Becoming an Angel: the *mundus imaginalis of* Henry Corbin and the Platonic path of self-knowledge

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The profoundly alchemical implications of Corbin's imaginal hermeneutics, in a spiritual sense, are illustrated by his interest in the hieratic art of statue animation, which he describes as

> neither a simple dramaturgy of the unconscious or psychological allegory, nor a simple manipulation of materials practiced in the manner of a mere chemist or pharmacist (droguiste). It is an operation at once material and spiritual, the juncture between the two aspects remaining the hidden secret underneath the symbols of the "Philosophers" (as the alchemists designate themselves).[1]

Alchemy for Corbin is essentially the inner, spiritual work of attaining union between the human soul and its heavenly counterpart within the mysterious ground of the 'hidden secret' pointed to by the symbolic image. This is the intermediate place between spirit and matter, the *mundus imaginalis*, where the spiritual world assumes an objective reality, and where the transmutation of the *prima materia* of the human psyche into the subtle or spiritual body is the work of an alchemical *opus* that involves *encounter* with an angelic presence through the faculty of the active imagination. In this paper, I intend to explore the nature of this encounter in the context of the neoplatonism of the Islamic mystical philosophers to whom Corbin dedicated his life and work.

To begin, we should briefly consider the kind of knowledge that characterises the Platonic path of *gnosis*. At the risk of a gross oversimplification, one could say that one of the ways the Aristotelian and Platonic methods of philosophising were distinguished in the Renaissance was through the assignment of a 'human' mode of investigation to the former, and a 'divine' mode of revelation to the latter. Human modes were characterised by rational, theoretical and analytical attempts to grasp the world of nature through the observation and deduction of sense-perception, whereas divine modes embodied a deep intuitive sense of transcendent principles governing and emanating throughout creation, apprehended only through the highest intellectual principle in the soul which recognised the images of its divine source. The former entailed the separation of the observer from

[1] H. Corbin, '*Le Livre des sept Statues* d'Apollonios de Tyane, commenté par Jaldakî,' in *Alchimie comme art hiératique*, ed. Pierre Lory (Paris: L'Herne, 1986), p.64, trans. A. Cheak.

the object observed, the latter direct participation in it in order to know it. The former took place in time, the latter in a timeless place beyond the working out of cause and effect. Such contrasting modes lie behind the statement of Henry Corbin that "*the Active Imagination is not a theory, it is an initiation to vision*.[2]

Let us now turn our attention to the nature of the *mundus imaginalis* as articulated by Corbin, particularly in respect to the active function of divine intelligence, which in the neoplatonic tradition of the Sufi mystics which he expounds becomes personified in the myriad forms of spiritual beings which mediate between God and humanity. Central to Corbin's interest in Islamic mysticism was the role of the individual human being in the redemption of the world, which could only be achieved through his or her relationship (and eventually identification) with their angelic counterpart. The Angel exists in another dimension to that of time and matter, yet paradoxically can only be recognised through it, through penetrating to the depths of our world to reach a place where, to quote Tom Cheetham, the world turns "inside out" and reveals its hidden secrets.[3] This act of intellectual penetration is essentially neoplatonic in that it depends on a vital, dynamic connection between the soul of man and the soul of the world in a cosmos illuminated and animated with divine energy. Corbin felt that the arid materialism of the West with its impersonal universe and abstract metaphysical speculations arose through the triumph of the Aristotelianism of Averroes in the middle ages.[4] This, as he understood it, led to the severing of the soul from its divine archetype and the denial of the cosmic role of the active intelligence which manifested itself through personal, revelatory knowledge. From the perspective of the mystics, as he ruefully put it, "what Aristotelianism considers as the concept of a species, the logical universal, ceases to be anything more than the dead body of an angel."[5]

It is not my intention to focus on this controversy here, save as an illustration of the fundamental difference of orientation between the two schools of thought. I am more interested in conveying a sense of what Corbin means by the *living* angel and the kind of human perception which is required to make contact with it. This is certainly not the

