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upon his Intellectual Significance”

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## Recollections of Henry Corbin and Reflections upon his Intellectual Significance\*

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

Twenty years has passed since the death of the eminent French philosopher and orientalist, my old friend and colleague Henry Corbin, and it is only befitting his pre-eminence in the intellectual realm to devote this occasion to the celebration of his memory. Having spent twenty years in very close collaboration and also friendship with Corbin, I could have easily spent the time accorded to me here today to speak of our participation in many conferences from Paris and Strasbourg to Tehran, of our pilgrimage to Islamic holy sites in Iran such as Jamkaran near Qom, of visits to numerous traditional scholars foremost among them the late 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī with whom Corbin and I held regular sessions for some twenty years, in many of which a number of other scholars from the late Murtaḍā Muṭahharī to Dariush Shayegan were present. I could also speak of our numerous academic collaborations from teaching a doctoral seminar together at the Faculty of Letters of Tehran University, to working together in the establishment of the Iranian Academy of Philosophy, to writing joint works such as *L'Histoire de la philosophie islamique* not to mention the long effort spent together in making the works of Suhrawardī known to both the Iranian and French worlds.

I shall, however, refrain from delving into personal recollections, but make use of my long years of personal association with Corbin, as well as my own engagement in the field of Islamic philosophy, Sufism and related subjects, to appraise the significance of the Corbinian *corpus* and the intellectual and spiritual traits of the man which led to the creation of one of the most imposing intellectual edifices of twentieth century western scholarship.

It must be said at the outset that Corbin was not only a philosopher nor only a mystic but a mystical philosopher and philosophical mystic. He had a strong mystical bent and a love for the esoteric. He sought to see everything with the eye of inwardness and never remained satisfied

\* English version of a lecture given in Paris in October 1998 on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the death of Henry Corbin.

with only the outward. It seems that in his early days, long before having discovered Nāṣir-i Khusraw, he had understood the verse of this master poet-philosopher.

Look at the inner dimension of the world with the eye of inwardness,  
For with the outward looking eye thou shalt never see the inward.

Corbin was always in search of the inward and the esoteric, not in an occultist way but in the context of religious traditions and in a metaphysical sense. He was not of a mystical bent in the ordinary sense of the mysticism of love so prevalent in Christianity, but was a mystic in the sense of being always concerned with the *mysterium* in its sacred sense. He was a mystic like Meister Eckhart and Johannes Scotus Erigena, for whom mysticism was combined with knowledge which illuminates and finally delivers the soul from all bondage. Corbin was drawn to gnosis, if this term be understood in its authentic sense as being the same as *irfān* in Arabic and Persian *jñāna* in Sanskrit and not the sectarian school known as gnosticism. He was in fact a gnostic in the traditional sense even if today certain of his readers seek to turn him into a champion of gnosticism in its historical sense as related to the early centuries of Christianity and to its revival in certain circles today.

Corbin was, however, also a rigorous philosopher with a disciplined philosophical mind which distinguished him from the type of mystic who stands opposed to any intellectual discourse. Corbin felt deeply at home with Plotinus or Proclus, Suhrawardī or Gemisthos Plethon, for him there was a deep need to avoid a schism between philosophy and mysticism or the intellectual training of the mind and preparation of one's whole being for an existential experience of the noumenal.

To achieve this end, Corbin was deeply drawn to the reality of religion and especially the spiritual life and his gaze went beyond the confines of the Christian tradition even in his youth. But while Corbin studied and also ascertained on the practical plane the significance of a spiritual master, and in fact met many Sufi masters in Iran, he never sought a human master for himself. He was attracted to the type of spirituality which emphasizes a celestial master, whether that be Christ, the Hermetic 'Perfect Nature', the Twelfth Imam, or Khadīr. This particular trait of Corbin was to play a central role in his private as well as his scholarly life and his strong attachment to Shi'ism.

Besides all these traits, Corbin also had a remarkable scholarly bent of mind without ever being only scholarly in a pedantic sense for the

meaning always predominated, for him, over form. But he did master many difficult languages, was very meticulous in his study of manuscripts and was a bibliophile who paid a great deal of attention to the bibliographic aspect of scholarly research. His years of work at the Bibliothèque Nationale only helped to train this aspect of his mind and to strengthen a propensity which already existed in him.

