Review of Spiritual body and celestial earth: from Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran, by Henry Corbin, trans. N. Pearson

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While this classic study, first published in 1960, is surely familiar to specialists in Islamic philosophy, mysticism and Shiite thought, this paperback re-edition of the Bollingen translation now makes available to a wider audience, at a price affordable for classroom use, what is probably still the best available English anthology of later Islamic thought and a marvelous introduction to the "spiritual aesthetics" of poetry and the visual arts (and the religious perception of nature), in both Sunni and Shiite Islam. This volume actually includes two very different books: the lyrical, highly personal Eranos lecture aptly described by the title (pp. 3-105, originally published in the *Eranos-Jahrbuch* for 1953); and a carefully selected, easily readable and pedagogically more useful selection of key texts focusing on the "metaphysics of the imagination" in four major schools of later Islamic thought. While longer works by a few of those thinkers (notably Mulla Sadra and Ibn ‘Arabi) have since become available in complete English translations, in this case the broad range of sources, combined with the careful focus on a single major topic and extensive annotation, still make the translations in this volume an ideal pedagogical tool for survey or introductory courses in Islamic (or Persian) religion, civilization, arts, etc.

The long translation section (pp. 107-end) includes key passages on the common theme of the epistemology (and metaphysics) of spiritual perception—often phrased in terms of eschatological symbolism from the Qur'an and hadith—drawn from representative works by Suhrawardi, Ibn ‘Arabi, Mulla Sadra and Shaykh Ahmad Ahsâ’î. In each case, Corbin has joined short excerpts from these seminal thinkers with commentaries or further illustrations of their insights by their students or later disciples (e.g., Qaysari and ‘Abd al-Karim Jili for Ibn ‘Arabi; Shahrazuri, Ibn Kammuna and Qutb al-Din Shirazi for Suhrawardi), in a way that beautifully conveys the usual commentary-based forms of writing and teaching within those Islamic intellectual traditions. And although Corbin's personal interests highlighted in the opening essay are clearly focused on the later (Safavid and Qajar) Shiite authors, who were still
virtually unknown outside Iran at the time this book was written, in fact half of the fourteen texts translated here are by Sunni writers from the traditions of Suhrawardi and especially of Ibn ‘Arabi, which were so widely influential in the intellectual and artistic expressions of religious life throughout the Eastern Islamic world (including the Ottoman and Mughal realms and Malay literature, as well as in Shiite Iran) at least until the colonial era.

The wider pedagogical interest of these selections, beyond their obvious significance for students of Islamic philosophy, Sufism and Shiite esotericism, has to do with the way they so clearly communicate two fundamental dimensions of Islamic religious and artistic life that are often largely absent from introductory or survey materials on Islam: i.e., the spiritual perception of the world of nature, and the inner experience of artistic and religious symbols. That effectiveness should not really be too surprising: the profound historical influence of these metaphysics of "theophanies" for several centuries in such a wide range of Muslim religious and cultural settings already reflected the way such works were felt to express (as well as to justify) the otherwise inarticulate depths of aesthetic and religious realization and creativity.

Yet at the same time the broader philosophic framework of many of these Islamic classics is so clearly spelled out that thoughtful readers can hardly avoid noticing their applicability to our interpretation (and experience) of religious and aesthetic symbolism in many other, non-Islamic contexts. The intensely personal opening essay is perhaps Corbin's most lyrical and poetic attempt to suggest those wider perspectives. With its multiple levels of allusion to Goethe and earlier German mystics, musical resonances, and phenomenological "parallels" in Jungian psychology, Christian, Buddhist, Jewish and gnostic mystical traditions, it is difficult enough to follow even in the original; much has inevitably been lost in translation. Behind those thought-provoking meditations, however, stands the broader historical problem suggested by the title: the complex transformation of Zoroastrian and gnostic elements (among so many others) in the gradual formation of Islamic religion and culture, a process by no means limited to the particularly striking cases (of Suhrawardi and the early Shiite hadith elaborated by the Shaykhis) that are the author's special focus here. Compared with analogous research in the areas of formative Judaism and Christianity, it is remarkable how relatively little Iranian studies have advanced, in this particular area, in the almost four decades since this Eranos lecture was originally delivered.
As for the ongoing relevance of these so insistently other-worldly Islamic philosophers and mystics, ironically enough, the arguments advanced in this volume have recently been echoed by an undoubtedly "authoritative" Shiite source: Khomeini's famous letter to Gorbachev recommending the study of these very same subjects and authors (Suhrawardi, Ibn ‘Arabi and Mulla Sadra). Were he to heed that advice, he could well begin with these translations.

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