[2] H. Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (Princeton, 1969, repr. Mythos, 1981), p.93.
[3] T. Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out: Henry Corbin and Islamic Mysticism* (Woodstock, Conn.: Spring, 2003).
[4] See H. Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, pp.12-14.
[5] H. Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p.22.

conceptual and abstract way of thinking that has dominated Western philosophy since the enlightenment (and which may well derive from certain forms of Aristotelian scholasticism), but a deeply intuitive connection of the knower's soul with what is known through the activation of the visionary imagination. As Corbin puts it, the kind of 'divine' image we are encountering

> is not one that results from some previous external perception; it is an Image that precedes all perception, an a priori expressing the deepest being of the person… Each of us carries within himself an Image of his own world, his *imago mundi*, and projects it into a more or less coherent universe, which becomes the stage on which his destiny is played out.[6]

This deep, primordial knowing had already been eloquently expressed by the neoplatonist Iamblichus as a "unitary connection with the gods that is natural and indivisible".[7] He explains, "the contact we have with divinity is not to be taken as knowledge. Knowledge, after all, is separated from its object by some degree of otherness."[8] Human beings can only attain to the understanding of divine matters by assimilating themselves to that order of being,

> not employing conjecture or opinion or some form of syllogistic reasoning, all of which take their start from the plane of temporal reality…but rather connecting [their soul] to the gods with pure and blameless reasonings which it has received from all eternity from those same gods.[9]

This then is the position championed by Corbin in his passionate exegesis of the Platonic path as revealed through the Persian mystics, which was born out of his own intensive study of, and initiation into, their tradition.

Henry Corbin

Let us now cast a brief glance at Corbin himself and the route by which he arrived at his syncretic vision of religious experience. He was born in Paris in 1903, and came into contact with Louis Massignon, Director of Islamic studies at the Sorbonne. When Massignon gave him a volume of the 12th c. Persian mystic Suhrawardi, Corbin wrote "through my meeting with Suhrawardi, my spiritual destiny for the passage through this

[6] H. Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1960), pp.7-8.
[7] Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, I.3, trans. E. Clarke, J. Dillon & J. Herschbell (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Studies, 2003), p.13.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., p. 15.

world was sealed. Platonism, expressed in terms of the Zoroastrian angelology of ancient Persia, illuminated the path that I was seeking".[10]

He was also studying the Protestant theologians of the German theological tradition and the hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger; it was the latter's *Being and Time* that had a particularly profound influence on him. In 1939 he went to Istanbul and Teheran for seven years to immerse himself in Islamic mysticism, and ten years later he began to attend the Eranos conferences in Ascona along with Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade and Gershom Scholem. In 1954 he succeeded Massignon in the Chair of Islamic studies at the Sorbonne, and in the 1950s wrote his three major works, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital, Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi,* and *Spiritual Body, Celestial Earth*. Corbin's profound knowledge of Christian theology, Western philosophy and phenomenology, and the insights of the new depth and archetypal psychology of Carl Jung and James Hillman all supported and informed his task of "comparative spiritual hermeneutics", as he was intent on articulating the common themes at the heart of the three great monotheistic religions. But it was in the prophetic mysticism of the Sufi tradition that Corbin found the central inspiration for his life work, namely the integration of Hermetic and neoplatonic *gnosis* into a spiritual path of the imagination, as exemplified in the writings of Ibn 'Arabi and Suhrawardi in particular.

Cosmology

Before considering the specific function of the angel in this gnostic path, we need to lay out some of the key characteristics of the intermediary world that Corbin named the *mundus imaginalis*.[11] In a nutshell, neoplatonic cosmology consists of three planes of reality, the divine intelligible realm, the material realm, and linking them a mediating dimension which partakes of both: a spiritual body or celestial earth. The reality of this place communicates itself to human beings through images, for images are perceived through sense-perception but may also carry an immaterial or divine meaning which

[10] Quoted in C. Jambet (ed.), *Henry Corbin,* Cahier de l'Herne (Paris, 1981), pp. 40-41. See also T. Cheetham, 'The Prophetic Tradition and the Battle for the Soul of the World', *Temenos Review* 8, 2005, pp. 14-33, this ref. p.17.

