

## Ta'wil and the Angel

By Samir Mahmoud

MPhil, Faculty of Divinity

University of Cambridge

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### The Mundus Imaginalis and Oriental Knowledge

We have answered the question: *what* and *to what* is the human presence present? Now we are in the position to ask the fundamental question: “*whom* and *to whom* is the human presence present?”<sup>1</sup>

The theory of visionary knowledge and the *mundus imaginalis* we have just explored and the notion of human presence to this visionary world presuppose certain conditions for entering this world and becoming present to the spiritual world. This condition is the “transition from theoretical teaching to real event of the soul” through a spiritual exegesis of both text and soul.

To be oriented towards the “Light in the East,” the Orient of Being, is to comport oneself in a specific mode of being and knowing, it is to be present in the Orient of one’s Being. It is for one’s being-in-the-world to be oriented. To clarify and explain this inner transformation and metamorphosis of the soul as it journeys to its original abode, Corbin had recourse to the visionary recitals, mystical narratives, of visionaries like Avicenna and Suhrawardi. The visionary recital is the visionary’s account of his soul’s voyage into the *mundus imaginalis* under the guidance of her Angel-guide.

The visionary recitals signify in the philosophy of *Ishraq* the “Quest for the Orient” (*istishraq*), which is our “Oriental Being.” This Quest for the Orient is none other than the Quest for “Oriental Knowledge” (*‘ilm Ishraqi*) that salvific knowledge that will lead the soul out of its incarceration in this world and into the next. It is a quest for self-realization, pursuing the ‘authentic’ life, of one’s being-in-the-world. We have come full circle and are back at the fundamental realization that Corbin had found in Heidegger, namely, that our *modus intelligendi* (mode of knowing or Oriental Knowledge) corresponds to our *modus essendi* (mode of being or Oriental Being). We recall that *Dasein*’s being-in-the-world is a presence, it is a *being*-there, which is essentially “to be enacting a presence, that enactment

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<sup>1</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 29.

by which and for which meaning is revealed in the present.” Therefore, the modality of being-there of *Dasein* is revelatory “in such a way that, in revealing meaning, it reveals itself, and is that which is revealed.”<sup>2</sup> In Suhrawardi’s terms the self’s rise to the Orient of its Being, to the Orient of luminaries, is reciprocated by an illumination from above culminating in a *presence*, a *being-there*, of the self to the object of its contemplation “presential knowledge” (*ilm huduri* or a direct witnessing), which is none other than a *presence*, a *being-there*, to its celestial twin, its Angel. This *presencing* varies in intensity from mystical station to another and in all of these Presences, the Angel is the guide appearing to the initiand in the form and epiphany that is in the capacity of the initiand to receive. Corbin states that this knowledge is “illuminating because it is Oriental, and Oriental because it is illuminating.”<sup>3</sup>

The Quest portrayed in these recitals presupposes in the voyager a sense of existential exile (*ghorbah*). This is the theme of Suhrawardi’s *The Recital of Occidental Exile*, where the Occident of our Being as opposed to the Orient of our Being, is symbolic of the world of disorientation, the world of Absence, the world of Darkness. As Corbin explains it: “It is by awakening to the feeling of being a stranger that the gnostic’s soul discovers *where* it is and at the same time forebodes *whence* it comes and *whither* it returns.”<sup>4</sup> The yearning for return arises from the “feeling of kingship with the divinity, with celestial beings, forms of light and beauty, which for the gnostic are his true family.”<sup>5</sup> The soul upon re-cognizing its true self and by coming back to this true self, “experiences itself as exiled, terrified, and disoriented.” At this point, the “soul must find the way of Return. That way is Gnosis, and on that way it needs a Guide.”<sup>6</sup>

We shall not explore in detail the specific visionary recitals of Avicenna and Suhrawardi, but we shall look at the common themes underlying their subject matter.

### **The Voyage and the Messenger<sup>7</sup>**

Corbin found the most common metaphor to describe the spiritual journey in Islamic mysticism to be that of the voyage, often including the figure of the messenger who beckons

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<sup>2</sup> Corbin, “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol.2, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger*.

the soul towards her abode of origin. No doubt, as Corbin reminds us, the prototype for the mystic journey has always been the heavenly ascension, the Night Journey, (*the Mi'raj*),<sup>8</sup> when the Prophet was summoned by the Archangel Gabriel to a journey through the seven heavens, and during which he saw the prophets who dwell in each heaven.

The significance of the Prophetic mystical ascension is characteristic of all Islamic spirituality, whether of the philosophical or the mystical type. We find this theme of particular concern for example in the *Ishraqiyun*, the “Persian Platonists” as Corbin calls them, followers of Suhrawardi, who wrote a number of mystical recitals. Avicenna had also written a number of mystical recitals, which goes to show that as Corbin describes it, “there is something in common between the vocation of the philosopher and that of the prophet.” The theme of these recitals is the voyage of the soul back to her original abode guided by a messenger. Both philosophy, in its etymological sense, and the mystical experience are at the heart of Suhrawardi’s thought. For a Suhrawardi, as we have seen, without solid philosophical preparation, the mystical experience is in danger of going astray; also, a philosophical search that does not culminate in a mystical experience, in a spiritual self-realization, is “a vanity and a waste of time.”<sup>9</sup> This is why Corbin has proposed the term *gnosis* (*irfan*), which he defines as “knowledge which never remains at a theoretical level: it is a salvational knowledge, because it engages the spiritual, inner human being in the way of deliverance and regeneration.”<sup>10</sup> This is precisely what the voyage of the recitals means because it “transmutes philosophy into a divine wisdom—etymologically, into a *theosophia*.”<sup>11</sup>

Corbin finds in Mulla Sadra’s idea of the “fourfold voyage” in his “High Wisdom Concerning the Four Spiritual Voyages,” a summary of the typologies of the Islamic mystic journey. The first journey is a journey from the physical world towards God. During this journey, the philosopher struggles with problems of physics, matter, form, substance, and accident, etc... at the end of which “the philosopher-pilgrim experiences fulfillment at the supersensible level of divine realities.” The second voyage is a movement from God, towards, God, but by means of God. “One travels with God and in God.” At the metaphysical plane, the initiate learns the divine sciences (*ilahiyat, divinalia*) and the names and attributes

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<sup>8</sup> See Quran 17:1

<sup>9</sup> Corbin, *Biographical Post-Scriptum*, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger*, p. 136.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

of the Divine Essence. The third voyage is a return or re-entry of the initiate into the physical world of creation, but “by means of God and in God.” This is a reversal of the first voyage after an initiation into the “Hierarchy of Intelligences and the supersensible universes (the *malakut* and the *jabarut*).” The fourth and final journey is one in the physical world of creatures, however, this time it is accomplished by God or with God. “Essentially, it is an initiation into knowledge of the soul, into self-knowledge.” This is what the *Ishraqiyun* refer to as *Oriental Knowledge* (*‘ilm Ishraqi*), in the metaphysical sense of the Orient. It gives substance to the divine maxim, “He who knows himself, knows his Lord,” which both the Sufis and Corbin are so fond of quoting. In Corbin’s own eloquent definition, “it is an initiation into the esoteric *tawhid*, the “theomonism” which maintains that only God truly is.”<sup>12</sup> According to a divine saying (*hadith qudsi*), God describes he who has attained to this level: “Henceforth I am the looking through which he sees, the listening through which he hears, the hand with which he touches, the foot with which he walks, etc.” That is to say, the “Divine Subject” replaces the human subject for in truth God can never be the *object* of anything but forever the subject. These are, in broad terms, the contours of the voyage in Mulla Sadra, which find resonances throughout the Islamic tradition.<sup>13</sup>

The essential nature of these recitals is that they reflect the metamorphosis of the knowing subject being initiated; this is the voyage they are describing. For Corbin, the journey is the overcoming of the abyss separating the “certainty of theoretical knowledge (*‘ilm al-yaqin*)” and the “certainty of personally lived and realized gnostic knowledge (*haqq al-yaqin*).” It is to overcome the separation between the I of the ego and the unknowable hidden deity not by any dialectical discursive knowledge, but by the non-discursive knowledge of the deity as it is “revealed to the knowing subject by the subject itself,”<sup>14</sup> as in Luther’s *significatio passiva* and Ibn Arabi’s notion of “Divine Passion and Compassion.”<sup>15</sup> God cannot be known by *another*, Corbin reminds us, because God is not *other* than oneself. “God can only be known by God as absolute Subject, which is *absous* of all illusory

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 138. “Theomonism” is one of Corbin’s translations of Ibn Arabi’s concept of the unity of being or the one-ness of being (*wahdat al-wujud*): “Theomonism is no more than the philosophical expression of the interdependence of Creator and created—interdependence, that is, on the level of theophany.” Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 295

<sup>13</sup> For example, as Corbin tells us, Haydar Amoli of the fourteenth century gave a similar account of the fourfold voyage. See Haydar Amoli, *Le Texte des textes*, edited and presented by Henry Corbin and Osman Yahia, “Bibliothèque iraniennne,” 22, p. 268, § 600. in Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger*, p. 138-139.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 141.

<sup>15</sup> See Corbin’s “Sympathy and Theopathy,” in *Alone with the Alone*, p.105-175.

objectivity.”<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, it is the Divine Subject that is really the active subject of all knowledge of God for it is God who is thinking himself though whatever form or thought the human intellect is contemplating.