As a result of the possession of these traits and also because of his great personal sensitivity to the spiritual dimension of existence, Corbin was fully aware of the dead-end which modern western civilization had reached. He deplored the depleting of the meaning of life, the reduction of philosophy to logic and its divorce from spiritual vision, the prevalence of various forms of materialism and especially historicism and the worship of time against which he rebelled with all his being. Once, when we were working on *L'Histoire de la philosophie islamique* and envisaging its continuation after the first volume, he said to me, 'My friend, the time has now arrived to write the anti-history of anti-philosophy in the West'. His constant battle against historicism in later life, and his insistence upon distinguishing between *historial* and *historical*, go back to profound intellectual and psychological traits to be found in him since his youth.

Now, for such a young man studying in the France of the 1920s, what were the possibilities to pursue an intellectual and spiritual life that would be harmonious with his inner nature and the need for esoterism and an authentic mystical philosophy? Corbin had already distanced himself from Catholicism precisely because of his love for esoterism and his identification of Catholic orthodoxy with only the exoteric. He had therefore learned much from such great Catholic figures as Etienne Gilson and Louis Massignon, both of whom I also knew well, but he could not follow their lead completely in his own personal quest. Precisely because of this early aversion against 'orthodoxy', which he understood only in the exoteric sense that he had encountered in his youth, he was also not attracted to the traditionalist perspective of René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon and Titus Burckhardt, an orthodox and at the same time esoteric perspective which I share and which I discussed often with Corbin. Nor could Corbin follow completely the German schools of philosophy, especially Martin Heidegger whose works he was the first to translate into French. Although Corbin was interested in Heidegger's hermeneutics and called himself a phenomenologist, he could not accept any philosophy which did not lead to the illuminative

knowledge of the hidden, to the *kashf al-mahjūb* or unveiling of the veiled with which he identified his understanding of phenomenology. Corbin was interested in spiritual hermeneutics or *ta'wīl* and therefore, while attracted and indebted to Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger and others who were engaged in hermeneutics, he sought a hermeneutics which would do full justice to the reality of the esoteric dimension of things, and that could not be other than what Islamic esoterists call *kashf al-mahjūb*. Nor could Corbin accept a view of *Existenz* which would lead to death and non-existence rather than the eternal life of the abode of Absolute Being (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*). He in fact yearned for a Mullā Ṣadrā long before he knew him.

Had a man such as Corbin lived in the Middle Ages, he would have found a St. Bonaventure, Dante, Eckhart or even later Nicholas of Cusa with whom he could study and whom he could follow. Even if he lived during the following few centuries, he could have discovered Jacob Boehme and the Lutheran theosophers before him, or a figure such as J. C. Hamann who turned the Cartesian dictum *cogito ergo sum* on its head and expressed the truth of the matter by saying *sum ergo cognito*, since being precedes the accident of thinking. Corbin was to write of such figures and felt especially close to them, but they were not his contemporaries. It was as a result of the situation in the Europe of his youth, where esoterism had been dismissed by both official religion and mainstream philosophy and what remained of it reduced to occultism, that Corbin looked intellectually beyond the borders of the West. He thus turned to the study of Arabic, Persian and Pahlavi as well as Islamic thought.

It was during the course of these studies that he was introduced by Massignon to the works of Suhrawardī, the master of *ishrāq* or illumination, who across eight centuries of history was to stretch a hand to the young Corbin and lead him, after a detour of several years in Istanbul, to Iran where Corbin found his spiritual home. A congeniality developed between him and the heirs to Iran's spiritual and intellectual traditions, a relation that itself issued from the deep inner attachment of Corbin to the Iranian world which he considered as the indispensable intermediate spiritual realm between Jerusalem and Benares, between the world of Abraham and that of Rama, Krishna and the Buddha. Through this inner *sympatheia*, Corbin was able to set out to explore a whole spiritual and intellectual continent which is that of Islamic Iran and what he himself called 'Iranian Islam'. But he was an

explorer who came with love and the desire to learn, to know and make known, rather than to plunder and dominate. It was these very inner qualities and traits of Corbin that made him not only a pioneer in the discovery of this continent for the western and especially French audience, but also an important bridge between the Islamic East and the West.