[11] See H. Corbin, *Mundus imaginalis or the imaginal and the imaginary* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1976)

appeals to the intellect.[12] It is important to emphasise that these planes are not static strata but dynamic intensifications of the energy of the supreme Divine Being which perpetually pours out through creation, and in neoplatonic terms, expresses itself in the middle realm through personifications we call gods, angels or daimons. Thus in the cosmology of Avicenna, which derives from ancient Persian Zoroastrianism, we find the intermediate universe full of celestial souls each of which resonate with a particular archangel above them and a material sphere below them, in ten degrees of emanation from the First Intelligence (which itself derives from the One Divine Being).[13] These celestial souls are empowered by the desire to return to their particular archangel, and at each level they form a couple. Each level of the material cosmos too resonates with its soul and thereby with its angel, but the soul or angel of the world is only perceptible through the cultivation of what Corbin terms the active imagination. The imagination is the angelic mode of perception, for being immaterial they do not possess the sense-perception of human beings.

In this dynamic cosmos, the angelic hierarchies are not things, but *events*. Angel, soul and world are not separate entities 'out there', but modes of perception: the world is perceived through sense, soul through imagination and angel through intellect (which is intellect in the Platonic sense of the pre-conceptual knowing described earlier by Iamblichus). As the imagination then conveys divine thoughts through images, the very act of imagining becomes a divine act of reconnection. This is very different from the modern view of reality where 'imagination' becomes a mode of distancing from the 'really real', a mere fantasy of human invention. In this imaginal mode of seeing, the literal, material reality we take as real is in fact totally enveloped by a spiritual reality which determines it. The idea of linear temporality as fixed in a historical trajectory is seen as an illusion, for the eternal 'presence' of soul time is the true foundational reality. To quote Tom Cheetham, "The analysis of space and time must not begin by regarding them as given, but rather by investigating the mode of presence by means of which they themselves are revealed".[14] In other words, it is the mode of being, the mode of Presence, of the human person that determines the nature of time, not the other way round. So-

[12] For the neoplatonic basis of the imaginative function as intermediary, see Plotinus, *Enneads* IV, 3-5.
[13] See H. Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p.1.
[14] T. Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, p. 6.

called external reality becomes the reflection of the internal state of the individual, and will therefore change in relation to his or her ability to penetrate to ever deeper levels of insight. Our mode of being governs everything. Most importantly, all the spiritual universes of the past as creations of the soul are as real now as they ever were, in a qualitative sense – for they all partake of the timeless reality of the *mundus imaginalis*.

Mundus imaginalis

In his essay, *mundus imaginalis, or the imaginal and the imaginary*, Corbin gives a detailed exposition of this interworld as a place of visionary revelation and events that are experienced as more vividly real than everyday reality. This is the place of all religious and transcendent experience: theophanic visions and dreams, meditative and ritual consciousness, prayer and contemplation, artistic inspiration and romantic love. It is a "precise order of reality corresponding to a precise mode of perception"[15] which is the active imagination, whose function is precisely that of transmuting sensible forms into symbols, of 'seeing' sensible forms *as* symbols: Corbin explains:

> The active imagination guides, anticipates, molds sense perception, that is why it transmutes sensory data into symbols. The Burning Bush is only a brushwood fire if it is merely perceived by the sensory organs. In order that Moses may perceive the Burning Bush and hear the Voice calling him…an organ of trans-sensory perception is needed.[16]

Thus the active imagination couples objective and subjective worlds, literal fact and spiritual meaning. When directed towards archetypal realities, it can bring these realities into harmony and resonance with the world, but as Corbin points out, if it is solely directed downwards towards matter it can only produce images which are "fantastic, imaginary, unreal or even absurd"[17] whose attraction is surface-deep and which flutter on the walls of the cave in which men are fettered.