Corbin finds remarkable resemblances between these Islamic gnostics and the tradition of speculative wisdom in the West extending from Meister Eckhart to the “speculative theologians.” The original meaning of “speculative” is lost, Corbin tells us, unless we remember that etymologically, *speculum* means *mirror*. Thus, the proper function of a “speculative theology” is to reflect God like a mirror in which God is revealed. As Franz von Baader says, “*Spekulieren heisst spiegeln*,” (“To speculate is to reflect”).<sup>17</sup> Corbin,

The mirror is the inner human being, to whom, and for whom the theophany (*tajalli, zohur*) is produced, and who is the place and form (*mazhar*) which it takes. The speculative state, in its mystical sense, is when the human being has become a mirror in which the *gesta divina* are accomplished. However, because the mirror is the place of the soul contemplating itself in contemplation, it is also true to say that the mirror is itself the divine being.<sup>18</sup>

This state of being a polished mirror reflecting the divine is the goal of the spiritual voyage and the visionary recitals of Avicenna and Suhrawardi. The real voyage begins when the theoretical teaching “becomes an event of the soul,” when it is transmuted into a lived and passionate undertaking. It is at this decisive moment that the Messenger appears and guides the initiate. The teaching imparted during the initiation “becomes the messenger at the moment when personal consciousness obeys the imperative to embark upon the voyage.” It is also the moment when the spiritual energy latent is activated and appears to the initiate as an apparition “embodied” in the form of a Messenger-Guide or the Angel-Guide, “at the horizon of inner vision”<sup>19</sup> as we shall see shortly with Avicenna and Suhrawardi’s visionary recitals. This inner metamorphosis of the soul is effected by a spiritual exegesis.

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<sup>16</sup> *Absous* in Laitn means: “rid of, free of.” Corbin, *Voyage and Messenger*, p. 141.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141-142.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

### **Ta'wil or *Spiritual Exegesis***

'Spiritual exegesis' is one of the many terms Corbin uses to describe his method of spiritual hermeneutics and phenomenology.<sup>20</sup> It is a method of exegesis that Corbin found in all his "Spirituals:" Islamic theosophers (Ishraqiyun, Sufis, Shi'ite, and Ismaili), Christian theosophers (Jacob Boehme, Immanuel Swedenborg, and also), and all those who went by the name of Platonists or Neoplatonists (Cambridge Platonists). The counterpart in Islamic gnosis is the characteristically Shi'ite/Ismaili, and to a lesser extent Sufi, notion of *Ta'wil*.

Essentially, *Ta'wil* is the "bringing back," or the returning to its origins, "not only of a text of a book but also the cosmic context in which the soul is imprisoned."<sup>21</sup> It is to *cause something to arrive* at its origin. This "bringing back" is effected for the soul by its transmutation of this cosmic context into symbols in order that it may be carried beyond the mere external appearance of natural phenomena to their internal and *true Reality (haqiqah)*. Nature and history are only the visible, external, and exoteric (*zahir*) of the spiritual world that is the true reality invisible and hidden behind the visible, it is the esoteric (*batin*) in which the true history of Events occurs. The true meaning of Prophethood, for example, cannot be found in the "material facts of the external biography of the prophets" but in their "spiritual meaning," or in the "events that happen to them, invisibly, in the world of the Spirit." Nature, *Liber mundi*, and Revelation, *Liber revelatus* have their true meaning in the hidden meaning unveiled by the *Ta'wil* of the Book "descended from Heaven," and herein lies the secret of the prophets, in the *hierohistory* as we have already seen.<sup>22</sup>

History and nature, thus, imitate the world of the soul and *ta'wil* brings back everything, every event, to its truth, its archetype (*asl*) in the spiritual universes of the supernal realm, of which it is an exemplification. *Ta'wil*, though, does not arbitrarily "construct this multidimensional world" of spiritual universes to which it returns the soul, for it is discovered "by virtue of a principle of equilibrium and harmony."<sup>23</sup>

This principle in Islamic mysticism of the Ismailis is the "The Science of the Balance" (*ilm al-Mizan*), which is the "metaphysical and mystical basis of the science of

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<sup>20</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 28. For a discussion of Corbin's hermeneutics and phenomenology see my article: "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi: An Introduction to the Thought of Henry Corbin".

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Corbin, Swedenborg, p. 37.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, p. 93.

correspondences.”<sup>24</sup> In Islamic gnosis, “the Balance signifies the equilibrium between Light and Darkness”<sup>25</sup> because, like in alchemy, it is the “principle that measures the intensity of the Soul’s desire during its descent through matter.”<sup>26</sup> The Science of the Balance also implies cosmic harmony and sympathy. There is a “correspondence between the earthly esoteric hierarchy and the celestial angelic hierarchy.....between the spiritual and corporeal worlds.”<sup>27</sup> This finds its most complete expression, according to Corbin, in the Ismaili *Ta’wil*.<sup>28</sup>

For Isma‘ilism, the literal sense of the word, its external appearance, the exoteric, conceals within it a plurality of internal meanings which are ordered in a hierarchy of universes symbolizing with each other. The Principle (*Mobdi‘*), the *Deus absconditus*, “Divine Silence and Abyss” as Corbin calls it, is, in Ismaili gnosis, as with Swedenborg, inaccessible, “Super-Being (*hyperousion*)”, and beyond being and non-being, a *no*-thing. The *Deus absconditus* manifests as *Deus revelatus*, the Primordial Theophany, with the procession of the First Archangelic Intelligence from the Abysmal Silence, and from which proceed the entire “supreme pleroma of the Primordial Establishment (*‘alam al-ibda‘*),” which consists of the hierarchical angelic intelligences.<sup>29</sup> From one of the intelligences, our demiurge, originates the physical universe, the *macrocosm*, and also the world of man, the *microcosm*, which is homologous with that of the *macrocosm*. Most importantly, between these two, Corbin tells us, there emerges the *mesocosm*, “which is the spiritual world

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<sup>24</sup> This was particularly practiced by the Arab Alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan.

<sup>25</sup> Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, p. 57.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 55.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 57.

<sup>28</sup> Corbin found this sympathy of being, “the essential community between visible and invisible beings,” in the Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus, who writes: “On earth suns and moons can be seen in an earthly state and in the heavens all the plants, stones, animals in a heavenly state, living spiritually.” In the example of the Heliotrope and its prayer, Proclus invokes the principle of the sympathy between visible things and with “the invisible powers,” and writes: “What other reason can we give for the fact that the heliotrope follows in its movement the movement of the sun and the selenotrope the movement of the moon, forming a procession within the limits of their power, behind the torches of the universe? For, in truth, each thing prays according to the rank it occupies in nature, and sings the praise of the leader of the divine series to which it belongs, a spiritual or rational or physical or sensuous praise; for the heliotrope moves to the extent that it is free to move, and in its rotation, if we could hear the sound of the air buffeted by its movement, we should be aware that it is a hymn to its king, such as it is within the power of a plant to sing.” There is a “common essence,” Corbin tells us, “that is distributed among several beings,” and which is not perceivable through arguments of a cause and effect nature. Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 105-107.

<sup>29</sup> Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 96.

constituted by the esoteric community on earth.”<sup>30</sup> This esoteric community lives in strict *incognito*, Corbin tells us, for its members are not permitted to reveal themselves.<sup>31</sup>

The *mesocosm* constitutes the totality of “forms of light” which are none other than the subtle forms of microcosmic man raised to the level of macrocosmic man, the integral individual in his form of light as *Anthropos*, (*Insan Kabir*), *Homo maximus* for Swedenborg. This totality of “forms of light” of the initiates of the esoteric community constitute the “Temple of Light” (*Haykal nurani*). We find that the hierarchical structure of the *mesocosm*, of the esoteric community, symbolizes with the “Temple of Light,” the hierarchical structure of the astronomical sky, and the hierarchical structure of the archangelic Pleroma.<sup>32</sup> This Ismaili metaphysics of being is fundamentally hierarchical and is characterized by a strict correspondence between the degree of the celestial hierarchy and those of the esoteric earthly hierarchy. This also forms the basis of Ismaili spiritual exegesis, *ta'wil*, linking cosmology with anthropology and angelology because to be initiated into the esoteric community of mystics on earth, the *corpus mysticum*, is to enter the “virtual paradise,” thereby allowing the realization of one’s potential “angelicity.”

In Swedenborg’s *Theory of Correspondences*, Corbin finds remarkable parallels with this Ismaili *Ta'wil*.<sup>33</sup> Swedenborg’s hermeneutics, Corbin tells us, is governed by a theory of correspondences, which is also linked to a definite theory of cognition, a spiritual cognition, or what Corbin calls a “hierognosis.” For Swedenborg, everything in nature represents or corresponds to something in the spiritual world, that is to say, everything below *symbolizes with* something above. Every individual consists of an external person, the physical body inhering in the natural world and an “internal person” which is his spiritual world. This cosmic and anthropological “bipartition” is supported by a “cosmology for which natural forms are essentially effects” because they cannot be causes of their own appearances and occurrences. Their causes precede them vertically from the spiritual world. This is a fundamental intuition of Swedenborg’s, which puts his *Theory of Correspondences* in

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 93. See also. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol 4. 205 ff, 346 ff.

<sup>32</sup> See Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 97. For example, Corbin finds in the work of the Ismaili Hamid Kermani (d. about 408/1017), a schema that agrees with that of Avicenna. To the Ten Archangelic Intelligences of the supreme Pleroma (each of these Intelligences itself containing an entire pleroma), corresponds the visible astronomical sky and the grades of the esoteric hierarchy.” p. 97.

