

MUNDUS IMAGINALIS OR THE IMAGINARY AND THE IMAGINAL

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My intention in proposing the two Latin words *mundus imaginalis* as a title for this paper was to circumscribe a very precise order of reality, which corresponds to a precise mode of perception. Latin terminology has the advantage of providing us with a fixed and technical point of reference against which we can compare and measure the various, more or less vague equivalents suggested by modern Western languages.

To begin with, I shall make a confession. The choice of the two words had begun to become inevitable for me some time ago, because I found it impossible to content myself with the word imaginary for what I had to translate or to describe. This is by no means intended as a criticism of those whom language usage compels to have recourse to this word, since all of us are trying merely to revalue it in the positive sense. However, despite all our efforts, we cannot prevent that, in current and non-premeditated usage, the term imaginary is equated with the unreal, with something that is outside the framework of being and existing, in brief, with something Utopian. The reason why I absolutely had to find another expression was that, for a good many years, my calling and my profession required me to interpret Arabic and Persian texts, whose meaning I would undoubtedly have betrayed had I simply contented myself — even by taking all due precaution — with the term *imaginary*. I had to find a new expression to avoid misleading the Western reader, who, on the contrary, has to be roused from his old engrained way of thinking in order to awaken him to another order of things.

In other words, if in French (and in English) usage we equate the *imaginary* with the unreal, the Utopian, this is undoubtedly symptomatic of something that contrasts with an order of reality, which I call the *mundus imaginalis*, and which the theosophers of Islam designate as the "eighth clime". After a brief outline of this order of reality, we shall study the organ which perceives it, i.e., imaginative consciousness, cognitive Imagination; and finally, we shall draw some conclusions from the experiences of those who have really been there.

1. "Nâ-Kojâ-Abâd" or the Eighth Clime

I just mentioned the word *utopian*. Strangely enough — or perhaps it is the poignant example — in Persian, our authors use a term that seems to be its linguistic transfer: Nâ-Kojâ-Abâd, "the country of non-where". And yet, this place is anything but a *utopia*.

Let us look at the very beautiful narratives, which are both visionary tales and tales of spiritual initiation, written in Persian by Sohrawardi, the young sheikh who was "the resurrector of ancient Persian theosophy" in the Islamic Iran of the twelfth century. At the beginning of each narrative, the visionary finds himself in the presence of a supernatural being of great beauty, whom he asks *who* he is and *whence* he comes. Essentially, these tales illustrate the Gnostic's experience, lived as the personal history of the Stranger, the captive aspiring to return home.

At the beginning of the narrative, which Sohrawardi entitles *The Crimson Archangel*¹, the captive, who has just escaped the watchful eyes of his gaolers, i.e., who has momentarily left the world of sensible experience, finds himself in the desert in the presence of a being who appears to him to be endowed with all the graces of adolescence. He therefore asks him: "Whence do you come, oh Youth!" And the answer is: "How so? I am the eldest child of the Creator [in Gnostic terms the *Protokistos*, the First-Created] and you call me a youth?" His origin gives the clue to the mysterious purple-red colour in which he appears: it is the colour of a being that is pure Light, whose brilliance is attenuated to a twilight purple by the darkness of the world of earthly creatures. "I come from beyond Mount Qâf.. This is where you were at the beginning and it is where you will return, once you are free of your shackles."

Mount Qâf is the cosmic mountain, which, summit after summit and valley after valley, is built up of celestial spheres, all enveloping one another. Where then is the road that leads out of it? What is the distance? "However far you may journey", it is said, "you will always come back to the point of departure", just as the needle of the compass always swerves back to the magnetic point. Does this simply mean that you leave yourself to come back to yourself? Not quite, because, in the meantime a very important event will have changed everything. The *self* one finds yonder, beyond Mount Qâf, is a higher self, the self experienced as a "Thou". Like Khezr (or Khadir, the mysterious prophet, the eternal wanderer Elijah or his double), the traveller has to bathe in the Spring of Life.