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These traits in Corbin led him to profound studies of Christian esoteric and theosophical doctrines as well as those lesser known trends of the western esoteric philosophical traditions which are hardly ever presented in standard works of the history of western philosophy. He studied Hamann and Swedenborg, Boehme and Renaissance alchemists as well as such philosophers as Franz von Baader. He was also deeply immersed in those currents of philosophical and religious thought of his day which had an esoteric bent or at least pointed to the reality of the inner world as can be seen in his long association with the Eranos annual meetings and such figures as Gershom Scholem and Ernst Benz. He was also attracted on a certain level to C. G. Jung, over whom we had many heated discussions, his view of Jung having been much more positive than mine, to put it mildly.

For Corbin all of these activists were important but nevertheless in a sense secondary in comparison to his intellectual and spiritual journey in the 'newly discovered' continent of Persian thought and culture which took most of his energy and effort. His interest in the esoteric combined with a quest for a non-human spiritual master and a historical view of religious reality which would not become imprisoned in the dimension of time and historicism, led him to the world of Islam in general and Shi'ism in particular. He paid little attention to the legal and social aspects of Shi'ism being interested in Shi'ism primarily as Islamic esoterism. Not only did he make major intellectual contributions to both Twelve-Imam and Ismā'īlī Shi'ite studies on the philosophical and theological levels, but he was also drawn personally to Shi'ism. His attitude toward the Shi'ite Imams was not one of a French scholar deeply attached to the subject of his studies. It was more than that and involved an existential participation in the reality of Shi'ism. On many occasions when discussing some philosophical or theological subject he would begin by saying '*nous shi'ites*' and then expressing his views. Shi'ism was for Corbin a spiritual reality in which he participated as well

as a subject which he studied with unprecedented empathy as far as western scholarship was concerned.

The love for the esoteric also led Corbin to Sufism which, along with Shi'ism, is the repository of Islamic esoterism and in fact its main expression. Here again he was deeply attracted to Persian Sufism and such figures as Rūzbihān Baqlī and Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, who was both a Sufi and a Shi'ite theologian. But his love for gnosis was to lead him naturally beyond the borders of the Iranian world to Ibn 'Arabī, that ocean of Islamic gnosis from whom so many tributaries originated in later centuries. In Ibn 'Arabī Corbin found one of the most complete expressions of gnosis and mystical philosophy and a life of remarkable richness as far as spiritual vision was concerned. Moreover, Corbin was the first major contemporary western expositor of the metaphysical doctrine of the imaginal world, the *mundus imaginalis*, to which he was attracted with all his mind and soul. All of these traits, along with others that cannot be discussed here, made Ibn 'Arabī one of the major subjects of Corbin's studies. Through the doctrines of Ibn 'Arabī Corbin was in fact able to present for the first time to the modern West a complete doctrine of the *mundus imaginalis*, an achievement which is one of Corbin's main intellectual contributions, one which has had great influence among certain philosophers, psychologists and artists in Europe and America. This intense interest in Ibn 'Arabī shows that Corbin did not limit his interests to the Iranian world, although that world would remain the centre of his interests. Even his major study of Ibn 'Arabī, *L'Imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi* has a chapter entitled 'Entre l'Andalousie et l'Iran: Esquisse d'une topographie spirituelle'.