<sup>33</sup> Corbin wrote a remarkable comparative essay on Ismaili and Swedenborgian hermeneutics titled, “Comparative Spiritual Hermeneutics.”

profound harmony with those of the Neoplatonists, as Corbin points out.<sup>34</sup> Briefly stated, everything in nature—the atmosphere, the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, etc.—are nothing more than the “representative theatre” of the spiritual world, if only we can learn to see them in their sublime beauty “in the state of their Heaven.” This is also professed by the Theosophers of Light in Islam (the *Ishraqiyun* of Suhrawardi, the theosophy of Ibn Arabi, and Mulla Sadra Shirazi, etc): “sensory things are apparitional forms, the places of epiphany (*mazahir*), the *theatrum* of suprasensory universes.”<sup>35</sup> This relation between reality and epiphany is repeated along the vertical gradations of being. Each form is an *epiphany* of that which is in the grade and spiritual universe *above* it; it is also the *reality* of its own epiphany in the grade and spiritual universe *below* it. The preceding grade possesses ontological priority over the grade that proceeds from it.

From the above, we can better understand the spiritual universes that Swedenborg speaks of. There are essentially three heavens in ascensional order of “increasing interiority and purity.” The first heaven Swedenborg calls the “abode” of good spirits, the lower heaven; the second is the “abode” of angelic spirits or spiritual angels of the middle heaven; the third is the “abode” of the “celestial” angels of the higher heaven. Each “abode” is to be understood, Corbin explains, as the “*state* of the internal man.” The phases of time and space are also “interior *states* of man as well.” This hierarchy of heavens ordered in increasing interiority and purity as states of the internal man Corbin calls a “*hierocosmology*.” This hierocosmology essentially reflects the fundamental double dimension of reality: nature-heaven, external-internal, macrocosm-microcosm, etc all of which correspond with each other. To the astronomical Sun providing light we have the light of the soul emerging from the spiritual Sun. As the physical sun illuminates and makes vision and life possible with its warmth, so the spiritual Sun illuminates the dark regions of our internal spiritual world and provides the warmth for a healthy spiritual life. However, whereas *man is within* the astronomical universe at the centre of which is the Sun, the spiritual Sun is *within man*, “he is within this light itself.” There is thus a double light and a double heat, Swedenborg:

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<sup>34</sup> Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p.42. In the footnote Corbin adds: “This is, for example, the fundamental doctrine professed by all the ‘eastern’ theosophers (*Ishraqiyun*) of the school of Suhrawardi in Iran, the doctrine called *al-imkan al-ashraf*, namely, that if a particular degree of being is given, this implies *eo ipso* the effective existence of the higher degree of being.” *Ibid*, , no. 11, p. 135.

<sup>35</sup> Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p, 43-44.

The heat of heaven [proceeds] from the spiritual sun, which is the Lord, and the heat of the world proceeds from the sun thereof, which is the luminary seen by our physical eyes. The heat of heaven manifests itself to the internal person by spiritual loves and affections, whereas the heat of the world manifests itself to the external person by natural loves and affections. The former heat causes the life of the internal person, but the latter the life of the external person; for without love and affection man cannot life at all. Between these two heats also there are correspondences.<sup>36</sup>

The dominant idea here, Corbin tells us, is that behind every principle active in the natural world, whether it be of psychology or cosmology, there corresponds a spiritual principle. For Swedenborg, light and heat are related to intelligence and will, or wisdom and love. For an angelic mode of cognition, *hierognosis*, light appears to their eyes as light within which there is contained intelligence and will; similarly, heat is experienced as warmth, containing love. “Love is therefore called spiritual heat....just as intelligence is called spiritual light.”<sup>37</sup> According to Swedenborg, as with Ismaili thought, the earliest humanity possessed this angelic sensitivity to the true spiritual reality of things.

We see that for both Swedenborg and the Ismaili theosophers, the real history is the spiritual history of humanity that unfolds in spiritual world of the soul, where, as Corbin has explained, the succession of moments of time is nothing other than the succession of internal states of the soul, an irreversible qualitative time distinct from the quantitative time of the physical world. This has far-reaching implications for the understanding of the True sense, the true meaning of the Sacred Book. The spiritual sense rescues the Sacred Book from a self-defeating *historicism* that makes the “significance of the Sacred Book *captive* to the date of its material composition.”<sup>38</sup> Unless, as Swedenborg and the Ismaili theosophers have so eloquently demonstrated, the Revealed Book is understood in its *true* sense, which is to say in its *present* sense, all meaning is lost. The *present* sense means, as we have seen with Avicenna and Suhrawardi, a meaning which has been lost on those of a historicist bent, that “the *presence* of spiritual universes that symbolize with each other, by means of a comparable architecture,” is here and now, in the present, but vertically in an ascensional hierarchical order of gradations of being; it is an ever present realized eschatological moment in the reality and time/space of the soul.

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<sup>36</sup> Immanuel Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, § 3338. quoted in Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 47.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 48.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p. 91.

There is profound accord between Biblical hermeneutics as exemplified by Swedenborg (and Jacob Boehme) and the Islamic theosophers like the Ismaili exegetes. Corbin,

There is a similarity in the way in which Boehme or a Swedenborg understands Genesis, Exodus or Revelation, and the way in which the Shiites, Ismaili as well as Twelver, or else the Sufi theosophers of the school of Ibn al-'Arabi, understand the Quran and the *corpus* of the traditions explaining it. This similarity is a perspective in which the universe is seen as possessing several levels, as consisting of a plurality of worlds that all *symbolize* with each other.<sup>39</sup>

Such is the extent of this similarity that, for someone like Corbin, it provides fertile ground for a general theology of the *history* of religions and a general theology *of religions*. However, this cannot be established, as Corbin insists, as a “synthesis or as a process of the ‘historical past.’” Corbin is proposing a theology or theosophy of the Paraclete. Only in a *hierohistory*, which Swedenborg and the Ismaili theosophers analysed as a “succession of spiritual states, and the events that are visions,”<sup>40</sup> can follow the spiritual traces of these events of this primordial fact, anterior to our empirical history, the answer to the primordial covenant of (*alastu*) where God asks all souls in the anteriority of their existence in the physical world: “Am I not your Lord?” The joyous affirmative response (*bala*) “concluded an eternal pact of fidelity; and from epoch to epoch, all the prophets...have come to remind men of their fidelity to this fact.”<sup>41</sup> This is the true meaning to which the above theosophers are guiding us.

Such a *Ta'wil*, or spiritual hermeneutics, becomes a contemplative and meditative mode of knowing/being; a liturgy of the soul, the world being its theurgy.

The way of reading and of comprehending to which I refer presupposes, in the strict sense of the word, a *theosophia*, that is, the mental or visionary penetration of an entire hierarchy of spiritual universes that are not discovered by means of syllogisms, because they do not reveal themselves except through a certain mode of cognition, a *hierognosis* that unites the speculative knowledge of traditional information to the

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<sup>39</sup> Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 132.

<sup>41</sup> Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 3.

most personal interior experience, for, in the absence of the latter, technical models alone would be transmitted, and these would be doomed to a rapid decline.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, Ta'wil is not theory, it is “an initiation into vision.” “Is it possible to see without *being* in the place where one sees?” Corbin asks rhetorically. The *penetrations* into the visionary worlds are a *being* in order to *see*.<sup>43</sup> “If thou *be* this, thou *see* this,” says Henry More, one of Corbin’s favorite “Cambridge Platonists.”

### **Text, Symbol, Soul, & the Sympathy of Being**

What makes the vision of the *ta'wil* possible is the continuity and communication between the Divine and the Human, which is the Logos. Here we are in the company of Luther and Hamann as well as Ibn Arabi. It is the Revealed Word that provides the departure point for any spiritual exegesis. The primary fact for the People of the Book, claims Corbin, is the existence of a revealed Sacred Book, which is the word of God. Corbin writes,

By its nature, at the heart of a prophetic religion—that is, a religion that professes the necessity of superhuman mediators between the divinity who inspires them and humanity as a whole—there is the phenomenon of the Sacred Book that every prophet who has the quality of a Messenger...brings to man. This phenomenon pre-eminently creates a “hermeneutic situation,” the great issue being to know and understand the *true meaning* of the Book.<sup>44</sup>

The lived “hermeneutic situation” is one where human speech and divine speech are in mutual sympathy. It is the Breath of Compassionate so central to the theosophy of Ibn Arabi. The Abrahamic traditions share this common “hermeneutic situation;” one that is centered around the understanding of the Divine Word, of Revelation.

But in recent times, we have lost the capacity for understanding the Divine Logos. The modern age, according to Corbin, is an age that is witness to the severance of heaven and earth, the human and the Divine, with the concomitant loss of the Divine Logos; it is a crisis of meaning. Corbin explains,

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<sup>42</sup> Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 38.

<sup>43</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 93.

<sup>44</sup> Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 37.

The drama common to all the ‘religions of the Book,’ or better said, to the community that the Qur’an designates as *Ahl al-Kitab*, the community of the Book, and that encompasses the three great branches of the Abrahamic tradition (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), can be designated as the drama of the “Lost Speech.” And this because the whole meaning of their life revolves around the phenomenon of the revealed holy Book, around the true meaning of this Book. If the true meaning of the Book is the interior meaning, hidden under the literal appearance, then from the instant that men fail to recognize or refuse this interior meaning, from that instant they mutilate the unity of the Word, of the Logos, and begin the drama of the “Lost Speech.”<sup>45</sup>

For Corbin, there is a common drama to the three Abrahamic traditions in which their histories are the “theatre in which the drama of the conflict between the literal and the hidden meaning of the Word is played out.”<sup>46</sup> It is this inner esoteric history of the Religions of the Book that Corbin singles out as the important stage of events rather than the empirical history of social institutions.

