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IMAGINATION IN HENRY CORBIN'S THOUGHT: AN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY INQUIRY²

Abstract

This article reconstructs the intellectual history of Henry Corbin's philosophy of imagination within the European context of the 1930s, a period when phenomenology, Protestant theology, and German as well as Arabic philosophy intersected in new and decisive ways. It highlights the formative role of Protestant thought in Corbin's reflections on faith, revelation, and language, particularly shaped by apophatic philosophy. The

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² This essay is partially adapted and translated from several of my earlier publications in French. Wherever possible, I have used existing English translations of Corbin's works, all other translations are my own and have been revised humanly assisted by AI tools.

study also examines the decisive influence of Alexandre Koyré and Carl Gustav Jung, through whom Corbin developed a metaphysical conception of imagination as the organ of theophany rather than a psychological faculty. His sustained participation in the Eranos Circle provided the intellectual setting in which these ideas matured into a phenomenological and hermeneutic vision of the imaginal, conceived as an intermediate mode of being between the sensible and the intelligible. Through a historical and textual analysis, the article traces how the concept of imagination evolved in Corbin's work itself, situating it within the broader currents of twentieth-century intellectual history.

Keywords: Henry Corbin, imagination, Martin Heidegger, Alexandre Koyré, Carl Gustav Jung, Eranos Circle, archives documents

A imaginação no pensamento de Henry Corbin: uma investigação de história intelectual

Resumo

Este artigo reconstrói a história intelectual da filosofia da imaginação de Henry Corbin no contexto europeu dos anos 30, um período em que a fenomenologia, a teologia Protestante e a filosofia tanto Alemã como Árabe se intersectam de maneiras novas e decisivas. Destaca o papel formador do pensamento Protestante nas reflexões de Corbin sobre a fé, a revelação e a linguagem, particularmente formadas pela filosofia apofática. O estudo também examina a influência decisiva de Alexandre Koyré e de Carl Gustav Jung, através dos quais Corbin desenvolveu uma concepção metafísica da imaginação como órgão de teofania mais do que como faculdade psicológica. A sua participação contínua no Círculo Eranos forneceu o cenário intelectual no qual estas ideias amadureceram e se tornaram numa visão fenomenológica e hermenêutica do imaginal, concebido como um modo de ser intermédio entre o sensível e o inteligível. Através de uma análise histórica e contextual, o artigo re-traça a forma como o conceito de imaginação evolui no interior da própria obra de Corbin, situando-o no interior de correntes mais largas da história intelectual do século vinte.

Palavras-chave: Henry Corbin, imaginação, Martin Heidegger, Alexandre Koyré, Carl Gustav Jung, Círculo Eranos, documentos de arquivo.

Introduction

To understand the meanings of *imagination* and the *imaginal* in Henry Corbin's thought, it is necessary to situate them within the trajectory of his own philosophical formation and the intellectual milieu in which they first took shape. In much contemporary discourse, these terms are invoked loosely or metaphorically to legitimize various spiritual or psychological experiences, yet in Corbin's writings they possess a precise and technical significance that demands rigorous interpretation. This study therefore seeks to reconstruct their intellectual history and to clarify their conceptual scope. Although imagination occupies a central position in Corbin's metaphysics, the popularity of works such as *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* has encouraged a proliferation of derivative usages detached from their original context. Corbin's name now circulates across an extraordinary range of disciplines,

from poetry and philosophy to psychology, education, and even modern forms of esotericism, often through isolated quotations that obscure rather than illuminate his philosophical intent. Because his writings have remained largely peripheral to the academic canon, the intellectual landscape in which he elaborated the ideas of the *imaginal world* (*mundus imaginalis*) and the *active imagination* has been insufficiently examined. As a result, his sources, motivations, and aims have frequently been misunderstood. Yet Corbin's philosophy of imagination did not arise in a vacuum: it emerged from a specific constellation of readings, influences, and debates that defined the intellectual scene of the 1930s, flourishing in dialogue with figures such as Alexandre Koyré and Carl Gustav Jung.

Henry Corbin, *philosophus crucis*

Although widely known within European intellectual circles, Corbin remains an elusive and singular figure. His intellectual and spiritual path, which moved through Protestant theology³, German⁴ and Iranian philosophy, various spiritual and theosophical⁵ currents, and, after his retirement, a brief initiation into a chivalric form of Freemasonry during the final decade of his life⁶, resists any simple classification.

Interpreting Corbin's work is challenging precisely because of the continual interplay between his own philosophical reflections and the thinkers he interprets. His hermeneutic method so closely inhabits their vision that the boundary between his voice and theirs often becomes indiscernible. The distinction between the two is always delicate. Corbin never articulates his philosophy in a direct or systematic form. It reveals itself instead through the mirrored outline of a presence that withdraws as it manifests itself.

His approach may best be described as a labor of *actualization*. He expressed this with remarkable clarity in a letter written in 1947 to his venerable teacher of Persian, Henri Massé⁷. Speaking of traditional Iranian society in the region south of Tehran, Corbin wrote:

I believe that the most fruitful role we can play is indeed to help them

³ D. Proulx, «Les écrits "théologiques" de Henry Corbin, jeune philosophe protestant», *11^e Journée Henry Corbin – Raison philosophique et expérience mystique* (ed.), Paris 2015; J. Brun, «Un missionnaire protestant : Henry Corbin», *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuse*, 59, 2 (1979) 187-200.

⁴ M. Heidegger, «Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique ? Leçon inaugurale donnée à l'Université de Fribourg-en-Brisgau le 24 juillet 1929», trad. H. Corbin, *Bifur*(ed.), vol. 8, 1931, p. 9-27; M. Heidegger, *Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique ? : suivi d'extraits sur l'être et le temps et d'une conférence sur Hölderlin*, trad. H. Corbin, Gallimard, Paris 1938; A. J. Heschel, «La prophétie», trad. H. Corbin, *Hermès*(ed.), Bruxelles/Paris, R. Henriquez, 1939, p. 78-110.

⁵ H. Corbin, *Swedenborg and esoteric Islam*, trad. L. Fox, Swedenborg Foundation, West Chester, PA. 1995.

⁶ See W. J. Hanegraaff, «Henry Corbin as Knight of the Temple», *New Perspectives on Henry Corbin*, H. Fakhoury (ed.), Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2025, p. 211-235; J. A. Clergue, «En quête de Henry Corbin franc-maçon chevaleresque I», *L'initiation*, 2 (2009) 84-114; J. A. Clergue, «En quête de Henry Corbin franc-maçon chevaleresque II», *L'initiation*, 4 (2009) 245-273.

⁷ Henry Massé (1886–1969) is a French orientalist and Arabist, professor at the Faculty of Letters in Algiers and later at the Sorbonne, renowned for his studies on Persian culture and Arabic literature. H. Corbin, «L'Iran, patrie des philosophes et des poètes», *L'Âme de l'Iran*, R. Grousset, L. Massignon et H. Massé (ed.), Albin Michel, Paris 2009 [1951], p. 29-42.

learn how to think their own spiritual tradition in a way that gives them a 'self-consciousness' communicable in the present. In return, we have much to receive, and there are several venerable shaykhs of whom I consider myself, in some sense, a *shāgerd*⁸.

What clearly emerges here is that Corbin does not adopt a colonial posture, but that of a *passeur* intent on valuing the other within a form intelligible to Europe. In this sense, he invokes the notions of "actuality" and "actualization" to delineate the emergent phenomenon of *human presence* as a form of personal spiritual anthropology⁹. In Corbin's case, his act of *philosophizing thus functions as a spiritual realization*.

As he himself explained:

In writing the word *actuality*, I do not mean, of course, what is usually understood by that term in a daily newspaper or in the cinema. I mean, more precisely, what is conveyed by the Greek word *energeia*, of which the Latin *actualitas* is only a more or less fortunate translation. It is the idea of a power, latent or in act, that by its very nature produces certain effects¹⁰.

Encounter and Withdrawal from French Heideggerianism

Regarding his role as translator and introducer of Martin Heidegger's philosophy in France, it is essential to recall that Corbin had indeed translated the entirety of *Sein und Zeit* during his years in Turkey (1939-1945). He even dated and signed his translation on July 22, 1943, marking it with the Arabic phrase: « بَمُشَلِّا تَسْبِتَقَا » « I borrowed my flame from the comets, and with it I set my enemies ablaze. » Yet this complete translation was never published.

When Corbin returned to Paris in July 1946, after six years in Turkey and one year in Iran, he discovered that the Heideggerian movement he had first helped introduce to France had taken on a life of its own. The existentialist fervor that now dominated the Parisian intellectual scene no longer bore much resemblance to the metaphysical questions that had originally inspired his interest in Heidegger. As Denis de Rougemont wrote to him on September 21, 1946: « I suppose you have had time to see the damage for which you are responsible through your translation of Heidegger, and that before the existentialism of the *Sixième arrondissement* you have already exclaimed: *Das hatte ich nicht gewollt* [That was not what I meant] »¹¹. It may be inferred that Corbin chose silence over misinterpretation¹². His correspondence with Gallimard concerning his translations and royalties provides further insight. In

⁸ Daniel Proulx, *Catalogue du Fonds Henry et Stella Corbin* (AHSC), Grand équipement documentaire du Campus Condorcet, École pratique des hautes études, Paris, 2016, EPHE BSR 5COR, 48 boxes, 16 linear meters, <http://www.calames.abes.fr/pub/#details?id=FileId-2016>. AHSC 266.31, Henry Corbin à Henri Massé, lettre datée du 7 avril 1946 envoyée de Téhéran, p. 2. <https://calames.abes.fr/pub/#details?id=Calames-2016101116101280947>

⁹ See D. Proulx, « L'anthropologie corbinienne à l'aune de la personne humaine ou le personnalisme métaphysique », *19 Journée Henry Corbin – La personne humaine* (ed.), Paris 2024.

¹⁰ H. Corbin, « Actualité de la philosophie traditionnelle en Iran », *Acta Iranica*, 1, 1 (1968) 1.

¹¹ AHSC 277.18, Lettre de Denis de Rougemont à Henry Corbin datée du 21 septembre 1946, p. 2.

¹² For a reconsideration of this misunderstanding, see H. Corbin, *From Heidegger to Suhrawardi – An interview with Philippe Nemo*, trad. M. Evans-Cockle, amiscorbin.com, Paris 2006.

a pointed letter addressed to Brice Parrain on July 18, 1960, Corbin wrote:

I recall the time when only dear Groethuysen¹³ and I still had faith in my translation of Heidegger. Since then, success has come, and everyone has been meddling in it. That is only natural. I have already explained why the period of my life devoted to such matters now seems to me to belong to the past. My work and teaching in the Iranian field are already more than enough to overburden me. Yet the 1938 volume in the *Essais* formed a coherent whole. It contained an introduction in which I set out my terminology, and it included, above all, a valuable letter from Heidegger himself. That small volume played a pioneering role; it opened a path, and I believe many have benefited from it. Are you sure it is entirely elegant to break apart that unity? [...] In any case, I remain in this affair an ancestor (a pre-existentialist).¹⁴

Protestantism

Another important and often overlooked aspect of Corbin's intellectual formation is his Protestant background. Born in Paris on April 14, 1903¹⁵, into a Catholic family, Corbin converted to Protestantism as a young adult¹⁶. The precise date of his conversion remains unknown, but it likely occurred after 1922, when he abruptly left the Grand Séminaire of Issy-les-Moulineaux¹⁷, and probably before 1927. In that year, the *Archives Henry and Stella Corbin (AHSC)* preserve a fragment of an unfinished, almost certainly autobiographical novel expressing a vehement rejection of Catholicism. The text, written in a tone of poignant pathos, bears the mark of a soul that has endured a profound inner rupture¹⁸.

