28]

The archetype of the mystic journey in Islam is the *miraj* of Mohammad, his ascent to the Absolute, mediated by Gabriel, the Angel of Humanity, Knowledge, and of Revelation. In this *miraj* the moment of greatest danger is the penetration beyond what the Qur'an calls the "Lotus of the Limit" where there occurs the *fana fi'llah*, the annihilation of the soul and its resorption into God. This ordeal is the experience of death to which the Prophet refers in the saying "You must die before you die!" Corbin writes of this moment of the mystic's greatest challenge, "Either he will be swallowed up in dementia or he will rise again from it, initiated in the meaning of theophanies and revelations." This resurrection in life is the annihilation of annihilation. [29] It signifies the recognition of the Unknowable in "a supreme

act of metaphysical renunciation." This is the real meaning of poverty, of the Persian word *darwish*.

Metaphysical poverty is the true state of all beings: everything in creation *has* nothing in itself, *is* nothing in itself. The 17th century Shi'ite mystic Mir Damad heard "the great occult clamor of beings," the "silent clamor of their metaphysical distress" that appeared to him as a music of cosmic anguish and as a sudden black light invading the entire universe.[30] This is a direct perception of what rational philosophy calls the contingency of being. It is the experience behind the great question of metaphysics "Why is there something rather than nothing?" For the gnostic it takes the form of a shattering experience of annihilation and terror, undoing all the solid foundations upon which the *ego* and the literal world is built. In Corbin's words,

"The black light reveals the very secret of being, which can only *be* as *made-to-be*; all beings have a twofold face, a face of light and a black face. The luminous face, the face of day, is the only one that the common run of men perceive. Their black face, the one the mystic perceives, is their poverty. The totality of their being is their daylight face and their night face"[31]

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And at the same time, this Absolute beyond-being is also, in the Abrahamic tradition, the Absolute Subject. This giver of being can never be an object, a thing, a being. In its infinite fecundity and mystery, its forever-receding depth and absolute Unity, it is the unifier and archetype of the Person, and of that personhood and interiority that infuses all the beings of the Earth perceived and experienced as an Angel.

The dual face of every being explains the necessity for two kinds of theology: affirmative (*kataphatic*) and negative (*apophatic*). Both are indispensable. They interpenetrate in the same way as the attributes of Majesty and Beauty. Positive theology in isolation becomes Positivism. Dogmas and idols spring up everywhere. Negative theology unaided can disclose no beauties, no Treasures longing to be known. Without the balancing perceptions provided by the Names of Beauty, apophatic theology cannot distinguish between the *Deus absconditum* and the abyss of nihilism. It must collapse into blindness, denial and bitterness and end as nihilism pure and simple. Only through the perception of the indissoluble unity of the two faces of being in creation, the poverty of the soul of humanity and of the world, can we perceive the beauty and the animation and the personification of the things of the world. It is only by the continual perception of this beauty-in-poverty that our certainties, our graspings, our hardnesses of heart can be perpetually undone.

II. In Vagabondage & Perdition: The Battle for the Soul of the World

Failures of Initiation, Failures of Imagination

Corbin said that the philosophical tradition of the Christian West has been the theater for the "battle for the Soul of the World." [32] It is a battle that we have largely lost. For Corbin the pivotal events in this history concern the interpretation of the doctrine of the Incarnation, what theologians call Christology: the attempt to answer the question "Who was Jesus?" On this crucial question he accepts Semnani's reading of Christianity. Corbin says:

"It is worth our while to listen attentively to this evaluation of Christianity as formulated by a Sufi. Semnani's critique is made in the name of spiritual experience; everything takes place as though this Sufi Master's aim were to perfect the Christian *ta'wil* [hermeneutic], that is, to 'lead it back,' to open the way at last to its ultimate truth." [33]

We have seen that for Semnani the Black Light erupts at the level of the "Jesus of your being," and that this is the most perilous stage on the initiatic path. The pilgrim is threatened here most of all with madness and with metaphysical and moral nihilism. [34] Corbin follows Semnani in affirming a homology between the ecstatic cry of Sufis such as al-Hallaj "I am God!" and the proclamation that Jesus

is God Incarnate. He writes,

"These dangers are symmetrical. On the one hand the Sufi, on experiencing the *fana fi'llah*, mistakes it for the actual and material reabsorption of human reality in the Godhead; on the other, the Christian sees a *fana* of God into human reality." [35]

This is the result of a failed initiation. It signals a failure to avoid the abyss which opens up at just that precarious point where the *ego* gives way to the higher Self. If the divine center is not attained, if the poverty of the soul is not complete, then the lower modes of perception remain operative, the higher realities cannot be attained and the lower soul is subject to dementia, intoxication and a compensating inflation which grows Promethean and unbounded in response to the vision of the Abyss. Corbin writes, "In a fatal moment of looking back the newborn higher [Self]perishes in the moment of triumph." On the one hand the *ego* mistakes itself for God. On the other, God collapses into history. And seeing all of Western history encapsulated in this momentous event, Corbin says that this "is the very same situation with which the West came face to face when Nietzsche cried out: 'God is dead.'" [36]

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The encounter of the unprepared *ego* with the *Deus absconditum* results in the experience of the Abyss, the *nihil* of radical nihilism. If God is dead then man is master. The human subject claims the vertiginous freedom to be the source of all values. At the same time this marks the violent violation of the Hidden Treasure who created the world out of the depths of an eternal loneliness and longing to be known. It signals the end of mystery, the rending of the veils, the destruction of the cosmic Temple, the death of the Soul. What is an experience of the Abyss from the point of view of the human soul, is, from the point of view of the Divinity, so to speak, the collapse of God into history. To say that Christ *is* God incarnate, is equivalent to saying that God is dead. The entry of God materially, wholly and substantially into historical, material and public time and space is the archetypal act of secularization. A *fana* of the divine into human reality can only result in the secularization, historicization and socialization of all religious phenomena, which must then be defined in terms that are public, general, universal and abstract. If the Incarnation is an historical event that has occurred once and for all, then sacred history is closed and access of the individual soul to God is made problematic at best and impossible at worst, since it must rely on the common dogmas of the Church as the bearer of the collective memory of this unique, definitive Event. A God who is only Public, a God who is only Visible, a God in History, is no God at all. A God not balanced by the overwhelming *absconditum* is an Idol and a Holy Terror.

It is vital for orthodox Christian dogma that God became human *in the flesh* and was both fully God and fully human, since it is only through this union that a sinful humanity can be saved. Christianity is a religion of salvation, and doctrines of how that salvation or Atonement can come about are central to its teachings. We cannot save ourselves, but must be saved through the descent of Christ. For Corbin it is in this idea that God must descend and live here among the fallen creatures in order for salvation to be possible that is the root of the problem. His contention is that because of an emphasis on sin and human helplessness with respect to salvation, Christian theologians have felt the need to unite the divine and the human at the level of fallen humanity. But this shattering violation of the Mystery turns the world inside out. It collapses the celestial hierarchies, and reduces being to a single level. God is de-mythologized, the world is abandoned to secular history, and the possibility of a personal relation to the Divine is eliminated.

The connection between the Violation of the Hidden Treasure, and the terrible Void of the Abyss is intimated in the Gospel's narration of that most horrible moment in Christian history:

"there was darkness over the whole land and at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" [37]

"and behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the

rocks were split"[38]

Truly this is the hour of darkness. The encounter with the Hidden God is the moment of greatest danger. All of Creation teeters on the brink: "Either he will be swallowed up in dementia or he will rise again from it, initiated in the meaning of theophanies and revelations."

Two paths lead out from this pivotal moment. On one there is the Death of God and the birth of a Promethean, rapacious and monstrous Humanity. On the other, Resurrection and the poverty of a life in sympathy with beings.

Note these words from the Qur'an:

"They did not kill him, they did not crucify him, they were taken in by the appearance; God carried him off towards Himself."[39]

They did not kill him. They could never kill him, because the meaning of Christ does not lie in a body or in a moment in time. Christ was never a man. From a Corbinian perspective, Christ was, Christ is and Christ will ever be a *theophany*, "a forever inexhaustible event of the soul." [40] Everything is at stake here. The whole cosmos depends upon the interpretation of this moment. In Corbin's words: "There is only Revelation." There are *only* theophanies. This is the truth that we are called to see. Our knowledge, our vision, our hearing, all of this is worth what we *are*. Our world is a measure of our being. The event of the Transfiguration as told in the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* makes this quite clear. The form of the Lord was visible only to some, and among these each saw something different, some a boy, some a youth, some an old man. But each could say: "I saw him as I was able to receive him." [41]

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The alternative to the catastrophe of the death of God is the theophanic cosmology of the gnostics in the Abrahamic tradition. Corbin devoted his life to articulating this vision of the essential harmony at the root of all of the religions of the Book, the vision of what he was to call in his late work the *Harmonia Abrahamica*. [42] It is based on a Christology radically different from the one that became dogma. It requires a return to the Christology of the Ebionites, who had no doctrine of the Trinity, or of the substantial union of the divine and human in Jesus. For these Jewish-Christians, Jesus was a manifestation of the celestial Son of Man, the *Christos Angelos*, who was consecrated as Christ at his baptism. Jesus then takes his place in the lineage of the True Prophets. Corbin writes

for Ebionite Christianity - sacred history, the hierology of humanity, is constituted by the successive manifestations of the celestial *Anthropos*, of the eternal *Adam-Christos* who is the prophet of Truth, the True Prophet. We count seven of these manifestations, eight if we include the terrestrial person of Adam himself. They are Adam, Noah, Enoch, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jesus. The fundamental basis of this prophetology is therefore the idea of the True Prophet who is the celestial *Anthropos*, the *Christus aeternus*, hastening from christophany to christophany 'toward the place of his repose.' Now, this is the same structure that Islamic prophetology presents, with this difference, that the succession of christophanies is no longer completed with the prophet Jesus of Nazareth, but with the prophet of Islam, the 'Seal of the Prophets' whose coming Jesus himself announced, and who is the 'recapitulation' of all the prophets [43]

Thus Mohammad is identified with the figure of the Paraclete in the Gospel of John. Among the Shi'ites, the Twelfth Imam, the Hidden Imam, is sometimes identified with this final manifestation of the True Prophet, the central figure of the Eternal Gospel.

The death of Christ signifies something utterly different from what we have come to accept. Corbin relates with evident approval the story of Christ's death told in the Medieval Gospel of Barnabas. Jesus is taken up by the Angels, *before* Good Friday. Judas Iscariot, transformed to resemble Jesus, is arrested and killed upon the Cross. And so His followers believe that He has died. It must be this way, since as Corbin writes,

"in making of him the 'Son of God' it is Man himself that humanity has equated with God, and it was only possible to expiate this blasphemy through succumbing to the belief that his God was dead. Everything occurs as if the Ebionite-Islamic prophetology here went ahead to denounce and refute the false news of the 'death of God.'

It is undeniable that this vision overturns from top to bottom some eighteen centuries of the Christian theology of History."[44]

Without any illusions about the magnitude of the transformation he is suggesting, this vision is Corbin's answer to those who wonder whether Christianity itself is capable of surviving. It is only by being open to a radically reformed Christianity in harmony with the mystical traditions of the rest of the Abrahamic tradition, that the religion of Christ can find its fulfillment. Only a Christianity based on theophany can survive.

There is a balance, an "essential community being visible and invisible things"[45] and it is the function of theophanic perception to reveal this community as it is within the power of each being to perceive. To train our senses to perceive this community even dimly, is to begin to realize the "cognitive function of sympathy"[46] and to sense in the presence of the beings of this world the harmonies that resonate through all the worlds beyond. To live in sensate sympathy with the beings of the world requires that we experience the spaces that stretch singing between the Terrible Majesty of the Unattainable *Deus absconditus* and the Beauty and Glory of the *Deus revelatus*. It is the dissolving power of the Hidden God that guarantees the freedom from dogma and from idolatry. Idolatry "immobilizes us before an object without transcendence." A theophanic perception knows that there are no such objects. Likewise, since the Face of Darkness must have a Face of Light, a Face of Beauty that reveals it, there *is* no unbridgeable chasm between the Absolute Subject who is the Thou of the soul's love and longing and the soul itself. And so there is no gulf between love of a creature and love of the divine - their union is achieved through theophanic perception. We are saved not just from idolatry, but from the "furies and rejections" of world-denying asceticisms.[47] The identity of being and perceiving that theophanic vision implies is beautifully expressed by Corbin when he refers to "a God unknown and unknowable, God of Gods, of whom all the universes and all the galaxies are the *sensorium*."[48]

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On the Islamic view the reason we do not understand any of this, that we don't experience ourselves as *organs* in this grand sensorium is not because of an Original Sin, "sinned before us." We are not so much inherently sinful as we are *forgetful*. We need more or less constant reminders. And the word for remembrance is *dhikr*.

Corbin's passionate vision derives not only from Islamic theosophy. The doctrine of the power of the Hidden God is central to the apophatic tradition both in the Abrahamic religions, and in the history of Neoplatonism that is so intimately connected with them. Michael Sells has shown that the Neoplatonic hierarchy in Plotinus, Dionysius the Areopagite, John Scotus Eriugena and others in the Christian tradition was never the static system that its detractors have scorned. It can only be read that way if the apophatic component is ignored, if the power of the Dark Face of the deity is not understood.[49] Speaking of the element of negative theology in Plotinus, Sells writes, "Apophysis demands a moment of nothingness."[50] And yet it is this nothingness that is the fount of all being. Corbin has told us that for the gnostics the encounter with nothingness is seen as only withdrawal, absence and trial. He writes elsewhere of the *numinosity* of Sophia, the Angel of Wisdom, Angel of the Earth and theophany of Beauty:

"In her pure numinosity, Sophia is forbidding Because she is a guide who always leads [the gnostic] towards the beyond, preserving him from metaphysical idolatry, Sophia appears to him sometimes as compassionate and comforting, sometimes as severe and silent, because only Silence can 'speak', can indicate transcendences."[51]

Voice and Silence, Beauty and Majesty, All and Nothing, Presence and Absence: these opposites coincide in the unknowable deity.