The crucial figure in Corbin’s thought here is Hamann and his view of language. In Hamann’s essay “*Aesthetica in nuce*,” which Corbin translated, Hamann writes,

Poetry is the mother-tongue of the human race; even as the garden is older than the ploughed field, painting than script; as song is more ancient than declamation; parables older than reasoning; barter older than trade. A deep sleep was the repose of our farthest ancestors; and their movement a frenzied dance. Seven days they would sit in the silence of deep thought or wonder;—and would open their mouths to utter winged sentences.

The senses and passions speak and understand nothing but images. The entire store of human knowledge and happiness consists in images. The first outburst of creation, and the first impression of its recording scribe;—the first manifestation and the first enjoyment of Nature are united in the words: Let there be Light! Here beginneth the feeling for the presence of things.....

Speak, that I may see Thee! This wish was answered by Creation, which is an utterance to created things through created things....The fault may lie where it will (outside or within us): all we have left in nature for our use is fragmentary verse and *disjecta membra poetae*. To collect these together is the scholar’s modest part; the philosopher’s to interpret them; to imitate them, or—bolder still—to adapt them, the poet’s.

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<sup>45</sup> Corbin, “L’Initiation Ismaélienne ou l’Esoterisme et le Verb,” p. 81. in Tom Cheetham, “Harmonia Abrahamica: The Lost Language and the Battle for the Soul of the World,” *Temenos Academy Review*, p. 121.

<sup>46</sup> Cheetham, *Harmonia Abrahamica*, p. 121.

To speak is to translate—from the language of angels into the tongue of men, that is to translate thoughts into words—things into names—images into signs....<sup>47</sup>

Corbin found the imagination to be central to the theosophy of Ibn Arabi, Avicenna, and Suhrawardi as we have seen. The “language of the angels” is not completely lost to us, as Luther’s *significatio passiva* and Hamann’s *Verbalism* have shown. Holy scripture as descent, possesses this primordiality as long as it is experienced as the lived word.

It is the Quran, in Islam, that is the unmediated Word of God. As a Revelation intended for the soul, it defies the intellectual constructs of ego-consciousness and mundane daily experiences, its objective being to elevate and raise the soul to a higher plane, from ego consciousness to *super-consciousness*, from the time of history to that of *metahistory* (*hierohistory*), and from the physical world to the *imaginal world*. Thematically and chronologically speaking, it is a Text that defies the canon of narrative. Seyyed Hossein Nasr has this to say about the Quran:

Many people, especially non-Muslims, who read the *Quran* for the first time are struck by what appears as a kind of incoherence from the human point of view. It is neither like a highly mystical text nor as manual of Aristotelian logic, though it contains both mysticism and logic. It is not just poetry, although it contains the most powerful poetry. The text of the *Quran* reveals human language crushed by the power of the Divine Word. It is as if human language were scattered into a thousand fragments like a wave scattered into drops against the rocks at sea. One feels through the shattering effect left upon the language of the *Quran*, the power of the Divine whence it originated. The *Quran* displays human language with all its weakness inherent in it becoming suddenly the recipient of the Divine Word and displaying its frailty before a power which is infinitely greater than man can imagine.<sup>48</sup>

The Divine Logos is profoundly an oral one; it is primarily meant to be spoken, heard, and recited; it is a liturgy. Holy Writ thus assumes a character and meaning altogether different from that assumed by the term ‘text’ in a modern context. Once again Seyyed Hossein Nasr,

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<sup>47</sup> Johann Georg Hamann, “Aesthetica in nuce,” Translated by H.B. Nisbet. In *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winkelman, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller, Goethe*, H.B. Nisbet. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985. p. 141-142. quoted in Cheetham, *Harmonia Abrahamica*, p. 121.

<sup>48</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Quoted in Norman O. Brown, *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 90.

The whole experience of the Quran 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 word....[T]he oral dimension of the Quranic reality, combined with the traditional significance of memory in the transmission of knowledge, could not but affect the whole of the Islamic intellectual tradition.<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, understanding the *Quran* presupposes conforming to it and conforming to it presupposes understanding it in an endless life of sympathy. This understanding of the Quran by Muslims accords with the self-understanding of Islam as the Primordial Revelation, the return to the pure monotheism of Abraham.

The Islamic imagination, 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 on the Rock.<sup>50</sup>

This Rock or *sakhrāh* in Arabic is essentially related to the *Imago Templi*, which corresponds to the location of the Holy of Holies in the ancient Temple; the entrance or gateway to the heavenly abode. “It is through the holy rock as the foundation stone that Heaven and Earth exist and communicate with each other.”<sup>51</sup> It is at this point that the journey of the soul out of the Occident of its being towards the Orient of its being begins, as in the Occidental Exile in Suhrawardi. As such, the return is a return to origins exemplified by the spiritual and mystical narratives of exile. There is no regression into a lost past nor a flight into a utopist future. The return is here and now. Resurrection is as much an eschatological event of the soul now as it is an eschatological event beyond the grave. “Die before you die,” as the Prophet said. As Corbin reminds us: “the resurrection, as ‘realized eschatology’, is not a fact, which happens in history; it is the ‘liturgical mystery.’” Therefore, eschatology in time is to be understood in terms of an eternal present, or space. Corbin continues: “‘Liturgical time’ continuously recurrent and reversible—the time of the ‘angelic presence’—is both the rupture or ‘end’ of linear chronological time, and the assumption of

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<sup>49</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Oral Transmission and the Book in Islamic Education: The Spoken and the Written Word.” In *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East*, ed. George N. Atiyeh, Albany, : State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 57-70.

<sup>50</sup> Brown, *Apocalypse*, p. 92.

<sup>51</sup> Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, p. 281.

space.”<sup>52</sup> This return to the primordial state of being-in-the-world is not accomplished in the external events of time but the in Eternal events of the Soul.

This intensity measures a time in which the past remains present to the future, in which the future is already present to the past, just as the notes of a musical phrase, though played successively, nevertheless all persist together in the present and thus form a phrase.<sup>53</sup>

To be sure, as Holy Writ, the Quran does not conform to any literary canon, especially the modern obsession with narrative born of a corrosive historicism. The Quran “backs off from that linear organization of time, revelation, and history which became the backbone of orthodox Christianity and remains the backbone of the Western culture after the death of God.”<sup>54</sup> The entire Quran can be seen, as Massignon described Islam, as a “mysterious regression to a more primitive stratum, archetypal, folkloristic, fabulous, and apocryphal. Historical material is fragmented into its archetypal constituents and then subjected to displacement and condensation, as in dreams.”<sup>55</sup> Hence, the order of the verses and chapters (*surahs*) is irrelevant. There is no sequence of events; the entirety of the Quran is present to itself in every verse. Every verse announces a warning, a portent, and the style is apocalyptic or “simultaneous totality” whereby the “infinite” is “contained within finiteness.” The whole is in every part; this “simultaneous totality” thus violates the “classic rules of unity, propriety, and harmony.”<sup>56</sup> The effect is “bewildering changes of subject; abrupt juxtaposition of incongruities.” Every verse is its own moment because what is real is only the present moment as opposed to the absent past and the withheld future; the world consists of “atomic space-time points.” The result is that the Quran is “transhistorical or “metahistorical.” The Quran “projects a metahistorical plane on which the eternal meaning of historical events is disclosed.”<sup>57</sup> Corbin,

Perhaps one could say that the aptitude to perceive forms in irreversible chronological succession, to situate them in a moment of this succession and explain them as a function of this moment, is in inverse proportion to the aptitude for seeing them and situating them in space, in a space, that is, which is no longer physical,

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<sup>52</sup> Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, p. 323.

<sup>53</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 35-36.

<sup>54</sup> Brown, *Apocalypse*, p.88.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>57</sup> Brown, *Apocalypse*, p. 88.

quantitative and homogenous, and to explain them by their rank in a *qualitative, permanent and hierarchic space*.<sup>58</sup>

A true prophetic philosophy depends on the possibility of the sudden irruption of the meaning of the Text into the soul, in the form of a spiritual birth, in the here and now, the eternal Present. Every moment is a realized eschatology. The meaning of the *moment* of the irruption of meaning, in the present, is an existential esoteric one: its vertical blossoming into Eternity. This sudden irruption of meaning in the soul is not possible without the vertical dimension of the “qualitative, permanent, and hierarchic space.”

Such a prophetic philosophy moves in the dimension of a pure theophanic historicity, in the inner time of the soul; external events, cosmologies, the histories of the prophets are perceived as the history of the spiritual man. Thus it obliterates the “historical trend” with which our epoch is obsessed. Prophetic philosophy looks for the meaning of history not in “horizons,” that is, not by orienting itself in the latitudinal sense of linear development, but vertically, by a longitudinal orientation extending from the celestial pole to the Earth, in the transparency of the heights or depths in which the spiritual individuality experiences the reality of its celestial counterpart, its “lordly” dimension, its “second person,” its “Thou.”<sup>59</sup>

Historical consciousness as we understand it today is bound by latitudinal linear development, a quantitative horizontal material time and causality. The events of the soul, on the other hand, of qualitative vertical subtle time originate in the imaginal world and are subject to a vertical causality. Hence, in its rejection of linearity, the Quran also rejects narrative. The Quran, to be sure, remains replete with stories of old and “recalls of former times;” however, this in no way implies history.

