

# THE TEMENOS ACADEMY

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Source: Temenos Academy Review 6 (2003)

pp. 65-82

Published by The Temenos Academy

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# Imagination as Theophany in Islam\*

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Imagination in Islam is a vast topic. One way to approach it would be to offer a few examples of how Muslims have put it to use in the creative arts, such as poetry, music, or calligraphy. Today, however, I want to look at the theory of imagination as developed by some of the many thinkers who have discussed it, though I will also take advantage of the occasion to cite a few lines of poetry. Especially important here is Ibn 'Arabi, the great thirteenth-century theologian, philosopher, jurist, and Sufi whose focus on imagination is well known, largely thanks to the writings of Henry Corbin.<sup>1</sup>

By choosing to speak about 'imagination as theophany', I wanted to highlight a point that can get lost or obscured in studies of imagination that fail to draw from the Muslim theoreticians themselves or that isolate the topic from its broader context. This point is that *tawhīd* – the assertion of the unity of God – underlies the Islamic understanding of imagination, just as it informs all theoretical writings and creative expressions that have a claim on Islamicity. My title is meant to suggest that the concept of imagination largely overlaps with that of theophany. In other words, many Muslim theoreticians understand imagination primarily as an expression of the divine unity.

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I need to begin by defining some terms. The Arabic word that is commonly rendered into English as 'imagination' is *khayāl*.<sup>2</sup> In analysing the human soul, the Muslim philosophers use the word to designate one of the inner senses or faculties. Typically they make it one of

\* Text of a lecture given at the Temenos Academy, London, 26 June 2002.

1. See especially Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969). See also Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989) and idem, *Imaginal Worlds* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994).

2. There are other important technical terms whose meanings overlap with those of *khayāl*, but none of them has the same inclusiveness, and discussing them would take me too far afield. These include *wahm*, *mithāl*, *ṣūra*, and *ẓāhir*.

the basic types of perception or comprehension. They say, for example, that we perceive things in three ways – by the senses, by imagination, and by intellect. The senses perceive things that are actually present in the physical world. Imagination perceives the same things, but inside the soul rather than outside. The intellect, which is the spiritual core of the individual, perceives the intelligible essences of things, without the intermediary of senses or imagination.

The philosophers differ among themselves in many details, but they all make the point that imagination is a faculty situated somewhere between the senses and the intellect. Its most obvious property is its in-betweenness, or the fact that it brings together the characteristics of the soul's highest and lowest powers.

What I have just said about *khayāl* is not too far from the basic meaning of the word *imagination* in English. There is one connotation of the English word, however, that is not present in the Arabic. This is the idea of creativity. It is of course acknowledged that imagination does not simply replicate what the senses perceive, and that it is able to synthesize various disparate elements and to make novel forms. But the word *khayāl* does not immediately suggest a creative power. When Corbin wrote about 'creative imagination' in Ibn 'Arabī, he did not have the Islamic understanding of imagination in mind. I am not suggesting that Corbin misrepresents Ibn 'Arabī here, but it should not be thought that Ibn 'Arabī would use the word *khayāl* in the sense that Corbin uses the expression 'creative imagination' – or that Ibn 'Arabī, or some other Muslim thinker, uses a corresponding Arabic phrase (such as *al-ʿaql al-khallāq*).

So, one meaning of the word *khayāl* is the faculty of imagination. This is a technical meaning that was established by thinkers who were analysing the nature of human perception and cognition. When we look at the non-technical use of the word, we find that the earlier and more basic sense of *khayāl* is not 'imagination' but 'image'. When dictionaries explain the meaning of the word, the examples they cite include reflections, shadows, and scarecrows. When we look in a mirror, we are seeing a *khayāl*, an 'image', and we are not simply imagining things. The image is actually there, though obviously not in the same way that the observer or the mirror is there. Of course, dictionaries also cite dreams and mental images in general as examples of *khayāl*. In this case the 'image' is also 'imagination'.

In pre-Islamic poetry, the poet is commonly visited by the *khayāl* of his beloved, and one does not get the impression that he is simply



thinking about her. Rather, her image really comes to him and actually makes itself present to him. In Sufi poetry, the same word is used – by Rūmī, for example – to designate a visitation by the divine beloved. In this sense, the beloved's image can be perceived as having more reality than the world and everything it contains. The world is then seen as an image of an image.