That Corbin's vision is rooted in Christian as well as Islamic mysticism is made abundantly clear in this description of the theophanic concept of creation given by John Scotus Eriugena:

For everything that is understood and sensed is nothing other than the apparition of the non-apparent, the manifestation of the hidden, the affirmation of the negated, the comprehension of the incomprehensible, the utterance of the unutterable, the access to the inaccessible, the intellection of the unintelligible, the body of the bodiless, the essence of the beyond-essence, the form of the formless, the measure of the immeasurable, the number of the unnumbered, the weight of the weightless, the materialization of the spiritual, the visibility of the invisible, the place of the placeless, the time of the timeless, the definition of the infinite, the circumscription of the uncircumscribed, and the other things which are both conceived and perceived by the intellect alone and cannot be retained within the recesses of memory and which escape the blade of the mind.[52]

Everything proceeds from this God in whom the opposites coincide. The *Deus absconditus* is the *coincidentia oppositorum*. Out of the God beyond-being in whom the opposites coincide comes everything. Dionysius speaks of the divine Word as "undiminished even as superceding and overflowing all things in itself in a single and incessant bounty that is overfull and cannot be diminished." [53]

One way of understanding this view of the world and the forms of life that it entails is to see that what makes it different from modern materialism is the experience of the relation between the *thing* and the *thought* of the thing. If I look at a rock, there is the object, the rock, and the subject, me. Just what it is about me that is the subjective part is a bit problematic, and increasingly over the course of the history of modern science there is the sense that there really is no subject at all. But at least for several hundred years we've been able to assume that there is something like a subject. This subject perceives the object and has ideas about it, that exist somewhere, and they either apply to, map onto, or are true of the thing, or are not. It doesn't matter how I'm feeling or what mood the rock is in. There is no question of sympathy. No questions arise about whether I am more intensely myself today than I was yesterday when I looked at this rock - there are no "modes of being" involved: there's just me and the rock. Well, you see, there's the trouble: only one mode of being. If your cosmology doesn't include a plurality of modes of being, then there can be only one. Then everything "flattens out" as Heidegger and Corbin both say, and pretty soon you can't tell the difference between me and the rock - we're both just quantifiable "standing reserve" (Heidegger's term), equally subject to commodification in the universal economy of objects. Just two bits of matter present in a uni-modal world. But of course if you lose the subject, if you lose hold of the notion of a Person, then the rock can no more be present to me than I can be to the rock and what you have is really *Absence* and everything falls away into the Abyss, the darkness from which nothing comes. We will have more to say about this Absence later.

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The theophanic experience is not this. As we have seen, there is ample precedent for the theophanic vision in Christianity, but it has not been in the mainstream. It is linked to a doctrine that has all but disappeared in Christian theology, the heresy of Docetism. This is the belief that Christ was not God Incarnate but was instead an Image.[54] There is a tradition of angel Christology in the early Church that is perfectly consistent with the theophanic vision.[55] Corbin says that the figure of the *Christus juvenis*, the *Christos Angelos*, "translates the idea that God can only come into contact with humanity by transfiguring the latter." [56] Theophanic psychocosmology is based upon this transfiguration. In it ontology and epistemology are united in a cosmogenesis of the individual.

We have to look carefully at what *docetism* means, for on it hinges the entire epistemology of the theophanic consciousness. Corbin says that the dogmas of positivist theology are "propositions demonstrated, established one time for all and consequently imposing a uniform authority on each and every one." [57] What the theophanic vision manifests is

the relation, each time unique, between God manifested as a person (biblically the Angel of the Face) and the person that he promotes to the rank of person in revealing himself to him, this relation is fundamentally an existential relation, never a

dogmatic one. It cannot be expressed as a *dogma* but as a *dokhema*. The two terms derive from the same Greek word *dokeo*, signifying all at once to appear, to show itself as, and also, believe, think, admit. The *dokhema* marks the line of interdependence between the form of that which manifests itself, and that to whom it manifests. It is this same correlation that can be called *dokesis*. Unfortunately it is from this that the routine accumulated over the centuries of history of Occidental dogmas has derived the term *docetism*, synonym of the phantasmic, the unreal, the apparent. So it is necessary to reinvigorate the primary sense: that which is called *docetism* is in fact the theological critique, or rather the theosophical critique, of religious consciousness.[58]

The *dokhema* expresses a relation between the knower and the known that is not sundered into object and subject because it is based on an experience of participation. The figure of Christ is the Heavenly Twin, who is the source of personhood, the figure who in other guises is the very Soul of the World and the source of all Presence, all personifications in all the worlds. The *Christos Angelos* is the transfiguring presence visible by means of the Light of Glory that is the soul itself. The *Imago animae* is the Image that "the soul projects into beings and things, raising them to the incandescence of that victorial Fire with which the Mazdean soul has set the whole of creation ablaze"[59] The transfiguration of the *anima mundi* and of the body of light are inseparable. This dual eschatology achieved in the present is the centerpiece of the theophanic vision.

With the *dokhema* we enter the strange imaginal interworld where *thought* and *thing* mingle, where bodies give up their literal heaviness and where thoughts have body. It is the realm of subtle bodies and of embodied thoughts. Here we experience what Jung once called the "thing-like-ness of thought." [60] It represents what to a rationalist consciousness seems confusion and nonsense, but it is the foundation of theophanic consciousness. And it is not foreign to the ancient Greeks. Even Aristotle assumed a kind of relation between thought and being which is nearly incomprehensible to the modern mind. He says "the soul is somehow all beings." [61] And Plotinus says: "When we know (the intelligibles) we do not have images or impressions of them but we are them." [62]

As we have seen, the apophatic dynamic in Plotinus makes possible the continual undoing of definitive, "dogmatic" statements and perceptions. Access to this boundary breaking experience requires a special kind of "in-sight" that he calls *theoria*. This seeing, or *theasthai* requires the ability to "let go of being" in the moment of nothingness that the *coincidentia oppositorum* entails. Such letting go results in wonderment, *thauma*, and the transformation of discursive reason into an open-ended process.[63] The Greek *thauma* means 'a wonder, a thing compelling to the gaze.' [64] The gaze that is turned upon this wonder is the *theoria*, an inward-turning contemplation of the theophanic apparition. We again are in the interworld where thought and thing mingle. It is the meeting place of the two seas, of the divine and the earthly, where Moses meets Khidr. *Dokeo* unites thought and being by bringing together appearance, thought and belief. Likewise *thauma* is the source of both *theory* and *theater*; both speculation and spectacle, seeing with the mind and seeing with the eye. John Deck writes, "'Theoria,' with its cognate verb seems to have evolved in meaning from 'sending an official see-er to the games,' to 'being a spectator at the games,' to 'being a spectator generally,' (i.e., simply 'seeing, viewing'), to 'contemplating, contemplation.'" [65]

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In his essay *Emblematic Cities* Corbin discusses Proclus's *Commentary* on the *Parmenides* of Plato. The philosophers have come to Athens for the festival of the Goddess of Wisdom whose splendidly embroidered robe "was carried like the sail of a galley" [66] in the procession, or *theoria* "in celebration of victory over the Titans who unloose chaos." [67] For Proclus the colorful, spectacular Athenian *theoria* is symbolic of the return of the soul to the One. Corbin compares this procession with the pilgrimage to another symbolic center. Compostella too is an emblematic city, and the goal of pilgrims for hundreds of years. Among them was Nicolas Flamel the great alchemist, "because," Corbin writes, "in reality the pilgrimage to Compostella is the symbolic description of the preparation of the Stone." [68]

The alchemists too, you see, have their *theoria*. The endless profusion of symbolic images is central to the method of alchemy. It is the *amplificatio*, which is, as Jung writes, "understood by the alchemist as

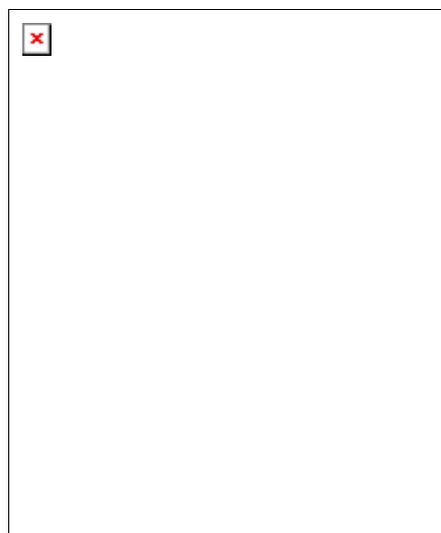
theoria," and is "a *theoria* in the true sense of a *visio* (spectacle, watching scenes in a theater)."[69] The *opus* itself consists in "the extraction of thought from matter," [70] the *extractio animae*[71] by means of Imagination which is the "star in man", the spark that is the "concentrated extract of life, both psychic and physical" that gives rise to the subtle body in the intermediate, imaginal world where the *physika* and the *mystika* unite.[72]

For Najm Cobra the seeker himself is a particle of light imprisoned in the darkness, and the alchemical *opus* frees him to perceive the figures and the lights that "shine in the Skies of the soul, the Sky of the Earth of Light." These lights reveal the Figure "dominating the *Imago mundi*: the Imam who is the *pole*, just as in terms of spiritual alchemy he is the 'Stone' or 'Elixer.'"[73] In the West, Christ is the miraculous Stone,[74] and the halo, the aura surrounding the subtle body of the transfigured Christ is that same *Xvaranah* and Light of Glory that flies upward as particles of light reclaiming their home in Byzantine, Manichean and Persian painting.[75]

The whole difference between dogmatic, literal consciousness, and theophanic, imaginal consciousness lies in the mode of perception. The soul that can perceive these lights can do so because it is able to open to the spectacle which the *theoria* presents. Corbin writes,

Dogma corresponds to dogmatic perception, simple and unidimensional, to a rational evidence, demonstrated, established and stabilized. The *dokêma* corresponds to a theophanic mode of perception, to a multiple and multiform vision of figures manifesting themselves on many levels Dogma is formulated and formulable *ne varietur*. Theophanic perception remains open to all metamorphoses, and perceives the forms through their very metamorphoses Theophanic perception presupposes that the soul that perceives the theophany - or all hierophany - is entirely a mirror, a *speculum* It was necessarily a complete a degradation for the word 'speculative' to end by signifying the contrary of what the visionary realism intended to announce in the etymology of the word: *speculum*, mirror. A degradation concomitant to that of the status of the Imagination.[76]

The *imaginal* world is the realm of the symbolic, the alchemical, the visionary, the wonder-ful. The imagination is a mediating function, an organ of the subtle body. Through the *theoria* that "pours forth a vast power," it overflows the limited discursive meaning of words, and dissolves the idolatry inherent in the experience of beings without transcendence. We have lost touch with this imagination and with the concrete reality of beings, with their openness, their animation. We stand disoriented in a world of distant objects. Because of the literal way in which the Incarnation has been interpreted we have become so far removed from reality that it seems paradoxical to say that it is the realities of the objective, public world that that are abstract and the subtle realities of the *imaginatio vera* that are concrete. The nihilism and the death of God that is the heritage of the West is for Corbin a direct result of the destruction of the functions of the imagination, of the shattering of the *speculum*. It is this that made it possible for Christ to be seen by the eyes of dogma as God Incarnate. It is to an examination of the doctrine of the Incarnation that we now turn.



The Emptying God in Christian Theology

In the Christian West, docetism all but disappeared as an official doctrine in the face of the doctrine of the Incarnation: God and Man in one substance, Christ in time on earth. Singular, unique, factual. This, Corbin and Semnani say, marks a failure of initiation, the *fana* of God into the world. As Corbin notes, the descent of God into the world is the subject of the Christian doctrine of *kenosis*, the self-emptying, or self-limiting of God. The idea has its source in Paul's *Epistle to the Philippians*:

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Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.[77]

Exaltation through emptying lies at the heart of Incarnationist doctrine. How is such an emptying possible and what does it mean?

In a footnote to *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism* Corbin suggests a comparative study of the *kenosis* of God into human reality and the *fana* of the erring mystic who claims "I am God!"[78] This leads into a dense thicket of historical and theological complexity. Such an effort would require the work of years. For our purposes it will be enough to provide a brief review of the manifold meanings of *kenosis* in Christian theology. We are indebted to Sarah Coakley for introducing some order in to the *massa confusa* of the theological controversies.[79]

At issue in the debate is the nature of the relation between the man Jesus and God, the Father. The passage in Paul's *Epistle* was probably a hymn already in use before Paul appropriated it in his exhortation to his audience to "have the mind among yourselves which you have in Christ Jesus." The first question is how this "mind of Christ" was understood in the early Christian community. Corbin points out that there has been a docetic strain in Christianity from the very beginning, that continues to the present day. As we will see, the discussion of *kenosis* and incarnation always wavers between one extreme, arguably docetic, emphasizing Christ's divinity, and another that emphasizes his humanity.

There is a wide range of views on how Paul and his predecessors and contemporaries would have understood the "emptying." At one end of the spectrum are those who argue that Paul modified pre-Christian gnostic doctrines of the descent of the *Anthropos* who delivers a salvational *gnosis* to his disciples. The emptying then refers simply to his appearance on earth.[80] This gnostic mythology is docetic in the sense that Christ only appeared to take on 'the form of man' in order to accomplish his mission of salvation.[81] This is of course the kind of position that Corbin is defending. On the other hand, a purely ethical reading asserts that the emptying refers to the example of humility set by Jesus, whose earthly life provides the standard for humanity.[82] New Testament scholars nearly all agree that Paul is focused on the ritual enactment of the salvational story of Christ's example, not on theological claims about the relation of Father and Son that were to arise later on. The nature of Jesus' relation to God *before* the Incarnation was not at issue. In the earliest history of the religion *kenosis* meant either relinquishing or pretending to relinquish divine powers while acting as redeemer, or choosing never to have worldly powers that are wrongly assumed by erring humans to be the ends of ethical action.[83] Neither of these options is the Incarnationist doctrine attacked by Corbin.

The period between the composition of Paul's *Epistle* in the first century and the Council of Chalcedon in 451 was rife with theological controversy, but by its end the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity had been given their dogmatic form. The encounter between Christian faith and Greek philosophy made the following question inevitable: Is the Supreme Being, the One of the Platonists, the same as the God of the Christians? And if so, Who is Jesus Christ? That is: How can this Supreme Being have a personal

relation to his creatures? The doctrine of the *Logos* as presaged in the Gospel of John developed in response. There is the Immutable Father, to be sure, but there is another component in the divinity, the *Logos*, the Word who became flesh. This incarnate Word is the human face of God. Then the theological issue is the relation between the Father and the Word. This came to a head in the Arian Controversy, resolved as far as official doctrine is concerned, at the Council of Nicea in 325. Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria, argued that the Word, though divine and existing with God before the Incarnation, was not coeternal with the Father, but was rather first among creatures. He tried in this way to maintain a strict monotheism, rather than claim a duality in the One God. Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, argued that the Word was divine and *therefore* coeternal with the Father, and sought to defend the total divinity of Jesus who could only thereby be worthy of worship. The Council of Nicea agreed on a formula rejecting Arius and affirming that Father and Son are of one substance, *homoousios*.