Schooled in the Quran, Muslim consciousness is spontaneously ahistorical, that is to say mythic. It takes up events of the past in approximately the same way as the apocryphal gospels adapt the gospel narratives. When Muslim consciousness takes up for its own ends an event borrowed from the Bible or Judeo-Christian hagiography, it in most cases cannot resist effecting a transvaluation by introducing fabulous details or otherwise transforming the meaning. Passing from one hand to another in a chain of Muslim transmission the historical event evaporates and all that is left is a vague memory submerged in a story which has become mythic.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranienne*, vol.1, p. 138.

<sup>59</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, 81.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Nwyia, quoted in Brown, *Apocalypse*, p. 87.

The meaning of history and the Sacred Book for such a mythic consciousness is not to be found in the unfolding of events in physical time and space, of profane history, but rather with what Corbin calls a “subtle history”, “metahistory”, or “hierohistory.” This the eternal time of the soul in which the events of the soul take place. However, according to Corbin’s analysis, the modern world moves in the dimension of quantitative time and quantitative space, in which events have no quality of a presence but an absence; events seem to emerge out of the past in a linear causal manner and then disappear into a distant future. Upon either extreme, the past or the future, eschatological hopes and expectations- and all sorts of secularized Utopias- are projected. It is the paradox of *jam* (already) and *nondum* (not yet ), which in the *mundus imaginalis* are no longer two chronological moments but simultaneous.

The dominant conception of the modern world, Corbin laments, is to understand “man as being *in history*.” This conception represents history as exterior, exoteric, the literal, which is subject to the linear development and the material laws of causality. This is evident in the fate of eschatology in modern theology and philosophy. The *eschaton* of Eschatology once conceived as cut off from “hierohistory”, the “meeting place of the two seas”, it becomes an anticipated event in physical time. It is no wonder, Corbin continues, that once eschatology is cut off from “essential and continual expectation” that is realized not in history but in the ever present moment and eternal time of the soul, it is given over to the “perils of history;” it becomes *disoriented*. This is the modern world gone mad. Corbin rightly asks: “[How] can we discover a sense of history, a direction, in the absence of any landmark beyond history, any point at which history immobilizes itself or rather demobilizes itself? This means with out a metahistory, without a transhistoric dimension.”<sup>61</sup>

Contrary to this exterior meaning of history, Corbin reminds us of a contrary conception with out which “historical phenomena” lose their very foundation, namely, that man is not *in history* but history is *in man*.<sup>62</sup> This is a question of interior history, the esoteric, the subtle history in which the events of the soul take place, “events in the *Malakut*, in the world of the soul, in the ‘Heaven’ or the ‘Hell’ which man carries within himself.” External events of history are merely objectifications of this subtle history discernible and perceptible “by an organ of perception other than that of empirical, physical, or historical knowledge” as

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<sup>61</sup> Corbin, *Comparative Philosophy*, p. 8.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.

we shall see later.<sup>63</sup> The very notion of the *Malakut* resists reducing all events to events of this world, which are perceptible by empirical means. There are events of the *mundus imaginalis*, of the *Malakut*, “events in Heaven.” They occur in space, but not space that can be found on geographical maps, and in time, but not in latitudinal time of our world; vision of things in the *Malakut* is vision of *Wesenschau*.<sup>64</sup> The catastrophe of our age, Corbin tells us, is that it has lost the capacity to conceive of these kinds of events, and has locked itself in the “false dilemma of ‘myth’ or ‘history?’”<sup>65</sup> The choice between myth and history or already and yet to come is a false one, because in the *Malakut*, they are reconciled. It is the *Malakut*, the imaginal world that is the source and cause of the phenomenal appearances. The real past is not gone; it can still be Present because ‘the past is not behind us but beneath our feet.’

The *Ta'wil* brings us back to the supernal realm, but its point of departure in a prophetic religion is the text, the text of Revelation, the Quran. *Ta'wil*, Corbin informs us, is never without a *Tanzil* with which it forms a pair.

*Tanzil* properly designates positive religion, the letter of the Revelation dictated to the Prophet by the Angel. It is to *cause to descent* of this Revelation from the higher world. *Ta'wil* is, etymologically and inversely, to *cause to return*, to lead back, to restore to one's origin and to the place where one comes home, consequently to return to the true and original meaning of a text.<sup>66</sup>

*Ta'wil* implies that there is a movement from the letter of the word (*exoteric*) of its external form (*mazhar*) to its inner reality (*haqiqah*). The Sacred Book, Revelation-*Tanzil*, descent, is equilibrated by return, ascent, *Ta'wil*. This constitutes the very essence of what Corbin calls a “prophetic philosophy.” The prophetic reality at the heart of such a prophetic philosophy consists of a “bi-unity.”<sup>67</sup> The prophetic reality consists of an external/exoteric and an inner/esoteric dimension. The *walayah* is the specifically esoteric dimension of the eternal prophecy (*nubuwah*). It is the function of the *walayah* and the exegetes who uphold

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p.. 14.

<sup>64</sup> Corbin, in his usual comparative genius, defines Husserl's *Wesenschau* as “the intuitive perception of an essence; the vision of things in the *malakut*, which is the invisible subtle world of the soul.” See Corbin, *The Concept of Comparative Philosophy*, p. 4-5. It is also Hermann Landolt's view that Corbin was closer in his phenomenology to Husserl than to Heidegger. See Hermann Landolt, “Henry Corbin, 1903-1978: Between Philosophy and Orientalism.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, July-September, 119, (1999).

<sup>65</sup> Corbin, *Comparative Philosophy*, p. 13.

<sup>66</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 28-29.

<sup>67</sup> Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 41.

the gnostic knowledge (*'irfan*) of the *walayah*, the Spiritual Guides (Imams) or the successors to the Prophets, to carry the esoteric knowledge of the exoteric letter. It is to the latter, the “Spiritual Guides” (Imams) and “Sustainers of the Book” that the task of initiating people into the *true* sense is entrusted.<sup>68</sup>

The notion of Prophecy and the Imamate (or *walayah* of the Spiritual Guides) corresponds to what, in Shiite/Ismaili/Sufi gnosis, is the “double cosmic movement: *mabda'* and *ma'ad*, genesis and return, descent and ascent to origin.” To this there corresponds, as we have seen, the *Tanzil*, Revelation, or the act of sending down the Sacred Book, the letter of the message, the *Shari'ah*, the Law, and on the other hand, the *Ta'wil*, which is the act of bringing back the letter to its true sense, a spiritual exegesis, which is the function of the Spiritual Guide or the Imam. Corbin quotes the great Ismaili theosophers of Iran, Nasir Khusraw (11<sup>th</sup> century) who wrote: “Positive religion [*shari'ah*] is the exoteric aspect of the spiritual Idea [*haqiqah*], and the spiritual Idea is the esoteric aspect of positive religion; positive religion is the symbol [*mathal*], the spiritual Idea is that which is symbolized [*mamthul*].”<sup>69</sup>

Corbin found the *zahir-batin* or exoteric-esoteric balance most exemplified in the Shi'ite and Ismaili traditions.

From the very beginning, in fact, Shiite thinking has given sustenance to a prophetic type of philosophy which corresponds to a prophetic religion. A prophetic philosophy presupposes a type of thought which does not allow itself to be bound either by the historical past, nor by the letter of the dogmatic form in which the teachings of this past are consolidated, or by the limits imposed by the resources and laws of rational Logic. Shiite thinking is oriented by its expectation not of a revelation of a new *shari'ah*, but of the *plenary* Manifestation of all the hidden or spiritual meanings of the divine Revelations. ....Prophetic philosophy is essentially eschatological. ....The main thrust of Shiite thinking may be designated as, first, the *batin* or esoteric aspect, and second, the *walayah*, the meaning of which will become clear.<sup>70</sup>

The hierarchy of spiritual worlds which conceal the inner esoteric meaning as psychic Event obey this law of the esoteric-exoteric balance. Each one of these worlds, Corbin reminds us, is the internal, the esoteric (*batin*) in relation to the world below it; however, it is

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<sup>68</sup> Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 92.

<sup>69</sup> Nasir Khusraw, *Le Livre réunissant les deux sagesse (philosophie grecque et théosophie ismaélienne)*, Bibliothèque Iranienne, vol 3, (Paris:Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1953), p. 67. of Corbin's “Étude préliminaire.” quoted in Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 92.

<sup>70</sup> Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 24-25.

the exoteric (*zahir*) in relation to the world above it. Thus, *ta'wil*, or spiritual exegesis, leads back first to the *microcosm* of the human individual, to the *mesocosm*, or the middle world of “the alchemical operation,”<sup>71</sup> before leading to the *macrocosm*.

This Science of the Balance is reflected in other terms of paramount importance for a proper spiritual exegesis and understanding of the Text.