By 1931, Corbin was already active within Protestant intellectual circles¹⁹. Together with Denis de Rougemont²⁰, Roger Jézéquel, Roland de Pury²¹, and Albert-Marie Schmidt, he co-founded the journal *Hic et Nunc*. The texts he published there reveal with clarity the early outlines of his own thought, particularly the tension between faith and existence, between history and revelation²². The *Hic et Nunc*

¹³ Bernard Groethuysen (1880-1946)

¹⁴ Camilleri and Proulx, «Martin Heidegger et Henry Corbin», art. cit., p. 60. AHSC 265.C.9.

¹⁵ P. Lory, «Henry Corbin», *L'École pratique des hautes études : invention, érudition, innovation de 1868 à nos jours*, P. Henriot (ed.), Paris, Somogy éditions d'art & École pratique des hautes études, Paris 2018, p. 565-566.

¹⁶ It should be noted that Corbin never converted to Islam and remained a Protestant until his death.

¹⁷ C. Jambet, «Repères biographiques», *Henry Corbin*(ed.), L'Herne, Paris 1981, p. 15.

¹⁸ This unfinished novel is preserved in the Henry and Stella Corbin Fonds held at the École pratique des hautes études. The text recounts the experiences of the character Maxence and appears to be "autobiographical." See D. Proulx, *De la hiérobistoire, portrait de Henry Corbin*, sous la direction de J.-M. Counet, PhD, Institut supérieur de philosophie, Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgique), 2017, p. 103 ss.

¹⁹ H. Corbin, «La fédération allemande à Caub – 40^e congrès général de la Christliche Studenten Vereinigung», *Le Semeur*, (1931) 38-42.

²⁰ See D. d. Rougemont, «Hérétiques de toutes les religions, unissez-vous !», *Mélanges offerts à Henry Corbin*, S. H. Nasr (ed.), Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Téhéran 1977, p. 539-546.

²¹ See the correspondence with Henry Corbin in this volume. R. d. Pury, *Lettres d'Europe un jeune intellectuel dans l'entre-deux-guerres, 1931-1934*, Labor et fides/du Cerf, Genève/Paris 2010.

²² See, for example, this article on Karl Barth: H. Corbin, «La théologie dialectique et l'histoire», *Recherches philosophiques*, A. Koyré, H.-C. Puech et A. Spaier (ed.), vol. 3, Boivin & C^{ie}, Paris 1933-1934, p. 250-284.

“manifesto” declared that its members sought to be witnesses «of a truth that is not of our making, yet whose very essence calls for our effort to bring it into»²³.

In a brief 1932 text entitled *Témoignage à Kierkegaard* (*Testimony to Kierkegaard*), Corbin reaffirmed his Protestant conviction by insisting that the human being stands before God in a relationship that is paradoxically disproportionate, even absurd, where, as he put it, «to believe is to be»²⁴. Later in the same article, the tension between faith and history becomes explicit when he concludes: «The Reformation was able to incarnate itself in history and become a common good; but beyond history and before all historical greatness, it remains the single act accomplished by each human being, real and alone before God»²⁵.

For scholastic or rationalist theologians, as Corbin called them, such a relation between the human and the divine is impossible, since, as Sohrevardī wrote, repeating a classical theological argument, «God, the Most High, is too exalted for there to be any community of genus, any homogeneity, between Him and His creatures»²⁶. This perspective, however, would be neither Sohrevardī's nor Corbin's²⁷. For both, philosophical reflection becomes a form of *personal spiritual realization*. That is the crux of the philosophical debate around mysticism.

Apophatic Philosophizing

From a philosophical standpoint, how is such a position possible? The answer is to be found in theophany, for the relation itself is rooted in an opening, an *Ungrund*, a groundless ground where the divine discloses itself. Apophatism and theophany together resolve the dilemma: to love the manifestation of God as it presents itself to the soul, yet without confining the divine to that manifestation. The love of God is thus the openness through which the soul meets revelation at the level of its own being. Sohrevardī summarizes the situation with precision: “Every being possessed of vehement desire is therefore a seeker who does not find. Desire implies lack, for it is necessary to its very nature not to find»²⁸.

In his early writings, Corbin makes frequent allusions to Heidegger²⁹, Jaspers³⁰,

²³ H. Corbin, R. Jézéquel, R. de Pury, D. de Rougemont and A.-M. Schmidt, «Manifeste», *Hic et Nunc*, 1 (1932) 2.

²⁴ H. Corbin, «Témoignage à Kierkegaard», *Le Semeur*, (1932) p. 79.

²⁵ Corbin, «Témoignage à Kierkegaard», art. cit., p. 81.

²⁶ S. Y. Sohrevardī, *L'archange empourpré, quinze traités et récits mystiques*, ed. et trad. de l'arabe et du persan, intro. et notes de Henry Corbin, Fayard 1976, Paris p. 460.

²⁷ He reiterates the same warning when analyzing the work of Rūzbehān Baqlī Shīrāzī, the *fidèles d'amour*, and the theme of the Imams' divine affection. «Rūzbehān's great concern will be to dispel the misunderstanding perpetuated by the malice or the helplessness of the orthodox representatives of legalistic Islam. A theophany (*tajallī*) is not an incarnation (*hulūl*) [...] this docetism is nothing less than a 'spiritual realism.'» H. Corbin, *En islam iranien, aspects spirituels et philosophiques – Les fidèles d'amour, shī'isme et soufisme*, vol. 3, Paris, Gallimard 1972, p. 19. On this theme, see Proulx, *De la hiérophistoire, portrait de Henry Corbin*, op. cit., pp. 503-514.

²⁸ Sohrevardī, *L'archange empourpré, quinze traités et récits mystiques*, op. cit., pp. 460-461.

²⁹ Heidegger, «Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?», op. cit.; M. Heidegger, «Hölderlin et l'essence de la poésie», *Mesures*, 3 (1937); Heidegger, *Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?», op. cit.; M. Heidegger, «Phénoménologie de la mort», trad. H. Corbin, *Hermès*(ed.), R. Henriquez, Bruxelles/Paris 1938.*

³⁰ K. Jaspers, «La norme du jour et la passion pour la nuit», trad. H. Corbin, *Hermès*(ed.), R. Henriquez, Bruxelles/Paris 1938, p. 51-68.

Buber³¹, Barth³², and Baader. From Heidegger he takes the notion of existence, from Jaspers the dialectic of Day and Night, from Buber the concept of the *Thou*, and from Barth and Baader the *cogitor ergo sum*, which stands in deliberate opposition to the Cartesian *cogito*. Yet before Barth appropriated Baader's formulation, Hamann had already written, in a letter later cited by Corbin in his studies on him: «Not *cogito ergo sum*, but rather, and better still according to the Hebrew, *est ergo cogito*»³³. This reversal, "He is, therefore I am," or "I am, therefore I am thought," defines the movement required by an apophatic faith that knows it can never grasp God, yet precisely for that reason listens for the divine Word, aware that, for «it is not within History that the Word of God is to be heard, but each time and always in our present life»³⁴.

This Word, the divine *Logos*, is mediated by the angel. For Corbin, the angel is the hermeneut³⁵ par excellence, the mediation of transcendence itself. It rescues the human being from the solipsism of the ego, from the self-enclosed *cogito* of modern consciousness, opening instead to the *cogitor*, the "I am thought," the emergence of the real subject in its eternal anteriority. The Angel is that median presence through which self-awareness perceives «what relation the 'I' experiences with its Self, as being a form of the thought of that Self»³⁶. This inversion of the *I* by the *Self*³⁷ corresponds to the *significatio passiva*, a technical expression rediscovered by Luther and frequently invoked by Corbin. It marks the reversal of the ordinary relation between subject and object, for understanding no longer determines the object understood but enters into co-presence with it. In this sense, hermeneutics becomes spiritual hermeneutics, a mode of comprehension that is itself a mode of being. Such an orientation safeguards the subject from historicization, for self-knowledge is no longer conceived as the product of temporal or psychological development but as participation in an ever-present act of divine understanding. Corbin summarizes this perfectly:

The past is not something to be "overcome." What matters is to understand what once made that past possible, what brought it into being, what was its own future. When a soul once more apprehends that hidden possibility, mysteriously innate to it, it becomes, in turn and in the present moment, the very future it once anticipated. In doing so, it frees what we call the past from the weight that made it the past.³⁸

³¹ In his 1933 article *Quand nous nous réveillerons d'entre les morts*, published in *Hic et Nunc*, he writes: «The Word nonetheless shatters the enchanted circle of the solitary ego, and the love that gives itself is neither a hypothesis nor a norm, but passion within real time. Ethical existence designates this present instance of being-for, dependent upon the Other, the unique and simply human *Thou*, who confronts from without through the summons and the contradiction». H. Corbin, «Quand nous nous réveillerons d'entre les morts», *Hic et Nunc*, 2 (1933) 51.

³² Corbin, «La théologie dialectique et l'histoire», *op. cit.*, p. 250-284.

³³ H. Corbin and J. G. Hamann, *Hamann, philosophe du luthéranisme*, avec une intro. de J. Brun, Berg international, Paris 1985 [1935], p. 48. Lettre à Jacobi du 1^{er} juin 1785.

³⁴ H. Corbin, «Philosophia crucis», *Hic et Nunc*, 3/4 (1933) 87.

³⁵ H. Corbin, *Le paradoxe du monothéisme*, L'Herne, Paris 2003 [1981], p. 62, 100-101, 119-120.

³⁶ H. Corbin, *Avicenna and the visionary recital*, Pantheon Books, New York 1990 [1960], p. 264.

³⁷ Here one might ask about the influence of Martin Buber in this reversal.

³⁸ Corbin, «Actualité de la philosophie traditionnelle en Iran», *art. cit.*, p. 2.

Such an effort of existence is never accomplished alone, but always before the Word of God. This interior posture of *μόνος πρὸς μόνον*, “alone to the Alone”, so admired by Corbin³⁹ in Jung’s *Answer to Job*⁴⁰, defines the apophatic stance of the soul. This reversal of the Cartesian *cogito* finds another formulation in *En Islam iranien*, where he writes: «It is far more accurate to say that it is spiritual reality that contains and envelops us, rather than that we contain it»⁴¹.

This entire constellation belongs to what Corbin calls *philosophia crucis*⁴², a deliberate echo of Luther’s *theologia crucis*. The opposition between the theology of glory and the theology of the cross finds in Corbin a profoundly original resonance. Following Hamann, who once described himself as practicing a *philologia crucis*, Corbin affirms that «to philosophize is thus an event of existence, which must ultimately lead existence itself to the threshold where the relation between the two worlds becomes transparent»⁴³.

For Corbin, philosophizing is never separable from existence; it is the very act through which thought fulfills itself as spiritual experience. To believe is to be, to think is to pray, and to exist is to reveal. This perspective reveals what the young Corbin found in Sohravardī: a symbolic mode of thinking that opens toward personal spiritual realization⁴⁴ and which, once accomplished, pierces through history and sustains that which actualizes (*existencifie*) the ontological reality of human existence before God. The Word of God, in Corbin’s reading, pierces history.

On the relation between history and love, Corbin cites Friedrich Gogarten’s remarkable essay, inspired by Karl Barth and dialectical theology⁴⁵, which asserts

³⁹ A text of remarkable philosophical density. H. Corbin, «La sophia éternelle. À propos d’un livre récent de C.-G. Jung», *Revue de culture européenne*, 5, (1953), 11-44.