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Between Paul's time and the Council of Nicea and during the ensuing debates leading up to the Council of Chalcedon a significant change occurred. Coakley writes: "the formative christological discussion of the fourth and fifth centuries take Christ's substantial pre-existence and divinity *for granted*." [84] The contrast between the human and the divine aspects of Jesus has been sharpened. For a docetic doctrine there is no problem of incarnation since only an appearance is at issue. Neither is there a problem for a purely ethical reading since there is no true divinity at stake. But when Jesus must be thought as both man and God, the paradoxes force themselves forward. The discussion of *kenosis* becomes far more problematic. What can "emptying" mean if it is assumed to be essential for the incarnation and if divine attributes such as omnipotence and omniscience are understood to be unchanging elements of God? [85] How can the perfections and powers associated with the Father as immutable divinity be in any way compatible with the human frailties and sufferings of the man Jesus? On the one hand he must be fully God to be worthy of worship and yet to be Savior he must share our fallen humanity. The paradoxes were brought into sharp relief by Cyril of Alexandria. [86] In his Christology the eternal divine *Logos* was also paradoxically the personal subject of Christ's human states but in some incomprehensible way such that there is no change or impairment in the perfections of the divinity. This leads to another meaning of *kenosis*, one that incorporates the idea that Christ must be actually God and actually human, for here *kenosis* refers to the *taking on* of human flesh by the divine *Logos*, without diminishing the divine powers in any way. [87]

In order to resolve these tensions, a statement of orthodoxy was agreed upon at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 that affirmed again that the Son is consubstantial with the Father, but is at the same time "of two natures in one person" in such a way that the divine and the human are united and yet distinct. This formulation leaves the issue as difficult as ever. Coakley notes that the paradoxes of the Council hardly resolved questions about the form of Christ's earthly life "and certainly left many points of christological detail unanswered." [88] As Jung says, "Even the most tortuous explanations of theology have never improved upon the lapidary paradox of St. Hilary: 'Deus homo, immortalis mortuus, aeternus sepultus' (God-man, immortal-dead, eternal-buried)." [89]

The argument continues today, between those who tend to emphasize Christ's divinity (the "Alexandrian school") and those who emphasize his humanity (the "Antiochenes"). Cyril's solution is in some sense docetic since he said that Christ at times "permitted his own flesh to experience its proper affection" and this suggests that Christ's humanity was in truth an appearance. [90] In the Eastern Church an even more one-sided view was developed by John of Damascus in the 8th century. For John the communication of the two natures ran "only one way (from the divine to the human), the divine fully permeated the human nature of Christ by an act of 'coinherence'" or *perichoresis*. [91] This leaves no room for human weakness, and *kenosis* is hardly an emptying at all, but is more like an obliteration of the human by the divine. If this is a kind of docetism it is not that defended by Corbin where the human must be raised to meet the divine. Here it is merely crushed.

These issues were stirred to life again during the Reformation. Luther's Christology was based

simultaneously on Christ's extreme vulnerability on the cross and on his "real presence" in the Eucharist. But how is it possible for Christ's divinity to be active in his cry of despair at death?[92] In 1577 the Lutherans sided with John of Damascus in saying that the divine attributes fully permeated Christ. But this denied the human helplessness with which Luther began. In the 17th century a group of Lutherans from Giessen proposed a novel resolution: the *kenosis* operated only on Christ's *human* nature, not on his divine. This is a post-Chalcedonian version, that is, one that recognizes the two-nature doctrine, of one of the early possible interpretations, Christ's "choosing never to have certain forms of power in his incarnate life." [93]

In the late 19th century another Lutheran, Gottfried Thomasius, proposed the radical idea that the Logos itself is "emptied" in the incarnation. He says "The Logos reserved to Himself neither a special existence nor a special knowledge outside his humanity. He truly became man." [94] Thus the incarnation marks the abandonment of all attributes of divinity and a Christology based upon human attributes alone is entirely justified. [95]

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There is yet one more important part to this story, involving a development of the ethical reading of *kenosis*. Among twentieth-century theologians, there are those who see Jesus' "emptying" "not just as a blueprint for a perfect human moral response, but as revelatory of the humility of the *divine* nature." [96] In this view *kenosis* reveals divine power to be intrinsically "humble" rather than "grasping." [97] For John Robinson there is "a radical seepage of the *human* characteristics into the *divine*, such, indeed, as to collapse the apparatus of the two natures doctrine altogether." [98] John MacQuarrie says that Christ "has made known to us the final reality as likewise self-emptying, self-giving and self-limiting." [99] To what extent these ideas are compatible with the traditional Christian doctrines of the nature of God is open to question. Surely for Corbin they would represent at best a rear-guard action against the nihilism of the contemporary world.

Based on this review of the idea of *kenosis* we can make two observations. First, the paradoxes involved are insoluble. This may not be a criticism, since theology is not necessarily bounded by the rules of human logic. There is a dynamism in Christology that perhaps mitigates the rigidity of dogma that would disappear if the contradictions were not right on the surface as they clearly are. Second, it is clear that all but the most "docetic" of these doctrinal options are deeply suspect from Corbin's point of view. Any direct contact, any substantial union of the divine and the human taking place in the time of history and in the material, public world has the same effect in the end, however subtly one tries to arrange it. There can be no *kenosis* of any sort in the Christology that Corbin is defending. He is hostile to any historicizing of the Christian message that would compromise the universality of the figure of Christ, or a figure "like Christ" available to anyone, anywhere at any time, in accordance with the individual's capacity to "see." He defends with passion the *Harmonia Abrahamica* wherein the lineage of the prophets since Adam represents successive appearances of the one True Prophet. There can be no real incompatibilities among the religions of the Book. He defends a viewpoint that is extremely ecumenical and cross-cultural as is the case with traditional Islam. [100] In this, Corbin is in the camp of Justin Martyr who, in the 2nd century saw the Logos as the common source of all human knowledge, and too, of Origen's "illuminationism" that accepts both truth and salvation outside of Christianity. [101]

We have seen some of the ways in which the descent of God into the world has been understood within the theological tradition. We are now in a position to see how the results of the descent have been judged by a few of those who, like Corbin, see it as the definitive event in Christian consciousness.

Kenosis and the Destiny of the West

Amidst all the complexities of the Christian theological debate there is a common theme: that the birth, life and death of Jesus as a man among us represents a descent of God into creation and so in one degree or another an 'incarnation' and 'enfleshment' of God and in some sense an 'emptying' of God into this

world. Christ's life is the central fact of Christianity, and Christianity is the religion of the Western tradition. So incarnation and *kenosis* are part of the basic fabric of our history, and of the culture that is coming to dominate the world. There are others besides Henry Corbin who see these doctrines as essential components of our history, of our psychology and of contemporary culture. A review of their positions may help clarify Corbin's perspective and the critique of the West that he offers.

Silence & Communion: A Power Made Perfect in Weakness

A central part of the attack on the assumptions of modernism is the critical examination of gender issues in every area of life. Theology is no exception.[102] That the Abrahamic religions have been dominated by male power structures is undeniable. Whether this is integral to the doctrines of these faiths is an open question. The relevance of the kenotic moral example of Christ for women has been vigorously debated in Christian feminist literature. At issue is whether Christ's example of humility and self-sacrifice, however necessary for men, is not for women merely another means of oppression and domination. Elizabeth Cady Stanton famously said that after so many years of depersonalization and repression "self development is a higher duty than self-sacrifice." [103]

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Daphne Hampson has pointed out that Luther's theological anthropology, to take one characteristic example, is based essentially on masculine psychology. It depends for its force on an experience of the self as isolated and insecure, as *incurvare in se*, "curved in upon itself," not at-home-in-the-world, and able to find freedom finally only in a binding relation to God or to the devil.[104] Women, Hampson argues, tend to experience the self in terms of connectedness, open-ness and community, that is, as a relational entity. Whereas for men the problem is finding a way out of isolation and into community, and whose sin is therefore *hubris*, for women the problem is lack of center, and the "sin," so to speak, lies in having no autonomy. If this is generally true, then *kenosis* as self-denial can be no moral guide for women. And if that is true then it is hard to see how there can be a feminist Christianity, and there would be, in Coakley's words "little point in continuing the tortured battle to bring feminism and Christianity together." [105]

Coakley argues that there is one meaning of *kenosis* that holds promise for feminist Christians. Recall that the Lutherans of Geissen saw *kenosis* applying only to Christ's human nature. In this way human vulnerability and weakness can be united with divine power so that a special form of self-effacement can occur "which is not a negation of the self, but the place of the self's transformation and expansion into God." [106] She finds this special form of making space for waiting on and responding to the divine in the *ascesis* of wordless prayer or contemplation. This opening to the divine is both perilous and subversive. The self is in a posture of truly Christ-like vulnerability and doubt. She writes

engaging in any such regular and repeated 'waiting on the divine' will involve great personal commitment and great personal risk; to put it in psychological terms, the dangers of a too-sudden uprush of material from the unconscious, too immediate a contact of the thus-disarmed self with God, are not inconsiderable. To this extent the careful driving of wedges - which began to appear in the western church from the twelfth century on - between 'meditation' (discursive reflection on Scripture) and 'contemplation' (this more vulnerable activity of space-making), were not all cynical in their attempts to keep contemplation 'special.' [107]

Her appeal is to just that apophatic moment beyond speech we have already encountered:

The 'mystics' of the church have often been from surprising backgrounds, and their messages rightly construed as subversive; their insights have regularly chafed at the edges of doctrinal 'orthodoxy', and they have rejoiced in the coining of startling (sometimes erotically startling) new metaphors to describe their experiences of God. Those who have appealed to a 'dark' knowing beyond speech have thus challenged the smugness of accepted anthropomorphisms for God, have probed to the subversive place of the 'semiotic.' [108]

For Coakley this vulnerability is required by both men and women, and is not incompatible with the development of a centered self. It is only by this special kind of vulnerability that the self can both find its

true center and be able to connect with others in an authentic way.

However "mystical" the contemplation of wordless prayer may be, Coakley says that she must "avoid the lurking 'docetism' of the Alexandrian tradition." This can be done she feels, by recognizing that what Christ "instantiates is the very 'mind' that we ourselves enact, or enter into, in prayer: the unique intersection of vulnerable, 'non-grasping' humanity and authentic divine power." In the *Second Epistle to the Corinthians* Christ says "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." [109] Here is something that surely is akin to the mystical poverty of Sufism. And whether this is "docetic" or not, it suggests a relation of the individual to the divinity in Christ that Corbin would have found congenial.

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The idea that such a power in vulnerability is the fundamental meaning of *kenosis* is common to Coakley and the Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. [110] In Balthasar's theology there is an explicit attempt to present *kenosis* and the Incarnation as linked to a conception of relational personhood and to a theology of Beauty that in some respects parallels some of Corbin's key themes.

Balthasar's theology is Trinitarian. And this for a reason that echoes Corbin's warnings. O'Hanlon puts it succinctly: "If God were simply one he would become ensnared in the world process through the incarnation and the cross." [111] Any simple monism is incompatible with the fact of divine-human interaction. In order to explain any such communion there must be a dynamic within the divinity that makes it possible. In other words, God must be both immanent and transcendent. The incarnation must signal a real event in God, and this real dynamic is "the eternal event of the divine processions." The trinity is "an event of the communion of persons," and is an event of kenotic self-giving love. [112] This self-giving love of the Father, out of whose "abyss-like" depths the love arises, is returned eternally by the reciprocal self-giving of the Son. The movement of this love requires otherness and distance and is the archetype of all love of the other whether human or divine. We know the divine kenotic love only through the incarnate Christ who "is the Person, in an absolute sense, because in him self-consciousness coincides with the mission he has received from God." [113] Papanikolaou writes "One becomes a true person, for Balthasar, when one is able to relate to the Father in the way the incarnate Son relates to the Father, and that relation takes the form of obedient response to the Father's call to a unique, personal mission." [114]

It is far beyond our purpose here to contrast Balthasar and Corbin, although it would be worth the effort. But it is clear that there are revealing commonalities. Balthasar's Trinitarian procession serves a function similar to the Neoplatonic emanation for Corbin, and his insistence that God is both immanent and transcendent is the basis for Corbin's theophanic theology. The abyss of God's giving expresses that same apophatic moment we have encountered before. And Balthasar's account of the accession to true personality, that Christ is the exemplar for a unique and personal mission, recalls Corbin's concern with individuation.

Balthasar's Trinitarian theology is in some ways in fundamental resonance with Corbin's vision despite, indeed because of the absolute centrality of the Incarnation. This is because at root the doctrine of *kenosis* as love presupposes the ever-present availability of the spirit of Christ, and so avoids the historicism that Corbin rejects. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit permits Balthasar to provide a transformational doctrine of perception that is in some respects strikingly like that Corbin outlines. Nichols writes,

"Balthasar has made it clear that, in all authentic perception of the divine glory of Jesus Christ, seeing goes hand in hand with transformation [H]e sees that here perceiving is impossible without a being caught up in love. A theory of perception cannot be had in this context without a doctrine of conversion, and so ultimately of sanctification." [115]

This account could easily have been written about Corbin himself. In Balthasar's vision, *kenosis* signifies the Glory and Beauty of the Lord made manifest. Significantly, he shares Corbin's respect for Jakob

Georg Hamann's theology of Beauty.[116] It is perhaps true that Balthasar and Corbin share a common Catholic sacramental attitude towards the beauty of the earth. David Tracy has suggested that Catholic theologians and artists "tend to emphasize the presence of God in the world, while the classic works of Protestant theologians tend to emphasize the absence of God from the world." [117] If something like this is true, then we might say that Corbin, while vehemently rejecting the hierarchy of the Catholic Church as an institution, in favor of a more "Protestant," indeed Lutheran emphasis on the freedom of the individual, nonetheless displays a deep and pervasive sacramental sensibility that perceives the world as "haunted by a sense that the objects, events and persons of daily life are revelations of grace." [118] Now as Greeley suggests, the danger in this is idolatry - but Balthasar guards against this in a way similar to Corbin's: The Father is the Abyss of Giving, He is the Unknown and Unknowable Gift - the very fullness of Being of apophysis. Father and Son are correlative: Beauty and Majesty.

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Balthasar is also not unaware of the dangers inherent in the doctrine of the Incarnation that Corbin warns against. Nichols writes: "Balthasar is keenly aware of how easily an incarnational attitude to living can collapse into either a dualism of matter and spirit as only incidentally related or a mere materialism where spirit is but an epiphenomenon of matter." [119] His solution to this tension rests upon metaphors which are strikingly reminiscent of those Corbin depends upon throughout his own work. Balthasar says: "As a totality of spirit and body, man must make himself into God's mirror and seek to attain to that transcendence and radiance that must be found in the world's substance if it is indeed God's image and likeness - his word and gesture, action and drama." [120]

That being said, there is at least one central issue where Balthasar and Corbin must part company, and it involves, as one might expect, issues of authority, personal freedom and the meaning of the Incarnation. For Balthasar Christ is the absolute guarantor of objectivity. Upon Him rests the indestructibly solid support for supernatural revelation. Nichols writes,

Even the scholastic axiom that 'whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver' is to be brushed aside in this context. Here hermeneutics, whether cultural or philosophical, are sent packing, on the grounds that One who is both God and man cannot but draw what is universally valid in human life and thought to himself. In the last analysis, Christ is the all-important form because he is the all-sufficient content, the only Son of the Father. [121]

The critique of individual hermeneutics distinguishes Balthasar's position from Corbin's irrevocably, and illustrates quite clearly the reason Corbin was so vehement in his attacks on the incarnational attitude. It is because of his unwavering emphasis on the freedom of the individual that docetism and hermeneutics must be linked for Corbin.