Ibn ʿArabī puts the image of God at the very heart of Islamic spirituality. Following a standard classification that goes back to the Prophet, he divides the religion of Islam into three basic levels: *islām* or submission to God through practice, *īmān* or faith and understanding, and *ihsān* or 'doing what is beautiful'. The Prophet defined doing what is beautiful by saying, 'It is that you should serve God as if you see Him, for, if you do not see Him, He sees you.' Ibn ʿArabī reads this statement as voicing the indispensable role of imagination for achieving focus on God. He points out that the phrase 'as if' (*ka-anna*) designates *khayāl*, for it is precisely the faculty of imagination that allows us to see God *as if* he were actually present.

Ibn ʿArabī is saying that proper devotional activities and contemplative techniques will turn the God that we picture in our minds into the actual presence of God. Then it will no longer be a question of 'as if', for at that point there will be an actual encounter with God's reality. The imagining soul somehow merges with the divine image, and the divine image is somehow identical with God himself. Ibn ʿArabī's basic proof-text for this is a famous *ḥadīth qudsī*, which he cites more often than any other saying of the Prophet:

My servant never ceases drawing near to Me through supererogatory works until I love him. Then, when I love him, I am his hearing through which he hears, his sight through which he sees, his hand through which he grasps, and his foot through which he walks.

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Let me now turn to the word *theophany*. The Greek original obviously means the appearance or manifestation of God. I have in mind the Arabic word *tajallī*, which in itself does not suggest that God is involved. The basic meaning of the word is to become clear, apparent, manifest, evident. I normally translate it as 'disclosure' or 'self-disclosure.' The importance of the term in Islamic thought derives from the Koranic verse in which Moses asks God to show himself. God replies that Moses

will not see him. He then tells him to look at the mountain. If the mountain stays in place, he will see him. The verse goes on to say, 'When his Lord *disclosed Himself* to the mountain, He made it crumble to dust, and Moses fell down thunderstruck' (7:143).

This Koranic passage has been the subject of endless meditation and debate. Its interpretation has always played an important role in the hotly disputed theological issue of the vision of God (*ru'ya*). In the philosophical Sufism favoured by Ibn 'Arabī and his followers, the term is used in discussing both the vision of God and the ontological status of the universe.

The connection between *tajallī* and *khayāl* is not difficult to see. *Tajallī* means disclosure, manifestation, showing, and, when God is the explicit or implied subject, it means a divine showing, a theophany. Although the word *khayāl* can denote imagination, the faculty that perceives images, even more basically it designates the image itself, that is, what is disclosed, what is shown, what appears, and this is precisely the meaning of *tajallī*.

In the Koran, the idea that both the universe and the human soul are theophanies is a basic theme, though the word *tajallī* itself is used only twice (In the other verse, 92:2, the subject is not God but rather 'daytime'). The Koran most commonly expresses the notion of theophany with the word *āya*, sign or mark, which is used almost four hundred times. In the transparent universe described by the text, everything is a sign of God. The book repeatedly refers to natural phenomena as signs, and it wonders why people fail to reflect upon the heavens, the earth, the mountains, the birds, and why so many of them are unable to see the evidence of God's reality wherever they look. One of these natural phenomena is the human self or soul (*nafs*), which is singled out as having a significance somehow equivalent to that of the universe as a whole.

Everything, then, is a sign of God. Something of the resonance of the word *āya* is suggested by the fact that the Koran uses the word in a more specific sense to designate the miraculous activities of the prophets, such as bringing the dead to life by Jesus. In other words, natural phenomena fit into the same category as miracles. The Koran also uses the word to refer to its own verses, all of which are miraculous signs pointing to God's wisdom and mercy.

In Sufi literature, the Koranic passage that is most often cited to bring home the role of signs in the universe and the human self is this:



'We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons [that is, in the outside world] and in themselves, until it is clear to them that He is the Real' (41:53). For Ibn 'Arabī, the fact that this passage begins with the plural pronoun *We* shows that it is stressing not the unity of the Divine Essence, but the plurality of the divine names and attributes, which are the archetypes of every phenomenon in the universe and the soul. All things without exception show forth the names and attributes of God. Every creature and every event is a theophany, and everything has a message for those who know how to read the signs.