⁴⁰ C. G. Jung, «Answer to Job», *Psychology and religion: West and East* (ed.), Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. 1958, p. 355-470. It should be noted that the French edition includes an afterword by Henry Corbin. C. G. Jung, *Réponse à Job*, trad. R. Cahen, avec une postface de Henry Corbin, Buchet/Chastel, Paris 2009 [1964].

⁴¹ H. Corbin, *En islam iranien, aspects spirituels et philosophiques – Le shi’isme duodécimain*, vol. 1, Gallimard, Paris 1971, p. 12.

⁴² Corbin, «Philosophia crucis», art. cit., p. 86-94.

⁴³ Corbin, «Quand nous nous réveillerons d’entre les morts», art. cit., p. 45.

⁴⁴ A comparative reflection could be undertaken on Corbin’s and Bachelard’s respective understandings of *realization*. Bachelard, for his part, writes: «Thus realization takes precedence over reality. The primacy of realization relegates reality to a subordinate rank. A physicist truly knows a reality only insofar as he has realized it, when he becomes master of the eternal recommencement of things and inwardly constitutes an eternal return of reason. The ideal of realization is, moreover, exacting: a theory that realizes partially must realize totally. It cannot be true in a fragmentary way. Theory is the mathematical truth that has not yet achieved its full realization. The scientist must strive toward that complete realization. One must compel nature to go as far as the mind». G. Bachelard, *La philosophie du non, essai d’une philosophie du nouvel esprit scientifique*, 4^e ed., Presses universitaires de France, Paris 1966 [1940], p. 36. In both thinkers, *realization* designates not a mere verification of the real but an act of ontological actualization, a transmutation of knowledge into being, through which the world attains its form within the interiority of the knowing subject.

⁴⁵ Corbin’s engagement with Barth was brief, and by the mid-1930s he had already begun to move beyond that theological horizon. Late in his life, he would look back on this period in the only text of a truly autobiographical nature, where he writes: «We shared Keyserling’s conviction that ‘Karl Barth and his friends hold in their hands the future of Protestantism.’ Alas! Our illusions were to come tumbling down from great heights, and if dear Rudolf Otto had still been with us, he could have taken me by the hand, led me back to Schleiermacher and said: ‘Didn’t I tell you this would happen?’ I quickly became uncomfortable with ‘barthism’ and dialectical theology». H. Corbin,

that «there is history only where, in love, there is truly faith»⁴⁶. Yet along this path of divine love, dangers inevitably arise. If it is possible to love God, some will argue that humanity has reduced the divine to its own measure of affection, while others will maintain that the transcendence of love can never attain the ineffable and that what it reaches is only illusion. It is precisely along this ridge line that Corbin situates the philosophical act itself, at the threshold where the two worlds become transparent. To philosophize, in this sense, is to reveal; and here imagination appears as the faculty that sustains the birth of symbols capable of resolving the fundamental antinomy.

German and Arabic Philosophy

Alongside this Protestant orientation, how did Corbin come to Arabic philosophy? Étienne Gilson's 1925 course on «Latin Avicennism in the Middle Ages»⁴⁷ had already directed the young Corbin toward the Arabic sources of medieval thought. In the autumn of 1926, he turned away from the *agrégation* in philosophy and entered the École des langues orientales, where he studied Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and Sanskrit simultaneously⁴⁸, while pursuing a diploma at the École pratique des hautes études. In 1928 he graduated with a thesis entitled *Augustinisme et stoïcisme dans la pensée de Luis de León* (Augustinianism and Stoicism in the Thought of Luis de León)⁴⁹, and in 1929 he received his degree from the École des langues orientales in Arabic, Turkish, and Persian.

Meanwhile, in October 1928, the Bibliothèque nationale de France hired him as a substitute librarian, immediately recognizing his competence as an Arabist. He attended the lectures of Maurice Gaudefroy-Demombynes⁵⁰, among whose students

Biographical Post-Scriptum to a Philosophical Interview, trad. M. Evans-Cockle, amiscorbin.com, Paris, 2006 [1981]. La rupture date approximativement de 1936, lorsque Barth indique à Corbin dans une lettre que ses travaux sur Sohrawardī relèvent de la « théologie naturelle ». Cela avait confirmé à Corbin que Barth n'en avait pas saisi l'esprit profond. En 1940, il revient sur la question dans une lettre à Denis de Rougemont : « ravi que tu te sois accommodé avec Barth. Moi j'attends encore. Mais je ne nierai jamais, naturellement, le service qu'il nous a rendu ». Fonds Denis de Rougemont, Bibliothèque publique et universitaire Neuchâtel, lettre de Henry Corbin à Denis de Rougemont datée du 20 avril 1940, dans la correspondance générale boîte 3, dossier 4, « c », p. 4.

⁴⁶ Corbin, «La théologie dialectique et l'histoire», *op. cit.*, p. 276.

⁴⁷ É. Gilson, «L'Avicenne latin au moyen âge», *EPHE, Section sciences religieuses*, (1925) 52-53.

⁴⁸ Before turning toward the Islamic and Iranian world, Corbin had first been drawn to the Far East. Evidence of this early attraction can be found in his meeting with the archaeologist Joseph Hackin in April 1926. In his diary, he records the encounter in a tone of exalted clarity: «Since I met Hackin at the Musée Guimet, I have been seized by a joyful certainty. For a year my mind has wandered, from one enchantment to another, not knowing where to go, what precise direction to take. Since discovering the 'Calls of the Orient,' I have lived in a state of perpetual availability [...]». (Henry and Stella Corbin Archives, AHSC 293, Agenda, April 1926, <https://calames.abes.fr/pub/#details?id=Calames-201610271710464898109>. For the complete excerpt, see Proulx, *De la hiérophistoire, portrait de Henry Corbin*, *op. cit.*, p. 109-110. This early testimony already reveals the tone of spiritual expectancy that would characterize Corbin's intellectual path. At that moment, the «East» signified not yet Iran, but the Far East, a symbolic horizon of awakening and inner displacement. Corbin would soon articulate this orientation in his essay signed «Trong-ni», *Regard vers l'Orient*, published in *Tribune indochinoise* on August 15, 1927, where he sought to express his philosophical stance in relation to Eastern thought as a posture of openness rather than appropriation.

⁴⁹ AHSC 310, H. Corbin, *Augustinisme et stoïcisme dans la pensée de Luis de León*, sous la direction de P. Alphanhéry et A. Bayet, section des sciences religieuses, École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris 1928, 66 p.

⁵⁰ M. Gaudefroy-Demombynes, «Sourate V et une partie de la sourate VI, expliquées avec les commentaires

were Henri Laoust and Georges Vajda, both of whom would become close friends. The decisive moment came, however, on October 13, 1929, when Louis Massignon offered him a lithographed edition of Sohrevardī's *Hikmat al-Isḥrāq*⁵¹, an event that permanently fixed his trajectory toward Iran.

Corbin's encounter with Arabic philosophy thus preceded his engagement with German philosophy, since his first trip to Germany began on July 16, 1930, and it was after this journey that he noted in his agenda, on August 6, 1930, «Read Heidegger»⁵². One might even suppose that his study of Heidegger served as a general hermeneutic instrument in philosophy. As he would later confess, «What I was looking for in Heidegger and that which I understood thanks to Heidegger, is precisely that which I was looking for and found in the metaphysics of Islamic Iran»⁵³. It is plausible that he read Heidegger to illuminate Sohrevardī, just as it is plausible that he read Sohrevardī to understand Heidegger. A hypothesis confirmed, to some degree, by the Arabic glosses written in the margins of his personal copy of *Sein und Zeit*⁵⁴.

This constellation of studies, readings, and encounters forms, in a sense, the genesis of his vocation as an Iranologist. It also clarifies the singular mode of philosophizing proper to Corbin: at that time, he was not merely seeking to understand either Heidegger or Sohrevardī, but rather, through them, to discover his own act of philosophizing.

Toward a Phenomenological-Hermeneutics

Through the phenomenological-hermeneutic path, Corbin rejects any form of exclusive dualism and instead proposes what he calls a *dualité*⁵⁵, an inclusive reciprocity⁵⁶. For him, defining the relation between the human and the divine too

de Tabari, Baïdawi, Razi et Abdou», *EPHE, Section sciences religieuses*, (1929) 52 ; M. Gaudefroy-Demombynes, «Questions diverses relatives aux *Ṣaḥīḥ* d'Al Bokhārī, avec les commentaires de Qastallāni et d'Al Aīnī», *EPHE, Section sciences religieuses*, (1929) 52.

⁵¹ Jambet, «Repères biographiques», *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁵² In his «Biographical Post-Scriptum to a Philosophical», Henry Corbin precisely situates his encounter with Rudolf Otto and notes that it was Jean Baruzi who opened for him the path to Germany, more specifically, who brought him into contact with Otto and Friedrich Heiler, two central figures of liberal Protestant theology. This meeting proved decisive, for it reveals with great clarity the significance of that period in shaping Corbin's relation to German philosophy, even before his discovery of Heidegger's work. The influence of German thought on Corbin is too often reduced to Heidegger alone, whereas it must be understood in relation to Protestant theology. «Marburg an der Lahn!» he writes, as if to emphasize both the topographical and spiritual dimensions of that intellectual landscape. The exclamation itself evokes an entire a topography of the soul. Marburg, the city of Rudolf Otto, Friedrich Heiler, and, shortly before them, of Heidegger, became for Corbin a true *colline inspirée*, a hill of revelation and inspiration. It was also during this period that he also first encountered the thought of Karl Barth and of Emanuel Swedenborg, both of whom would leave an enduring imprint on his vision of theology and the human-divine relation. See <https://www.amiscorbin.com/en/biography/biographical-post-scriptum-to-a-philosophical-interview/>

⁵³ Corbin, *From Heidegger to Suhrawardī – An interview with Philippe Nemo*, *op. cit.*

⁵⁴ Camilleri and Proulx, «Martin Heidegger et Henry Corbin», *art. cit.*, p. 4-63.

⁵⁵ On this concept, see Proulx, «La non-dualité chez Henry Corbin», *op. cit.*, p. 103-123. Voir aussi Proulx, «La dualité comme identité mystique chez Henry Corbin», *art. cit.*, p. 45-58.

⁵⁶ Not to be confused with Karl Rahner's approach. Denis de Rougemont uses the expression «relation of complementarity» in a similar sense: «The 'single path' may therefore designate orthodoxy just as well as heresy. We see here that these two radically antinomic phenomena stand in a *relation of complementarity*." D. de Rougemont,

rigidly risks undermining the very edifice of *theandry*⁵⁷, the divine-human unity that lies at the heart of a certain philosophical anthropology present both in Christology and in Imāmology. The “indeterminacy” of imagination, understood as *gnosis*, as a mode of knowing rather than as a mere producer of images or representational forms, characterizes a metaphysical relation in which imagination functions as the median and mediating faculty between the human and the divine.

Closely linked to this spiritual hermeneutics, which necessarily *involves* the subject, is phenomenology. It provides the essential perspective through which the imaginal “relation”⁵⁸ can be understood as an existential relation in which the subject is engaged in the very act of manifestation. In Corbin’s thought, this “relation” is not an opposition but a polarity, a *dualitude*, a divine-human reciprocity, or as he writes, «a theophanic relation between that which shows itself and the one to whom the vision is shown. God reveals Himself to each according to the aptitude and spiritual degree of the one who receives the vision»⁵⁹. Throughout Corbin’s work, this perceptual relation is often summarized by the Latin phrase *talem eum vidi qualem capere potui*, «For each of us saw him as his capacity permitted»⁶⁰. What appears and what is lived correspond to the capacity of the soul to sustain the locus of manifestation, a locus that necessarily *involves* the subject itself, the *mundus imaginalis*. This is also what Emanuel Swedenborg⁶¹ meant when he wrote that «the body of each Spirit and each Angel is the form of its love»⁶². A formula that encapsulates, for Corbin, the metaphysical relation of the human to God. It is this “manifestation” that Corbin approaches phenomenologically.