¹ cf. The author's French translation of this little treatise (written in Persian by Sohrawardi) in *En Islam iranien, aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, vol. II, book II: "Sohrawardi et les Platoniciens de Perse", Paris (Gallimard), 1971. For a more complete study of the topics dealt with here, cf. ibid, particularly vol. IV, book VII on the 12th Imam or the "Imam cache".

He who has discovered the meaning of True Reality has arrived at this Spring. When he emerges from the Spring, he is endowed with a Gift that likens him to the balsam of which a drop, distilled in the hollow of one's hand held up against the sun, trans-passes to the back of the hand. If you are Khezr, you, too, can pass beyond Mount Qâf without difficulty.

The expression Nâ-Kojâ-Abâd is a strange term. It is not listed in any Persian dictionary, and, as far as I know, it was forged by Sohrawardi himself by using purely Persian roots. Literally it means the city, the land (abâd) of nowhere (Nâ-Kojâ). This is why we are confronted here with a term that, at first sight, may seem to us to be the exact equivalent of the term *ou-topia*, which in turn is not listed in any of the classical Greek dictionaries and was created by Thomas More as an abstract concept to denote the absence of any localization, of any given *situs* in the kind of space that can be explored and controlled by our sense experience. Etymologically and literally it might be correct to translate Nâ-Kojâ-Abâd by *outopia* or *utopia*, and yet I believe that this would be a misinterpretation of the concept, the intention behind it, as well as its meaning in terms of lived experience. It therefore seems to me exceedingly important at least to try to find out why it would be a mistranslation.

I believe it is indispensable here to be clear in our minds as to the real meaning and impact of the mass of information about the topographies explored in a visionary state, i.e., the intermediary state between waking and sleeping, including the information that, for the spiritualists of Shi'ite Islam, concerns the "country of the hidden Imam". In alerting us to a differential that relates to an entire area of the soul, and hence to an entire spiritual culture, this clarification would lead us to ask: under what circumstances does what we currently call a utopia, and therefore the type of man called utopist, become possible? How and why does he make his appearance? I am in fact asking myself whether anything like it can be found in traditional Islamic thought. I do not believe, for example, that the descriptions of the "Perfect City" by Farabi in the tenth century, or, along the same lines, the "Rule of the Solitary"² by the Andalusian philosopher Ibn Bajja (Avempace) in the twelfth century, were projections of what we call today a social or political *utopia*. To understand these descriptions as utopias, we would, I fear, have to abstract them from their own premises and perspectives, imposing our own dimensions instead. Above all, however, I fear that we would have to be resigned to a confusion of the Spiritual City with an imaginary city.

The word Nâ-Kojâ-Abâd does not denote something that is shaped like a point, not having extension in space. In fact, the Persian word abâd stands for a city, a cultivated region that is inhabited and consequently an expanse. What Sohrawardi therefore describes as being located "beyond Mount Qâf" is what all the mystical cities, such as Jâbalqâ, Jâbarsâ, and Hûrqalyâ, represent for him and through him for the entire theosophist tradition of Islam. It is made quite clear that topographically this region starts at the "convex surface" of the ninth Sphere, the Sphere of Spheres, or the Sphere that envelops the Cosmos as a whole. This means it begins at the very moment one leaves the Supreme Sphere, which defines all the types of orientation possible in our world (or on our side of the world), the "Sphere" to which the cardinal points refer. It becomes obvious that, once this border has been crossed, the question "where" (*ubi, kojâ*) becomes meaningless at least in terms of the meaning it has

² cf. Henry Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, vol. I, Paris (Gallimard), 1964, pp. 222 ff., 317 ff.

in the realm of sensible experience. Hence we find the expression Nâ-Kojâ-Abâd, which is a place out of space, a "place" that is not contained in any other place, in a *topos*, making it possible to give an answer to the question "where" by a gesture of the hand. What precisely do we mean, however, when we talk of "leaving the *where*"?