The human task, then, is to escape from ignorance and forgetfulness by learning how to read the signs, which are written out not only as the verses of the Koran, but also as the phenomena that appear in the universe and the soul. People must learn how to find the names and attributes of God in everything that they perceive. They need to witness experientially the import of the verse, 'Wherever you turn, there is the face of God' (2:115). They must see things as symbols and pointers rather than as obscurations and veils. Rumi sums up this whole discussion in two lines:

Each and every part of the universe  
is a lock for the fool and a key for the wise.  
For one it is sugar, for another poison,  
for one it is God's gentleness, for another His wrath.<sup>3</sup>

This is to say that theophany – God's disclosure of himself in all things – is a two-edged sword. If we see things as signs of God, we can discern their true meaning and put them to use for our own ultimate well-being. But, if we see things simply as objects with no significance, or, if we try to understand their significance in terms of various short-sighted viewpoints – such as the physical or social or psychological sciences – then we fail in our human calling.

In this way of looking at things, human beings have the duty to find the face of God wherever they turn and to act accordingly. What then is the 'face' of God? As Ibn 'Arabī often reminds us, in Arabic the word *face* (*wajh*) can designate the very essence and reality of a thing, and, in the case of God, it designates his one Essence, which stands infinitely

3. *Mathnawī* (Nicholson edition) vi, 4287–88.

beyond his many names. It is this one face concerning which the Koran says, 'Everything is perishing except His face' (28:88).

Although God's Face is one, its infinite unity embraces every possibility of manifestation and theophany. In other words, the same face discloses itself in all things, but in each thing it assumes a different form. It is as if a single person is looking into ten thousand funhouse mirrors. In each mirror he sees the same face, but each mirror discloses the face in keeping with its own limitations. The face's appearance in the mirror, then, is precisely the *image* of the face, and it is this image that is called 'theophany'.

Like imagination, theophany is by nature ambiguous. It is always in-between. It reveals, and by the very act of revealing it veils. The ambiguity of theophany, or the dance of face and veil, is a constant theme in Sufi poetry. Take, for example, the following verses from Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār, the prolific twelfth-century poet, best known in English for his poetical tale, *The Conference of the Birds*. In one kasida he elaborates upon the ambiguity of theophany and imagination in detail. He tells us that everything is an image of God, so everything is at once a face and a veil, a disclosure and a concealment. Part of the text reads as follows:

O You who have concealed Your face and come into the market –  
 a whole creation has been seized by this talisman!  
 Everything other than You is a mirage and a display,  
 for neither little nor much has come ...  
 There is one Maker, and His handiwork is many thousands of thousands!  
 Everything shows itself from the ready cash of His knowledge.  
 The Ocean has made the 'others' with its own waves –  
 a cloud no different from the drops has entered the bazaar.  
 This has an exact analogy in the sun:  
 Its reflection has filled the two worlds with light.  
 Have you not seen the Speech of God, which in truth is one?  
 Revelation brings the one Speech in a diversity of signs ...  
 The one uniform Entity, other than whom not an atom exists,  
 became manifest; then it was that all these 'others' appeared.  
 A reflection showed itself forth from under the curtain of Oneness –  
 it entered into a hundred thousand curtains of fancy.  
 For an instant He showed His own mystery to Himself –

eighteen thousand worlds of mystery came into being.  
 He cast one ray and the world was filled with lamps;  
 He planted one seed and all these fruits sprang up!  
 In the Garden of Love the One Unity flashed forth:  
 Branches, trees, petals, thorns – all began to grow!  
 Disclosing Yourself to Yourself is Your work –  
 You make a hundred thousand works come forth from one work!<sup>4</sup>

Notice that these verses can easily be read as a commentary on the Koranic story of Moses and the mountain. The mountain represents all the obstacles on the path to God – the veils and snares that are the world, the soul, and everything within them. By asking God to show himself, Moses is asking him to clear away the obscurations that prevent clarity of vision, to turn the veils into faces, to open up the significance of the signs. When God does show himself, the mountain crumbles to dust, because the divine unity does not allow anything of the 'others' to stand up before it. All the veils and obstacles are lifted – the mountain shatters. Moses himself falls down thunderstruck, because nothing can stand up to God's theophany. Only God can truly see God. As the already cited hadith tells us, 'When I love him, I am the sight with which he sees.' There is no room for the eye of Moses when God is both seer and seen.