In the end it seems clear that there are ways of interpreting *kenosis* that are compatible with a "theophanic cosmology" of some kind. An incarnational Christology can be articulated that is not a result of a failure of initiation, and does not end in nihilism and catastrophe, but it must be one that addresses Corbin's central worries about the secularizing effects of historicism and about ambiguities concerning the relation of matter and spirit. For a very different analysis we will step outside the confines of theology to encounter another reading of what the weakness of *kenosis* entails. We begin by returning to that crucial moment when according to Corbin, the West came face to face with its failed initiation.

A Hermeneutics of Absence: Adrift in the Sea of Technics

The Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo works in the tradition defined by Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida. [122] He can be counted among those who are, often unhelpfully, labeled "postmodernists." In our context, what is important and "postmodern" about Vattimo is his attack on dogma, on any attempt to impose a single truth on the plurality and variety of human lives.

For Vattimo, Nietzsche's radical nihilism, expressed in Zarathustra's cry "God is dead!" [123] is the prelude to a freedom that is only now coming within our reach, and that is in fact the culmination and

final destiny of the Christian tradition. It is significant that both Nietzsche and Corbin look back to the Zoroastrian roots of the eschatological religions of the West. Norman Cohn has argued that it was Zoroaster who shattered the vision of a cyclic, timeless cosmos, and initiated a view of a world moving inexorably forward towards a final consummation in history. The origins of the eschatological worldview can be traced back to Zoroaster's proclamation of the Final Battle at the end of time that will usher in the paradise that is the goal of history.[124] Nietzsche reaches back to the *Avesta* and reads there the desperate, ultimate fate of this history in the death of the God who promised so much and gave, in the end, Nothing. For Corbin, the mythic, the transhistorical has never in truth been fully suppressed. We still live in that mythic present; our insertion in history is only partial. The timelessness of the eternal present is always available, and eschatological hopes apply here and now.

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For Nietzsche himself this "greatest recent event,"[125] the death of God, was an occasion for joy and freedom:

our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, anticipation, expectation. At last the horizon appears free again to us, even granted that it is not bright; at last our ships may venture out again, venture out to face any danger; all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again; the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never yet been such an 'open sea.'[126]

Nietzsche's sensation of looking out over a horizon, free if not "bright," is a fair description of Vattimo's assessment of our situation. We live at the end of the era of metaphysics, of grand architectonics of thought claiming to uncover the final truth. For Vattimo as for Nietzsche "there are no facts, only interpretations." That is the meaning of the death of God. The idea of Truth has collapsed in upon itself. There is no Reality behind the appearance; there *is* only the appearance. This is what the process of secularization comes to in the end: there is no other, higher, transcendent world that can justify or ground our thoughts and actions. There is only this secular realm of things, reduced, as Heidegger has said, to the calculable, the manipulable, where everything is reduced to "exchange value" and treated as "standing reserve." This is the technological worldview.[127]

Technology is generally understood as the triumph of positivism, as the triumph of fact over interpretation. But if *everything* is subject to interpretation, then the dominance of scientific objectivity is itself subverted.[128] Natural scientists have no sympathy with the claims of postmodernists who claim "there is nothing outside the text." [129] But one does not have to understand "text" in a literal way to hold that there is nothing but interpretation, and the attempt to understand the contextual aspects of natural science is a major feature of modern epistemologies. But even this less obviously "literary" position is nonsensical, or at best entirely irrelevant, to most practicing scientists who are very happy to ignore hermeneutics and get on with discovering facts. Yet Vattimo's point, and Heidegger's too is, I think, that when everything has become "objective," when all things are reduced to objects for manipulation, then anything goes. There are no more natural boundaries to be respected, nothing has an inside or an outside, no individual can have more than an evanescent coherence, every thing is understood as cobbled together from parts that are subject to recombination by nature or by technology. Permanence and stability have been replaced by perpetual metamorphosis. The radical position of the feminist thinker Donna Harraway gives a hint of the possibilities here. For Harraway modern technology merely makes obvious what has been true all along: the boundaries between our tools and ourselves are really not boundaries at all. We are already *cyborgs*, amalgamations of machine and organism. Modern medicine will only continue to make this clear. What this suggests is that all boundaries are in some sense arbitrary, capable of dissolution and restructuring. This includes gender boundaries, racial boundaries, as well as boundaries between species, between animal and human, as Darwin and Wallace clearly saw. This situation, says Harraway, provides the possibility for envisioning the ultimate liberation from social constructions of class, race and gender, from the dominations of all essentialisms, all social and political powers.[130]

Nihilism as the ungrounding of all facts and the dissolution of all boundaries is expressed through the corrosive dissolving power of technology and of modern economics as its inevitable extension. It cannot be avoided, overcome or denied. Nihilism is, says Vattimo, "our sole opportunity." Any attempt to

institute something new in reaction to it, either a return to some prior primordial "foundations" or a leap into a new order, would only be a re-enactment of old violence, the same sad old story of repression and domination. Our only option is to abandon ourselves to this fluid, rootless, insecure position - to a radical acceptance of "not knowing" that Vattimo calls "weak thought."

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Vattimo argues that we are able to see the truth of nihilism only when we have been engulfed by the contemporary "society of generalized communication." It is only by living in the fluid and ever-changing flux of modern secular technology where nothing is sacred and nothing secure that we have been finally freed to enact the truth of Nietzsche's vision. And this, as Frascati-Lochhead points out, recalls to us again the words of Christ: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." But the dissolving power of nihilism has to be turned upon the claims of the very technology that gives rise to it. Even the domination of technology must be dis-located in a continuous process of undoing. This is an active, "accomplished" nihilism, one that recognizes the implausibility of *any* dominating structures in thought or society.

For Vattimo it is paradoxically this secularization and the dissolution of certainty that is the destiny of Christianity. Just the situation that seems to have resulted in the eclipse and repudiation of the Christian tradition is the only authentic outcome of that tradition itself. The way that Vattimo understands this strange twist is full of striking echoes of Corbin's work. On Vattimo's account what the flux of the modern world reveals is that facts must give way to interpretation. And what is the science of these interpretations? Hermeneutics. Here Vattimo turns directly to the Incarnation and *kenosis* as the central doctrines of the Christian tradition, and so therefore vital for the destiny of the West. Vattimo says that the Incarnation has mostly been read in a "Hegelian" way, so that

God and Jesus Christ are thought, in the light of an idea of truth, as the objective articulation of evidence that, as it becomes definitive, renders interpretation superfluous [T]he revelation somehow concluded with the coming of Jesus, the scriptural canon was fulfilled, and the interpretation of the sacred texts became ultimately the concern only of the Pope and the cardinals. [131]

This is of course precisely Corbin's point. That is how the Incarnation *has* in fact been read by the official Church. The doctrine of God's entry into human history freezes the mystery of Christ into time and into the hierarchical structures of those in power. We have seen Balthasar reject any application of hermeneutics to the revelation of Christ. Corbin vehemently rejects a "Hegelian" reading in favor of individual hermeneutics, of *gnosis*. But Vattimo rejects it because he says the metaphysics of Truth is no longer an option for us. We have, thanks to Nietzsche and Heidegger, finally been freed from the violence that is the inevitable outcome of metaphysical thought.

What dissolves the dogmatic vision of the Incarnation for Vattimo is a hermeneutic philosophy that gives equal rights to story, myth and philosophy - to all the forms of thought and meaning, and so explodes the single vision that dogma imposes. Hermeneutics in the modern sense began, Vattimo notes, with the Enlightenment project of biblical exegesis, and represents the culmination of Christianity in a post-Christian form as a secular philosophy. This extends its power far beyond the analysis of readings of the sacred text. And because hermeneutics "ungrounds" all claims to Truth and Transcendence, it is the heart of that nihilism in which we live.

This "freedom" that nihilism imposes is where the true meaning of *kenosis* lies. The emptying of God into the world results in "secularization" and the irreducible plurality of interpretations, of visions, of forms of life that this entails. Vattimo writes,

modern philosophical hermeneutics is born in Europe not only because here there is a religion of the book that focuses attention on the phenomenon of interpretation, but because this religion has at its base the idea of the incarnation of God, which it conceives as *kenosis*, as abasement, and, in our translation, as weakening.[132]

This weakening in the form of the rejection of dogma and the celebration of a plurality of voices has precursors in the Christian tradition. He points to Joachim of Fiore's doctrine of the Third Age of the Holy Spirit, in which the inner, spiritual sense of the scriptures takes precedence over the legal, disciplinarian interpretation. It is, he says, a matter of taking the doctrine of *kenosis* seriously. We can look to those pages where Schliermacher

"dreams of a religion in which everyone can be the author of their own Bible; or those of Novalis, in which a re-evaluation of the 'aesthetic' aspects of religiosity (the images, the Madonna, the rituals) runs alongside the same dream of a Christianity that is no longer dogmatic or disciplinarian." [133]



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Everyone the author of their own Bible. This is the culmination of the general philosophy of hermeneutics born from of Biblical interpretation. As Frascati-Lochhead points out,

If one discovers that hermeneutics is closely related to dogmatic Christianity, neither the meaning of hermeneutics nor that of dogmatics will be left intact. As regards the latter, the relation with hermeneutics produces a critical rethinking of its disciplinary character: the nihilistic 'dissolution' that hermeneutics reads in the 'myth' of the incarnation and crucifixion does not cease with the conclusion of Jesus' time on earth, but continues with the descent of the Holy Spirit and with the interpretation of revelation by the community of believers. According to the line that I propose to call Joachimist, the meaning of Scripture, in the age opened by the descent of the Holy Spirit, becomes increasingly 'spiritual,' and thereby less bound to the rigor of dogmatic definitions and of strict disciplinarian observance.[134]

Joachim of Fiore is for Corbin too a representative of the religion of the Spirit, of the Paraclete, the Figure who alone can inaugurate the True Church. Corbin compares Joachim and his disciples in the 12th and 13th centuries with the Shi'ite theosophers who:

speak of the 'eternal religion' and of the 'Paraclete.' The Joachimites, centered in the tradition of prophetic Christianity, invoke the 'Eternal Gospel' and the 'reign of the Paraclete.' For the Shi'ites the coming of the Imam-Paraclete will inaugurate the reign of the pure spiritual meaning of the divine revelations: it is this that they mean by 'Eternal Religion' For the Joachimites, the reign of the Holy Spirit, of the Paraclete, will be the time where the spiritual comprehension (*intelligentia spiritualis*) of the Scriptures will dominate; and this is what they mean by 'Eternal Gospel.' The consonance is striking. It is possible to speak of a common 'hermeneutical situation,' that is to say, of a 'mode of comprehension' common to one side and the other, notwithstanding the difference issuing from the Qur'anic Revelation and all the more rich in its instruction.[135]

But in a complete reversal of Corbin's view, the appearance and triumph of the spiritual Church beyond all dogma is for Vattimo only possible through the secularization that the *kenosis* of the Incarnation brings about. Vattimo writes,

The idea of secularization, if considered in relation to hermeneutics, seems to be less univocally definable than is generally believed: rather paradoxically, in fact, hermeneutics which, in its Enlightenment origins, shows a demythologizing and rationalist trend, leads in contemporary thought to the dissolution of the same myth of objectivity and to the rehabilitation of myth and of religion. This is a paradox that focuses on the intrinsic relation of hermeneutics to the Christian tradition: nihilism "resembles" *kenosis* too much for this similarity to be but a coincidence, an association of ideas. The hypothesis to which we are led is that hermeneutics itself is the outcome of secularization as an 'application,' an interpretation of the contents of Christian revelation, first of all of the dogma of the incarnation of God.[136]

This, from Corbin's perspective is precisely right: *kenosis* and nihilism are connected in just this way. But for him as for Semnani they represent a metaphysical failure, the catastrophe that is destroying the West, and making the Spiritual Church an impossibility. Hermeneutics, far from being the culmination of secularization, is the royal road to the sacred.

The active "accomplished nihilism" that Vattimo describes is not completely without content. It is not merely a dissolving power, but carries with it the central core of the Christian tradition: Love. For *kenosis* is God's self-emptying love. Frascati-Lochhead writes,

The principle of *caritas*, love, knows no limitation. This is Vattimo's answer to the criticism that secularization, instead of developing the Christian tradition, often places itself explicitly outside of it. The core of Christianity is love, *kenosis*, and hence, no doctrinal conclusion, no 'truth,' is guaranteed as ultimately and eternally valid. Augustine's word, "Love God and do as you please!" is as applicable to the interpretation of Scripture and dogma as to anything else.[137]

Here again, as with Coakley and Balthasar, we find a point of contact with Corbin's theology. Vattimo's ethics includes an almost sacramental sense of attention to the particulars of the world that he calls *pietas*. [138] Vattimo says that he uses the term,

"in the modern sense of piety as devoted attention to that which, however, has only a limited value and that deserves attention because this value, even though limited is the only one we know. *Pietas* is love for the living and its traces - those lived and those carried insofar as they are received from the past." [139]

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But for Corbin this love finds its source in the transcendent figure of the Beloved who is infinitely renewed and renewable through that very transcendence and so can never become an idol. As we have heard, "Theophanic perception remains open to all metamorphoses, and perceives the forms through their very metamorphoses" But the metamorphoses of which Corbin speaks presuppose the vertical hierarchies of being implicit in all Islamic thought. For Vattimo and the modern world, all metamorphoses can only be horizontal, Darwinian, temporal. All that prevents idolatry and dogma for Vattimo is the knowledge that one's idols will always melt away into another, merely different form. There can be no orientation in a world with no boundaries and our sole opportunity is acceptance of the transience of this mortal world of ceaseless flux.

Vattimo's work is part of the project of post-Nietzschean philosophy to destroy what Derrida calls the metaphysics of Presence. That is, metaphysics understood as the attempt to get a grip on the structure and eternal Truth of Being. If we follow Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida we realize that having come to the end of metaphysics we no longer have the option of believing in structures of permanence and domination, whether metaphysical or moral or scientific. We are left with the play of signifiers, the play of interpretations, or the flux of boundary-less entities that modern technology and economics provides. Being must be understood as *event*. We are freed for an active nihilism that holds itself open in self-giving love and *pietas* and can acknowledge the rights of *no* powers of violence or violation, because *no* dogmas, *no* interpretations are true, all stories, all myths, all religions, all powers and authorities are evanescent and groundless and infirm.

Everything becomes hermeneutics. No facts. Only interpretations. The hidden god that is the abyss of nihilism is dominant, but is given a positive twist: if there is no truth, there can at least be no rationale for domination and control. Though there may of course be such domination without any rationale. Corbin

indeed himself argues for what he calls a "permanent hermeneutics." [140] But there are subtle, significant differences. The "open sea" that Nietzsche celebrates is not the "ocean without a shore" that Ibn 'Arabi finds at the end of the mystic quest. There is a world of difference between *hubris* and mystical poverty, between the *übermensch* and the *darwish*. For Nietzsche and Vattimo there is nothing underlying the individual. Nothing gives structure or direction to the metamorphoses of personality. Nothing prevents the plurality of Bibles from becoming a Babel of chaos. And for Nietzsche, for Vattimo, there can be no ascent. Corbin's freedom from dogma always moves upwards towards the Angel of your being. Corbin's vision is based upon a primary orientation that precedes all human acts. It is founded upon a metaphysics that Vattimo must reject: the perception that like can only be known by like, and that, as for Balthasar, being, that is, moral existence, is intimately connected with perception. Speculative thought can only approach the truth when it serves to polish the mirror, the *speculum* in which the images of transcendence can be apprehended. Corbin's hermeneutic is always gnostic, it is always an uncovering, a revelation of something given as presence and as Gift. And it can never be the world of Promethean man, of technology, that frees us for this uncovering: the Revelation has always been there in the more-than-human world, and there it remains.