Undoubtedly what is involved is not a movement from one locality to another,³ a bodily transfer from one place to another, as would occur in the case of places in the same homogenous space. As suggested at the end of Sohrawardi's tale by the symbol of the drop of balsam in the hollow of the hand held up to the sun, it is essential to go inward, to penetrate to the interior. Yet, having reached the interior, one finds oneself paradoxically on the *outside*, or, in the language of our authors, "on the convex surface" of the ninth Sphere, in other words "beyond Mount Qâf". Essentially the relationship involved is that of the outer, the visible, the exoteric (in Greek *ta exo*, in Arabic *zahir*) to the inner, the invisible, the esoteric (in Greek *ta eso*, in Arabic *batin*), or the relationship of the natural to the spiritual world. Leaving the where, the *ubi* category, is equivalent to leaving the outer or natural appearances that cloak the hidden inner realities, just as the almond is concealed in its shell. For the Stranger, the Gnostic, this step represents a return *home*, or at least a striving in this direction.

Yet strange as it may seem, once the journey is completed, the reality which has hitherto been an inner and hidden one turns out to envelop, surround, or contain that which at first was outer and visible. As a result of internalization, one has moved out of external reality. Henceforth, spiritual reality envelops, surrounds, contains so-called material reality. Spiritual reality can therefore not be found "*in the where*". The "*where*" is in it. In other words, spiritual reality itself is the "*where*" of all things. It is not located anywhere and it is not covered by the question "*where*", the *ubi* category referring to a place in sensible space. Its place (abâd) as compared to the latter is Nâ-kojâ (nowhere) because, in relation to what is in sensory space, its *ubi* is an *ubique* (everywhere). Once we have understood this, we perhaps understand the most important thing enabling us to follow the topography of visionary experiences. We may discover the way (*sens* in French), both in terms of meaning and in terms of direction. Moreover, it may help us to discover what distinguishes the visionary experience of spiritualists, like Sohrawardi and so many others, from such pejorative terms in our modern vocabulary as "figments of the mind" or "imaginings" — to wit, Utopian fantasies.

At this point, however, we must make a real effort to overcome what one might call Western man's "agnostic reflex", since it is responsible for the divorce between thinking and being. A whole host of recent theories have their tacit origin in this reflex, and it is expected to help us escape the other realm of reality that confronts us with certain experiences and evidence. We try to run from this reality, even when we are secretly attracted by it. As a result we give it all sorts of ingenious explanations but discard the only one which would by its very existence suggest what this reality *is!* To understand the hint we would in any event have to have a cosmology that cannot even be compared with the most outstanding discoveries of

³ Therefore the representation of the Sphere of Spheres is only a schematic indication in peripatetic or Ptolemean astronomy; it continues to be valid, even though this astronomy has been given up. This means that no matter how high you might be able to go by rockets or Sputniks, you will never have progressed one inch toward Nâ-Kojâ-Abâd, because the "threshold" will not have been crossed.

modern science in relation to our physical universe. For as long as we are exclusively concerned with the physical universe, we remain tied to the mode of being "on this side of Mount Qâf". The traditional cosmology of Islamic theosophers is characterized by a structure consisting of the various universes and intermediate as well as intermediary worlds "beyond Mount Qâf", i.e., beyond the physical universes. It is intelligible only to a mode of existence whose *act of being* is an expression of its presence in these worlds. Conversely, owing to this act of being, these worlds are present in it.⁴ What then is the dimension of this *act of being* that is, or will be in the course of future palingeneses, the place of these universes which are outside our natural space? And first of all, what worlds are these?

There is the physical, sensible world encompassing both our terrestrial world (governed by the human souls) and the sidereal universe (governed by the Souls of the Spheres). The sensible world is the world of the phenomenon (*molk*). There is also the supersensible world of the Soul or Angel Souls, the Malakût, in which the above mentioned mystical Cities are located, and which starts at the "convex surface of the ninth Sphere". And there is the world of pure archangelic Intelligences. Each of these three worlds has its organ of perception: the senses, imagination, and the intellect, corresponding with the triad: body, soul and mind. The triads govern the threefold development of man extending from this world to his resurrections in the other worlds.