Because of Corbin's deep attraction to philosophy and mysticism at the same time, his main guide and teacher remained Suhrawardī to whom he would often refer as '*notre maître*'. Corbin found his perfect intellectual home in that harmonious fusion between logical rigor and mystical ecstasy that is demonstrated in the *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*, in a philosophy of illumination or *ishrāq* in which the role of the angelic substances and hierarchies of light is emphasized beyond nearly all else. By his inner nature, Corbin was meant to be an *ishrāqī ḥakīm*, which he preferred, as I do, to translate as 'theosopher', understood in its original sense. No other figure occupied his attention from the period of youth until his death as did Suhrawardī, as can be seen in Corbin's *magnum opus*, *En Islam iranien*, one of whose four volumes is dedi-

cated to Suhrawardī alone while the other figures have much less space devoted to them. It is by no means accidental that from the moment that Massignon handed a copy of the *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq* to the young Corbin, Suhrawardī became his inner guide leading him first to Istanbul and then his spiritual home Iran, to which Corbin came for the first time in quest of Suhrawardī's works. Thirty years of regular journeying to Iran, the establishment of the section of Iranian studies at the Institut Franco-iranien, the creation of the series Bibliothèques iraniennes, meetings with numerous Iranian scholars and teaching of many young Iranian philosophers and finally introduction to the vast world of later Islamic philosophy dominated by such figures as Mīr Dāmād and Mullā Ṣadrā, were the result of the guidance of Suhrawardī. The Master of Illumination took the hand of his disciple across the span of eight centuries and not only brought him into the world of *ishrāq*, the world of light which is at once ontological reality and the very substance of knowledge, but also opened the door of the spiritual world of his homeland to the young French *ishrāqī* philosopher-theosopher who was also destined to be the greatest interpreter of Suhrawardī in the West even helping in the revival of interest in this remarkable master in his own homeland.

Being the trained philosopher that he was with an intense interest in the living reality of *ishrāqī* thought, Corbin could not but become rapidly aware of the later development of philosophy in Persia based not only on the teachings of Suhrawardī but also Ibn Sīnā and Ibn 'Arabī. Moreover, Corbin's interest in a metaphysics of being which would do full justice to the act of being as *esto* and not only the passive state of being as *ens*, led him to the works of what he called 'L'École d'Ispahan', which I have also sought to make known as the School of Isfahan, and especially its greatest master Mullā Ṣadrā. The study of Ṣadrian ontology brought Corbin face to face with the very different trajectory that the study of being took in the Islamic world and in the West and led him to some of his most profound comparative philosophical studies, as can be seen in the introduction he wrote to his translation of Mullā Ṣadrā's *Kitāb al-mashā'ir* (*Le Livre des pénétrations métaphysiques*). This study makes clear why Corbin, with the particular intellectual and spiritual traits that he had, could not have remained satisfied with *Existenz Philosophie* and why his mind was bound to fly to the firmament of Ṣadrian and Suhrawardian metaphysics.

Corbin's attraction to the esoteric led him to investigate other esoteric teachings which he could discern in his adopted spiritual home. He carried out serious discussions with masters of several Persian Sufi orders as well as the leader of the Shaykhī movement, to whose pure love of the Imams he was particularly attracted. Through the study of their writings, as well as earlier texts, Corbin had also become interested in Islamic alchemy, to which he devoted several profound studies. In general he was not attracted to the traditional natural sciences and natural philosophy, which happen to be among my fields of specialization, and often in his study of a text of Suhrawardī or some other philosopher when there were references to astronomy or some other traditional science, Corbin would consult with me. Also, in the writing of *L'Histoire de la philosophie islamique* he said from the beginning that he would have nothing to do with the section on natural philosophy and left that section to me. He was, however, very interested in Hermeticism and the symbolic nature of alchemy as a science of the cosmos as well as the soul, as can be seen not only in his studies of Jābir ibn Ḥayyān and other Islamic alchemists up to modern times, but also in his keen interest in Renaissance alchemy in Europe.

The love for the land and culture of Iran extended for Corbin to its pre-Islamic past and not only the Islamic period. Like his master Suhrawardī who sought to unite the philosophy of the ancient Persians and the Greeks as transformed by earlier Islamic philosophers in a synthesis, Corbin sought to bring out certain profound continuities between Islamic Iran and its ancient past. His goal was not to abet a kind of chauvinistic cultural nationalism, as some modern Iranians have interpreted him, but to point out the depth of Persia's ancient philosophical culture and the universality and richness of the philosophy of its Islamic period which was able to integrate many themes and motifs of Persia's ancient past into its own worldview. Corbin made many brilliant studies of the pre-Islamic thought of Iran and was attracted like a Gemisthos Plethon to Zoroaster as a great sage and not only prophet in the legalistic sense of the term.