On Vattimo's account God's descent into history dissolves the world, unmakes its structures and reveals Being as *event*. The *fana* of God into the world annihilates God Himself. The Incarnation removes the Reality behind the appearances and plunges us all into the endless world of story telling and interpretation. The metaphysics of Presence devolves into a metaphysics of Absence, of continual undoing, in a cosmos where there are no Names. Positive knowledge is vaporized into a perpetual unknowing through the encounter with the Absent God. We are left with weak thought, *pietas*, and love.

Vattimo's account allows an uncompromising stand against tyranny and oppression. It privileges freedom over domination by removing any possible grounds for the justification of any Master. But clearly from a viewpoint such a Corbin's or that of the Sufi masters he presents we are on very dangerous ground indeed - truly standing on the edge of the Abyss. Where is the individual in all this? Where does the human person stand? And how are we to understand the primordial facts of nature? and the miracle of language itself? It is not clear that this "accomplished nihilism" can give an account of the world that can do justice to the body, and to the place of humans in the natural world. And practically speaking we must ask what the consequences may be of trying to make openness to the nihil a public program. How far can people live without Presence to balance Absence? We have seen already that the Great Chain of Being was not the static structure of Presence that its critics claim. Surely it is true that when Being *is* regarded as Presence alone, not balanced by that moment of nothingness that the *Deus absconditum* initiates, then idolatry and violence and violation are ensured. But it is far from clear that we can live with Absence alone. The encounter with the Darkness is the most perilous stage, but Semnani tells us that it must result in dementia, or in Resurrection. The encounter cannot be maintained forever.

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Finally, it is not at all clear that science and technology are in any real sense subverted by hermeneutics as Vattimo hopes. Technicians and scientists don't behave as if they are: for the scientific worldview, facts *are* real, interpretations are only means to an end, and therein lies their power and their drive to domination.

But technology can be interpreted in a radically different way and still be understood as the final destiny of the Incarnation and *kenosis* at the heart of the Christian myth.

The Word Made Flesh: I Am Become Death, Destroyer of Worlds

Like Vattimo, Wolfgang Giegerich regards modern technology as the logical culmination of Christianity. [141] His perspective is that of a practicing psychologist and he presents his case as a description of the psychological and mythical dominants of our time - as the unconscious working out of Christian history. But for all that he borrows his terminology from the philosophers and presents a story that he says reveals

the essence and the underlying truth of the modern world. Like Vattimo, he sees the global reach of technology as the defining characteristic of modern Western culture. Yet listening to his description of that technology is like hearing a voice from a world radically different from the one Vattimo inhabits. If Vattimo attempts to read technology in the manner of Joachim of Fiore, then Giegerich provides an account of the "Hegelian" way that technology has, he argues, *in fact* developed, now matter how much we may wish that it hadn't. Giegerich focuses his attention on that most horrific display of technological domination, the nuclear bomb. His question is: How is it that only in the West such an instrument of annihilation has become possible? While other civilizations have had the means to develop a scientific technology, only the West has done so, and we have done it without regard to any limits whatsoever [142] He writes:

"since the Middle Ages, the mind of the West has lifted off like a rocket, starting slowly to raise itself above the ground, then picking up speed exponentially. No other civilization shows this self-propelling explosive development. Seen in this light, the atom bombs and missiles of this century do not look like accidental by-products of our culture but more like *the* symbol of the West as a whole"[143]

That science and technology are pursued with such single-minded devotion can only be understood if we realize that they are not secular activities at all. What he says of the bomb can be applied to the universal scope of technology as a whole:

"The nuclear bomb in its phenomenology is so immense and so inhuman that, although a man-made object, it nevertheless extends far beyond the merely human into the dimension of the ontological and theological, into the dimension of Being and of the Gods." [144]

Where do we look for the origins of this huge dynamic that threatens to overwhelm us all? There are two key events in Judeo-Christian history that are decisive. They are to be found in the Old Testament story of Moses and the Golden Calf, and in the New Testament narratives of the Incarnation.

Throughout his account, Giegerich contrasts what he regards as a characteristically Judeo-Christian experience of reality with an interpretation of that of the ancient Greeks. The story of the clash between them begins with Moses' destruction of the idol:

This story is, so to speak, a story of the collision of two worlds. One is situated in the lowlands and is characterized by an animal-shaped image of God cast from metal to whom the worshipping people bring offerings and in whose honor they celebrate a holiday, releasing themselves playfully to the celebration. The other world is a mountain peak and is characterized by an invisible, transcendent God in the heights, by a code of moral laws engraved on stone tables, and, on the part of God as well as on the part of Moses, by a fierce wrath against the celebrating people. [145]

Moses comes down from the mountain with the tablets of the Law, and in a rage pulverizes the golden calf around which the people have celebrated and danced in his absence. He forces a decision: "Who is on the side of the Lord?" and commands those siding with him to "slay every man his brother, every man his companion, every man his neighbor" [146] and so they ordained themselves for the service of the Lord. This story, Giegerich says, has penetrated deeply into the soul of Western humanity for 2000 years, causing a permanent rift in our souls between the pagan dancer and the warrior in service to the transcendent God. It signals the birth of both the sin of idolatry and of the One God. For there can be no True God without false gods, and no idols without that Lord.

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This story describes a schism in the experience of reality. The pagan, mythical, ritualistic, experience of the world is dominated by the self-evident radiance of phenomena. The word phenomenon has its roots in the Greek *phainesthai*: to appear, to shine. For Giegerich, a psychologist in the Jungian tradition, this "shining" of things is what Jung has meant by the "image." [147] Avens says, "Phenomena have no backs: they are what they mean and they mean what they are. What manifests itself and impresses the soul with a numinous effect is true by virtue of its shining." As Jung discovered in conversation with a Pueblo Indian

Chief, the Sun that is God has nothing "behind " it. The Chief said "The Sun is God, everyone can see that." "This is the Father, there is no Father behind it." [148] This "pagan" god is a *theos*, and does not refer to a Supreme Being - it expresses a quality of existence, something "unheard of", "extraordinary", "wonderful." [149] In the case of the Golden Calf, "anybody could immediately *see* from the bull's radiating imaginal quality that this is God. The essence of God was in the pagan world to be sought in the radiation and in the numinosity of this metaphoric shine." [150] There is no question as the existence of such deities - they *are* the self-evident fullness of sensuous reality.

But when Moses pulverizes the idol, God "pushes off from his animal base and takes off for the mountain." [151] This unprecedented, entirely unique event has enormous consequences. The meaning of divinity and the meaning of the world have changed utterly. Though it takes centuries for the effects to work themselves out, the die is cast. God becomes invisible, present only in faith and in the preaching of his word. God becomes wholly transcendent, his immanent shine now gone - he disappears even from the winds. God becomes *One*: no longer visible, but pure spirit, his particularity and plurality disappear. God's animal nature and concrete reality vaporize and we are left with an idealized Being. With no presence in the world, with no sensate epiphanies to speak for Him, there must be an unbroken string of Witnesses to keep the faith alive. Lastly, by pushing off any *image*, God becomes *literal*: the One, True, Positivist God. Only the literal can be *believed* in. Images show themselves - they are what they reveal, and as an essential part of this showing, they have their being in relation to other such images, and thus their boundaries are labile, indistinct and sensuous. Only an ideal, abstract reality can be perfect, stable and simple enough to be *literal*. In short:

"God was only able to acquire his literal existence by paying the price of his substantiality, self-evidence, and worldly embodiment. Only by abandoning his sensate reality, only through his mystification, was he able to become absolute spirit and true God." [152]

The effects on the world He leaves behind are just as radical. Idols and the True God are born simultaneously. Both are equally distant from the mythical, imaginal reality from which they emerge with the stroke of Moses' sword. Giegerich writes:

Moses' pulverizing and melting down the Golden Calf is an assault on the imaginal quality of reality as such Moses reduces the reality of God to 'mere matter': dust instead of divine image. Just as God becomes a literal God, so does matter in a positivistic sense originate here. It is this act which gives rise for the first time to the idea of something earthly that is 'nothing but' earthly, for it is deprived of its imaginal shine. As God becomes worldless by obtaining his ab-soluteness, so earthly reality becomes God-less. [153]

We are witnessing here the birth of positivism: literal, monotheistic religion, and literalist, monomaniacal secular scientism. It took centuries for this divine image of reality to be completely destroyed, and yet the seeds of the destruction are clear. In this biblical tale we are present at the birth of the literal and the "elimination altogether of the imaginal from the prevailing ontology." [154] For Giegerich the catastrophic event that leads to the modern world lies at the very heart of the Judeo-Christian experience of transcendence.

There are three new elements that appear at this birth: God as a transcendent, purely spiritual intensity, matter as a literalized, secular "dust," and, born out of the psychic energy released by this "first fission" of the West, the Will to Power, in the form of the *ego*. [155] This will to power is what drives modern scientific technology and has produced most emblematically the horror that is the Bomb.

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There is a good deal more to Giegerich's story, but our focus is on the Incarnation. Given the radical split between God and the world, what is the meaning of the Incarnation for Giegerich? He stresses that Christianity alone of all the world's religions professes such a doctrine, and it is out of the Christian Middle Ages that the modern view of nature arises. What this uniquely Christian doctrine adds to the schism is the paradoxical union of its members. Speaking in psychological terms, Giegerich says that God

must somehow compensate for his lack of Being, his disappearance into the empyrean. But given the gulf separating God from matter, the only way to effect a contact is through the necessarily paradoxical union, the *perichoresis* or reciprocal interpenetration of the divine and the human. Giegerich calls the burial of the Logos in earthly flesh the "somatization of Being" and says that it provides the only possible mythical basis for our modern sense of the objective reality of the world of things and facts.[156] It is significant that Giegerich should choose *perichoresis* from among all the various ways of understanding the doctrine of *kenosis*. As we have seen, this term was used by John of Damascus, and in his hands the doctrine threatened the full permeation of the human by the divine. It threatened the obliteration of human weakness "by the invasive leakage of divine power." [157] This understanding of *kenosis* raises the specter of a divine force destroying and controlling the human nature of Christ, and so His essential weakness. This is indeed the point that Giegerich is making. This is the kind of *kenosis* that is really at work in the Western psyche, in spite of all the disputations of the theologians.

When the Logos becomes flesh, the flesh is "logolized." The embodiment of the transcendent, abstract spirit, in compensation for its loss of reality and immanence, has three results. Avens summarizes:

First, God's essence ceases to be only image-like, mythical. God wants to be positively 'someone,' a substantial being, a being in flesh. Second, the fact that this God must become flesh, shows that from the very outset he lacks something - that he is incorporeal, insubstantial, unreal. The natural gods never need to become flesh because they carry their corporeality in their image-like or imaginal nature. Third, in the event of the incarnation a twofold change takes place: a change in the essence of flesh and a simultaneous change in the essence of nature [W]e are witnessing here an event of awesome proportions: the flesh - in its oneness with the Logos - acquires a radically different nature. The very idea of flesh, earth, reality, is changed. The flesh is no longer natural, but flesh from above; indeed it is not flesh at all but, so to speak, a 'logolized' abstract flesh.[158]

The world is forever changed. What counts as real is no longer the phenomenal real of the mythical, ritual world, but the abstract, manufactured "second nature" of what will become technology. Technology is Logos, and technology is flesh - and it is what defines what is really real: "the flesh, after the Incarnation, has acquired a new meaning: it is 'made,' technological flesh, a second nature." [159]

Christianity attains to its truth only through the death of nature, through the dominion of the abstract and yet intensely, literally real world of technological devices whose actual purpose is to build God here on earth, in the flesh. This is what transcendence means for us: it is "a quality within reality, another style of reality" where the abstract, invisible "spiritual" laws of nature, the generalized abstractions of science, are given body through technique. The global domination of Western technology is also a fulfillment of Christian monotheism in its relentless attempt to unify, control and dominate the various viewpoints of the plural, human world. The God's-eye view of the satellite in space, the all-encompassing reach of global capitalism and the pervasive tentacles of consumer culture, TV and the Internet: all of this points to the dominance of "one absolute, total, all-encompassing God - the God of technology." Giegerich says "The event of technology as a whole means the end of eachness, the end of cosmos and the victory of universe Concrete objects, tables, cars, shoes, tin cans, plastic now have their nature in being throwaway objects, and only abstract Technology as a whole has divine value." [160] The aim of technology is a total obliteration of the human and of the natural. Avens comments, "Everything is a fusion of heaven and earth in one point In a word, the very being of the artificial (the technological) is power and violence-violation." [161]

The movement into the literal world of second nature is also an exteriorization of everything inner, interior. This is a turning inside out into a world of objects and history, a world of human-made devices that have undone the natural realm in its entirety - where we have given all the names. The Incarnation is the truth of the West, and can only be fulfilled by a total exteriorization of our inwardness - by a total immersion in earthly reality. We must learn to see, Giegerich says, that humanism, freedom, individuality and interiority are the "untruth of the West." We are bound by destiny, by the new truth of Being which technology inaugurates, and our only redemption lies in giving ourselves over wholly to this new ontology, this more-than-human power that will sweep us along in its wake whether we will it or not. We have viewed the world of technology as a secular realm only because we have tried to deny its sacred power - the power of the one God among us - and we can be saved only by accepting the fact that for us,

technology is God. "The nuclear Bomb *is* God." [162]

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One can imagine Corbin's horror, were he to hear this account. This is just the catastrophe he feared, just what the failed initiation could produce, just what one could expect from a *fana* of God into the world. The perils of the Incarnation include just this divinization of the human. Corbin saw that the doctrine of the God-Man can go wrong in precisely this way, so that the two natures of Christ collapse together, and in a monstrous inversion of the monophysite doctrine, Man sets himself up as God on Earth. [163] Corbin would say that Giegerich has read the Judeo-Christian story from the point of view of the dominant tradition. By doing so, he has been able to show us what this tradition has done. But it has also lead him into the errors of that tradition. Importantly, he misunderstands the *imaginal*. His interpretation of the "image" as well as his use of *imaginal*, differ essentially from Corbin's. In Corbin's theophanic cosmology, "image" always implies an interplay between immanence and transcendence; that is what guarantees the angelic function of beings and prevents idolatry. Giegerich views the origins of monotheism through the lens ground by the very technicians whose worldview is the result of the failed initiation. So he cannot understand the true meaning of theophany and of the *imaginal*. Thus Giegerich reads a modern disaster back into the rift between the Greek and the Hebrew.