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Let me now come back to imagination. How does the concept of imagination help us understand theophany? Notice what 'Attār has just said about *khayāl*: 'A reflection showed itself from beneath the veil of Oneness – it entered into a hundred thousand curtains of fancy.' This is precisely theophany as imagination. The images that we see in the mirror of the universe are nothing but the Single Object that casts every image. But we are entranced by the images, so we do not notice that the mirror is distorting the object and showing it where it does not belong. Like the prisoners in Plato's cave, we see the images and take them for reality.

Once the eye of the heart opens, the lover sees the images for what they are. He perceives the diverse reflections as the immanent presence

4. *Dīwān-i 'Attār*, ed. T. Tafadḍulī (Tehran, 1967), pp. 817–19.



of the object in the appropriate manner – the manner that does not compromise the simultaneous transcendence of the One. He perceives the divine face in the mirror, knowing exactly what distortions have been introduced by the glass and by the distance from the object. He experiences the answer to the Prophet's prayer, 'O God, show us things as they are.'

When Ibn 'Arabī explains the meaning of *khayāl*, he insists that everything that the word properly designates falls into the realm of the in-between. A mirror image is located between the object and the glass. Dream images are situated between the soul and all the people and objects that are seen in the dream. The faculty of imagination lies between sense perception and the intellect. But the greatest of all in-between realms is the universe. The cosmos in its entirety is an image suspended between Absolute Being and pure nothingness. In other words, what we call 'reality' is an image of true reality. Or, we can divide reality into two sorts. There is the absolute and ultimate reality, which is God, and there is relative reality, which is the universe, an image of the true reality.

Generally, in Islamic thought, the universe is defined as 'everything other than God.' It is situated between Being and nothingness, or between Reality and unreality. All the infinite 'others' within the universe derive their reality from God. Hence they are theophanies, showings, manifestations, or disclosures of the true reality. Inasmuch as we perceive them as others, they are veils and snares. Inasmuch as we perceive them as the divine face, they are keys that unlock our hearts. This holds for all the signs – that is, for all things – but it is especially true with regard to the signs that have an immediate and obvious revelatory significance. Thus the Koran asks, 'Do they not ponder the Koran? Or are there locks on their hearts?' (47:24)

So, the word *khayāl* in its widest meaning denotes the cosmos. This is imagination as infinite theophany. In a more limited sense, the word designates what Corbin likes to call *mundus imaginālis*, the 'imaginal world'. This is a subtle realm in which all sorts of events take place that are similar to, but not identical with, what goes on in the visible world. Corbin has written a great deal about this world, but he usually does not point out that the notion of an intermediate realm – often called by other names – is basic to the Islamic understanding of the universe, not just to the vision of a few philosophers and Sufis.

In the standard Islamic cosmology, plainly set down in the Koran, the universe consists of three realms: heaven, earth, and 'what is between the two' (*mā baynahumā*). Heaven is the realm of angels, who are spirits made of light; it is a world of life, consciousness, power, and desire. It is a pure and unsullied theophany in which all the divine attributes appear synthetically as illuminating awareness. In contrast, earth is the realm of bodily things, which are made of clay and are inherently divisible, unconscious, ignorant, weak, and inanimate. The third domain – 'what is between the two' – is where heaven and earth interact, spirits and bodies meet, and angels come down to earth and souls go up to heaven.

The Koran commonly calls the two basic worlds *ghayb* and *shahāda*, that is, the unseen and the visible. The denizens of heaven are invisible by definition, and the inhabitants of earth are visible by definition. 'What is between the two' is neither purely invisible nor purely visible. This is the realm of the mixture of light and darkness, power and weakness, intelligence and unawareness. The ambiguity of the in-between realm is represented mythically by the jinn, who were created from fire. Normally they are invisible, but they can appear to the senses if they choose to do so. Moreover – as we all know from *The Thousand and One Nights* – the jinn can take any shape they want, because their corporeality is a fluid, spiritual corporeality, which is to say that their bodies are 'imaginal' (*khayālī*) or 'subtle' (*latīf*).