In brief, Corbin developed a phenomenological-hermeneutic method profoundly shaped by his Protestant formation, allowing him to delineate the appearing of God

«Hérétiques de toutes les religions...», Henry Corbin, C. Jambet (ed.), L’Herne, Paris 1981, p. 300.

⁵⁷ See H. Corbin, *Face de Dieu, face de l’homme – herméneutique et soufisme*, Entrelacs, Paris 2008 [1983], p. 246-248.

⁵⁸ It would be worth revisiting the opening pages of Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness unto Death*, where the problem of the *relation* is articulated with remarkable precision. Corbin’s early writings frequently return to Kierkegaard’s philosophy, and it should be recalled that during the 1930s, German scholars who had first encountered Kierkegaard through the German translations emphasized the need to render his work more fully into their own language.

⁵⁹ H. Corbin, «Face de Dieu et Face de l’homme», *Eranos-Jahrbuch – Polarität des Lebens*, A. Portmann (ed.), vol. XXXVI/1967, Rhein-Verlag, Zürich 1968, p. 170.

⁶⁰ This statement formulates the very principle of theophanic vision and makes it possible to grasp the differentiated reality of theophanic perceptions, while at the same time unifying the diversity of descriptions of a single spiritual event. Corbin cite the *Apocryphal Acts of John and Peter*: «For each of us saw him as his capacity permitted». J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: a Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation based on M. R. James*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York 1993, p. 413, § 20. See also in Corbin’s work: Corbin, «Face de Dieu et Face de l’homme», *op. cit.*, p. 198-200. This text essentially reprises the introduction to H. Corbin, «Divine Epiphany and Spiritual Birth in Ismailian Gnosis», trad. R. Manheim, *Cyclical time and Ismaili gnosis*(ed.), Kegan Paul International in association with Islamic Publications Ltd., London / Boston 1983, p. 59-66.

⁶¹ Corbin read Swedenborg extensively and even carried out a comparative study between his thought and that of Ismailism: H. Corbin, «Herméneutique spirituelle comparée - I. Swedenborg II. Gnose ismaélienne», *Eranos-Jahrbuch - Das menschliche Drama in der Welt der Ideen*(ed.), vol. XXXIII/1964, Rhein-Verlag, Zürich 1965, p. 71-176.

⁶² E. Swedenborg, *De Coelo et ejus mirabilibus, et de inferno, ex auditis et visis*, Londini 1758, p. 153, §363. Cité dans H. Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: from Mazdean Iran to Shi’ite Iran*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. 1977, p. 102.

in a way that neither reduces what appears to the perceiving subject nor objectifies it, but rather understands it as a *dualitude relation*, a reciprocity grounded in co-presence and mutual manifestation. The theophanic *relation* is the manifestation of divine love itself, and what appears must be interpreted as the symbolic *cipher*⁶³ of what it *involves*.

Imagination

For Corbin, imagination constitutes the very organ of ontological mediation. It links, without confusing them, the two poles of being, the sensible and the intelligible, the human and the divine. In it unfolds what he calls *dualitude*: a reciprocal and co-present relation in which each term finds its fulfillment in the other. The *mundus imaginalis* designates precisely this intermediate plane of being where revelation takes form, where spirit becomes vision and vision becomes knowledge. Imagination is therefore not a psychological faculty but the locus of an ontological encounter, the very space of theophany.

The notion of imagination constitutes one of the key loci of Corbin's thought. From the *imaginatio vera* to the *imaginal*, from the *mundus imaginalis archetypus* to the "eighth climate," through visionary recitals and spiritual experiences, imagination appears as the unifying organ of these multiple dimensions. Through his exploration of Islamic, particularly Iranian, philosophy, Corbin elaborated a philosophy of imagination that is original in both its hermeneutic scope and its spiritual depth.

Even though philologists and Orientalists have rightly pointed out certain limitations in his interpretations, the focus here lies on Corbin's own reception of imagination. The aim is not to examine the concept of imagination as it appears within Islamic philosophy or in specific authors, but rather as Corbin developed, reformulated, and integrated it into his spiritual anthropology. Assessing the fidelity of these transpositions belongs to specialists of Iranian thought⁶⁴. What matters first is to retrace the genesis of the notion of imagination within Corbin's work, for understanding what the term means presupposes an inquiry into its origins and the influences that shaped it. Any analysis of imagination in Corbin must therefore consider the decisive impact of Alexandre Koyré and Carl Gustav Jung before examining the structure and function of imagination within Corbin's own metaphysical architecture.

⁶³ This notion also appears in the final section of the outline for Corbin's unfinished dissertation, preserved in the AHSC. Associated with Karl Jaspers, the last section of the plan suggests that Jaspers was the philosophical source on which Corbin intended to draw, for in the third volume of his monumental work, simply titled *Philosophie*, Jaspers had resolved the problem of radical transcendence through the idea of the *cipher* (*Chiffre*). Corbin's essay on Hamann attests perfectly to this influence. There he writes: «The data of universal history are 'ciphers,' signs, a commentary on Scripture». (Corbin and Hamann, *Hamann, philosophe du luthéranisme*, op. cit., p. 20.) For Corbin, it is precisely this symbolic property of the divine Word that prevents one from falling into pantheism and safeguards the transcendence of God. On this theme, see X. Tilliette, «La "Lecture des Chiffres" : interprétations. Réflexions sur la Métaphysique de Karl Jaspers», *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 65, 3 (1960) 290-306. From an autobiographical standpoint, one may recall Corbin's letter to Hugo Friedrich, see below section on Corbin's faith.

⁶⁴ See for instance E. a. Rahmati, کیسانشن-برک، نادج و ناج رادی-دپ: (Karbon-shenasi: Padidar-e Jan va Jahan), vol. 1, Sofiya, Tehran 2025.

Alexandre Koyré

It is difficult to determine the precise moment when Corbin first turned his attention to the problem of imagination. The earliest trace, however, suggests that it was during a course given by Alexandre Koyré⁶⁵ in 1925 at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) that Corbin first encountered the philosophical question and function of imagination. Immediately after completing his thesis *On the Idea of God and the Proofs of His Existence in Descartes*⁶⁶, Koyré delivered from 1922 to 1927 a series of “temporary lectures” at the EPHE on *speculative mysticism in Germany*⁶⁷. In the first course of series, he examined the influence of Jakob Böhme and Franz von Baader and continued his research in 1924 with lectures on the religious doctrines of Schleiermacher and Schelling. His aim was to demonstrate the influence of medieval and Renaissance mysticism upon the doctrines of German idealism. At the center of these studies lies Koyré's original and decisive hypothesis, the gravitational axis of his entire philosophy, namely, that

the various philosophical positions of the post-Kantian systems are determined above all by religious positions [...]. Their philosophical theses translate theological inspirations and standpoints; hence they are all in irreducible opposition to Kantianism, and all animated by the desire to reconquer for man that central place in the universe which mystical theology assigns to him⁶⁸.

The course Corbin attended in 1925 represented a direct application of this hypothesis, seeking to trace the theological and mystical influences on Fichte, as revealed indirectly in his polemic with Schelling, who had himself been influenced by Oetinger. Passing through Böhme⁶⁹, Paracelsus⁷⁰, and Sebastian Franck⁷¹, the course devoted special attention, within a perspective of negative theology, to “the idea of the body and of imagination.” Koyré summarized the inquiry as follows:

We have been able to establish in Fichte the persistence of belief in the ‘subtle body,’ the ‘etheric’ or ‘spiritual body’ [...]. The idea of imagination (*productive Einbildungskraft*) has given rise to a very curious historical misunderstanding [...]. We have been able to show that [Novalis] identified Fichte's conception with that of Paracelsus, and believed he had rediscovered in Fichte the doctrine of the creative and magical role of imagination as a formative power⁷².

⁶⁵ For a presentation of Koyré's complete academic career as traced through the *Annuaire* of the École pratique des hautes études, see P. Vignaux, «Alexandre Koyré (1892-1964)», *École pratique des hautes études, Section des sciences religieuses*, (1963) 43-49.

⁶⁶ A. Koyré, *Essai sur l'idée de Dieu et les preuves de son existence chez Descartes*, E. Leroux, Paris 1922, 222 p.

⁶⁷ See the summaries of his courses in the *Annuaire de l'École pratique des hautes études, Section des sciences religieuses*, from 1922 to 1927.

⁶⁸ A. Koyré, «Le mysticisme spéculatif en Allemagne», *Annuaire de l'École pratique des hautes études – Section des sciences religieuses*, 34, (1924) 64.

⁶⁹ A. Koyré, *La philosophie de Jacob Boehme*, 2^e ed., Vrin, Paris 1971 [1929], XVII + 523 p.

⁷⁰ A. Koyré, «Paracelse», *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuse*, (1933) 46-75 et 145-163.

⁷¹ A. Koyré, «Sébastien Franck», *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuse*, (1931) 353-385.

⁷² A. Koyré, «Le mysticisme spéculatif en Allemagne», *Annuaire de l'École pratique des hautes études – Section*

This brief overview of Koyré's courses on speculative mysticism in Germany, which Corbin attended, reveals the decisive influence of that teaching on the formation of his thought. The themes of the subtle or spiritual body, imagination, negative theology, and theosophy, concepts that would later occupy a central place in his work, emerge here in embryonic form, even though his subsequent investigations would take root in Islamic rather than German philosophy. The presence of German mystics, spiritual thinkers, and alchemists in Corbin's later writings thus takes on a new significance, for it reveals that his primary source for understanding these authors, whom he often cited in counterpoint, was most likely Koyré's teaching.

One might be tempted to minimize Koyré's influence if one considered only this course and neglected the fact that the two men remained close collaborators between 1930 and 1939⁷³. Indeed, the 1931 issue of *Bifur*, which contained the first French translation of a text by Martin Heidegger, translated by Corbin, also included a short introduction signed by Koyré⁷⁴. From 1931 to 1937, Koyré served as the principal editor of *Recherches philosophiques*, and in the six substantial volumes of that remarkable philosophical venture, anticipating much of twentieth-century philosophy, Corbin published his major essays, including *For a Philosophical Anthropology*⁷⁵ and *Dialectical Theology and History*⁷⁶, along with nineteen book reviews. Finally, in 1937, when Koyré departed on a mission to Cairo, he asked Corbin to replace him at the EPHE⁷⁷ and to supervise and coordinate the publication of *Recherches philosophiques*. All these collaborations testify to the mutual esteem and friendship that united the two men. As Corbin later recalled, he was «the last of his colleagues from the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes to take his hand at the clinic, on the eve of his death»⁷⁸.

Imaginatio vera

Corbin often cites the notion of *imaginatio vera*⁷⁹, consistently attributing it to Paracelsus, and he employs it to establish the distinction between the chimerical imagination (*phantasia*) and the real imagination (*imaginatio*). He writes, for instance: «As Paracelsus already observed, fantasy, unlike Imagination [*imaginatio vera* (in the original)], is an exercise of thought without foundation in nature, it is

des sciences religieuses, (1925) 63-64.