We realize immediately that we are no longer confined to the dilemma of thought and extension, to the schema of a cosmology and a gnoseology restricted to the empirical world and the world of abstract intellect. Between them there is a world that is both intermediary and intermediate, described by our authors as the '*alam al-mithal*', the world of the image, the *mundus imaginalis*: a world that is ontologically as real as the world of the senses and that of the intellect. This world requires its own faculty of perception, namely, imaginative power, a faculty with a cognitive function, a *noetic* value which is as real as that of sense perception or intellectual intuition. We must be careful not to confuse it with the imagination identified by so-called modern man with "fantasy", and which, according to him, is nothing but an outpour of "imaginings". This brings us to the heart of the matter and our problem of terminology.

What is this intermediary universe, i.e., the one we referred to earlier as the "eighth clime"?⁵ For all our thinkers the sensible world of space consists of the seven climes belonging to traditional geography. However, there is another clime represented by a world possessing extension and dimension, figures and colours; but these features cannot be perceived by the senses in the same manner as if they were the properties of physical bodies. No, these dimensions, figures, and colours are the object of imaginative perception, or of the "psycho-spiritual senses". This fully objective and real world with equivalents for everything existing in the sensible world without being perceptible by the senses is designated as the eighth clime. The term speaks for itself, since it signifies a clime outside all climes, a place outside all places, outside of where (Nâ-Kojâ-Abâd).

⁴ On this notion of presence, cf. in particular the author's introduction to Molla Sadra Shirazi, *Le Livre des Penetrations metaphysiques* (*Kitab al-Masha'ir*), French edition and translation (Bibliotheque Iranienne, vol. 10), Paris (Adrien-Maisonneuve), 1964, index s.v.

⁵ For what follows, cf. Henry Corbin, *Terre celeste et corps de resurrection: de l'Iran mazdeen a l'Iran shi'ite*, Paris (Buchet-Chastel-Correia), 1961, pp. 130, 133, 142ff, 199 ff.

The *terminus technicus* in Arabic, '*'alam al-mithal*', might also be translated by *mundus archetypus*, provided one is careful to avoid confusion with another expression. For the same word ('*'alam al-mithal*') is used in Arabic to render the concept of the Platonic Ideas (interpreted by Sohrawardi in terms of Zoroastrian angelology), with the only difference that when it is used to denote Platonic Ideas it is almost always accompanied by the very precise qualification *mothal* (plural of *mithâl*), *aflâtûniyyâ nûrâniyyâ*, "the Platonic archetypes of light". Whenever the term is used to describe the world of the eighth clime it refers, on the one hand, to the archetypal images of individual and singular things; in this case it refers to the oriental region of the eighth clime, the city of Jâbalqâ, where these Images subsist pre-existent and pre-ordained in relation to the sensible world. On the other hand, the term also refers to the occidental region, the city of Jâbarsâ. It is the world or intermediary world where the spirits dwell after their sojourn in the natural terrestrial world, and the world in which the forms of our thoughts and desires, of our presentiments and of our behaviour and of all works accomplished on earth subsist.⁶ The '*'alam al-mithal*', the *mundus imaginalis*, is made up of all these manifestations.

To use once more the technical language of our thinkers, the '*'alam al-mithal*' is also designated as the world of "Images in suspense" (*mothal mo'allaqa*). Sohrawardi and his school understand by this a mode of being corresponding to the realities of this intermediary world, and which we shall designate as *Imaginalia*.⁷ This well-defined ontological status is based on visionary spiritual experiences which Sohrawardi holds to be as fully relevant as the observations of Hipparchus or Ptolemy are considered to be relevant for astronomy. Of course, the forms and figures of the *mundus imaginalis* do not subsist in the same manner as the empirical realities of the physical world, otherwise anyone would have the right to perceive them. The authors also noticed that these forms and figures could not subsist in the purely intelligible world, that they had indeed extension and dimension, an "immaterial" materiality compared to the sensible world, but that they also had a corporality and spaciality of their own. (In this context, I wish to recall the expression *spissitudo spiritualis* coined by Henry More, the Platonist of Cambridge; it has its exact equivalent in the writings of Sadra Shirazi, the Persian Platonist.) For the same reason, they considered it impossible for one mind to be the sole substratum for these forms and figures; and the possibility that they must be unreal, sheer nothingness, was also discarded, as otherwise we would not be able to discern, to grade or to evaluate them. The existence of this intermediary world, the *mundus imaginalis*, therefore, became a metaphysical necessity. Imagination is the cognitive function of this world. Ontologically, it ranks higher than the world of the senses and lower than the purely intelligible world; it is more immaterial than the former and less immaterial than the latter.⁸ This approach to imagination, which had always been of prime importance for our mystical theosophers, provided them with a basis for demonstrating the validity of dreams and of the visionary reports describing and relating "events in Heaven" as well as the validity of symbolic rites. It offered proof of the reality of the places that occur during intense meditation, the validity of inspired imaginative visions, of cosmogonies and theogonies and