In the later tradition, the realm between heaven and earth is often called 'imagination'. It is the domain of impure and obscured life and awareness, inhabited not only by the jinn, but also by the souls of plants, animals, and humans. It comes into existence as the result of the meeting of high and low, spirit and body, light and darkness. In the human microcosm, this meeting took place at the mythic moment when God blew of his own spirit into Adam's clay, which he had shaped with his two hands. The combination of spirit and clay gave rise to Adam 'himself', *nafsu*. In other words, when God blew the spirit into Adam's clay, a *nafs* was born – a soul, a self – and this soul is precisely the realm of imagination. Thus the intermediate realm, in both the external, macrocosmic world and the internal, microcosmic world, depends for its existence on the union of heaven and earth, or spirit and body, a union that occurs through the creative activity of God.

Both Sufis and Muslim philosophers employ the concept of 'the world of imagination' to explain the nature of visionary experience



and divine revelation. The mythic models for their explanations are provided by the Koran and the Hadith. The Koran, for example, tells us that Gabriel 'appeared as an image' (*tamaththala lahā*) to the Virgin Mary. But perhaps the most often used example is given by the accounts of the Prophet's *mi'raj*, his night journey, when he ascended to God by way of the seven celestial spheres. In each sphere, Muhammad met with the prophet and the angels in charge of the sphere. Remember that the tradition insists that the *mi'raj* was 'bodily'. The accounts describe the meetings with the prophets and angels as occurring when both he and they were embodied. Yet, the tradition also tells us that the bodies of angels are created from light, and we all know that light in itself – in its pure intensity – is invisible, because it is too bright to be seen. As for the prophets, their bodies had long gone back to dust. The account of the *mi'raj*, then, was read as describing the experience of the imaginal, in-between realm, the *mundus imaginalis*, where both spirit and body are fully present.

In short, the word *khayāl* has four basic meanings in the theoretical literature. First it means image, and it is used to refer to images both outside and inside the mind. Second, it means the power of the mind that is able to perceive, preserve, and conjure up images. Third, it means the *mundus imaginalis* on both the macrocosmic and the microcosmic levels. Fourth, it means everything other than God, the whole universe in its infinite expanse, embracing the spiritual, imaginal, and corporeal realms.

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Let me now come back to *tajallī* or 'theophany'. Like *khayāl*, the word *tajallī* can be applied to 'everything other than God'. The universe is a grand theophany, and all things within it are individual theophanies, disclosures of God's reality, or images in which God dreams of himself in the infinite forms in which his face can appear. This then is imagination as theophany.

If I were to conclude the discussion here, however, we would be left with a static picture. I would be ignoring one of the most basic notions of Islamic theology, cosmology, and spiritual psychology, and that is constant change. One of the characteristics of God is permanence and fixity, and one of the characteristics of everything other than God is never-ending transformation.

Ibn 'Arabī epitomizes the idea of constant change with the expression



*Lā takrār fi'l-tajallī*, 'There is no repetition in theophany.' He tells us that were there repetition in the divine self-disclosure that is the universe, God's infinity would be contradicted. It would be as if God had run short of ideas. In fact, God's absolute unity demands that each disclosure of his face be unique and never repeated. In the realm of time and space, the oneness of each showing means that no two things in the universe can be exactly alike, and no two moments of any single thing can be exactly the same. Hence, everything other than God undergoes perpetual change and transmutation. Ibn 'Arabī tells us here that we should reflect upon the constantly shifting images that we perceive in dreams, because they represent the real nature of the universe much more precisely than the slowly changing images that nowadays we like to call 'objects' or 'the real world'.

If theophany is never repeated, it nonetheless follows its own laws, which are expressed generally in terms of the divine names and attributes. Given, for example, that God is both First and Last, change and transformation are directional. All things appear *from* the First, and all things disappear *into* the Last. So central is the idea of directionality that it was singled out as the third of the three principles of Islamic faith, after *tawhīd* and prophecy. The word employed to name this third principle is 'return' (*ma'ād*). The very word tells us that all things have emerged from God and are now in the process of going back to him.

Given that everything in the universe is a moving and changing image of God, one can say that theophany appears to us with two directionalities: coming from God and going back to God. It is easy to conceive of theophany as the divine light coming forth from God, or as an emanation of the Real. But how do we picture an image that is somehow pulled back into the object that it represents? How can a ray of light be re-absorbed into the sun? Here we see that the usual metaphors are inadequate, so we need further explanation.