*Majaz* is figure, metaphor, while *haqiqat* is the truth that is real, the reality that is true, the essence, the Idea. *Majaz* contains the idea of *out-passing*, of passing beyond on the way to..., whence meta-phor. But let us note well that the spiritual meaning to be disengaged from the letter is not to be thought of as constituting a metaphorical meaning; it is the *letter* itself that is the *metaphor*, it is the *statement* that is a trans-gression of the ineffable idea..... The *ta'wil* causes the letter to *regress* to its true and original meaning (*haqiqat*), “with which” the figures of the exoteric letter symbolize.....The same is true of the pair of terms *zahir* and *batin*. *Zahir* is the exoteric, the apparent, the patency of the letter, the Law, the text of the Qur’an. *Zahir* holds the same relation to *Batin* (the hidden, the inner, the esoteric) as *Majaz* does to *Haqiqat*; the *Ta'wil* must “lead it back” to the hidden Reality, to the esoteric truth, with which it symbolizes.<sup>72</sup>

Indeed, Corbin is giving radical new meaning to the terms “text” and “metaphor” than what we find in linguistics and contemporary hermeneutics. At the heart of this spiritual exegesis is the *symbol*. Since our very presence in the corporeal world is a faint reflection, a shadow, of our celestial counterpart, the Angel, then an “analogical form of knowledge,” which characterizes the science of correspondences, is an “*anaphora* (the act of raising up), an *anagoge* (the act of lifting up or elevating); the analogical method follows the *anagogical path*, the path which leads upwards.” This method perfectly follows the “gradations of the hierarchy of being which is itself determined by the spiritual or esoteric function assigned to each level.”<sup>73</sup> The act of raising up or elevating derives its energy from the “power of the Angels to draw beings upward.”<sup>74</sup>

### *Symbol and Allegory*

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<sup>71</sup> Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, 94.

<sup>72</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 29-30.

<sup>73</sup> Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, p. 57.

<sup>74</sup> Cheetham, *World Turned Inside Out*, p. 124.

The symbol<sup>75</sup>, Corbin tells us, is “not an artificially constructed sign,” like that used in allegory, but it “flowers in the soul spontaneously to announce something that cannot be expressed otherwise.”<sup>76</sup> Thus, there is a uniqueness to the symbol for it is “the only possible expression of that which is symbolized, that is to say of the thing signified *with which* it symbolizes.”<sup>77</sup> This uniqueness differentiates symbol from allegory. “Allegory is a more or less artificial figuration of generalities or abstractions that are perfectly cognizable or expressible in other ways.”<sup>78</sup> The notion that the symbol is not to be understood on a plane of reference outside the symbol itself, as happens in allegory, is its self-referential nature, or tautegory. Tautegory is a term coined by Friedrich W.J. von Schelling.<sup>79</sup>

Corbin embraced Schelling’s notion of “Tautegory” as a resolution of the false dichotomy between matter and spirit, history or myth. In his essay, “The *Imago Templi* in confrontation with Secular Norms,” Corbin notes:

The *Imago Templi* is not allegorical but “tautegorical”; that is to say, it should not be understood as concealing the Other whose form it is. It is to be understood in its identity with that Other, and as being itself the thing which it expresses. It will thus be clear that we do not intend to take up the task of the psychologists, still less to subject the *Imago Templi* to the categories of positive historical criticism.<sup>80</sup>

The symbol bears within it its own meaning and its own revelation, the locus of the *Deus revelatus*. It is the form, the theophany, of that with which it symbolizes, the transcendent reality, in the Imaginal World.

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<sup>75</sup> We can trace the roots of Corbin’s understanding of the symbol to Hamann and Schelling but most importantly to Goethe whose famous couplet *Alles Vergängliche/Ist nur ein Gleichnis* Corbin translated into French. In the translation, Corbin comments: “Que l’interprétation de la Croix par l’Ismaélisme ne nous apparaisse pas comme une dévalorisation de ce reel don nou nous faisons une conception si unilatérale. Loin de là, symbolisme implique valorization éminente. Tout l’éphémère ne rien que symbole. Il faut plutôt traduire: *rien de moins qu’un symbole.*” We also find Corbin invoking Goethe’s *Farbenlehre* in “The Physiological Colours According to Goethe,” in his conclusion to *Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*.

<sup>76</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 30.

<sup>77</sup> Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 13.

<sup>78</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 30.

<sup>79</sup> Schelling borrowed the term “tautegory” from Samuel Coleridge. See Douglas Hedley, “Religion: Illusion or Legitimate Longing?,” (Reading handout in Lecture on Romanticism and Symbol), p. 4-7.

<sup>80</sup> Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, p. 267. In the same essay, Corbin notes that: “Since the hidden meaning is nothing other than the letter raised or transmuted into symbol, and perceived henceforth on the level of the *imaginal* world, the symbol is no longer something behind which hides the thing symbolized. It is, quite simply, the form assumed on this level by the transcendent reality, and this form *is* this reality. Thus, instead of allegory, one could perhaps speak of *tautegory*.” A few pages down Corbin continues: “In this world [Imaginal World] the *allos* (the other) of *allegory* is surpassed, because the *Imago* is the form in which both the *one* and the *other* integrally manifest themselves. This privileged imaginal form can also be called tautegorical.” Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, p. 304-305 and 308 respectively.

The uniqueness of the symbol, however, does not mean that to penetrate its meaning is “equivalent to making it superfluous or abolishing it.” Hence, Corbin’s caution, “the exegete should beware lest he thus close to himself the road of the symbol,” by reducing it to allegory, because the road of the symbol always “leads out of this world.”<sup>81</sup> Whereas allegory can be designated as “an infinite network of significations,” whereby one sign is substituted by another on the “same level of being and on the same spiritual plane,”<sup>82</sup> the symbol itself in its uniqueness draws upwards to higher levels of being and purer spiritual planes.

The difference between “symbol” and what nowadays is commonly called “allegory” is simple to grasp. An allegory remains on the same level of evidence and perception, whereas a symbol guarantees the correspondence between two universes belonging to different ontological levels: it is the means, and the only one, of penetrating into the invisible, into the world of mystery, into the esoteric dimension.<sup>83</sup>

The symbols effects a correspondence between two universes because it does not just symbolize the archetype but *symbolizes with* the archetype; this is the symbol’s transparency.

Symbolic perception effects a transmutation of the immediate data (the sensible and literal data), and renders them transparent. In the absence of the transparency brought about in this manner, it is impossible to pass from one level to another. Equally, without a plurality of universes rising above each other in an ascending perspective, symbolic exegesis perishes for lack of function and meaning.<sup>84</sup>

The transparency of the successive forms, of the levels of being, the various manifestations, the succession of theophanies (*tajalliyat*) leads to the knowledge of being as it is, no longer veiled by the veils of darkness.

But it [the Active Imagination] can also become increasingly transparent, for its sole purpose is to enable the mystic to gain knowledge of being as it is, that is to say, the knowledge that delivers, because it is the gnosis of salvation. This occurs when the gnostic understands that the multiple successive forms, their

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<sup>81</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 30.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>83</sup> Corbin, “Mysticism and Humour,” p. 27.

<sup>84</sup> Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 13. In yet another context, Corbin refers to the transparency of the veils covering the hidden before the eyes of the spiritual adept effected by spiritual exegesis, “the covering becomes transparent, diaphanous.” Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, p. 61.

movement and their actions, appear to be separate from the One only when they are veiled by a veil of transparency. Once transparency is achieved, he knows what they are and why they are...”<sup>85</sup>

A philosophy of “symbolic forms”<sup>86</sup> whereby the supra-sensible and spiritual universes and the macrocosm or *Homo maximus (insan kabir)* and the microcosm *symbolize with each other* is presupposed in a true ta'wil or spiritual exegesis, without which meaning would be lost at the horizontal and lateral level of mere allegory.

Allegory is a rational operation of discursive thought that implies no transition to a “new depth of consciousness” nor to a higher plane of reality. It is a figurative literary device that moves on an “identical plane of consciousness.” Symbol, on the contrary, “announces a plane of consciousness” that is non-discursive, a new depth of consciousness and a higher plane of reality. It is the symbol that both announces the higher level of being and is simultaneously the vehicle for the elevation up to it.

Allegory is a rational operation, implying no transition either to a new plane of being or to a new depth of consciousness; it is a figuration, at an identical level of consciousness, of what might very well be known in a different way. The symbol announces a plane of consciousness distinct from that of rational evidence; it is the “cipher” of a mystery, the only means of saying something that cannot be apprehended in any other way; a symbol is never “explained” once and for all, but must be deciphered over and over again, just as a musical score is never deciphered once and for all, but call for ever new execution.<sup>87</sup>

Corbin accentuates this crucial point when he criticizes the translation of the Arabic word *Tamthil* as “allegorization,” because it is really “the privileged exemplification of an archetype.” Thus, *Tamaththul*, or the symbol in its act of symbolizing, “is the state of the sensible or imaginable thing that possesses this investiture of the archetype, and this investiture, making it symbolize with the archetype, exalts it to its maximum meaning. The exaltation can in certain cases cause it to be understood as a hypostatis.”<sup>88</sup>

The full meaning of the hermeneutic circle becomes apparent once we understand the double nature of the symbol: “transmutation of the sensible and imaginable into symbol,

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<sup>85</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 187

<sup>86</sup> This reference to “symbolic forms” by Corbin is to Ernst Cassirer. See note 9, p. 2 in Introduction.

<sup>87</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 14.