The task of human beings then, is to purify and liberate the soul so that it may begin to pick up, as it were, the traces of divine meaning behind the appearances of things

> so that the intelligible realities perceived on the imaginal level may be reflected in the mirror of the senses and be translated into visionary perception... the vision of

[15] H. Corbin, *Mundus imaginalis* p.1.
[16] H. Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p.80.
[17] H. Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1998), p.127.

> the angel does not emerge from the negativity of an *unconscious*, but descends from a level of a positively differentiated *superconscious*.[18]

I cannot address here the debate between Corbin and the depth psychologists on the nature of the unconscious,[19] but certainly common to both Sufi mystical tradition and Jungian individuation is the importance of individual experience. The path and vision of each person will be truly unique, because the form of the theophany they witness will necessarily correspond to their own inner 'heaven' or form of being.[20] We are talking about a mode of knowing that can only happen by virtue of our participation in the thing known, through analogy and sympathy, and will always be particular to the individual and his or her life. Corbin differentiates between a universal, representational, abstract knowledge and what he calls a "presential illumination which the soul, as a being of light, causes to shine upon its object. By making herself present to herself, the soul also makes the object present to her... the truth of all objective knowledge is thus nothing more nor less than the awareness which the knowing subject has of itself".[21]

The Angel

Which now brings us to the supreme form of manifestation of Absolute Being in this tradition, which is in the Presence of the Angel. Corbin says "The Angel is the face that our god takes for us, and each of us finds his god only when he recognises that face."[22] Such a recognition takes place in the imaginal world. Far from being creations of human fantasy, the angelic beings exemplify an intensity of 'real being' of which we are mere reflections. According to this tradition of prophetic philosophy, the active intellect of God can *only* be encountered through the Angel of Revelation personified as an individual angelic being – it could be speculated upon as an abstract concept, but only fully understood through personal encounter. Now as we saw in the angelology of Avicenna, each human soul has as its counterpart, a celestial soul, who is the eternal and perfected individuality of the person, their "transcendent celestial self" as Corbin describes it. The

[18] H. Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation* (London: KPI, 1986), pp.265-66.
[19] For a discussion on Corbin's differences with some premises of Jungian analysis see T. Cheetham, *After Prophecy* (New Orleans: Spring Publications, 2007), pp.104-9.
[20] H. Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p.61.
[21] H. Corbin, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (London: Kegan Paul, 1993), p.210.
[22] H. Corbin, Prefatory Letter to David Miller, *The New Polytheism* (Dallas: Spring, 1981).

question then becomes how to integrate the earthly ego with this soul and through it with its angel, for it is through such an engagement that the individual becomes fully a Person, an integrated whole, connected to the source of Being yet also active in the world. As Tom Cheetham puts it,

> The connection with the Angel, the archetype in Heaven…guarantees that every being can be more itself, more real, more alive, to the degree that it is in contact with this celestial Presence. [23]

Making the connection, however, is not easy; it involves breaking through the boundaries of habitual consciousness and opening up to an intensity of existence normally inaccessible – hence the ecstasies of the mystic, or the divine frenzies of the Platonic lover. We can see the importance of an imaginal cosmology as a container and structure for such an experience, providing a navigation map as it were through from one world to the other. As Cheetham observes, without such a guiding image the struggle to achieve the sacred marriage would be in vain and humanity would collapse into an unredeemed chaos. Corbin uses the image of two poles balancing the celestial and human dimensions of the soul. Without the celestial pole, he says, the terrestrial one would topple and the world would be "completely *depolarised* in vagabondage and perdition".[24] Indeed failure to connect with the angel results in very real powers of darkness invading the soul, and here Corbin differs from his contemporary Carl Jung, for he did not see the dark forces as a shadow to be integrated, but as an enemy to be defeated by the powers of Light. In other respects, we could certainly talk of this *coniunctio* of human and angelic in terms of individuation, for the ego must undergo a painful transformation before the encounter with the angel can occur. The metaphors of travelling to the underworld, fighting the dragon, undergoing the alchemical *nigredo* or submitting to the tasks of Psyche all point to the struggle which precedes the dawn of consciousness which will inevitably entail meeting with the angelic Guide. This guardian angel or *daimon* will be revealed in a manner of ways, through a dream or visionary experience or a passionate encounter with an embodied human being, but it will only manifest in so far as the soul is ready for it. Corbin relates an anecdote from Ibn 'Arabi, who recounts how the Prophet Muhammed