It may be helpful to think of the emergence from God and the return to Him in terms of diminishment and intensification. Given that all things are images and no two images are the same, some images display the divine attributes more intensely than others. In general, those things that show forth the divine attributes most intensely are called 'spirits' and 'angels', and they inhabit the unseen world. They are invisible not because of physical distance or tangible obstructions, but because their light is blindingly bright.

Those things that are most diminished in intensity are called 'bodies'

and 'inanimate objects'. They inhabit the visible world. We see them because they are the darkest of the divine signs, the weakest in their capacity to show forth the divine attributes. Only darkness, after all, allows us to perceive things. After a certain low intensity, the brighter the light, the less we see – unless, that is, we are able to intensify our own powers of perception and awareness. If the luminous power of imagination is equal to the image, then the image can be seen, no matter how bright it may be. This is the principle implicit in the hadith that tells us that God becomes 'the eye with which he sees, the ear with which he hears'.

Depicting things in terms of degrees of intensity provides us with a picture in which spirits inhabit the invisible world and bodies dwell in the visible world. As for the intermediate world, it is populated by imaginal things, which are both visible and invisible. Imagination is situated between the diminished light characteristic of bodily things and the intense light characteristic of spirits and angels.

What makes human beings peculiar – and what makes them somehow equivalent to the whole universe – is that they dwell simultaneously in all three worlds. They are the most comprehensive of all created things. Made in the image of God's infinite unity, they display the signs and marks of each and every one of the divine names. In other words, each human being is potentially a total theophany, a disclosure of God as God, not of God as Creator, or Forgiver, or Just, or some other limiting name. In Ibn ʿArabī's view, this is why the hadith tells us that 'Allah' created Adam in his own form (*ṣūra*). Any name other than Allah, which is God's supreme and all-comprehensive name, would designate a specific, constraining attribute. In contrast, Allah designates God as such, embracing the infinite and absolute Essence along with all the names and attributes.

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The universe, then, is an image of the One Reality. It is a layered image, which is to say that some images display the One Reality more clearly and intensely than others. The universe is also directional and constantly moving, which is to say that it is always in the process of coming forth from God and going back to God. The two movements are commonly called the 'Arc of Descent' (*qaws al-nuzūl*) and the 'Arc of Ascent' (*qaws al-ṣuʿūd*). Together, the two Arcs give us a circle, which is the total theophany of the One God.



In order to grasp the full significance of imagination, we need to understand that this depiction of two Arcs presents us with a single visible world flanked by two invisible worlds. Ibn 'Arabī calls the invisible world located on the Arc of Descent 'the impossible unseen' (*al-ghayb al-muḥālī*), meaning by this that once things leave it and enter into the visible world, they can never return to it. From the visible realm they move on to the 'possible unseen' (*al-ghayb al-imkānī*), which is the route of the Ascending Arc. It includes the realms of death, the isthmus (*barzakh*) between death and resurrection, and the resurrection itself, all of which are invisible to us and designate a variety of possible outcomes.

The universe, then, is held together by two on-going movements, one descending and one ascending, one centrifugal and the other centripetal. In the Descending Arc, theophany brings the world into existence as a concatenation of diminishing degrees. Here the analogy of sunlight works perfectly well, though the process is analysed in many different ways in the texts. In these depictions, the universe descends by an invisible route until it finally reaches the inanimate realm. The realm of inanimate visibility marks the end of the descending arc and the simultaneous beginning of the ascending arc. Life and awareness are signs of the re-ascent into invisibility.

As observers of the world, we perceive the re-intensification of theophany's light in two basic ways – externally and internally. Outside ourselves it appears in the signs of life and awareness apparent in living things. On the internal level, life and awareness are presupposed by the very act of external perception. Discernment and cognition prove the presence of life and awareness in the perceiving subject. The very recognition of the signs depends upon our own invisibility. The simple act of perceiving external things demonstrates the actuality of sense perception, imagination, and spiritual awareness, which correspond to the three worlds: earth, the in-between, and heaven.

The senses perceive, but they are not aware of perceiving. It is the soul – the microcosmic world of imagination – that animates the senses and finds the sense objects invisibly present to itself, transferred from the visible realm. But the soul is not the source of awareness. The spirit or intellect infuses the soul with the luminosity that allows for awareness and coherence and makes it possible to reflect upon perceptions. Only through the spirit can one discard imaginal apparitions and ascend into the unified light of consciousness. Otherwise, animals



share with human beings in imaginal perception. They cannot, however, transcend the World of Imagination.