Although Corbin avoided shallow chauvinism as far as Iranian culture and thought was concerned, he was also adamantly opposed to calling Islamic philosophy Arabic philosophy, especially in modern times when the term 'Arabic' has gained a nationalistic sense and no longer bears the same meaning as it did in the European Middle Ages. Some Arab nationalists have called Corbin anti-Arab, but this is hardly

the case. By nature Corbin was attracted more to the Persian zone of Islamic civilization and things Iranian, as his teacher Massignon was drawn more to the Arabic zone of the Islamic world. But neither scholar neglected the other zone in which they were less interested. Corbin always spoke of Islamic philosophy rather than Arab or Arabic philosophy, but did not use Iranian philosophy except in particular cases where such a term needed to be used. His discovery of seven centuries of Islamic philosophy after Ibn Rushd with its locus in Persia, but stretching also to India and the Ottoman world, was itself the best scholarly proof, despite claims still made for political reasons, that Islamic philosophy is indeed Islamic and not Arabic philosophy, as the term Arabic is now understood.

Corbin's immersion in the world of Islamic-Iranian thought and at the same time rootedness in the western esoteric tradition, caused him to turn in many of his studies to what has come to be known as comparative philosophy in which he was one of the undisputed masters. His numerous works in this domain, ranging from the comparison between Persian mystical recitals and medieval western romances to comparative studies of *futuwwah* and western chivalry reflect his own inner intellectual life which was nourished by both eastern and western mystical and esoteric traditions. Furthermore, his study of Islamic esoteric teachings energized and deepened his work on western esoteric currents and figures. Moreover, remaining true to his aversion to historicism, Corbin was rarely interested in historical influences. Rather, his concern was with morphological resemblance and comparisons of manifestations of the same archetypes in different religions and cultural milieu. While being a profound expositor of Islamic-Iranian thought for the West, Corbin was also a bridge between the two worlds, this aspect of his function being most manifest in his comparative studies.

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In conclusion, a few words need to be said about the influence of Corbin now that two decades has passed since his death, although during these years many new works of his have appeared posthumously, thanks to the indefatigable efforts of his wife, spiritual consort and closest intellectual associate Stella Corbin, so that it cannot by any means be said that the publication of his work terminated with his death. In fact, just recently a new book of Corbin appeared in English under the title *The Voyage and the Messenger, Iran and Philosophy*

which to the surprise of a person like myself, contains still previously unpublished material. One wonders if this source is inexhaustible, or if a time will come when finally all of Corbin's writings will have seen the light of day.

In discussing Corbin's influence I shall not limit myself to the West but also mention a few words about Iran and the rest of the Islamic world. In the West the influence of Corbin has been of course greatest in France where he has influenced not only Islamic studies, but also philosophy itself as well as the study of esoterism in an academic setting. One needs only mention such figures as Gilbert Durand, Christian Jambet and Antoine Faivre as examples to demonstrate Corbin's influence in circles outside the field of Islamic studies. In fact, Corbin's study of the *mundus imaginalis* has opened a new chapter in western philosophy, at least on the Continent. Corbin's philosophical influence is also to be seen in Italy and Spain, where many of his works have been translated. In Germany Corbin's works on Islamic thought are widely read, but as far as I can see he has not exercised the same influence in philosophical circles there as he has in the Latin countries.

In the English speaking world many of Corbin's works have been translated and are now well known, although his major work *En Islam iranien* was never rendered into English despite our efforts in Iran to make this possible when this four volume work first appeared. In Britain it is mostly those concerned with theories of traditional art and the imagination, as understood by figures such as William Blake, that Corbin's works have been influential as can be seen in the activities of the Temenos Academy and the writings of its founder, the well-known poet Kathleen Raine. The philosophical scene has been too deeply immersed in logical analysis to be attracted to Corbin. As for the world of Islamic studies, while he has been criticized by many rationalists and historicists, as he has also been criticized in France and Germany, his studies of later Islamic thought in Persia and of Ibn 'Arabī have been widely influential. The Ibn 'Arabī Society, founded originally in Britain but also now functioning in America, received much of its early inspiration from Corbin and Titus Burckhardt. Also the philosophical and mystical texts in Arabic and Persian edited by Corbin have had wide influence in academic circles in the West in general and have drawn many younger scholars to the study of such figures as Suhrawardī, Rūzbihān Baqlī, Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, Mīr Dāmād and Mullā Ṣadrā, along with the Ismā'īlī philosophers from Abū Ḥātam Rāzī onward. In