[23] T. Cheetham, *The World turned Inside Out*, p.90.
[24] H. Corbin, *Le Paradoxe du Monotheism* (Paris : Editions de l'Herne, 1981), pp.243-4.

'saw' a beautiful Arab youth as the Angel Gabriel, but his companions only saw the Arab youth.[25]

The point being that the Angel can only manifest itself through the sensory world of images, be they in a dream, in artistic creations or human persons. This is when they become symbols, and this manifestation implies that a spiritual life in no way turns itself away from the world but on the contrary engages even more fully with it in order to penetrate to its depths. Corbin says

> The sensible species does not divert from the Angel but leads to the "place" of the encounter, on the condition that the soul seeks the encounter. For there are various ways of turning towards the sensible. There is one that simultaneously and as such turns towards the Angel. What follows is the transmutation of the sensible into symbols…[26]

If objects are turned to and venerated without the transcendent vision, or if the transcendent vision is separated from the object and worshipped in isolation from its material embodiment, one falls into the "two-faced spiritual infirmity" of idolatry.[27] As in neoplatonic theurgy, re-investing the sensible world with spiritual properties is essential for their apprehension, and heals the divide between gods and men which is a symptom of literal thinking about the world – or we might say, of diabolic thinking, as opposed to the unifying function of the symbolic.

Ta'wil

The process then of discovering the Angel is the task of what Corbin called spiritual hermeneutics—the unveiling or uncovering of reality to disclose meanings beyond the literal, which somehow takes place in the imaginal space between the soul and the text.[28] However interpretation in the neoplatonic sense is not an intellectual activity, but a passionate one. It is the intensity of the soul's desire that leads it through ever deeper levels of penetration into the meaning of the cosmic text before it. This movement involves a progressive reversion and interiorisation, until the point is reached at which there is no differentiation between the knower and what is known, between universal truth and personal encounter, between human ego and angelic consciousness. The term

[25] Recounted in H. Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p.219.
[26] Ibid., p.144.
[27] Ibid., p.134.
[28] See T. Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, pp. 118-123.

ta'wil refers to this process of interiorisation, of restoring the true meaning of a text or image through transmuting the world into symbols. This is the hermeneutical method referred to by Jewish and Christian Hellenistic and medieval sources as the four-fold method of interpretation, whereby a sacred text reveals its central, mystical message through the stages of the literal, the allegorical, the symbolic and the anagogic levels of understanding.[29] The crucial point of this journey is the transition from allegorical to symbolic interpretation, for it is here that the "turning upside down" (trope) of reality occurs and the spiritual meaning becomes apparent. An allegorical interpretation does not need to have implications for the reader's own life, it can simply relate what is already known in a different way, whereas a symbolic insight leads into unchartered territory and "can never be deciphered once and for all". As Corbin puts it:

> The current attitude is to oppose the real to the imaginary as though to the unreal, the utopian, as it is to confuse symbol with allegory, to confuse the exegesis of the spiritual sense with an allegorical interpretation. Now, every allegorical interpretation is harmless; the allegory is a sheathing, or, rather, it is a disguising, of something that is already known or knowable otherwise, while the appearance of an Image having the quality of a symbol is a primary phenomenon, unconditional and irreducible, the appearance of something that cannot manifest itself otherwise to the world where we are.[30]