The infinity of imaginal forms that exist in the imaginal realm, which is located both within us and ahead of us on the Arc of Ascent, is suggested by the never-ending variety of visible forms and physical objects. The external, inanimate surface of theophany – that is, the world as we perceive it – is in fact a seedbed in which life and awareness are sprouting inwardly. The visible surface never ceases being inanimate. We discern life and awareness only through the signs, and our discernment is the sign of our own life, awareness, and invisibility.

On the inanimate level, the unlimited potentialities of theophany are constrained and obscured by physical conditions. If theophany is to show its full range, it must turn back to the invisible realm from which it arose. Having exhausted the possibilities of sensory manifestation through the diversity of minerals, it gives intimations of its true, invisible nature through the qualities and characteristics that become manifest in plants and animals. It reaches its first culmination in the human condition. At this point it turns fully inward.

In the ascending levels that lead up to the human condition, theophany displays its potential only through the limiting images that appear to us as the species and individuals of the natural world. It cannot actualize its infinite potential for image-making except in the invisible realm. Nothing in the external realm has the capacity to act as a vehicle and container for the full range of imaginal apparition. Only the human form, made in the divine image, opens up to the infinity of absolute reality, and it does so only in the invisible realms of the soul and the spirit.

At the surface of the human condition, relative uniformity is the rule, because all human beings belong to the same species. True human diversity pertains to what goes on beneath the surface. The richest and most authentic human possibilities unfold not in our external activities, productions, and creations, but in the invisible depths of our souls. Alike on the surface, people are profoundly diversified by the unseen ramifications of the never-repeating theophanies. It is this inner wealth that overflows into the domain of activities, arts, and artifacts. The outward variety of human fabrication mirrors the inner flexibility and fluidity of the re-intensifying flow of theophany back to its source.

For Islamic thought – and indeed, for religion in general – the domain of outward human activities is only the beginning of specifically human

concerns. By its very nature, the re-intensification of light and awareness that marks the Ascending Arc of theophany moves from visibility to invisibility, from outwardness to inwardness, from unconsciousness to awareness, and from practice to contemplation. As long as we are hindered by corporeal constraints, the invisible realms can only be accessed imperfectly. The soul needs to be freed from its fetters in order to spread its wings. Beyond the preliminary realm of human development found in this world lies the realm of unlimited becoming that is commonly called 'death'.

In death the infinite imaginal realm of the human soul achieves an 'invisible visibility' through spiritual embodiment in the World of Imagination. The increasing intensification of awareness that had reached a peak in the human species is totally transfigured. The realm of inner experiences that had been dimly available to the embodied soul is brought into focus as the real, concrete realm of conscious life. Death is inextricably bound up with the soul's self-consciousness and self-awareness. Ibn 'Arabī and others tell us that through the process of death, what had been outward, visible, and physical in our own individual nature is internalized to become the stable ground of our inner being, and what had been inward and hidden in our thoughts and our character traits is externalized to become the defining landscape of our new world.

In short, when death removes the density and darkness that obscures the World of Imagination during life, the realm of the infinite in-between comes into stark focus. The senses continue to function, but they are no longer hindered by bodily objects and corporeal forms. Our present embodiment prevents the soul from displaying the full range of its imaginal powers. Death unleashes its potential.

This is not to say that the body was simply a hindrance to the unfolding of theophany. Quite the contrary, the body is absolutely necessary for the development of the imaginal faculties, which embrace the properties of both spirits and bodies. Mullā Ṣadrā and others present their teachings about 'the Origin and the Return' (*al-mabda' wa'l-ma'ād*) precisely to show that only the spirit's embodiment in this world allows the soul to come into being and develop its potential. As Mullā Ṣadrā's famous dictum puts it, the soul is 'bodily in origination but spiritual in subsistence' (*jismāniyyat al-ḥudūth rūḥāniyyat al-baqā*).