⁷³ The collaboration came to an end in 1939, the year Corbin departed for Turkey, where he would remain until the end of the war. From that point onward, his intellectual focus shifted almost entirely to Iranian and Islamic philosophy.

⁷⁴ See Alexandre Koyré's introduction (pp. 5-8) in Heidegger, «Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique ?», *op. cit.*, pp. 9-27. He was also very close to Corbin at the time of the publication of his well-known volume on Heidegger in 1938. For the correspondence and a portrait of Corbin's relationship with Heidegger, see Camilleri and Proulx, «Martin Heidegger et Henry Corbin», *art. cit.*, pp. 4-64.

⁷⁵ H. Corbin, «Pour l'anthropologie philosophique : un traité persan inédit de Suhrawardî d'Alep († 1191)», *Recherches philosophiques*, A. Koyré, H.-C. Puech et A. Spaier (ed.), vol. 2, Boivin & C^e, Paris 1932-1933, pp. 371-423.

⁷⁶ Corbin, «La théologie dialectique et l'histoire», *op. cit.*, pp. 250-284.

⁷⁷ It should be noted that Alexandre Kojevnikov, who later shortened his name, was Koyré's second replacement.

⁷⁸ Corbin, *Biographical Post-Scriptum to a Philosophical Interview*, *op. cit.*

⁷⁹ At least eight different texts refer to Paracelsus and *imaginatio vera*.

the 'madman's cornerstone'»⁸⁰. Both Koyré and Jung had studied the writings of the Swiss alchemist-physician, which makes it difficult to determine which of the two most directly influenced Corbin, and whether the credit for the distinction between *imaginatio* and *phantasia* belongs to Koyré or to Jung⁸¹.

In Jung's 1935 Eranos lecture⁸² *Dream Symbols of the Process of Individuation*, one finds the sentence «*Et hoc imaginare per veram imaginationem et non phantasticam*»⁸³ drawn from the *Rosarium philosophorum*, yet the Latin expression *imaginatio vera* does not appear in Jung's own vocabulary, for his concern lies primarily with the notion of active imagination. By isolating this expression, Corbin appears as both a careful and selective reader of Jung.

The problem of attribution thus arises: if both Jung and Koyré speak of a "true imagination" as opposed to a chimerical one, it is Corbin who associates Paracelsus's thought with the formula of the *Rosarium philosophorum* and attributes the phrase to Paracelsus himself, even though it does not appear literally in the physician-alchemist's works. Was it through Koyré's writings that Corbin absorbed this distinction, or did it take root through his reading of Jung? One thing is certain: Corbin never cites Paracelsus directly. He consistently refers to Koyré, and while in his first use of the expression *imaginatio vera* (1949) he footnotes Jung's 1936 *Eranos-Jahrbuch* essay, and once his own terminology surrounding imagination becomes stabilized, his references shift from Jung to Koyré⁸⁴.

This is already the case in the prologue to his 1956 Eranos lecture, which would later become the second part of his celebrated *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*⁸⁵. Does this mean that Corbin distanced himself from Jung? It would seem not, for he continued to cite Jung throughout most of his works. It would be inaccurate to speak of a genuine rupture, for Corbin had in fact envisaged a joint publication with Mircea Eliade on Jung's thought and had composed two extensive essays directly influenced by the Swiss psychoanalyst⁸⁶. What is striking, however, when examining the Jungian texts cited by Corbin, is that after 1956 references to

⁸⁰ H. Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, Princeton (N.J.), Princeton University Press 1998, p. 179. In the French version, Corbin uses the expression *imaginatio vera*. H. Corbin, «Imagination créatrice et prière créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi», *Eranos-Jahrbuch – Der Mensch und das Schöpferische*, O. Fröbe-Kapteyn (ed.), vol. XXV/1956, Rhein-Verlag, Zürich 1957, p. 122.

⁸¹ See details in D. Proulx, «Henry Corbin et l'*imaginatio vera*», *L'histoire du concept d'imagination en France, de 1918 à nos jours*, R. Barontini et J. Lamy (ed.), Classiques Garnier, Paris 2019, p. 187-195.

⁸² C. G. Jung, «Traumsymbole des Individuationsprozesses. Ein Beitrag zur Kenntnis der in den Träumen sich kundgebenden Vorgänge des Unbewussten», *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, III/1935, (1936), pp. 91-92. This lecture constitutes the second section of *Psychologie und Alchimie*, published in 1944 and translated in 1953. See C. G. Jung, «Individual Dream Symbolism in Relation to Alchemy: A Contribution to the Psychology of the Unconscious», trad. R. F. C. Hull, *The collected works of C. G. Jung – Psychology and Alchemy*, H. Read, M. Fordham et G. Adler (ed.), vol. 12, Princeton University Press, New York 1980 [1968], §§ 44–331.

⁸³ «And imagine this with true imagination, not with fantastical imagination». Anonyme, «Liber Rosarium philosophorum», *Artis auriferæ quam chemiam vocant* (ed.), vol. 2, Basileae excudebat Conrad Waldkirch expen. C. de Marne et J. Aubry, 1593, p. 215.

⁸⁴ Corbin, «Imagination créatrice et prière créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi», *op. cit.*, «Prologue», pp. 121-125.

⁸⁵ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, *op. cit.*

⁸⁶ See H. Corbin, *Jung, Buddhism, and the Incarnation of Sophia: unpublished writings from the philosopher of the soul*, trad. J. Cain, with the collaboration of Daniel Proulx, Vermont, Inner Traditions, Rochester 2019.

alchemy, and to *imaginatio vera*, disappear almost entirely.

The Eranos Circle

The meeting between Corbin and Jung⁸⁷ was made possible through the Eranos Circle⁸⁸, and more precisely through the invitation that Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn sent to Corbin on January 27, 1948, inviting him to take part in the conference scheduled for August of the same year. On February 20, Corbin replied in a long letter proposing to present a lecture on 'Alī Shāh. Then, on April 6, 1948, after reading Corbin's French introduction to Mohammad Mo'in's *L'influence du mazdéisme dans la littérature persane*⁸⁹ and discovering in it an interpretation of the Grail, Fröbe-Kapteyn encouraged him to address that theme explicitly, noting that it would also be of interest to Jung.

Corbin almost immediately embraced the spirit of Eranos, whose orientation corresponded perfectly to his own philosophical outlook. He wrote to Fröbe-Kapteyn in February 1948 with evident enthusiasm:

I rejoice infinitely at the prospect of finding myself among you for the first time, and of participating in the spirit that animates your research, which I have so deeply admired in the *Jahrbuch*. For two years I have wished to make

⁸⁷ On Jung and Corbin, see F. Serina, «Jung et les orientalistes, ou les impérities métaphysiques de la psychologie analytique», *C. G. Jung en France rencontres, passions et controverses*(ed.), Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2021, p. 281-304. Also Proulx, «L'imagination selon Henry Corbin», *op. cit.*, p. 421-437. Corbin, «La sophia éternelle», *art. cit.*, p. 11-44.

⁸⁸ On the history of the Eranos Circle, see H. T. Hakl, *Eranos : An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, trad. C. McIntosh, Montréal, McGill-Queen's University Press 2013. To understand Corbin's perspective on Eranos, read H. Corbin, «De l'Iran à Eranos», *Du*, 15, 4 (1955), p. 29; H. Corbin, «The Time of Eranos», trad. R. Manheim, *Man and time. Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, J. Campbell (ed.), London, Princeton University Press, 1983 [1957], p. xiii-xx; H. Corbin, «Eranos: liberté et spontanéité», *Eranos-Jahrbuch – Der Mensch, Führer und Geführter im Werk*, A. Portmann (ed.), vol. XXXI/1962, Rhein-Verlag, Zürich 1963, p. 9-12.

⁸⁹ H. Corbin, «Introduction», *L'influence du mazdéisme dans la littérature persane* (ردنای ریثات و انسی‌دزم) (یسراب تایی‌دبا), M. Mo'in (ed.), Téhéran 1948, p. 1-36. Here an excerpt, p. 33-34: «The Wine of the Magi and the Grail, this is perhaps the keystone of the entire lexicon (cf. p. 532). It is defined as “an intimate savor irradiating upon the mystic's heart the lights of celestial Realities”. Concerning this Grail, which possesses a long mythical lineage, the traditional Persian dictionaries say that it reveals all the circumstances of Good and Evil in the universe. Its origin is sometimes attributed to *Jamshid* (cf. supra, pp. 275-277), sometimes to *Kay Xusraw* (who further endowed it with the virtues of the astrolabe). The *Shāh-nāmāh* knows only the Grail of Kay Xusraw; around the sixth century A.H., Jamshid recovers his privilege. At times it is called “the Grail that shows the world,” at times “the Grail that sees the world.” The multiple interpretations virtually contained in this double aspect of a single virtue will gather together the motifs of the microcosm and of the Perfect Man. The verses of *Shabistari* (quoted p. 533) are laden with allusion: “When, I asked, did the Sage bestow upon thee this Grail that sees the world? — On the very day, he replied, when he created the enamelled vault of Heaven.” This mystical Grail, the '*urafā*' discern as transparent through all the concepts of their gnosis. *Sanā'ī* uses it to signify the heart, as does *Attār*. For the entire cosmos appears within this Grail; all knowledge of Real-Reality (*haqiqā*) is inward, and inward knowledge, mystical gnosis, is the experience of that Real-Reality manifested to the heart and within the heart. The kindling of the Grail is here, in the strict sense, the illumination of the heart (cf. *bayt* of *Shabistari*, p. 534). Water of Life, astrolabe, Mirror of the Reality-of-Being, in which the true Heart (itself this Mirror) contemplates and admires the entire kingdom of being, each has spoken of it according to the measure of his knowledge and experience. Yet this difficult question is by no means an easy one, for while “many have said all manner of things about it,” this Grail is revealed only to the soul “when the Perfect Man is born within it,” and then “it comprehends the totality of beings... The initiate of Real-Reality, though still human, when he attains the mystical knowledge of himself, is himself the Grail of Jamshid.” (p. 535) Two passages from *Hāfez* and *Shabistari* likewise evoke this quest for the Grail in the secret depths of the heart of the Perfect Man. The symbolism of the alchemists will follow the same intention in speaking of the “Sublime Elixir”.

this monument known to our Iranians, and to comment on this admirable example of religious studies.⁹⁰

Corbin would go on to deliver twenty-six lectures at Eranos, each of which can be read as a testimony to his inner life. Mircea Eliade perceived this clearly: «You think with pencil in hand; it matters little which book you read, for it is always your own profound and personal thought that you pursue»⁹¹. Corbin also distinguished between two kinds of participants at Eranos, those who, passing through, failed to harmonize with its spirit, and those who, «as the years went by and without any kind of premeditation, there was a small group of participants who became the very cornerstones and primary support of the concept of Eranos»⁹².

Like Fröbe-Kapteyn, who refused to define Eranos in rational terms⁹³, since, in her view, any definition would have confined the phenomenon to something it was not⁹⁴, Corbin likewise rejected all attempts at definition. For him, Eranos was «a place where [the speakers] could be wholly themselves,⁹⁵» where each «allowed the depths of his being to speak»⁹⁶.

In *Le Temps d'Eranos*, one of Corbin's most personal texts⁹⁷, he reflects on how future historians might view the Eranos Circle:

He will [the future historian] perhaps believe that he has «explained» it by a profound and ingenious dialectic of causes. But he will not have divined that the real problem would have been to discover not *what* explains Eranos, but *what* Eranos *explains* by virtue of what it *implies*⁹⁸.