<sup>88</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 30-31.

return of the symbol to the situation that brought it to flower.”<sup>89</sup> These two movements characterize the hermeneutic circle. Thus, if the exegesis of the symbol “opens a perspective of height and depth,” there is no *regressio ad infinitum*, because *regressio ad infinitum* occurs on the same plane of being, horizontally, which characterizes the rational and deductive nature of allegory; vertically, in the heights and depths of a hierarchy of being and spiritual universes, the symbol is a flowering of a vision; an event of the Soul, “a spiritual birth.”<sup>90</sup>

Spiritual birth means that the truth of the *ta'wil* consists simultaneously of two things: the mental operation of the *ta'wil*, which returns the text to its truth; and the psycho-spiritual *Event* of the soul, which gives rise to it. “The *ta'wil* of texts supposes the *ta'wil* of the soul.”<sup>91</sup> Thus, the soul can only lead the text back to its truth by returning itself to its truth (*haqiqah*), which entails leaving the world of appearances, metaphors, and the exoteric, the world of Occidental Exile<sup>92</sup>, and returning to the inner reality and truth, the world of the Orient, the *Orient of its Being*. *Ta'wil* as exegesis of text and soul thus becomes the path towards Self-realization, the returning of the self back to its primordial *being*. The point of departure for Self-exegesis is the text, which the soul’s efforts will “carry to a transmutation, raise to the rank of a real, but inner and psychic, Event.” Thus, the *ta'wil* simultaneously leads back to the imaginal world, which answers the question we posed earlier as to the *what* and *to what* does the *ta'wil* lead. However, the *ta'wil* also answers the question *whom* and *to whom* does it lead back. This is why, the experience and transformation, expressed in the recitals, though possessing a cosmological dimension, is also a soteriology.

This soteriology, Corbin informs us, the encounter with the “transcendent Self”, which is my-self and not my-self and, is, simultaneously “the soul’s awakening to its consciousness of being a Stranger.” It is to realize that we are ‘thrown’ into the world, a world of metaphor, appearances, the exoteric, and the literal. In the spiritual romances like those of Avicenna, Suhrawardi, and the philosophical treatises of an Ismailian like Nasiraddin Tusi, we find the beginnings of “phenomenology of the *stranger*-consciousness.” What does it mean, for these spirituals, to be thrown into the world, to be “cast into the depths of the cosmic crypt?” For sure, as Corbin reminds us, it does not mean a physical change or movement in physical space. We are here talking about cosmic space, existential

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 31.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

space. To be cast into the world means to be cast from the world of Reality (*haqiqat*) into the world of appearances, of figure and metaphor (*majaz*). “This coming into the world means that realities in the true sense have become doubtful or improbable, suspect, and ambiguous.” The visionary recitals show us how to leave this world of Darkness and doubts, an *exitus*, into a world of certainty and Light. To leave is to first become a stranger to this world of metaphor, to be “a soul regenerated in the Spring of Life, having accomplished the passage of *return from Majaz to Haqiqat*.” It is to die to this world in order to be reborn into the true Reality.<sup>93</sup>

As we saw earlier, Corbin’s spiritual hermeneutics, or *Ta’wil*, is “essential symbolic understanding, the transmutation of everything visible into symbols...the only means of signifying what is to be signified.”<sup>94</sup> Everything in nature, all sensory data, is transmutable into a symbol, everything is a theophany.

*Ta’wil* of text becomes effective only as a simultaneous *ta’wil* of the soul where by an alchemical metamorphosis the soul is transformed in the process of the exegesis.

Beneath the idea of exegesis appears that of a Guide (the *exegete*), and beneath the idea of exegesis we glimpse that of an *exodus*, of a “departure from Egypt,” which is an exodus from metaphor and the slavery of the letter, from *exile* and the *Occident* of exoteric appearance to the *Orient* of the original and hidden idea.<sup>95</sup>

### **The Angel and Initiation**

At this point, we have arrived at the very heart of Corbin’s Quest and we can finally ask: “To what is this human presence, this Being-there, present?” or more precisely, we are in a position to “press this notion of presence,”<sup>96</sup> and ask in relation to the question of being lead back to the Orient of our Being: “*whom and to whom does it lead back?*”<sup>97</sup>

The very idea of a journey into the Orient, the soul’s return to her original home, her celestial Self, under the guidance of a messenger-guide, Corbin tells us, presupposes an “angelic pedagogy.” We recall from Avicenna’s visionary *Recital of Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, that there is a triple angelic hierarchy: there are the Archangels or pure Intelligences, the Cherubs;

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p. 27-28.

<sup>94</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 13.

<sup>95</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 29. see also Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 11-13.

<sup>96</sup> Corbin, “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 10.

<sup>97</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 29.

there are the Angels that emanate from them, the moving Souls of the celestial spheres; and there are the human souls, or “terrestrial angels,” who govern the earthly human bodies. We are reminded also of the essential homology between the *Animae coelestes* and the *animae humanae* and of the homologous relationship between the human souls and the Angel from whom they emanate, the Tenth of the Cherubs, on the one hand, and between each celestial Soul and the Archangel or pure Intelligence. It is through the imitation of the *Anima coelestis* that the terrestrial angel or the *anima humanae* will realize its “angelicity.” Thus, Avicenna’s cosmology is simultaneously an angelology and a soteriology. Each *anima humanae*, each human soul, forms with the Active Intelligence or the Archangel of Humanity (Gabriel or the Holy Spirit) a “dyadic whole, a closed universe.” We also saw that the solution to the dilemma of the relationship between each soul to one single Archangel, “the homology of structure and behavior,” is resolved not theoretically but as the consummation of a vision, that of *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*.

This “dyadic” relationship, a *dualitude* as we have seen earlier, the celestial kinship, is announced to the soul the moment it awakens to itself, “by attaining to consciousness of self.” The moment of consciousness to self is the moment that the soul *re*-cognizes the Angel, its own celestial counterpart and is thus initiated into the world of the Angel, the “clime of the Angel,” the Orient of its Being, which coincides with the soul’s exodus from the Occident of its Being.

Corbin is emphatic on the fact that the universe is not a Faustian, quantitative, and discontinuous space. It is a personified cosmos full of Presences, of Persons, of Angels. In fact, for Corbin, it is this “angelology” that provides the ultimate ontological foundation for human individuality. “It is the Presence of the angel that provides the conditions for the possibility of the experience of the Person.”<sup>98</sup> The secular cosmologies of the modern world are cosmologies of Absences and not Presences for in their rejection of the intermediary spiritual worlds of the Angelic hierarchies; they have severed the human soul from its celestial counterpart with which it forms a syzygy. “The Self is neither a metaphor nor an ideogram. It is, “in person,” the heavenly counterpart of a pair or a syzygy made up of a fallen angel, or an angel appointed to govern a body, and of an angel retaining its abode in heaven.”<sup>99</sup> Corbin identifies the origins of this spiritual catastrophe in the triumph the

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<sup>98</sup> Cheetham, *World Turned Inside Out*, p. 86.

<sup>99</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 21.

Aristotelianism of Averroes in the West since the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the subsequent rejection of the Neoplatonism of Avicenna.<sup>100</sup>

First, Averroes rejected Avicenna's doctrine of Emanation, which he suspected was a form of Creationism and his Peripatetic sensitivity would not tolerate. Second, Averroes admitted to an active Intelligence independent of the organic world and the individual. The individual is identified with everything perishable. Third, Averroes rejected the entire second angelic hierarchy, that of the celestial Angel-Souls, which govern the intermediary world of the active imagination, the locus of visionary events. By so doing, Averroes had eliminated the archetypal, angelic, celestial counterparts *to whom* the ta'wil is supposed to lead back. "They are par excellence the Angels of this intermediate world where prophetic inspiration and theophanic visions have their place; their world is the world of symbols and of symbolic knowledge."<sup>101</sup> The fate of a civilization hinges upon the acceptance or rejection of such a cosmology. In the West, such a cosmology had triumphed and with the loss of the intermediate world there emerged "the conflict which split the Occident, the conflict between theology and philosophy, between faith and knowledge, between symbol and history."<sup>102</sup>

With Avicenna and Suhrawardi, we are in the presence of a cosmology and angelology that "provides the foundation of the intermediate world of pure Imagination," and that which makes possible a "prophetic psychology" with its "symbolic exegesis, the spiritual understanding of Revelations, in short, ta'wil." Thus, this angelology "provides a secure foundation for the radical autonomy of the individual."<sup>103</sup> As we saw earlier in the cosmologies of Avicenna and Suhrawardi, there is a definite hierarchy of intermediary Intelligences, Angels, descending from God up until the Active Intelligence. The Figure that dominates these cosmologies is the Active Intelligence, the Angel of Humanity, the Archangel Gabriel who is both the Angel of Knowledge and Revelation. All knowledge is a result of illumination from the Angel of Humanity above and not from theoretical abstract thought or deliberation upon concepts from below. "All knowledge and all reminiscence are a light projected by the Intelligence upon the soul. Through the Intelligence the human individual is attached directly to the celestial pleroma without the mediation of any magistrery or ecclesiastical reality."<sup>104</sup> Although Avicenna and Suhrawardi describe this active

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<sup>100</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 12.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11.