Himma

A literal fact or an allegory can be appreciated by the discursive mind. A symbol however, can only be fully grasped by what Ibn 'Arabi calls *himma,* or the power of the heart. This is the power than facilitates the presence of the Angel, through the very act of desiring it. Corbin defines *himma* as "the act of meditating, conceiving, imagining, projecting, ardently desiring… It is the force of an intention so powerful as to project and realise a being external to the being who conceives the intention".[31] The *himma* of a mystic can create changes in the world through an intensity of imagination that resonates on the plane of archetypal Ideas; he is thus himself a divine creator who establishes the patterns from which material forms derive. What we call a miracle is the result of such a capacity to bring spiritual power to bear on matter and cut through the apparently objective dimension of cause and effect. Ibn 'Arabi himself was perfectly capable of perceiving

[29] On the fourfold hermeneutic, see for example H. De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, the Four Senses of Scripture* (repr. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1998 & 2000).
[30] H. Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam* (West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995), p.13.
[31] H. Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p.222.

spiritual beings as physical forms; he describes an experience whereby he saw another young man pass straight through the bodies of two passer-bys, and concluded that he was an embodied spirit. Interestingly, he found that when he followed the spirit, he too passed through the mens' bodies, implying that in order to 'see' the being, he too had to attain the same quality of imaginal manifestation. Yet the spirit was seen as perfectly 'real'. It "projected" itself into a human form "in the same sense as a form projects itself upon a mirror".[32] Indeed mirror images were understood to illustrate the paradox of 'being' in the imaginal world, for although forms can be clearly seen in a mirror, they do not exist there in any substantial sense. Corbin suggests that the artist too may perform the role of magician, creating external forms through his art for the divine quality he has perceived through his *himma*, and thus leading the viewer or listener also to perceive it. "Here we have a compelling term of comparison", he says, "by which to measure the decadence of our dreams and of our arts".[33]

To those who have cultivated the direction of affective force through longing and desire, the Angel will reveal itself, often in an intensely private and uncommunicable way, disguised as an event which to an outsider seems no different from any other. But we are tricked if we think that the union with the Angel can take place solely on the level of the material world. There is an anecdote from ancient Greece of a man who fell in love with Praxiteles' statue of Aphrodite.[34] He broke into her shrine and attempted to make love with the marble image, leaving a stain on her thigh as evidence of his passion. He did not realise that what he really desired lay beyond and through the goddess' material form, and that if he were able to follow the symbolic beckoning of her statue he might eventually achieve a union of his soul with its divine feminine counterpart. Furthermore, if he were to persevere further in his task of spiritual alchemy, like Pygmalion and Galatea he might even achieve the final miracle of animating his statue and uniting with his Angel as both heavenly goddess and earthly woman.

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[32] For this episode, see W. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: Suny Press, 1994), pp.93-5.
[33] H. Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p.224.
[34] Reported by Pseudo-Lucian in *Erotes*, ch.15.

Conclusion

The importance of Corbin's work cannot be overestimated in a world which is blinkered and starved of a sense of the sacred, and which tends to reduce the imagination to fantasy and illusion. He gives us a language in which to speak with penetrating insight about the reality of visionary experience, a place to locate divinatory 'realisation'. But perhaps most importantly he reconnects the reader with what has become popularly known as "the power of now"[35] –through demonstrating that a faithful study of religious experience must involve a move away from the objectifying approach of the historian, towards the position of the mystic for whom it is a living reality. He stands in the line of Platonic interpreters from Plotinus, Iamblichus and Ficino through to the archetypal and depth psychologists Carl Jung and James Hillman, who all "battle for the soul of the world" and for the autonomy of the individual, through a championing of the imagination as a faculty of perception which can penetrate far deeper into the mysterious nature of being than any abstract or conceptual thought.

[35] As demonstrated in the work of Eckhart Tolle.