⁶ ibid., pp. 202 ff., 251 ff.

⁷ ibid., pp. 142 ff., 199 ff.

⁸ ibid., p. 201.

above all of the veracity of the spiritual meaning perceived in the imaginative information supplied by prophetic revelations.⁹

In short, this is the world of "subtle bodies", of which it is indispensable to have some notion in order to understand that there is a link between pure spirit and material body. Their mode of being is therefore described as "being in suspense". Like that of the Image or Form this mode of being constitutes its own "matter" and is independent of the substratum to which it is immanent as if by accident.¹⁰ In other words, Form or Image does not subsist in the manner black color subsists through the black body to which it is immanent. The comparison regularly used by our authors is the mode in which Images "in suspense" appear and subsist in a mirror. The material substance of the mirror, whether metal or mineral, is not the substance of the Image; the Image could only accidentally be of the same substance as the mirror. The substance is simply the "place of its appearance". And thus we are led to a general theory about the epiphanic places and forms, *mazhar* (plural *mazâhir*), which are so characteristic of Sôhrawardi's "oriental theosophy".

Active imagination is the *mirror par excellence*, the epiphanic place for the Images of the archetypal world. This is why the theory of the *mundus imaginalis* is closely bound up with a theory of imaginative cognition and of the imaginative function, which is a truly central, mediating function, owing both to the median and the mediating position of the *mundus imaginalis*. The imaginative function makes it possible for all the universes to symbolize with each other and, by way of experiment, it enables us to imagine that each substantial reality assumes forms that correspond to each respective universe (for example, Jâbalqâ and Jâbarsâ in the subtle world correspond to the Elements of the physical world, whereas Hûrqalyâ corresponds to the Heavens). The cognitive function of imagination provides the foundation for a rigorous analogical knowledge permitting us to evade the dilemma of current rationalism, which gives us only a choice between the two banal dualistic terms of either "matter" or "mind". Ultimately, the "socialization" of conscience is bound to replace the matter or mind dilemma by another no less fatal one, that of "history" or "myth".

Those accustomed to sojourning in the "eighth clime", the kingdom of "subtle bodies", the "spiritual bodies" — threshold of the Malakût or the world of the Soul — would never have fallen victim to this dilemma. They say that the world of Hûrqalyâ begins "at the convex surface of the supreme Sphere". This is obviously a symbolic way of pointing out that this world is at the limit where the relationship of interiority expressed by the preposition "in", "inside of", is inverted. Spiritual bodies or entities are not in any world, nor in their world, in the same manner as a material body is in its place or may be contained in another body. On the contrary, their world is in them. Hence, the *Theology* attributed to Aristotle (that Arabic version of the three last Enneads by Plotinus which Avicenna annotated and which all our thinkers read and meditated in turn) explains that each spiritual entity is "in the entire sphere of its Heaven". Of course, all these entities subsist independently of each other. Nonetheless, all exist simultaneously and each is contained in the other. It would be completely wrong to imagine this other world as undifferentiated and formless. There is indeed multiformity, but the relative positions in spiritual space differ as much from those in the space encompassed by the starry skies, as the circumstance of existing in a body differs from the fact of being "in

⁹ ibid., p. 142.