The body, as Ṣadrā tells us, is like a net that is needed to catch the bird of the soul. Once the bird is caught and tamed, the net must be



discarded. Through the taming, the bird gains the powers of the spirit and learns how to fly on the wings of imagination. The density, solidity, and exteriority of the body are gradually overcome, and the body itself is subtilized and interiorized to make way for the full experience of the *mundus imaginalis*. So vast indeed is the soul's potential for imaginative creativity that, according to Ṣadrā, every human soul, whether of the blessed or the damned, will create an entire, independent universe in its posthumous becoming.<sup>5</sup>

Let me conclude by coming back to the powers of imagination as expressed in poetic creativity. I will quote two poems from Rumi. The first is a ghazal that sings of the splendors of theophany. Rumi describes how God discloses himself in all things, then he retraces the flow of theophany back to its origin in the Essence of God. The poem, in other words, describes the Arc of Descent.

The scent of the garden and roses keeps on coming,  
 the scent of that kind Friend keeps on coming.  
 My Friend is scattering pearls to me,  
 and the ocean's water keeps on rising up inside me.  
 I look upon the image of His rose garden  
 and keep on seeing the field of brambles softer than silk.  
 With such a carpenter – I mean His love –  
 a ladder to heaven keeps on rising.  
 My hungry dog keeps on catching  
 the scent of bread from the spirit's kitchen.  
 The scent of the spirit keeps on coming to the lovers  
 from the doors and walls of the Friend's lane.  
 Bring an act of faithfulness and take a hundred thousand –  
 from such as this, such as that keeps on coming.

5. In one passage Mullā Ṣadrā writes, 'The bodies and orbs of the next world are infinite in keeping with the number of conceptions and perceptions of souls. This is because the proofs that establish the finitude of the dimensions do not apply to the next world, but only to material directions and spatial confines. In the next world there is no crowding or interference, and nothing there is located inside or outside anything else. Rather, every human being, whether felicitous or wretched, will have a world complete in itself, greater than this world, and not strung on the same string as any other world. Every one of the folk of felicity will have the kingdom that he desires, however vast he may desire it to be.' *Arshīyya*, edited by Gh. Āhanī (Isfahan, 1341/1962), p. 252. For the passage in context, see James Morris's translation of this work: *The Wisdom of the Throne* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 165.



Everyone who dies before the beauty of the Friend's face  
     keeps on entering paradise not having died.  
 The caravan of the Unseen comes before the eyes  
     but it conceals itself from these ugly ones.  
 Why should lovely women come to ugly men?  
     The nightingale always comes to the rosebush.  
 The jasmine grows next to the narcissus,  
     the rose comes to the sweet-mouthed bud.  
 All of these are symbols – I mean  
     the other world keeps on coming into this world.  
 Like cream hidden in the soul of milk,  
     No-place keeps on coming into place.  
 Like intellect concealed in blood and skin,  
     the Traceless keeps on entering into traces.  
 From beyond intellect, beautiful Love  
     keeps on coming, skirt dragging, a cup of wine in hand.  
 And from beyond Love, the Indescribable  
     who can only be called 'That' keeps on coming.  
 I could explain more than this,  
     but jealousy keeps on throwing its spear.  
 I'll stop, because difficult words about Him  
     keep on throwing people into a hundred doubts.<sup>6</sup>

The second group of lines I want to read is from the *Mathnawī*. The verses are well known. They represent one of several passages that have sometimes been misinterpreted as presenting an early version of Darwinian evolution. What Rumi is in fact talking about is the ascent of a single soul, in a single lifetime, into the divine light. He is describing the gradually intensifying vision of the invisible realm of awareness, consciousness, imagination, and spirit. Unlike the ghazal just quoted, the verses speak not of the Origin and the downward flow of images, but rather of the Return and the gradual maturation of the imaginal power. And notice that, just as Rumi concluded the foregoing ghazal by speaking of 'That', which is beyond language and images, so also these verses remind us that imagination must be left behind in the lonely flight to God.

6. *Diwān* (Furūzānfar edition), ghazal number 2897.

I died to the inanimate and I became a plant,  
 I died to vegetal nature and I came forth as an animal.  
 I died to animality and I became a man.  
 Why should I fear? When did I become less through dying?  
 In the next jump, I will die to human nature  
 and lift up head and wings among the angels.  
 Then I will jump the stream of the angels—  
*Everything is perishing except His face.*  
 Once again, I will be sacrificed as an angel  
 and become what does not enter into imagination.<sup>7</sup>

7. *Mathnawī* (Nicholson edition), Book 3, verses 3901–05.