But it is not the Abrahamic tradition that is at fault, only the literal, dogmatic, "Hegelian" versions of it. What Giegerich has done is to reveal to us clearly what these interpretations of the Incarnation and kenosis have produced. Surely Corbin would say that Giegerich reads the Incarnation aright - this *is* what has happened, we do live under the dominion of the Will to Power, in the shadow of the domination of the individual, and the violation of the world of the *anima mundi* given in the primordial Revelation. It is a rape of Nature and of humanity as well. Giegerich's view of the Incarnation expresses precisely what Corbin was most worried about - Faustian science, demonic inflation and the disappearance of the interiority of the individual. But for Giegerich this reality forces us to accept that Pan is in fact dead, Nature is violated, the air is fouled and the forests will not regrow. This is our fate, we have all contributed to its development, and *we* are the very enemy we pretend to loath. He says that we have no choice. In an echo of Vattimo, he thinks this is our destiny and we have no other option. We must accept the world of technology. It is, he says, the place where our being truly is. He writes "for us technology is 'our place of soul-making' our form of alchemical opus and our place of theophany." [164] But where Vattimo's theophanies appear in the ephemeral being of transient things, Giegerich's appear in warheads and thermonuclear detonations.

There is sense in his "realism," for we cannot bury our heads in the sand in escapism. And yet to believe that technology is the inevitable embodiment of the Will to Power invites the darkest visions of a technological world run amok. Haraway, who as we have heard writes of the promise that *may* be found in the image of the cyborg, sees the demonic side quite clearly. In her words, the cyborg is

the awful apocalyptic telos of the West's escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space From one perspective a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defense, about the final appropriation of women's bodies in a masculinist orgy of war. [165]

We can envision a technological future as Vattimo does, and as Haraway hopes we may, as the birthplace of multiple interpretations that dissolve all global powers in a happy chaotic welter of local powers and local rationalities. There is a good deal of such theorizing within the scientific community itself. [166] Then technology can perhaps represent the culmination of *kenosis* as love. In that case there are some points of agreement with Corbin's theology. There are then ways of understanding the kenotic foundations of normative Christianity in line with Corbin's views. But co-existing with these tendencies are those that Giegerich describes. If, as I suspect, it is the latter that are likely to prevail, then Corbin's prediction of catastrophe has come true with a vengeance.

There are clearly truths in both of these accounts of the modern world. But whichever way we read

technology, Corbin would stand firm against both Vattimo and Giegerich on one key issue: that there is no other option. Both Vattimo and Giegerich affirm our helplessness in the face of the Truth of Being. We are doomed either to accept "accomplished nihilism" or the inhuman powers of Second Nature. But to interpret this as the unalterable destiny of the West, as somehow the new Truth of Being[167] which we must accept in order to be in tune with our times - this invites the ultimate catastrophe, the ultimate Idolatry: worship of the Promethean human in the form of Technology and the complete and final occultation of even the memory of both the human being and of God. For Corbin the proclamation that our current sorry state is our destiny and in fact the truth of Being, is the greatest domination, the most dangerous dogmatism. Corbin stands for the freedom of the individual against the tides of the times. It is a stand against a world made by men, or a world, if so it be, made by the Fallen God, the absolute literalist, a God who is no longer hidden at all, whose body is the bomb, whose meaningless images now flood our lives. Corbin stands for the individual soul, in that community of beings accessible to us in the numinous shine and radiance of the Primordial Revelation.

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III. For Love of the World: Imagination, Language and the Primordial Revelation

I want to sketch out the rudiments of a response to these analyses of the history of the West, of technology and of our sense of who we are. Surely we have been shaped by the prophetic tradition out of which Christianity was born, but I share Corbin's belief that we are not trapped within the confines of history as it has developed. The direction I want to pursue owes a great deal to Corbin's vision of the Religions of Abraham, the Religions of the Book, and to those elements within those traditions that he so passionately defended. But I find it difficult embrace any of them. Their official forms have been too violent, too oppressive, too destructive. And the God of Abraham has been absent too long and too hideously in the century's genocides and catastrophes. And yet, I am profoundly stirred by Corbin's work, and want to count myself among "those who have chosen," I want to join in his battle against the forces of Ahriman, and in the search for glimmers of light in these dark times. Corbin's work on the roots of the Abrahamic tradition points the way towards an understanding of the relation between transcendence and immanence, thought and being, the spiritual and the ethical, that can perhaps allow us to begin formulate a response adequate to the conditions of humanity and the world in our time. We must pay close attention to what he has to tell us of the Imagination, the world, and the Word. Because the central question to be asked about the Religions of the Book is: After the unspeakable catastrophes of the 20th century, what *can* we say?

The Dome is Built Upon the Rock

We are in danger of becoming defined and dominated by our tools. Our powers and techniques are truly titanic: monstrous and divine at once. We are caught in a multitude of contradictions established by the powers we have unleashed. We are indeed made weak by what we have thought, for our tools *are* our thoughts "made flesh." We are overcome by these literally real abstractions in a global society of a generalized communication and the unfettered flow of *things*. This world without boundaries is wracked with violence, madness and despair - for overhanging it all is that final abstraction made real, that infinite counterweight to any physicist's Theory of Everything, the nuclear bomb. We find ourselves caught between the abyss of a horrible "freedom" and the finality of an annihilating constraint, amidst the wreckage of nature and of human hopes.

It is time for each of us to make a choice. If we are not to perish in the flux of history we must follow Corbin's lead and take a stand against it. His entire work constitutes an invitation to choose, not for ourselves, but for our Angel and for the Angel of the Earth. In order to gain access to the experience of soul of the world upon which our own souls depend we need a method, a *theoria*. To take a stand against the powers that threaten to engulf us we need a counter-technology. We need techniques to oppose the immense powers that threaten to annihilate all the rich diversities of the world, both cultural and natural. And we need the means to resist the perils of nihilism that threaten to weaken our determination,

undermine our sense of the ultimate worth of the human soul, and that give support to the insidious darknesses that dissolve us from within.

Among the lovers of the world, among the ecologists, among the "greens," there has long been recognition that our species has overstepped its bounds, that our actions are disrupting the physical and biological systems upon which our lives depend. We see the need to reinvent human political economies, to move beyond the economic systems of the developed nations. Not in order to revert to an idealized non-technological past, but to move towards a world where the human connection to the earth is understood, and given its due. We have to envision a post-technological world, a post-modern world where human culture is no longer conceived in separation from the natural world.

The attempt to establish humility, respect and reverence for the matrix of life as the guiding principles for a new conception of human culture has been called "posthistoric primitivism." [168] *Posthistoric* because our vision of the enormous diversity of human cultures over vast expanses of time and space means that we can stand now outside the limits of a narrowly human conception of history. We can see ourselves as embedded in non-human nature, and our present lives as extensions of a pre-historic, Paleolithic past. *Primitive*, because we can recognize the primordial bases of human communal and individual life. As the anthropologist Stanley Diamond has said, "the sickness of civilization consists in its failure to incorporate (and only then to move beyond the limits of) the primitive." [169] Even Giegerich suggests that our situation would not perhaps have become so desperate had we been able from the outset to see our technologies not as part of the secular realm, and so merely utilitarian and unconnected to the life of the soul or the spirit, but as a living part of the psyche of the world. We might then have given them the attention due to any expression of the *anima mundi*. We might have taken the care to develop humane and appropriate technologies that could have helped to usher in a new kind of primitivism. [170]

The situation is very different from the perspective of traditional Islam. In Islam Nature itself is the primordial Revelation. Thus as Corbin often repeats, God can say "I was a Hidden Treasure and I longed to be known, so I created the world." The world itself is the original manifestation of the Face of Beauty. The Qur'an says "Whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God." [171] The revealed Book is replete with cosmic imagery, more so perhaps than any other sacred text, and everything in that cosmos is a sign of God. As the last Revelation, part of the message of Islam is to restore the first Revelation, the miracle of creation, to center stage, since over time it has more and more come to be taken for granted. [172]

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But the return to the primordial in Islam does not signify what in the modern West is sometimes disparagingly termed "a return to nature." The Islamic Revelation is a laying bare of the Face of God, by means of the "reminder" that is the Book. As Norman O. Brown has argued, the Qur'an, by means of its pulverization of human language, is more avant-garde, more post-modern than *Finnegan's Wake*. In its structure, its language, its allusiveness, its ambiguities, its imagery and its poetry "the Qur'an reveals human language crushed by the power of the divine." [173] God's Word unmakes all human meanings, all the proud constructions of civilization, of high culture, and returns all the luxuriant cosmic imagery back to the lowly and the oppressed, so that in their imaginations it can be made anew. Brown says "The Islamic imagination, [as] Massignon has written, should be seen as the product of a desperate regression back to the primitive, the eternal pagan substrate of all religions - that proteiform cubehouse, the Ka'ba - as well as to a primitive pre-Mosaic monotheism of Abraham. The Dome is built upon the Rock." The way to start a new civilization, Brown says, "is not to introduce some new refinement in high culture but to change the imagination of the masses" [174]

To effect this transformation, to liberate the imagination from the control of the powerful who would manipulate all our thoughts and desires requires the moment of nothingness that is the result of the encounter with the *Deus absconditus*. It requires the destruction of human meaning that Joyce called the "abnihilation of the etym." [175] This is part of the task of hermeneutics. In Corbin's vision, the soul and the world are not divisible, and hermeneutics is their simultaneous development. Speech and song are the

primordial technologies of the soul. A counter-technology based on this insight would consist in an attempt to reclaim the roots of language, of the soul and of the world from their domination by the powers of abstraction and universalization, whether these are technological, economic or political. These roots are to be sought not in the universal, abstract and general, but in the individual, the oral, the local and the particular.[176] This provides the answer to the question that may be the central question of the Abrahamic prophetic tradition: Who is Khidr?[177] There is a hint of the answer in his name: Khidr is the "Verdant One." [178] He is the Green Man. He is the Angel of the Face and the Angel of the Earth as hermeneut: the *Verus Propheta* revealed to each soul in the form in which each is able to receive it.

It is to this hermeneutics that we now turn.

Psychocosmology: Alchemies of the Word and of the World

If we recognize the realm of the imaginal as the mediating world between the purely physical and the purely spiritual then the schism between them can begin to heal. Matter need no longer be confused with the demonic. Indeed everything becomes material.[179] What had been conceived as spiritual reality becomes the realm of subtle bodies, and there is a continuum from the dense to the subtle that corresponds to an intensification of being. It is possible for any of the beings belonging to the world of Light to become more real, more themselves, more individual and intense in their very being. We begin to suspect then that the true meaning of the word *substance* is fading from our consciousness. We tend to think of the spiritual as disembodied, diaphanous, even abstract. We set spirit on one side, and matter on the other, and increasingly only the material, the manipulable, has any real importance, any "substance." But when priority is given to the imaginal, the dichotomy between substance and spirit collapses. The spiritual *is* substantial. It is not disembodied. It is here, it is now. This is how we can reclaim a sense of the substantial presence and the concrete significance of human life.[180] The "real work" for us is simultaneously a spiritual, ethical and physical struggle. Like can only be known by like: this means that thought and being are inseparable, that ethics and perception are complementary. The form of the soul is the form of your world. This fundamental unity of the faculties of human cognition and the world to which they give access *is* that eternal pagan substrate of all religion. As we saw earlier, Corbin speaks of the "cognitive function of sympathy" as basic to the revelation of correspondences, the "balances" between the worlds visible to the eyes of flesh and the worlds visible to the eyes of fire. This sympathy is at once perceptual and cognitive and requires an attitude towards reality that the modern world has nearly completely forgotten. It is a stance towards reality that gives weight to the display of the image, denying the schism between the inner and the outer, the subjective and the objective. All the prophets have been sent to remind us of it. And in the Islamic view there have been no people to whom there have not been sent messengers. We can trace this substrate right back to the Paleolithic. In recalling the poetic or cognitive function of sympathy, Corbin is calling us to recover what the poet Gary Snyder calls the "mythological present." Snyder writes:

To live in the 'mythological present' in close relation to nature and in basic but disciplined body/mind states suggests a wider-ranging imagination and a closer subjective knowledge of one's own physical properties than is usually available to men living (as they themselves describe it) impotently and inadequately in 'history' - their mind-content programmed, and their caressing of nature complicated by the extensions and abstractions which elaborate tools are Poets, as few others, must live close to the world that primitive men are in: the world, in its nakedness, which is fundamental for all of us - birth, love, death; the sheer fact of being alive In one school of Mahayana Buddhism, they talk about the 'Three Mysteries.' These are Body, Voice and Mind. The things that are what living *is* for us, in life. Poetry is the vehicle of the mystery of Voice. The universe, as they sometimes say, is a vast breathing body.[181]

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In Ibn 'Arabi's cosmology, which was so crucial for Corbin, it is the Breath of the All-Merciful that unites the Cosmos, God and Language into a single extraordinary animate system of perpetual descent and return. For Ibn 'Arabi "[I]anguage is an articulation of the breath It is an image of the self and of the world outside the self." [182] The imaginal world of the breath and human speech expresses the creative power of the divine form 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.

It is essential for the hermeneutics we are seeking to grasp the fact of the embodied spirituality of the Word in Islam. The Qur'an is first and foremost a *recited* text. Nasr writes:

The whole experience of the Qur'an for Muslims remains to this day first of all an auditory experience and is only later associated with reading in the ordinary sense of the world. There is an ever-present, orally heard, and memorized Qur'an in addition to the written version of the Sacred Text, an auditory reality which touches the deepest chords in the souls of the faithful, even if they are unable to read the Arabic text.[183]

The power of the word, its poetic force, is based first of all upon public vocalization, not internalized, private reading. The Revelation of the Qur'an 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 very 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.[184]

And there is no distinction between the sacred and the secular in Islam. There cannot be a merely utilitarian realm where a secular technology can get a foothold. There is no realm of life that is outside the religion. All the details of human existence are subject to ritual prescriptions.[185] In the figure of Mohammad we find an exemplar of the perfect human that Christians often find hard to understand, raised as they have been with the image of Christ as the archetype of holiness. Mohammad was a husband many times over, father, confidant, warrior, teacher, politician, businessman, prophet and mystic: the fullness of human worldliness *and* spirituality, the perfection of that breathing body and microcosm of the world which is the human self. He provides a model for the substantial struggle of human life, for *gnosis* as the transformational, salvational knowledge that alters the networks of connections linking the microcosm and the macrocosm.