This hermeneutical reversal is typical of Corbin's approach, allowing him to develop a *spiritual hermeneutics* while avoiding the pitfalls of historicism and reductionist determinism.

This spontaneous freedom found symbolic expression in the stele erected in 1950 by van der Leeuw and Jung⁹⁹, dedicated to *the unknown genius of the place* (*Genio loci ignoto*). As van der Leeuw had already written in 1933, «It is not because of the sanctuary that its site is sacred; it is the sanctity of the site that calls forth the erection of the sanctuary.¹⁰⁰» Jung and van der Leeuw recognized in Eranos this elusive *je-ne-sais-quoi*, and Fröbe-Kapteyn herself observed that the meetings seemed to organize themselves¹⁰¹, that she simply allowed them to unfold of their own

⁹⁰ AHSC 126, Henry Corbin à Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, 20 février 1948, envoyé de Téhéran.

⁹¹ AHSC 272.2, Mircea Eliade à Henry Corbin, lettre manuscrite datée du 30 décembre 1952.

⁹² Corbin, *Biographical Post-Scriptum to a Philosophical Interview*, *op. cit.*

⁹³ O. Fröbe-Kapteyn, «Ein Brief der Gründerin», *Du*, 15, 4 (1955) 10.

⁹⁴ Corbin, «Eranos : liberté et spontanéité», *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁹⁵ Corbin, «Eranos : liberté et spontanéité», *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁹⁶ Corbin, *Biographical Post-Scriptum to a Philosophical Interview*, *op. cit.*

⁹⁷ This text reveals Corbin's feelings toward what the Eranos Circle had brought him and how he perceived it. In Corbin's work, texts of such a personal tone are exceedingly rare.

⁹⁸ Corbin, «The Time of Eranos», *op. cit.*, xiii.

⁹⁹ Let us recall that Jung had learned stone carving to build his tower at Bollingen. The stele, however, was carved by Paul Speck, not by Jung himself.

¹⁰⁰ G. van der Leeuw, *La religion dans son essence et ses manifestations : phénoménologie de la religion*, trad. J. Marty, ed. française refondue et mise à jour par l'auteur avec la collaboration du traducteur Jacques Marty, Payot 1955, Paris, p. 386.

¹⁰¹ Haki, *Eranos : An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, *op. cit.*, p. 218-220.

accord, though, in truth, this required great inner discipline on her part. By granting the speakers a genuine space of freedom, Fröbe-Kapteyn channelled within them the unknown genius of Eranos. The three decades that Corbin would devote to Eranos were already foreshadowed in the empathy and intellectual kinship that marked his earliest exchanges with Fröbe-Kapteyn.

On July 11, 1948, Corbin sent her a letter written in a tone of deep regret: he could not come to Ascona.

I have delayed writing back to you, hoping I would not have to communicate news that may disappoint you as much as it grieves me. I was very touched by your last letter, in which you spoke of your interest in my study of Dr. Mo'in's book, and in order to join in your concerns, which are also precisely my own, my intention was to propose a one-hour talk on 'Anthropomorphosis and Resurrection in Ismailian Gnosis' (as the most characteristic aspect of Shi'ite gnosis), and another on 'The Holy Grail in Iran.' I was greatly looking forward to meeting you this year, and especially to meeting under your auspices Professors Jung and van der Leeuw.¹⁰²

Naturally, Fröbe-Kapteyn invited him to the 1949 session, rightly sensing, as Corbin himself had written, that «the general orientation of my work is in itself sufficient guarantee that it accords with the programs and spirit of Eranos»¹⁰³.

In 1949, Henry and Stella Corbin arrived in Ascona, Switzerland. There Corbin delivered his first Eranos lecture, "The Initiatory Tale and Hermetism in Iran (An Angelological Inquiry)." In April of that year, during the correspondence preceding the conference, he provided Fröbe-Kapteyn with details about his forthcoming lecture:

Since the subject pleases you, my intention remains to comment on at least one of the short "initiatory romances" of Suhrawardī. It is entitled *The Tale of the Occidental Exile* and is entirely unpublished (in both Arabic and Persian). I believe that, through its symbolism, it fits particularly well with the general program of Eranos and with the theme chosen for this year. It allows me to address the question of 'Alchemy and Eschatology,' and thus to connect with Dr. Jung's admirable research.

Since I understand that you are interested in Chinese philosophy, I still recall the beautiful paper by Erwin Rousselle published in the *Jahrbuch*, and even more the teachings of *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. This has led me to take a far greater interest than before in our Arabic and Persian alchemical literature. I believe that Dr. Jung's theses will find powerful confirmation from this side.¹⁰⁴

To summarize: Corbin had read the *Eranos Jahrbücher*¹⁰⁵, he had studied Jung,

¹⁰² AHSC 126, Henry Corbin à Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, 11 juillet 1948, envoyé de Téhéran.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ AHSC 126, Henry Corbin à Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, 18 avril 1949, envoyé de Téhéran.

¹⁰⁵ Florent Serina, curator of the exhibition «Carl Gustav Jung et la France. Lettres, dédicaces et livres rares» (French Society of Analytical Psychology, Paris), has noted that several works related to Jung and psychology were bequeathed there, among them *Eranos Jahrbuch* volumes annotated by Corbin and a few dedications from Jung addressed to him. The AHSC preserves records of this donation, as well as of similar gifts made to the Faculty of Protestant Theology in Paris and to the Saint-Serge Institute. AHSC 47, <http://www.calames.abes.fr/pub/ms/>

and he was eager to meet both him and van der Leeuw¹⁰⁶. *The Secret of the Golden Flower*¹⁰⁷ had drawn him further into the study of Islamic alchemical literature, elements that resonate vividly in his early Eranos lectures.

Carl Gustav Jung

The following year, Corbin contributed a text derived from his research on Avicenna's visionary recitals. This second lecture at the Eranos Circle coincided with the celebration of Jung's seventy-fifth birthday. For the *Festschrift* dedicated to Jung, Corbin offered an essay entitled *The Book of the Glorious by Jābir ibn ḥayyān*. In a letter to Louis Massignon, Corbin explained his motive for writing it: «It was an opportunity to pay homage to poor Kraus, to connect Jābir with Jung's symbolism through my own interpretation, and, above all, to meditate upon and highlight your Salmān Pāk, whose meaning I always love in advance»¹⁰⁸. The significance of this essay lies not only in the fact that it was offered to Jung, but also in Corbin's explicit acknowledgment of Jung's symbolic influence. The subtitle, "Alchemy and Archetype," makes the reference unmistakable. Jung is mentioned directly four times in the text and cited another four times in footnotes.

Corbin wrote to Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn: «But it was so hopelessly complex that if I were able to finally get to the end of it, it was from the love of Eranos and for C.G. Jung»¹⁰⁹! His homage to Jung in this 1950 volume belongs fully to the intellectual atmosphere of Eranos, where alchemy had become a shared symbolic language bridging psychology, philosophy, and mystical experience. Yet it must be emphasized that while Jung developed his psychological interpretation of alchemy as a process of psychic transformation, Corbin's research on spiritual hermeneutics and visionary recitals situated these same symbols within a *hierohistory* of spiritual forms. Jungian psychology cannot be simply superimposed upon Corbin's metaphysics. While both shared the conviction that alchemical imagery expresses inner transmutation, Corbin's project carried a metaphysical scope that far exceeded the psychological. The *depth psychology* of Jung, for all its suggestive power, could not account for the ontological and metaphysical dimension of the symbol, which for Corbin ultimately points toward a transcendent reality.

Following these early Eranos lectures and his encounter with Jung, Corbin, at the request of Mircea Eliade¹¹⁰, composed in December 1952 a substantial review

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¹⁰⁶ It should be recalled that Corbin wrote a review of *La religion dans son essence et ses manifestations*. H. Corbin, «Compte-rendu - G. Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*», *Revue critique d'histoire et de littérature*, 67, (1934) 486-489.

¹⁰⁷ C. G. Jung, «The Secret of the Golden Flower», trad. R. F. C. Hull, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung – Alchemical Studies*, H. Read, M. Fordham et G. Adler (ed.), vol. 13, Princeton University Press, New York 1980 [1968], pp.1-86.

¹⁰⁸ AHSC 273.43, lettre de Henry Corbin à Louis Massignon, 19 juin 1950.

¹⁰⁹ Corbin, *Jung, Buddhism, and the Incarnation of Sophia : unpublished writings from the philosopher of the soul*, op. cit.

¹¹⁰ The friendship that Corbin would maintain with Eliade centered on their shared interest in Jungian thought. Corbin notes: «The first time I ever heard the name of Mircea Eliade [...] was in Istanbul, in Constantinople, during the war, in 1942». H. Corbin, «Mircea Eliade», *Mircea Eliade*, C. Tacou (ed.), L'Herne, Paris 1977, p. 266. This was most likely at the periphery of his work on the writings of Stăniloae and Bulgakov. He finally met the renowned

article for the *Revue de culture européenne*, entitled *La Sophia éternelle : à propos d'un livre récent de C.-G. Jung*¹¹¹, on Jung's *Answer to Job*. In that work, Jung sought, as a psychologist, to confront the problem of divine arbitrariness and duality. In Corbinian terms, Jung was attempting to move beyond the dualism of God toward what Corbin would call divine *dualitude*, by means of the exemplification of the archetype of God¹¹². Jung wrote:

There is no doubt that there is something behind these images that transcends consciousness and operates in such a way that the statements do not vary limitlessly and chaotically, but clearly all relate to a few basic principles or archetypes¹¹³.

Corbin discerned in Jung's exploration of the figure of Job a quest for the image of God within the human being, the search for *Sophia*. For Jung, Job dramatizes the loss of divine Wisdom. As Jung observes, Job «He clearly sees that God is at odds with himself so totally at odds that he, Job, is quite certain of finding in God a helper and an 'advocate' against God»¹¹⁴. In Jung's interpretation, it is Job who enables God to differentiate Himself and to become incarnate, for Job, by never yielding to God, by never abandoning God, proves wiser and more virtuous than God, who had yielded to Satan's provocation. In Job, God rediscovers the Wisdom He had forgotten, the *anamnēsis* of Sophia¹¹⁵.

Romanian mythologist in person in 1949 in Paris. Their first two meetings took place on 20 and 23 October 1949. The friendship between the two men developed rapidly, and all evidence suggests that it was Corbin who proposed that Eliade be invited to Eranos the following year. Indeed, a letter from Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn to Corbin, dated 16 October 1949, reads: «I have invited Mircea Eliade to collaborate at Eranos 1950, and he accepted with pleasure. He was already well informed about Eranos, which made things easier». AHSC 126, <http://www.calames.abes.fr/pub/ms/Calames-2015112417114829328>. W. McGuire, *Bollingen, an adventure in collecting the past*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press 1982, p. 150. It was also through Corbin's intervention with John Barrett, the administrator of the Bollingen Foundation and a participant at Eranos in 1949 and 1950, that Eliade obtained a grant of two hundred dollars per month for three years, a scholarship that undoubtedly "motivated" him to work more directly on Jungian thought. See M. Eliade, *Fragments d'un journal 1945-1969*, trad. L. Badesco, vol. 1, Gallimard, Paris, 1973, p. 130 9 décembre 1950.

¹¹¹ Corbin, «La sophia éternelle», art. cit., p. 11-44.