¹⁰ ibid., p. 143.

the totality of one's Heaven". For this reason it can be said that "behind this world there is Heaven, an Earth, sea, animals, plants and celestial men; but every being in it is celestial; the spiritual entities that subsist there are equivalent to human beings, but this does not mean that they are terrestrial".

The most exact formulation of all this in the theosophist tradition of the West can perhaps be found in Swedenborg. One can hardly avoid being struck by the extent to which the statements of the great Swedish theosophist and visionary coincide with those of Sohrawardi, Ibn 'Arabi or Sadra Shirazi. Thus, Swedenborg explains:

Although all things in heaven appear in place and in space as they do in the world, still the angels have no notion or idea of place and space. [In fact,] all progressions in the spiritual world are effected by changes of the state of the interiors. . . Hence, those are near each other who are in a similar state, and those are far apart whose state is dissimilar; and spaces in heaven are nothing but external states corresponding to internal ones. This is the only case that the heavens are distinct from each other. . . When... anyone proceeds from one place to another . . . he arrives sooner when he desires it, and later when he does not. The way itself is lengthened or shortened according to the strength of the desire . . . This I have often witnessed, and have wondered at. From these facts it again is evident, that distances, and consequently spaces, exist with the angels altogether according to the states of their interiors; and such being the fact, that the notion and idea of space cannot enter their thoughts; although spaces exist with them equally as in the world.¹¹

This description applies eminently well to the *Nâ-Kojâ-Abâd* and its mysterious Cities. In brief, it follows that there is a spiritual place and a corporal place. The transfer from one to the other is in a way accomplished according to the laws of our homogenous physical space. By comparison with corporal space, spiritual space is a nowhere and for those who reach *Nâ-Kojâ-Abâd* everything happens contrary to the evidence of ordinary consciousness, which remains oriented within our space. For henceforth the where, the place, is located in the soul; the corporal substance resides in the spiritual substance; the soul surrounds and carries the body. As a result, one cannot say where the spiritual place is located. Rather than being situated, it situates, it is situating. Its *ubi* is an *ubique*. Topographical correspondences can, of course, exist between the sensible world and the *mundus imaginalis*, one symbolizing with the other. However, it is not possible to pass from one to the other without a break. This is pointed out by many reports. One starts out, but at some point there is a break-down of the geographical coordinates found on our maps. Only the "traveller" is not aware of it at that moment. He realizes it — either with dismay or amazement — only after the event. If he did notice it, he would be able to retrace his steps at will or indicate the way to others. However, he can only describe where he has been; he cannot show the road to anyone.

¹¹ E. Swedenborg, Heaven and Its Wonders, also Hell and the Intermediate State, from Things Heard and Seen, transl. Swedenborg Society, British and Foreign, London, 1875, §§ 191—195. Swedenborg repeatedly insisted on this doctrine of space and time, e.g., in his little book *De telluribus in mundo nostro solari*. If this doctrine is not taken into account, visionary experiences can be countered by arguments that are as facile as they are invalid, because they confuse spiritual visions of the spiritual world with the fantasies produced by science fiction. An abyss separates the two notions.

2. Spiritual Imagination

Here we touch on the decisive point for which everything that precedes has prepared us, i.e., the organ by means of which the penetration of the *mundus imaginalis*, the journey to the "eighth clime", is accomplished. What is this organ capable of producing a movement that constitutes a return *ab extra ad intra* (from the outside to the inside), a topographical inversion? It is not the senses or the faculties of the physical organism, much less is it pure intellect. Rather, it is the intermediary power which has a mediating role par excellence, i.e., active imagination. But let there be no misunderstanding here. What is involved is the organ that makes possible a transmutation of inner spiritual states into outer states, into vision-events symbolizing with these inner states. Any progression in spiritual space is accomplished by means of this transmutation, or better even, the transmutation itself is what spatializes the space. It gives rise to the space that is there, as well as to the "nearnesses", the "distances" and the "far-off" places.