The phenomenology of the imaginal is in full accord with this essential embodiment of Islamic spirituality. "Imagination embodies. It cannot conceive of God or anything else save in concrete terms." [186] It is characteristic of Qur'anic Arabic that it is concrete: "the Arabic of the Qur'an always has a concrete side to it, and this is true of Arabic in general" [187] The language of the Qur'an is the foundation of Islamic spirituality. And so it is that for Ibn 'Arabi "it is in the world's concrete realities that God is found, not its abstractions." [188] On his view both reason and imagination are required for adequate knowledge of the self, the world and God. Without reason we can easily be misled into delusion. And yet for us it is his emphasis on the imagination and the way that it prevents the rupture between matter and spirit that is definitive of our tradition. Chittick writes:

imagination perceives that the symbol is identical with what it symbolizes, creation is the same as the Creator, the form is none other than the meaning, the body is the spirit, the locus of manifestation is nothing but God as manifest, and the image is the object. This perception is unmediated by any rational process - it is a tasting, an unveiling, a witnessing, an insight. It is best exemplified in human experience precisely by concrete experience - tasting food, being carried away by music, falling in love. Theologically, imagination, achieves an incontrovertible understanding that the creature is God

The mysteries of the universe do not lie primarily in the universal laws and principles, even though these are mysterious enough. What is most mysterious and miraculous about the universe is its concrete particularity, its every object and inhabitant, each of which is ultimately unfathomable.[189]

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For Ibn 'Arabi language, imagination and the concrete embodiment of the cosmos are linked together through the flow of the Breath of the All-Merciful. And perhaps by believing in the vitality and truth of this worldview we can begin to recover the meaningful substance of the work of human life. Perhaps we can, as Corbin did, learn from the way Islam safeguards the primordial unity of self and world in a sensate, imaginative sympathy. It is this that he saw as the primordial vision uniting the monotheisms of the West into one True Church, living embodiment of the *Harmonia Abrahamica*.

We can perhaps begin by taking language very seriously indeed. We can acknowledge the psycho-cosmic

reach of language and its ontological force, its ability to transform the soul and the world. There is ample precedent for this in the Christian tradition, especially in what Corbin called the "tradition of hermeneutics" that stretches from Jacob Boehme through J. G. Hamann and continues right up to Heidegger and the contemporary world.

To attempt to learn to speak a language based upon the cognitive sympathy that lies at the root of religion would provide a means of warding off the dangers of abstraction and the dogmas that accompany it. Such a poetics could help us to live in the mythological present, in what Corbin called a realized eschatology: that is, one that occurs *right now*. In his book on Ibn 'Arabi, Corbin tells of a conversation with 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 'Arabi would have relished it.[190]

Corbin devoted many pages to the work of Emanuel Swedenborg. For Swedenborg as for Corbin, 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*, just as in the Sufism of Najm Kubra. David Loy, an authority on Buddhism, writes of 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, according to Swedenborg, and *nirvâna* is to be attained here and now, according to â,kyamuni Buddha." [191]

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. Not curved in upon ourselves, but open to the tastes and textures of the world as the Manifestation of the Real. And the breath of our words is essential because they reflect the images that engender the angelic function of beings.

A language is concrete, like Arabic, when the words are pregnant with images.[192] Poetic language in any tongue can be concrete in this way. Image opens onto image, landscape onto landscape, stitching the inner and outer together and enacting the sympathies between beings by means of perceptions of the subtle relations that link all things. This requires subtlety and attention and perceptual skills that have atrophied in us from lack of use.

We have Freud and Jung to thank for taking seriously the procession of images, the theater of the life of the soul, for the "talking cure" that recognizes the power of language to transform, and for the *amplificatio* that extends our reach into the unknown places where our souls and the world interact. But, as James Hillman has argued for many years now, we need to move beyond the inner-directed emphasis of much psychotherapy to the complex and difficult task of working in that intermediate realm of the alchemical, of subtle bodies, where the geographies of nature and the landscapes of the human soul interpenetrate. We have to learn to inhabit a world where the human and the more-than-human meet in mutual presence.

We who live in a world of real abstractions have seen the products of abstract and dogmatic thought with little sympathy for human or any other beings. Knowing the inhumanities and excesses of a world so constructed, we can turn to the more difficult task of transformation that the thing-like-ness of concrete thought implies. We can turn now back to the real work of being human.

Reading the Wilderness

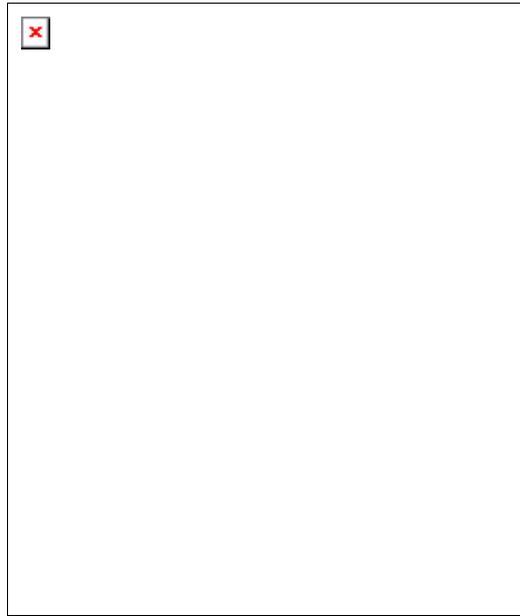
We have lived too long within a world of our own making. We have lived too long within a language of

the merely human. To keep our internals open we have to learn to read and write ourselves out of ourselves, and uncurl ourselves back into the world.[193] This is the task set to us by Khidr, the Green Man, the hermeneut at the meeting place of the two seas. Language is not a tool for communication that belongs to us. Language is not an exclusively human ability at all. It is a field of meanings and intentions that we inhabit. Human language grows out of the world itself. We speak because the world speaks. And because language and the symbols upon which it depends are the Breath of God, it has the power to penetrate to the very heart of things. Language in the broadest sense is creative because the world was spoken into being. Because of this, reading can be, in the words of Ivan Illich, "an ontologically remedial technique,"[194] a means of transformation, of *gnosis*.

It seems clear the habits and skills of literate culture are being lost. We may indeed be entering a time that George Steiner calls the After-word. The habits of reading and the culture of the book are on the decline in modern technological society. Both Steiner and Illich have somewhat wistfully proposed that perhaps as the universities turn themselves into the handmaidens of business, technology and the military, we may yet preserve cells of humanist resistance, "Houses of Reading" where the habits of mind of a bookish civilization can endure. I believe with them that something like this is essential for the preservation of our humanity, essential if we are to take a stand against the ongoing violations that are the annihilation of the person and the rape of nature. But it is not enough. Khidr is not a humanist. He is a messenger from far beyond.[195] The world that he opens up to us is infinite. He announces that the cosmos itself is a "house of reading" - it is the Primordial Temple of the Word. The guardians of high culture, of literature and the humanities, have for a long time not read this book at all. They have been too curved in upon themselves. And when it is read, as it is by natural scientists, it is too often only in the most abstract languages of domination and control. The cultures of the After-word will not just be illiterate, but also de-natured, dysfunctional and condemned to occupy the world of Second Nature that Giegerich describes.

There are as many kinds of literature as there are kinds of attentiveness.[196] In 1907 the unorthodox psychoanalyst and physician Georg Groddeck made a distinction that is useful here.[197] He said that there is a kind of poetry, of literature, that seems to come from inside human consciousness and brings us "news of the human mind." Groddeck suggested that European culture after around 1600 became increasingly absorbed in this kind of attention, and that the resulting literature, having reached its apogee in Shakespeare, is now in decline and becoming more extreme in order to compensate for its essential bankruptcy. At the opposite end of the spectrum is a kind of poetics based on attentiveness, not to the human, but to the more-than-human, to what Groddeck calls *Gott-natur*, a divine instinctuality. This kind of attentiveness and the art it produces bring us "news of the universe." Groddeck found this attention sometimes in Goethe. He thought it represented something new beginning in the West. I hope he was right, and I think it is here that we may look for an element of the counter-technology we are seeking. Robert Bly comments: "Literature and art that attempt to reopen the channels between human beings and nature, and to make our fear of her dark side conscious, help us to see her without fear, hatred or distance." [198]

What are the techniques we need? We already know that we must be willing to allow the world to speak, willing to seek correspondences between human consciousness and what we might call the consciousnesses in the natural world. We already know that this means being open to images as the theater of the world. To open ourselves to the news of the universe requires a poet's hermeneutic attentiveness, and this requires some disciplines we are sorely lacking. We do need something like "houses of reading," to serve as cells of resistance to the dominion of those who control the post-literate culture of the wholly un-natural. But these would be half-open dwellings, opening outward beyond the confines of the *ego*, beyond the range of human culture and onto the mysteries of the more-than-human world. To fully understand the significance of the task we set ourselves, we must recognize with Jung that these untamed regions do not correspond to the boundaries we have set up between the inner and the outer. The wild is not identical with the world of physical nature. And the tame is not restricted to a protected enclave within the human person.



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The reading of the world that we need to learn has to be active and engaged. It must take the form of a dialogue that begins with a careful listening to the voices that speak to us from beyond the bounds of the known. We have to engage in a gentle kind of call and response, a reading that calls in turn for speech, and perhaps for writing, or other kinds of making, and that always turns back to listening. We can learn aspects of this kind of discipline from children, from certain kinds of natural science, and from poets and artists. George Steiner's profound study of the grounds of meaning in language and art are of tremendous importance here. We need a theory, a *theoria*, not just of meaning in poetry and literature, but in the perception of all reality, and Steiner's suggestions are fertile. He recalls to us yet again the roots of *theoria*. "It tells," he writes,

of concentrated insight, of an act of contemplation focused patiently on its object. But it pertains also to the deeds of witness performed by the legates sent, in solemn embassy, to observe the oracles spoken or the rites performed at the sacred Attic games. A 'theorist' or 'theoretician' is one who is disciplined in observance, a term itself charged with a twofold significance of intellectual-sensory perception and religious or ritual conduct. Thus theory is inhabited by truth when it contemplates its object unwaveringly and when, in the observant process of such contemplation, it beholds, it takes grasp of the often confused and contingent images, associations, suggestions, possibly erroneous, to which the object gives rise.[199]

All truth in perception begins with this "theory." This kind of attention is intensely relational because it is felt, it is sensuous, it is embodied. The encounter with intelligible form as presented in art requires that the object be experienced as a real presence, and in this encounter the "poem, the statue, the sonata are not so much read, viewed or heard as they are lived." [200] Art thus "makes sense" of the world. But *aesthesis* refers to the perception of the world we have not made, as much as to the world that we have. We who are so removed from the more-than-human need this kind of contact with the primordial grounds of life. And crucially, Steiner understands that the perception of any meaningful form is grounded in the encounter with a real presence, a transcendence, beyond the human. The perception of meaning in art, and we can extend this to the world as a whole, is based upon the "axiom of dialogue." [201] We are always, when we are truly paying attention, in communion with what lies beyond us. Steiner writes, "it is, I believe, poetry, art and music which relate us most directly to that in being which is not ours." [202] As we begin to learn what it may mean to read and write the world, to hear the news of the universe, we would do well to hear these words. [203]

Another feature of the reading we must learn is that it is attentive to *place*. Bodies occupy places, they are located. This we know from the ecologists. You need to know where you live: to know the trees, the flowers, the bedrock on which we build, where the water comes from and where it goes. But human beings are not only located; they *locate*. Corbin says

"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." [204]

Both of these aspects of our place in the world must be given their due. The inner and the outer interpenetrate. You cannot know who you are without knowing the terrain you occupy; and yet you cannot truly know what your orientation is within that terrain without knowing who you are. The ecologists tell us we are defined by our world. Corbin tells us that our world *is* who we are. Our inner landscapes define our orientation in the world just as surely as the geographies of the outer world. The boundaries of the world as we have learned to see them are disrupted. To realize this is threatening. There are few safe havens in this task of being human. [205]

To cope with the threats and challenges of the encounter with the worlds beyond the *ego*, what we would learn in the houses of reading would have to include an ancient virtue: *ascesis*. There are three aspects of this discipline to consider. First, an asceticism of the body. Not the asceticism that Corbin so vehemently attacks, the furious, rejecting asceticism that creates a chasm between the object of love and the transcendence that is imminent in it. [206] This asceticism cannot be incompatible with a passionate love for the things of this world. An asceticism of the body would, for us in the developed world, mean a refusal to participate in the excesses of the consumer culture. But this is really the easy part. Ivan Illich uses *ascesis* in another sense to mean "courageous, disciplined, self-critical renunciation, accomplished in community." He proposes an "epistemological asceticism," a purging of corrupting concepts that give reality to abstraction, and tear us away from our roots in embodied, local, communal realities. [207] When we live immersed in the modern world of generalized communication, where every natural boundary is violated, we are constantly assaulted by images, messages, ideas, *all* of them having their origins outside the boundaries of our responsibility and control, all of them having been crafted by someone for some purpose of their own, and all of which in the end serve to manipulate us. The profound and magical news of the human that Shakespeare once brought, has now degenerated, at the end of literacy, into advertising and mere "news."

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Epistemological asceticism cannot entail a refusal to entertain novelty or new ideas. But I have lived at the mercy of the tides of intellectual fashion for long enough to know that the tremendously difficult task of renunciation is based on an ability to discriminate and to refuse - to have a keen and attentive sense for what is destructive, dangerous and dominating. This requires a matured sense of freedom and beauty. Is this teachable? Is it "art?" Perhaps it is the basis for art; an art we have to learn in our half-open dwellings of reading.

The third aspect of asceticism is poverty: having little, needing little, living rooted in the mystical poverty of the dervish. It is only through realizing the poverty of the *ego* that attentiveness to the news of the universe is possible. There is an intimate connection between asceticism and aesthesis. Each requires subtle discrimination, silent attention with all the senses, and careful, watchful feeling. These operations can best be accomplished in spaces that open freely onto mystery and the unknown, that open onto darkness. Remember Sarah Coakley's call for an *asceticism* appropriate to contemplative, wordless prayer, that quiet vulnerable waiting that opens onto the dark knowing beyond speech.

The *psyche*, the *anima mundi* that we find in nature often has this open-ness to darkness evident as a kind of sadness. Bly writes "The psychic tone of nature strikes many people as having some melancholy in it. The tone of nature is related to what human beings call 'grief,' what Lucretius calls 'the tears of things,' what in Japanese poetry is called *mono no aware*, the slender sadness." [208] We have encountered this before in Mir Damad's perception of the silent clamor of beings in their metaphysical distress. All things *are* only as made-to-be. All things exist in poverty and it is this that opens them to mystery, to the angelic function of beings. That is their ability to lead beyond themselves as symbols revealed to the lover, to the hermeneut, as tokens of transcendence. This may well be another way of saying that all things have some

kind of consciousness, that there is a vast web of images tying together the inner and the outer. As consciousness is to supraconsciousness, so being is to mystical poverty.

The hermeneut and the lover, you see, must keep the darkness very close, always. For it is the function of the *Absconditum*, the forever and necessarily hidden God, to open the world for us at each instant, making everything new. The ever-present "moment of nothingness" hovering just beyond the horizon insures the pervasive transcendence of the world. Only the *Deus absconditum* guarantees the eternal dissolution of dogmas and underlies the necessity of a "permanent hermeneutics," the unending reading and writing of the soul of the world, the ceaseless uncovering of harmonies between the worlds within and the worlds without. This provides the setting for the human journey towards itself and the world in which it is truly at home. We are not spirits lost in a world of matter. Both spirit and matter are abstractions born of reason. Closer to the mysterious and substantial truth is Corbin's image of a soul seeking its Angel, in an endless quest through immense landscapes in a cosmos that knows no bounds.

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[1] Jambet, 1981, pp. 62-3. My translation.