¹¹² Jung in fact told Corbin that the original idea for *Answer to Job* came to him during an illness accompanied by high fever: «You say that you read my book as an 'oratorio.' The book 'came to me' during an illness, in fever. It was as though it were accompanied by the great music of a Bach or a Handel. I do not belong to the auditory type; that is why I heard nothing. It was only the feeling of a vast composition, or rather of a concert at which I was present. The whole thing was an adventure that happened to me, and which I was eager to record». Letter from Jung to Corbin, dated 4 May 1953, published in Jung, *Réponse à Job*, op. cit., p. 259. The fever, moreover, could be regarded as analogous to the ordeal that God inflicts upon Job. Fever is the ally of the afflicted body, setting it in antagonism with itself, compelling it to struggle. The patient must surrender to the fever in a kind of paradoxical trust.

¹¹³ Jung, «Answer to Job», op. cit., p. 361 § 555.

¹¹⁴ Jung, «Answer to Job», op. cit., p. 369 § 567. Corbin's association of Jung's text with the Sophianic tradition of Jakob Böhme arises from the fact that Böhme, in *The Aurora (Aurora oder Morgenröte im Aufgang)*, offers a profound meditation on the struggle of God with Himself—the drama of the divine self-division and the "second birth" of God. This moment, in Böhme's vision, marks the act through which the Creator subdues the luciferian forces that have emanated from His own being. As Böhme writes, «It was not man, nor any creature, that opposed God, but God Himself set in conflict with God». Translated from the French. J. Böhme, *L'auroré naissante ou la racine de la philosophie, de l'astrologie et de la théologie*, trad. L.-C. d. Saint Martin, Milano, Archè 1977, p. 244, chap. XIV, § 72.

¹¹⁵ On the *anamnēsis* of Sophia, see Henry Corbin, «La Sophia éternelle. À propos d'un livre récent de C.-

As Corbin summarizes it: «The Creator experiences Himself as belated with respect to His creature; He must catch up with her. The merciful intervention of Sophia is the consciousness of that delay»¹¹⁶. What God rediscovers through Job's piety is Sophia herself. For Jung, this recovery of Wisdom marks the point of departure for his search for the amplifications that constitute «an Old Testament of the sophianic religion»¹¹⁷, as Corbin phrases it. This exploration of the *sophianic manifestations* forms the heart of *Answer to Job* as the exemplification of the archetype of God.

At this point, however, a divergence begins to appear between the metaphysical and the psychological approaches. Corbin, by amplifying Jung's insights through his reading of Sergei Bulgakov¹¹⁸, takes a path that departs from Jung's psychological interpretation toward a metaphysical one. As Corbin writes, paraphrasing Bulgakov, the latter «sought to show that the divinity in God constitutes the divine Sophia [...] that this Sophia is not itself a hypostasis, but the power to hypostatize itself in a given hypostasis and to constitute its life»¹¹⁹.

The Imaginal and the Mundus Imaginalis

Through a careful examination of Corbin's writings and lectures, one can discern three decisive movements in the unfolding of his thought on imagination. To discern this development, it is necessary first to arrange his writings in chronological order. Such a reorganization is crucial, since Corbin's major "books" are, in most cases, not books in the ordinary sense. Whether one considers *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī*, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, *The Paradox of Monotheism or Temple and Contemplation*, and the list continue, the majority of Corbin's works are in fact collections of lectures delivered at the Eranos Circle. It is therefore misleading to classify Corbin's writings according to the publication dates of his books. The proper approach is to follow the order of his Eranos conferences. Doing so allows us to identify three decisive moments in the development of his reflection on imagination: first, 1953, with *Celestial Earth and the Body of Resurrection*¹²⁰, then 1956, with *Creative Imagination and Creative Prayer in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī*¹²¹, and finally 1964, with the publication of *Mundus imaginalis, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal*¹²². Returning to the original dates of composition is essential, for relying on the printed books reverses the order.

G. Jung », dans *Revue de culture européenne*, vol. 5, 1953, pp. 21 ss.

¹¹⁶ Corbin, «La sophia éternelle», art. cit., p. 25.

¹¹⁷ Corbin, «La sophia éternelle», art. cit., p. 21.

¹¹⁸ It would also be worth examining the parallel that Corbin draws with Mazdean cosmology.

¹¹⁹ Corbin, «La sophia éternelle», art. cit., p. 39.

¹²⁰ H. Corbin, «Terre céleste et corps de résurrection», *Eranos-Jahrbuch - Mensch und Erde*, O. Fröbe-Kapteyn (ed.), vol. XXII/1953, Rhein-Verlag, Zürich 1954, p. 97-194.

¹²¹ Corbin, «Imagination créatrice et prière créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabī», *op. cit.*, p. 121-240.

¹²² H. Corbin, «*Mundus imaginalis* or the Imaginary and the Imaginal», trad. R. Horine, *Spring: An Annual of Archetypal Psychology and Jungian Thought*(ed.), 1972 [1964]. Moreover, the role of Gilbert Durand in the emergence of this text ought to be examined. See M. Quinon, «Préhistoire et histoire des *Cahiers internationaux de symbolisme* (1950-1970) : Les parcours croisés de Claire Lejeune et de Gilbert Durand», *Cahiers internationaux de symbolisme*, 119-120-121 (2008) 145-175.

Until the appearance of *Mundus imaginalis* in 1964, Corbin's vocabulary concerning imagination had not yet crystallized. Without attempting an exhaustive inventory, his writings employ numerous epithets: imagination can be *creative*, *active*, *true*, *autonomous*, *separated*, *theophanic*, *immanent*, *absolute*, or *divine*. Jung had already used the expressions "creative" and "active imagination," and it is evident that this had a strong influence on him. Yet one must not confuse their respective uses. Corbin employs the term within a highly metaphysical and theological framework. For Jung, imagination is a means of generating mental images that sustain an inner, creative dialogue «things pass from an unconscious potential state to a manifest one»¹²³. Jung remains, at his core, a psychologist, albeit one whose work is never far from the spiritual, whereas Corbin, drawing on the Iranian mystics and theosophers he studied, conceives the same process within a framework where the existence of God is neither questioned nor muted in the name of psychological scientificity. Thus, for Corbin, imagination is no longer merely the faculty that renders inner contents manifest, but rather the very faculty through which the existence of God is made manifest. Imagination is literally *theophanic*, and the space in which divinity discloses itself corresponds to the *mundus imaginalis*. By contrast, in Jung, imagination functions as a practice of the self, a technique of "active imagination" through which the contents of the unconscious are given form, a practice that culminated in *The Red Book*¹²⁴. As Jung wrote in *Psychological Types*:

phantasy, therefore, appears to me as the clearest expression often specific psychic activity. Before everything it is the creative activity whence issue the solutions to all answerable questions; it is the mother of all possibilities, in which too the inner and the outer worlds, like all psychological antitheses, are joined in living union. Phantasy it was and ever is which fashions the bridge between the irreconcilable claims of object and subject, of extraversion and introversion. In phantasy alone are both mechanisms united¹²⁵.

The structure of imagination proposed by Corbin is, in many respects, analogous to that of Jung's psychology. One might even ask whether Jung's *introverted* and *extraverted* types correspond, at some level, to the *esoteric* and *exoteric* typology that characterizes Corbin's hermeneutics. For Jung, imagination is a bridge between subject and object, allowing the inner life to enter into conjunction with outer reality so that the psyche may discover meaning within the world in which it is immersed. In Corbin, this structure becomes metaphysical. As he writes in his *Imaginal Charter*:

It [creative imagination] is essentially a mediating and intermediate power, just as the universe to which it gives access is an intermediate and mediating world, an interworld between the sensible and the intelligible, without which the articulation between the two would be definitively blocked¹²⁶.

¹²³ Jung, «Psychology and Alchemy», *op. cit.*, p. 274 §390.

¹²⁴ C. G. Jung, *The red book: Liber novus*, 1st, W.W. Norton & Co, New York 2009.

¹²⁵ C. G. Jung, *Psychological types*, trad. H. G. Baynes, K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & co. Harcourt, Brace & company, inc., London/New York 1923, p. 69.

¹²⁶ H. Corbin, «Prélude à la deuxième édition - Pour une charte de l'Imaginal», *Corps spirituel et Terre céleste - de l'Iran mazdéen à l'Iran shi'ite*(ed.), Buchet/Chastel, Paris 2005 [1960], p. 9.

This intermediate and mediating world is the *mundus imaginalis*. In Jung's writings, though less metaphysically defined, one finds its analogue in the *mundus archetypes*¹²⁷, a world explored through imagination itself.

After 1964, with the publication of *Mundus imaginalis* in the *Cahiers internationaux du symbolisme*, Corbin's terminology became influential among a younger generation of scholars concerned with the question of imagination. *Imaginal* gradually replaced *archetypal* in James Hillman's psychology¹²⁸, while Gilbert Durand adopted it in 1965 to designate the «place of anthropological epiphanies»¹²⁹. Both expressions, *imaginal* and *mundus imaginalis*, continued to evolve. Though the Latin phrase seems ancient, it is in fact Corbin's own coinage. Before stabilizing in this form, he referred to it variously as the *mundus archetypus*, *mundus imaginalis archetypus*, "land of the imagination," "world of imagination," "world of Idea-Images," and "archetypal world." These variations trace the spiritual and metaphysical itinerary of Corbin's quest.

In its full form, *mundus imaginalis archetypus* clearly borrows one of the central ideas of Jung's work. Yet again, Corbin neither analyzes nor debates the Jungian notion of the archetype, and because he later abandoned it using simply *mundus imaginalis*, the connection to Jung is not immediately apparent to readers. Corbin himself explains the distance he introduced between their approaches:

But I was forced to take note of the following. All that the psychologist [C.G. Jung] says of the *Imago*, acquires a metaphysical meaning for the metaphysician. In turn, all that the metaphysician says will be interpreted by the psychologist in psychological terms. From whence the possible misunderstandings. This is why, as I said above, having once shared the information at each other's disposal, one has to accept the inevitable separation when the time comes¹³⁰.

This self-understanding as a metaphysician explains why Corbin rather quickly ceased to cite Jung directly. In several texts written after 1964, he even claimed that he had coined the expression while working with a Latin dictionary, statements that further obscure Jung's influence on Corbin's conception of imagination:

It was precisely this last expression [*hālam al-mithāl*] that recently made me feel our deficiencies. I could not translate it as 'the world of the imaginary,' for it is not of the imaginary, and we only worsen the confusion when we

¹²⁷ C. G. Jung, «Paracelsus as a Spiritual Phenomenon», trad. R. F. C. Hull, *The collected works of C. G. Jung – Alchemical Studies*, H. Read, M. Fordham et G. Adler (ed.), vol. 13, Princeton University Press, New York, 1983 [1967], p. 171, §210. In the English translation "archetypal world" is used. In the French translation "mundus archetypus" C. G. Jung, *Synchronicité et paracelsica*, trad. C. Maillard et C. Pelieger-Maillard, Paris, Albin Michel 1988, p. 220, §210. The expression *mundus archetypus* is also used in C. G. Jung, «The Third Stage: The Unus Mundus», trad. R. F. C. Hull, *The collected works of C. G. Jung – Mysterium Coniunctionis*, H. Read, M. Fordham et G. Adler (ed.), vol. 14, New York, Princeton University Press, 1970, p. 534.

¹²⁸ Moreover, the fact that James Hillman reintroduced the notion of the *imaginal* within a psychological framework led to considerable misunderstanding, for in Corbin's view the *imaginal* is never psychological but rather the manifestation of a metaphysical cosmology. See T. Cheetham, *Imaginal Love - The Meanings of Imagination in Henry Corbin and James Hillman*, Spring Publications 2015, 200 p.

¹²⁹ G. Durand, «Tâches de l'Esprit et impératif de l'Être», *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, XXXIV/1965, (1966), p. 343.