The *first postulate* is that this Imagination must be a purely spiritual faculty, independent of the physical organism and therefore able to continue to exist after the latter has disappeared. Sadra Shirazi, among others, insisted on this point on several occasions.¹² Just as the soul is independent of the material, physical body, as to intellective capacity for the act of receiving the intelligibles, the soul is also independent as to its *imaginative capacity* and its *imaginative activity*. Moreover, when it is separated from this world it can continue to avail itself of active imagination. By means of its own essence and this faculty, the soul is therefore capable of perceiving concrete things whose existence, as actualized in knowledge (cognition) and in imagination, constitutes *eo ipso* the very concrete existential form of these things. In other words, consciousness and its object are ontologically inseparable here. After this separation all the soul's powers are assembled and concentrated in the sole faculty of active imagination. Because at that time imaginative perception ceases to be scattered across the various thresholds of the physical body's five senses, and because it is no longer required for the care of the physical body, which is exposed to the vicissitudes of the external world, imaginative perception can finally display its true superiority over sense perception.

(Sadra Shirazi writes) All the faculties of the soul then become as if they were one single faculty, which is the capacity to configurate and typify (*tasvir* and *tamthil*). The imagination of the soul becomes just like a sensible perception of the super-sensible. The *imaginative insight* of the soul is like its sensible insight. Thus, its hearing, its sense of smell, its taste and touch [all these imaginative senses] are just like the corresponding sensible faculties, but these imaginative senses are attributed to the super-sensible. Whereas in the outer world there are five sensible faculties, each with its specific organ in the body, in the inner world they are synthesized into one (*biss rnoshtarak*).

Having equated imagination with the *currus subtilis* (in Greek *okhēma*, subtle vehicle or body) of the soul, Sadra Shirazi sets forth in these texts an entire physiology of the "subtle body" and thereby of the "body of resurrection". And for this reason he accused even Avicenna of having identified these acts of otherworldly imaginative perception with what happens in

¹² cf. the author's book *En Islam iranien* (cf. note 1), vol. IV, book V: "L'Ecole d'Ispahan"; Chapter II is entirely devoted to the writings of Molla Sadra Shirazi. cf. also the work cited in note 4.

dreams during life in the here-and-now. For, Sadra Shirazi claims, even during sleep, the imaginative power is affected by the organic activities taking place in the physical body. A great deal more is therefore required for this power to benefit from a maximum of perfection and activity, freedom and purity. Otherwise, sleep would simply be an awakening in the otherworld. That is not so, however, as suggested by a statement attributed at times to the Prophet and at times to the First Imam of the Shi'ites: "Human beings are asleep. Only when they die, they awaken".

A second postulate results: spiritual imagination is indeed a cognitive power, an organ of true knowledge. Imaginative perception and imaginative consciousness have their function and their *noetic* (cognitive) value within their own world, which is — as pointed out earlier — the *'alam al-mithal*, the *mundus imaginalis*, the world of the mystical cities such as Hûrqalyâ, where time is reversed and where space, being only the outer aspect of an inner state, is created at will.

Imagination is thus solidly placed around the *axis* of two other cognitive functions: its own world symbolizes with the worlds to which the two other functions correspond (sensible cognition and intellective cognition). In other words, there is a type of control to protect imagination from straying and from reckless wastage. Thus, it can assume its rightful function and bring about the events related in the visionary narratives of Sohrawardi and others. For the approach to the eighth clime must be made via the imagination. This may be the reason for the extraordinary soberness of language encountered in Persian mystical epics (ranging from 'Attar to Jami and on to Nur 'Ali-Shah), where the same archetypes are constantly amplified and re-amplified by new symbols. Whenever imagination strays and is wasted recklessly, when it ceases to fulfill its function of perceiving and producing the symbols that lead to inner intelligence, the *mundus imaginalis* (which is the realm of the Malakut, the world of the soul) may be considered to have disappeared. In the West, this decadence may date back to the moment when Averroism rejected the Avicennian cosmology with its intermediary angelic hierarchy of the *Animae* or *Angeli caelestes*. These *Angeli caelestes* (on a lower rung of the hierarchy than that of the *Angeli intellectus*) had in fact the privilege of imaginative power in its purest form. Once the universe of these souls had disappeared, the imaginative function itself was thrown out of joint and devalued. Thus one can understand the warning issued later by Paracelsus, who cautioned against any confusion of *Imaginatio vera*, as the Alchemists called it, with fantasy, that "mad-man's corner stone."¹³