fact, the Ismā'īlī Institute of London has played a notable role in the translation of a number of Corbin's works into English.

In America the influence of Corbin is being felt to an ever greater degree, not only among Islamicists but also psychologists such as James Hillman and intellectual historians such as Harold Bloom. In Canada at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University, the presence of Toshihiko Izutsu and Corbin's former student Hermann Landolt have helped to make Corbin, and the subjects with which he dealt, a permanent feature of the programme and many doctoral theses in Islamic studies have been produced there which are in reality outgrowths of Corbin's works.

In his spiritual home Iran the influence of Corbin was and remains profound and diverse. He came to Iran at a time when a re-awakening of interest in traditional philosophies was taking place and as a western defender of these philosophies he played an important role in the actualization of this process among the western educated classes. The seminar on Islamic thought which he and I taught to doctoral students at Tehran University for over a decade was attended by nearly every older professor of philosophy who teaches the subject in Iran today. In fact Corbin's ideas became part of the general intellectual discourse of the country in the 1960's and 70's. Moreover, his discussions and debates with 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, to which I have already referred, had profound repercussions in traditional circles of students in the *madrasahs* of Qom, Mashhad, Isfahan, Shiraz and Tehran itself. His anthology of philosophy since the Safavid period, prepared in collaboration with Sayyid Jalāl al-Dīn Āshtiyānī, opened the eyes of many western-oriented Iranians to the richness of their own philosophical tradition, so rapidly forgotten at the end of the Qajar period as a result of their becoming dazzled by the glitter of western civilization. Corbin's influence was to extend even to a number of painters, cinematographers and architects in search of an authentic philosophy of Persian art. As for the classical texts of philosophy and Sufism which he edited, often in collaboration with Iranian scholars, the fact that they have been re-printed numerous times in Iran since his death is clear proof of their great influence.

In other parts of the Islamic world, the influence of Corbin has not been as great as in Iran. Nevertheless, he trained a number of important Arab scholars who have pursued the main thrust of his thought, especially as it concerns the study of Ibn 'Arabī and his school. But most of all it is in Corbin's insistence upon the living nature of Islamic

philosophy and that this tradition has had eight centuries of a very rich life after its supposed demise with the death of Ibn Rushd (Averroes) that he has had the greatest influence in other Islamic countries such as Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as the Arab world itself. There is no serious younger scholar of Islamic philosophy today who would repeat the thesis of a DeBoer that Islamic philosophy ended in the twelfth century. This new integral vision of Islamic philosophy is due to the work of several scholars, of whom the first in time is certainly Corbin. *L'Histoire de la philosophie islamique* remains an influential book, translated into all the major Islamic languages, not only in providing knowledge of later Islamic philosophy, but also in providing a new vision for a whole generation of Muslim thinkers in the study of their own philosophical tradition.

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Corbin left this world of turmoil and contention in 1978 for the angelic realm to which his soul was so deeply attuned, but his thought is very much alive today not only in France and Iran, his natural and spiritual homelands, but also in the rest of the Islamic world and other parts of the West. There is little doubt in my mind that his influence will continue to grow throughout the world in coming years. Surely his soul will be gladdened to know that the revival of traditional Islamic philosophy to which he was so devoted is taking place today in so many parts of the Islamic world, and especially in Iran, and that the philosophical themes to whose study he devoted his whole life are attracting to an even greater degree those in the West who, tired of the misosophy which passes for so much of philosophy today, are in quest of that *sophia* that belongs to the meta-historical reality of which Corbin's works are among the most significant spiritual hermeneutic interpretations of this day and age.