¹³⁰ Corbin, *Biographical Post-Scriptum to a Philosophical Interview*, op. cit.

concede a ‘reality of the imaginary.’ No, it was necessary, simply with the help of the Latin dictionary, to find an adequate expression, and we began to speak of the ‘world of the imaginal’¹³¹.

All this suggests that the contributions of both Koyré and Jung are essential for understanding Corbin’s conception of imagination, though one must never forget the metaphysical standpoint from which he speaks. Unfortunately for his readers, neither is mentioned in *Mundus imaginalis, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal*, which has led commentators to treat Corbin’s work as an isolated continent. Ultimately, a full analysis of the reception of German speculative mysticism, as introduced to Corbin by Koyré, should be paired with a detailed comparison of the uses and meanings of *active imagination* in Jung and Corbin. In such a study, special attention should be given to James Hillman, deeply influenced by Corbin, while keeping in mind Corbin’s own warning about «the misunderstanding that has crept into the psychologists’ use of certain neologisms»¹³².

Corbin’s Metaphysics

In brief, Corbin’s work may be described as an attempt to recover the metaphysical unity of the religions of the Book within what might be called a *hierohistorical anthropology*. Yet whenever one seeks unity, the greatest danger is that of reducing what is studied to the unity one hopes to find. Fully aware of this problem, and unlike the *perennialists* or the movements he himself called “pseudo-esotericisms,” Corbin did not pursue an original unity from which one might deduce the features of a universal religion. His project should therefore not be confused with that of René Guénon¹³³. The differences between the two are far too profound to be reconciled.

Guénon was not merely an intellectual pilgrim of the spirit but the spiritual head of his own *tariqa*, and as such he opposed secular Western modernity with intransigent rigor. For him, the opposition between East and West was absolute and irreducible. Corbin, on the other hand, never converted to Islam and remained a Protestant throughout his life. The apparent affinities with Guénon, terms such as “esotericism” or “symbol,” for instance, vanish under closer scrutiny¹³⁴. Corbin himself clarified his position in a letter to Richard Pickrell, who had asked why he never cited Guénon. He replied:

Guénon rendered a service by finally opening a path that was neither historicist nor sociological. But I cannot say that I was influenced by him. [...] Have you made a precise count of the Arabic texts he actually knew firsthand? [...] I am certainly not the first to regret his ‘dogmatism,’ his ‘intellectualism’

¹³¹ H. Corbin, «Siyavakhsh à Persépolis», *Orient*, (1966), p. 70.

¹³² AHSC 276.5 This warning comes from a letter by Stella Corbin to Dario Caggia, dated 1985.

¹³³ For a comprehensive and critical presentation of Guénon’s work, see D. Bisson, *René Guénon. Une politique de l’esprit*, PGDR, Paris 2013, 526 p.

¹³⁴ See, for instance, the excellent and well-documented article by X. Accart, «Identité et théophanies René Guénon (1886-1951) et Henry Corbin (1903-1978)», *Politica Hermetica - René Guénon, lectures et enjeux*, 16, (2002), p. 176-200.

(although I dislike the word). He seems systematically to disregard the affective dimension. What bothers me most is that he never provides references; one must simply take him at his word. I have always tried, on the contrary, to indicate all my sources and the byways of my research so that others may retrace the same path. [...] I myself adhere neither to historicism, nor to sociology, nor to psychology, etc. I am truly pursuing a metaphysical inquiry, which is not at all 'fashionable' these days. [...] I agree with what he sought to restore, but his work seems to me an example to study and to learn from, not a dogma to be received servilely¹³⁵.

Corbin's pursuit was unambiguous: spiritual realities must be received in the freedom of the Spirit. His aim was to present Iranian spirituality as a mirror through which the West might rediscover, within its own roots, the traces of its great mystical and theological traditions. Hence the importance of textual fidelity and precise citation: Corbin's task was not to invent a new path but to uncover what materialism and literalism had concealed.

This did not prevent him, however, from speaking of a «metaphysical catastrophe» in the modern West, resulting from «the disappearance of the world of the celestial Souls, the world of correspondences and subsisting images, whose proper organ of knowledge was active Imagination»¹³⁶. For Corbin, the contemporary incapacity to perceive the reality of symbols is a consequence of this metaphysical catastrophe, which reduced the perception of reality to empirical fact. And because he seemed inwardly to live the very traditions he studied, Corbin has often been treated as a privileged witness, one whose own metaphysical life gave existential grounding to the spiritual realities he uncovered, an impression that helps explain why his thought has been appropriated in so many personal ways.

Geographia Imaginalis

Corbin's metaphysics of imagination rests simultaneously upon phenomenology and hermeneutics. He was deeply conversant with both philosophical traditions. His Protestant hermeneutic drew upon the notion of *Chiffreschrift*, or cipher-writing, much as Kant had spoken in the *Critique of Judgment* of the ciphered writing of Nature¹³⁷. This notion is central to Corbin's hermeneutics: for without something to decipher, there can be no hermeneutic act. Symbols thus serve as keys to the cipher. The concept of *chiffre* also bears conceptual affinities with that of *ta'wil*.

Indeed, whenever Corbin discusses the symbol, he often introduces the idea of the *chiffre*. «The symbol», he writes, «The symbol announces a plane of consciousness distinct from that of rational evidence; it is the cipher [*chiffre*] of a mystery, the only means of saying something that cannot be apprehended in any other way»¹³⁸. For Corbin, a symbol can never be «explained once and for all», but must always remain open to interpretation corresponding of the *via apophatic*.

¹³⁵ AHSC 15, letter dated September 28, 1976, Henry Corbin to Richard Pickrell.

¹³⁶ H. Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabî*, 2^e ed., Flammarion, Paris 1976 [1958], p. 19.

¹³⁷ It should be noted that this already constitutes a romanticized interpretation, Kant himself speaks rather of a symbol.

¹³⁸ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone : Creative Imagination in the Sûfism of Ibn 'Arabî*, op. cit., p. 26.

In sum, for Corbin phenomenology had exposed the insufficiency of the conceptual apparatus meant to mediate between understanding and empirical data, an insufficiency that only imagination could remedy. This, he believed, was the spiritual crisis of the modern West, the very mark of its metaphysical catastrophe: where imagination should have been recognized as a noetic faculty, its place was left vacant. Yet one must not reduce imagination to a mere metaphorical or aesthetic mediation. Drawing upon Hamann's hermeneutics, the concept of the *chiffre*, and later that of the symbol, Corbin forged the term *imaginal* to designate the ontological function that makes possible the actual experience of divine presence, that is, *theophany*. As he often repeated, the imaginal «that is to say it gives us access to a region and a reality of Being which without that function remains closed and forbidden to us»¹³⁹.

Corbin's phenomenology thus culminates in an exploration of *imaginative consciousness*. It is not a phenomenology of mental content but a description of access to a new ontological dimension: the *mundus imaginalis*. This world constitutes an autonomous order of being, intermediate between the sensible and the intelligible. From this perspective, Corbin's phenomenology discloses a deeper and more comprehensive level of human consciousness, a level Jungians might call *archetypal*, but which Corbin interprets within a properly metaphysical orientation. The *mundus imaginalis* is not a psychic construct but a real, spiritual world within which the human being is contained. For, as Corbin writes, it is not human consciousness that encompasses spiritual reality, but spiritual reality itself that contains, envelops, and grounds human presence.

Concluding Opening: Corbin's Faith

How much interiority is directly projected into his work? Corbin was undoubtedly a believer for whom the reality of angels and visionary dreams was never in doubt. To understand his cosmology, one must refer to the only spiritual experience he ever described, which took place in 1932 during a summer journey to Lake Leksand, when he was not yet thirty. The trace of this experience appears in his correspondence with Hugo Friedrich¹⁴⁰ and in a short poetic text entitled *Theology by the Lake*. In it, he exults in the divine mystery revealed as that of the Earth of the Angel and of the Woman:

As soon as you have read and received, as soon as you look, wish to understand, wish to possess, to name and to retain, to explain and to rediscover, ah! there remains only a cipher, and your judgment is pronounced¹⁴¹.

This experience is decisive, marking the moment when Corbin seems to have touched the divine mystery itself. It is the only explicit trace of such an event in his

¹³⁹ H. Corbin, «Towards a Chart of the Imaginal», trad. P. Russel, *Spiritual body and celestial Earth: from Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran* (ed.), Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1977, p. vii.

¹⁴⁰ This correspondence has not been published; all the letters are preserved in the Henry Corbin Archives. See, however, F.-R. Hausmann, «Hugo Friedrich und Henry Corbin – Briefzeugnisse eines ungewöhnlichen Gedankenaustauschs», *Romanistische Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte*, 36, 1-2 (2012) 111-145.

¹⁴¹ H. Corbin, «Théologie au bord du lac», *Henry Corbin*, C. Jambet (ed.), L'Herne, Paris 1981 [1932], p. 63.

corpus. Described through the term *chiffre* (cipher), it reflects the influence of his readings of Luther, Hamann, and Jaspers. In a letter to Hugo Friedrich, he wrote:

Thus, the immediate work was steeped in the reflection of boundless forests and the countless lakes, beside which stand low wooden houses where man still abides in kinship with the earth. I felt many things there, in that North, above all, the revelation of the "Thou" through geography. I sought to record it; it was so difficult to render, yet so new, so vital, so compelling, the fleeting reading of the *Chiffreschrift*¹⁴².

His 1953 Eranos lecture, which became the first part of *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, continues this very *geographia imaginalis* first experienced at Lake Leksand. The text opens with a passage from Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801–1887), founder of psychophysics, describing how, one morning, he was seized by a transfiguring light that haloed the face of the Earth. «He was struck not merely by the esthetic idea, but by the vision and concrete evidence the 'the Earth is an Anglet, such a gorgeously real Angel, so like a flower'»¹⁴³! The resonance between Fechner's text and Corbin's experience at Leksand suggests that, from 1932 to 1953, the underlying structure of Corbin's vision of the world remained remarkably consistent: for him, the world was a *geographia imaginalis*, unrelated to geology or geography in the ordinary sense, but a landscape of theophanies¹⁴⁴.

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¹⁴² Universitätsarchiv der Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg I, Nachlass Hugo Friedrich, C0135-019-Korrespondenz A-C (1931-1977), Lettre à Hugo Friedrich 29 septembre 1932, p. 3.

¹⁴³ Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, *op. cit.*, p. 3. The first reference to Fechner in Corbin's work that has been identified appears in his 1951 lecture *Iranologie et philosophie*, where he cites as his source W. James, *A pluralistic universe; Hibbert Lectures to Manchester College on the present situation in philosophy*, New York, Longmans, Green, and Co. 1909, p. 164-165. Later, in *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, Corbin directly quotes G. T. Fechner, *Über die Seelenfrage, ein Gang durch die sichtbare Welt, um die unsichtbare zu finden*, Leipzig, Amelang 1861.

¹⁴⁴ It is worth recalling here that Éric Dardel, Henry Corbin's brother-in-law, was a geographer who, in 1952, published E. Dardel, *L'homme et la terre : nature de la réalité géographique*, Paris, P.U.F. 1952, 133 p.. In this book, he explores the existential bond between human beings and the world's geography, what he calls "geographicity." As J.-M. Besse notes in "Lire Dardel aujourd'hui" (*Espace géographique*, 1988, pp. 43-46), Dardel had already, in an earlier work from 1946, *L'histoire, science du concret* (Paris: P.U.F., 1946), explicitly acknowledged his intellectual debt to Henry Corbin.

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