Intelligence in theoretical terms in their treatises, it is in their visionary recital that the active Intelligence is encountered as a real event of the individuated soul, a Presence “at the limit of the Cosmos,” as the soul’s Celestial counterpart, a real Person, Angel-Guide. “The Event carries us to the utmost limit of the world; at this limit, the cosmos yields before the soul, it can no longer escape being interiorized into the soul, being *integrated* with it.”<sup>105</sup> What ensues is an alchemical metamorphosis when the “psychic energy” transmutes the text into “a constellation of symbols” and then, what “the soul suddenly visualizes is its own archetypal Image.”<sup>106</sup> The archetypal Image is none other than the divine imprint it bears within it but can only project once it arrives “at the utmost limit of the world.” It is this archetypal Image of a Person as Heavenly counterpart that constitutes the eternal Self of every human soul, its real individuality. Corbin is worth quoting at length here:

At the moment when the soul discovers itself to be a stranger and alone in a world formerly familiar, a *personal* figure appears on its horizon, a figure that announces itself to the soul *personally* because it symbolizes with the soul’s most intimate depths. In other words, the soul discovers itself to be the earthly counterpart of another being with which it forms a totality that is dual in structure. The two elements of this *dualitude* may be called the ego and the Self, or the transcendent celestial Self and the earthly Self, or by still other names. It is from this transcendent Self that the soul originates in the past of Metahistory; this Self had become strange to it while the soul slumbered in the world of ordinary consciousness; but it ceases to be strange to it at the moment when the soul in turn feels itself a stranger in this world. This is why the soul requires an absolutely individual expression of this Self, one that could pass into the common stock of symbolism (or into allegory) only at the cost of its painfully won individual differentiation being repressed, leveled, and abolished by ordinary consciousness.<sup>107</sup>

This is the drama of the soul and this is the passionate undertaking that it undergoes in its journey of ascent. Through the encounter with the Holy Spirit, the Archangel Gabriel, which is the culmination of a spiritual pilgrimage, a Quest, the individual is promoted to the rank of Person. Herein lies the importance of a personified hierarchical cosmos, a Platonism and Angelology as in Avicenna and Suhrawardi. At this limit, there are no longer abstractions or universals, everything is a person. Corbin,

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<sup>105</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 32.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

All mental or ideal reality, every concept (*ma 'na*) in the world of the universal has its counterpart in the world of the individual: a concrete person (*shakhs 'ayni*) outside of which this ideal or mental reality remains virtuality and pure abstraction. Everything takes place as though the question 'Who is it? Were substituted for the question 'What is it?'—as though to name the *person* were to define its *essence*; and it is to this person and not to the abstract, universal concept that the *ta'wil* or internal exegesis is lead back.<sup>108</sup>

As Nasiruddin Tusi has said: "Paradise is a person (or a human being)." "Every thought, every word, every action is a person." "Every true thought, every true word, every good action has an Angel."<sup>109</sup> Even if one is in the physical material world, there is a mode of being in Paradise, which can be realized only if one *is* the Paradise in the sense that by the principle of the *significatio passiva*, one intensifies one's share of being to arrive at Presence.

### **To Be a Disciple of Khidr**

To meet with the Angel marks the very beginning of the journey. The gnostic has only just begun his emancipation from absorption in "the They" or what Heidegger calls *das man*, the state of "unconsciousness of ignorance." To free himself, he "must pass through the Darkness; this is a terrifying and painful experience, for it ruins and destroys all the patencies and norms on which the natural man lived and depended—a true 'descent into hell, the hell of the unconscious.'" <sup>110</sup>

The goal of initiation by the Angel is the soul's ascent from the world of exile to the true Reality of the Orient of its Being; a spiral movement upwards of purification of the 'body of light' which is imprisoned in the 'body of matter.' As we saw with Suhrawardi, a mystical journey without solid philosophical preparation may be led astray. "Our theosophers—Suhrawardi's *Ishraqiyun*," Corbin tells us, "are no less aware than we are of the perils of the imaginary." The imagination according to these theosophers possesses two aspect and fulfill two functions:

On the one hand there is the passive imagination, the imagination that 're-presents' or 're-produces' (*khayal*). As such the imagination is, quite simply, the storehouse that garners all the images perceived by the *sensorium*, this latter being the mirror in which all the perceptions of the external senses converge. On

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<sup>108</sup> Henry Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, (London: Kegan Paul International & Islamic Publications, 1983), p. 51.

<sup>109</sup> Nasiruddin Tusi, *Tasawwurat*, quoted in Corbin *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, p. 51.

<sup>110</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 159.

the other hand there is the active Imagination (*wahmiyah*). This active Imagination is caught between two fires. It can submit docilely to the injunctions of the estimatory function (*wahmiyah*), in which case it is the *rational animal* that assesses things in a way related to that of animals. The rational animal can and in fact does fall prey to all the deliriums and monstrous inventions of the imaginary, obstinately rejecting the judgment of the intellect. Yet the active Imagination can, on the contrary, put itself exclusively at the service of the intellect—of, that is to say, the *intellectus sanctus* as this functions in both philosophers and prophets. In such a case, Imagination is called cogitative or meditative.<sup>111</sup>

To be oriented is to become conscious and this depends on a “crucial existential decision.” This decision either “announces that each human being is *oriented* toward a quest for his invisible guide, or that he entrusts himself to the collective, magisterial authority as the intermediary between himself and Revelation.”<sup>112</sup> The guide assists the gnostic “in purifying and liberating [his] inner being so that the intelligible realities perceived on the *imaginal* level maybe reflected in the mirror of the *sensorium* and be translated into visionary perception.”<sup>113</sup>

This is the figure of the invisible guide, the mysterious prophet figure, the idea of the *incognito* in Corbin, the person of Khidr who is often identified “with Elijah<sup>114</sup>, with St. George.” The spiritual relationship with Khidr “lends the disciple an essentially ‘transhistorical’ dimension and presupposes an ability to experience events”<sup>115</sup> in the *mundus imaginalis*. For Corbin, the crucial questions of the gnostic journey are “*Who is Khidr?* and *What does it mean to be a disciple of Khidr?*”

To answer the first question is to compile a considerable amount of material from folklore, prophetology, alchemy, etc. but for those who “owe their investiture to no authority” and who “consider [Khidr] as the essentially invisible spiritual master, reserved for those who are called to a direct unmediated relationship with the divine world,”<sup>116</sup> that is to say those who are only interested in the *spiritual filiation* and who can do without the historical justification and traces, it suffices to say mention to them Khidr’s story as recounted in the Quran.

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<sup>111</sup> Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, p. 265-266.

<sup>112</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 45.

<sup>113</sup> Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, p. 266.

<sup>114</sup> See Louis Massignon, “Elie et son rôle transhistorique, Khadriya, en Islam,” *Elie le prophète*, II, p. 269-290 quoted in Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 55.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, p. 32.

<sup>116</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, 55.

In Sura 18 of the Quran, Moses encounters an enigmatic figure called Khidr who initiates Moses “into the science of predestination.” Khidr reveals himself to Moses to be “the repository of an inspired divine science, superior to the law (*shari‘a*.)” Since Moses is the prophet-messenger and bearer of the exoteric law (*shari‘a*), Khidr is superior to Moses. Khidr “reveals to Moses precisely the secret, mystic truth (*haqiqah*) that transcends the *shari‘a*,” which explains why Khidr is “free from the servitude of the literal religion.”<sup>117</sup> We recall from an earlier discussion, that the (*walayah*) accompanies every prophecy (*nubuwwah*). In this case, Khidr is the bearer of the (*walayah*) the esoteric dimension of the eternal prophecy of (*nubuwwah*). This is why Khidr is Moses’ invisible master and initiator into the divine secrets, his Imam, or spiritual guide. Khidr is both Moses’ personal guide, a living figure, a friend of God but at the same time he is a person-archetype. “Khidr is the master of all those who are masterless...who has attained to the Spring of Life, the Eternal Youth.” His relationship with each initiand is such that he is “his own person and an archetype, and it is by being one and the other that he is able to be each man’s master” because he manifests or exemplifies himself in as many times as he has disciples.

He leads each disciple to his theophany, the theophany of which he personally is the witness, because that theophany corresponds to his ‘inner heaven,’ to the form of his own being, to his eternal individuality (*‘ayn thabita*)....Khidr’s mission consist in enabling you to attain to the “Khidr of your being,” for it is in this inner depth, in this “prophet of your being,” that springs the Water of Life at the foot of the mystic Sinai, pole of the microcosm, centre of the world. <sup>118</sup>

To become Khidr is to have achieved the capacity for “theophanic vision,” to have attained to Oriental Knowledge, that makes possible the encounter with “the divine Alter Ego,” the celestial twin. The forms in which Khidr appears “conforms” to the “inner heaven” of the initiand. This is the principle of “theophanism” that Corbin found so illuminating in Ibn Arabi and which guards against confusing a theophany for the divine essence itself. Khidr can “only guide *each* man individually to what he alone is capable of *seeing*, and not bring him to any collective pre-established dogma: *Talem eum vidi qualem capere potui*.”<sup>119</sup> Recall Henry More’s dictum: “if thou be this thou see this.” “Like can only be known by Like!”

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, p. 61.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, p. 75-76.

## **Conclusion**

There are obvious similarities between this phenomenology of Presence and Heidegger's *Dasein*. However, the metaphysics of our Platonists of Persia, and all the spirituals Corbin had studied, is rooted in a hierarchical structure of Being peopled by real Persons, and these are precisely the hermeneutic levels Heidegger's Analytic "had not foreseen." It is precisely what Heidegger had not foreseen that constitutes the very core of a "prophetic philosophy" and without which humanity is lost in Absence. Corbin says: "If the Prophet received his revelations from the Angel Gabriel, it is none the less true that, for each mystical Sage, joining himself with the Active Intelligence (which is but the speculative name of the Angel Holy Spirit) is each time equivalent to becoming the 'seal of prophecy.'"<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 75.