[2] *ibid.*, pp. 40-41

[3] Corbin, 1994, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, [ML] p. 7

[4] See Waley, 1991

[5] Born in Khiva in what is now Uzbekistan in 1146, he traveled widely before returning to Khiva, where he was killed defending the town against the Mongols in 1220.

[6] One of Kubra's 12 chief disciples he fled west at his master's insistence, eventually to Asia Minor where he had contacts with Rumi and his followers. He died in Baghdad in 1256.

[7] Born in Semnan, east of Teheran, in 1261. After undergoing a spiritual crisis at the age of 15, he devoted his life to Sufism. He spent most of his life in Semnan and died in 1336.

[8] Corbin, 1977a, *Spiritual Body & Celestial Earth*, [SB], p. 81

[9] ML, p. 60

[10] Najm Kubra quoted in Waley, p. 84

[11] Every Sufi Order specifies a particular method. The rules of the *Kubrawiyyah* include the Eight Principles of Junayd of Bagdad: ritual purity, fasting, silence, seclusion, invocation (*dhikr*), absolute devotion to the shaykh, repression of all thoughts and impulses as they occur, and surrender to the will of God. The disciple must at all costs avoid the impulse to desire visionary experience - this comes directly from the lower soul. (See Waley, p. 83)

[12] *ibid.*, p. 73

[13] See Nasr, 1995, also Sells, 1999

[14] SB, p. x

[15] ML, p. 75

[16] Corbin, 1969, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, [CI], p. xi

[17] See ML., pp. 124-125

[18] *ibid.*, p. 125

[19] CI, p. 55

[20] Although there are some significant differences in the various doctrines of the masters these are outweighed by the similarities. Najm Razi notably places the Black Light at the summit of the path.

[21] See SB, pp. 10 & 13. Corbin's view of the essential purity and goodness of the bodily state is in accord with Zoroastrian beliefs. It is only by admixture with Ahrimanic darkness that the boundaries are breached and the body is defiled. In its original state, to which it can return, the body is a source of intelligent life and good action. Williams writes that "purity is felt to be an intensely fecund state: the higher the state of purity, the more intense may be the impregnation by the creative forces of the divine beings." The Zoroastrians held it to be a duty to make the body an abode for the gods. See Williams, 1997.

[22] ML, pp. 65-66

[23] CI, p. 143

[24] *ibid.*, p. 282

[25] ML, p. 103

[26] *ibid.* p. 150, n. 64

[27] Corbin, 1981b. My translation.

[28] ML p. 108

[29] *ibid.* p. 117

[30] *ibid.*, p. 112

[31] *ibid.*, p. 112-113

[32] SB, p. xiv

[33] ML, p. 127

[34] *ibid.*, p. 120

[35] *ibid.*, p. 127

[36] *ibid.*, p. 128

[37] Mark 15:33-34 (RSV)

[38] Matthew 27:51 (RSV)

[39] 4: 156

[40] CI, p. 292, n. 10

[41] Corbin, 1960 [AV], p. 92

[42] Corbin, 1977b.

[43] *ibid.*, p. 11. My translation.

[44] *ibid.*, p. 15. My translation.

[45] SB, p. 106

[46] CI, p. 107

[47] *ibid.*, p. 292

[48] Corbin, 1981a, p. 73. My translation.

[49] Sells, 1994. The effect of A.O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* on scholarly interpretations of the hierarchic cosmology was immense. Sells points out that one of the few scholars to appreciate the apophatic component in Neoplatonism was Emile Bréhier (Sells, 1994, p. 226, n. 5). In the 1920's while he studied with both Étienne Gilson and Louis Massignon, Corbin attended Bréhier's lectures on the relation between Plotinus and the Upanishads. He comments "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?" Jambet, 1981, p. 39.

[50] Sells, p. 31

[51] CI, p. 327, n. 16

[52] Quoted in Sells, p. 44

[53] *ibid.*, 47

[54] The fusion of the Divine and the human in the person of Jesus Christ has implications for the meaning of the person, the nature of salvation and the relation of the material creation to the transcendent Creator. Schliermacher identified the four central "heresies" that help define these relations. Docetism is the claim that Christ is not human, but only an apparition of the Divine. Ebionitism is the opposing belief that Christ was fully human, with no true divinity, thus merely another Prophet. Pelagianism is the claim that man can redeem himself by means of his own efforts and that the grace of God through Jesus Christ is unnecessary, which suggests that there is nothing inherently evil or unredeemable in human nature. The contrary heresy is an understanding of Manicheanism that contends that matter is inherently evil and unredeemable, thus that the natural world and its creatures are creatures of the Devil. Corbin's theophanic theology links the "Ebionite" view and the docetic. It denies the split between the divine and the merely human that is the basis of Schliermacher's scheme. Christ was human, but as the Anointed One, was the locus of manifestation of the *Christos Angelos*, whose appearance is dependent upon the mode of being of the individual who sees Him. To those who cannot see, he is a man. To those who can, he is a Figure of

Light.

[55] See Pelikan, 1971, Ch. 4

[56] ML, p. 133

[57] Corbin, 1981b, p. 24 My translation. Also, Corbin, 1977b, pp. 13-14

[58] *loc. cit.*

[59] SB, p. 14

[60] CW6: 62

[61] *Peri psyche* III 8 432b20

[62] *Ennead* VI, 5, 7

[63] See Sells, Chap. 1, esp. pp. 17-32

[64] Partridge, Eric, *Dictionary of English Etymology*, s.v. *theater*

[65] Deck, 1967

[66] Liddell & Scott, s.v. *peplum*

[67] Corbin 1976, p. 12

[68] *loc. cit.*

[69] CW12: 403 & n. 3

[70] CW15: 37-38 & n. 46

[71] CW16: 486

[72] Corbin repeatedly cites Jung on this issue of the subtle body. See Corbin SB, p. 11 & n. 24, and p. 98 & n. 69; Jung CW12: 393 ff. & CW15: 173 ff.; On the *physika* and the *mystika* see e.g. CW12: 332.

[73] ML, p. 135

[74] Jung, CW12, Chapter 5

[75] ML, pp. 137-138

[76] Corbin, 1977b, p. 14. My translation.

[77] Philippians 2: 6-11 (RSV)

[78] ML, p. 127 and n. 133a, p. 159

[79] For what follows see Coakley, 1996

[80] *ibid.*, p. 85

[81] *ibid.*, p. 87

[82] This would be "Ebionite" in Schliermacher's sense, but not in Corbin's or in that of the original Ebionites, for whom the Prophets are special bearers of the Spirit, and therefore rather more than "mere" human exemplars.

[83] For reasons of simplicity and organization, I do not follow Coakley's numbered list of meanings of *kenosis*. I combine her numbers 1 & 2 and omit her number four until later.

[84] *ibid.*, p. 90

[85] *loc. cit.* Of course the really interesting question from Corbin's point of view would be precisely why the docetic interpretation lost out to the Incarnationist.

[86] d. 444

[87] *ibid.*, p. 91

[88] *ibid.*, p. 91

[89] CW12: 29

[90] Coakley, p. 92

[91] *loc. cit.*

[92] *ibid.*, p. 93

[93] *ibid.*, p. 94

[94] Quoted in Loofs, 1915. This is a translation of the original German article that Corbin refers to in his footnote.

[95] McGrath, 1997, p. 355

[96] Coakley, p. 88

[97] *ibid.*, p. 89

[98] *ibid.*, p. 99

[99] *loc. cit.*

[100] See, for instance, Murata & Chittick, 1994

[101] McGrath., p. 331-332

[102] See for instance, Hampson, 1996; Loades, 1990; Russell, 1985.

[103] Quoted in Papanikolaou, 2000

[104] Hampson, 1990, pp. 218-219

[105] Coakley, p. 84

[106] *ibid.*, p. 108

[107] *loc. cit.* It is perhaps not surprising that this 'driving of wedges' should occur in the 12th century since this marks the point in the history of reading where an embodied textuality open to the Word of God began to be replaced with a more modern experience of "text" and reading. See Illich, 1993.

[108] *ibid.*, p. 109

[109] *ibid.*, p. 110; and 2 Corinthians 12: 9

[110] Papanikolaou, 2000.

[111] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 9

[112] *ibid.*, pp. 5-6

[113] von Balthasar quoted in *ibid.*, p. 6

[114] *ibid.*, p. 7. On the idea of the Trinity as Corbin develops it, see his treatment of Andrei Rublev's *Old Testament Trinity* and the idea of the philoxeny of Abraham in Corbin 1969, pp. 130-131 & n. 75, pp. 315-316.

[115] Nichols, 2000, p. 3

[116] Nichols, 1998, p. 16

[117] Greeley, 2000, p. 5

[118] *ibid.*, p. 1

[119] Nichols, 1998, p. 2

[120] Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Vol. I, p. 22. Quoted in Nichols, 1998, p. 3

[121] Nichols, 1998, p. 43. Notice that this does not mean that Balthasar is an advocate of the sufficiency of the "historical Christ."

[122] My reading of Vattimo is based on the analysis presented in Frascati-Lochhead, 1998.

[123] *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 124, in Nietzsche, 1982

[124] Cohn, 1993.

[125] *The Gay Science*, p. 447, in *op. cit.*

[126] *ibid.*, p. 448

[127] See Heidegger, 1977. Vattimo has his own novel interpretation of Heidegger, and of Heidegger's

understanding of Nietzsche, as well as of the way both of them understand modern science and technology. See Frascati-Lochhead.

[128] Frascati-Lochhead, p. 154

[129] See Hayles, 1999, p. xxxx, for instance.

[130] Frascati-Lochhead, pp. 140-147

[131] Vattimo, 1997, p. 48. Quoted in Frascati-Lochhead, p. 156.

[132] *op. cit.*, p. 48. Quoted in Frascati-Lochhead, p. 156

[133] *op. cit.*, p. 49.

[134] *op. cit.*, pp. 49-50. Translation slightly altered in accordance with that given by Frascati-Lochhead, p. 157

[135] Corbin, 1973, pp. 443-444. My translation.

[136] Quoted in Frascati-Lochhead, p. 158

[137] *op. cit.*, p. 158

[138] He is following Heidegger's use of some similar key terms, but we cannot make these comparisons here.

[139] Quoted in Frascati-Lochhead, p. 193.

[140] Jambet, 1981, p. 36

[141] My analysis relies on Giegerich's writings in English and especially on Avens' paraphrase of Giegerich, 1983. See Giegerich, 1983, 1985, 1987 and Avens, 1987.

[142] Giegerich mentions China in particular, but the Islamic world also had the requisite wealth and knowledge.

[143] Giegerich, 1988, p. 1

[144] Giegerich, 1985, p. 2

[145] *ibid.*, p. 4

[146] Exodus 32: 27

[147] Giegerich thus stands within that part of the phenomenological tradition that sees common ground between Jung and Heideggerian phenomenology. See Roger Brooke 1991. Brooke comments that "what analytical psychology calls images, phenomenology, following Heidegger, calls things" (Brooke, p. 149).

[148] Avens, 1987, p. 5

[149] *ibid.*, p. 6

[150] Giegerich, 1985, p. 8

[151] *ibid.*, p. 6

[152] *ibid.*, p. 9

[153] *ibid.*, pp. 9-10

[154] *ibid.*, p. 11

[155] Vattimo, and Frascati-Lochhead following his lead, provide critiques of the idea of technology as Will to Power in Nietzsche and Heidegger and in modern feminist epistemologies. See esp. Frascati-Lochhead, 1998, Ch. 5. This is pertinent here since there is much in Giegerich's account that seems influenced by Heidegger's view of technology.

[156] Avens, 1987, p. 6

[157] Coakley, 1996, pp. 92-93

[158] Avens, 1987, p. 7

[159] *loc cit.*

[160] *ibid.*: p. 14

[161] *loc. cit.*

[162] Giegerich, 1985, p. 23

[163] Corbin, 1981c, p. 153

[164] Quoted in Avens, 1987, p. 17

[165] Quoted in Frascati-Lochhead, 1998, pp. 142-143. N. Catherine Hayles (1999) has thought very deeply about these issues and treats Haraway's views at some length.

[166] A "post-modern" view of scientific culture stressing the inherent pluralism of scientific thought is found in the works of Jacob Bronowski, Paul Feyerabend, Clifford Geertz, Stuart Kauffman and Stephen Toulmin, for instance.

[167] Giegerich's style is reminiscent of Heidegger's later ontology. For a critique of the essentialism of the later Heidegger's view of technology see Caputo, 2000.

[168] Oelschlager, 1991, Ch. 1

[169] Diamond, 1974, p. 129

[170] Avens, 1987, p. 10

[171] II: 115

[172] Lings, 1981, p. 23

[173] Seyyed Hossein Nasr quoted in Brown, 1991

[174] Brown, 1991, 160

[175] *Finnegan's Wake*, cited in Brown, *op. cit.*

[176] See Toulmin, 1990

[177] Brown, *op. cit.*

[178] Corbin, 1969, p. 56

[179] Jambet, 1983, p. 312

[180] Corbin took just this position from the very first. In 1931 he and a small group of friends founded a short-lived review *Hic et Nunc*.

[181] Snyder, 1983, p. 91

[182] Chittick, 1998, pp. xxxii-xxxiii

[183] Nasr, 1995, p. 57

[184] Sells, 1996, p. 11

[185] See Chittick, 1992

[186] Chittick, 1998, p. xxxvi

[187] *op. cit.*, p. xxxv

[188] *op. cit.* p. xxxvi

[189] *op. cit.* pp. xxxvi-xxxvii

[190] CI, n. 41, pp. 354-5

[191] Loy, in Suzuki, 1996, p. 98

[192] See Senghor, 1995, p. 565.

[193] This is the conclusion reached by David Abram (1996) in his groundbreaking book. This essay is in part the result of an attempt to begin to think through some of the implications of Abram's work.

[194] Illich, 1993, p. 11. Illich is speaking here of the monastic reading of the Sacred Text and of the medieval experience of reading presented by Hugh of St. Victor in the 12th century.

[195] This is of course not an anti-humanism of the sort that George Steiner finds in Heidegger, since it is based on a perception of transcendence of the sort that Heidegger cannot admit. See Steiner, 1991.

[196] It is as unfair to scientists to lump them all together as apologists for the dominion of technology, as it is to making sweeping generalizations about "the humanists," but there is no space for finer distinction here.

[197] Groddeck's essay is discussed by Bly, 1980, pp. 280-285

[198] Bly, 1980, p. 285

[199] Steiner, 1989, p. 69

[200] *ibid.*, p. 142

[201] *ibid.*, p. 198

[202] *ibid.*, p. 226

[203] There is indeed so much in Steiner's work that relates directly or indirectly to Corbin's vision and to aspects of the ideas presented here, that an extended study is called for.

[204] ML, p. 1

[205] The work of Paul Celan, which reveals the struggle to speak again, after the Holocaust, is one place to look for the lineaments of such landscapes. See Steiner, 1991; the introductions by Pierre Joris in Celan, 1995, 2000; and Lyon, 1974.

[206] Corbin, CI, p. 292.

[207] Cayley, 1992, pp. 49-51

[208] Bly, p. 286