And this is the very reason for which we can no longer avoid the problem of terminology. Why is it that in French (and in English) we have no current and entirely satisfactory expression for the idea of *'alam al-mithal*? I have proposed the Latin *mundus imaginalis*, because we must avoid any confusion between the object of imaginative or imagining perception, on the one hand, and what we commonly qualify as 'imaginary', on the other. For the general tendency is to juxtapose the real and the imaginary as if the latter were unreal, Utopian, just as it is customary to confuse the symbol with allegory, or the exegesis of *spiritual meaning* with allegorical interpretation. Allegory, being harmless, is a cover, or rather a travesty of something that is already known or at least knowable in some other way; whereas, the

¹³ cf. the author's *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, Princeton and London, 1969, p. 179. On the theory of the *Angeli caelestes* cf. the author's *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, Bollingen Series LXVI, New York (Pantheon Books), 1960.

appearance of an Image that can be qualified as a symbol is a primordial phenomenon (*Urphænomen*). Its appearance is both unconditional and irreducible and it is something that cannot manifest itself in any other way in this world.

Neither Sohrawardi's stories, nor those which in the Shi'ite tradition tell of attainment to the "country of the hidden Imam", are in the realm of the imaginary, the unreal or allegory, precisely because the eighth clime or "country of nowhere" is not what we commonly call a *Utopia*. As a world beyond the empirical control of our sciences it is a supersensible world. It is only perceptible by imaginative perception and the events taking place there can be lived only by imaginative or imagining consciousness. Let me again emphasize that what is involved is not imagination as we understand it in our present-day language, but a *vision* which is *Imaginatio vera*. And this *Imaginatio vera* must be recognized as possessing fully noetic or cognitive value. If we are no longer capable of talking about imagination in terms other than *la folle du logis*¹⁴ it is perhaps that we have forgotten the standards and the rules, the discipline and the "axial arrangement" that guarantee the *cognitive* function of imagination, which I have sometimes referred to as *imaginatrice*.

It must be stressed that the world into which these Oriental theosophers probed is perfectly real. Its reality is more irrefutable and more coherent than that of the empirical world, where *reality* is perceived by the senses. Upon returning, the beholders of this world are perfectly aware of having been "elsewhere"; they are not mere schizophrenics. This world is hidden behind the very act of sense perception and has to be sought underneath its apparent objective certainty. For this reason, we definitely cannot qualify it as being *imaginary* in the current sense of the word, i.e., as unreal, or non-existent. Just as the Latin word *origo* has provided us in French with the derivatives *originnaire* (native of), *original*, *originel* (primary), the word *imago* can give us the term *imaginal* in addition to the regular derivative *imaginary*. We would thus have the *imaginal* world as an intermediary between the sensible world and the intelligible world. Whenever we come across the Arabic term *jism mithali* to denote the "subtle body" that reaches the eighth clime, or the "body of resurrection", we will thus be able to translate it literally by *imaginal* body, but, of course, not by *imaginary* body. Perhaps we will have less difficulty situating figures that are neither "mythological" nor "historical", and perhaps this translation will provide us with the password for the road leading to the "lost continent".

And to find the courage to travel this road, we would have to ask ourselves what our *reality* is, the *reality for us*, so that, when we leave it, we would attain to more than an *imaginary* world, or a *Utopia*. Furthermore, we would have to ask: what is the *reality* of these traditional oriental thinkers that enables them to reach the eighth clime, Nâ-Kojâ-Abâd. How are they able to leave the sensible world without leaving reality; or, rather, how is it that only in so doing they attain true reality? This presupposes a scale of being with many more degrees than our own. Let us not make any mistake and simply state that our precursors in the West conceived imagination too rationalistically and too intellectualistically. Unless we have access to a cosmology structured similarly to that of the traditional oriental philosophers, with a plurality of universes arranged in ascending order, our imagination will remain *out of focus*, and its recurrent conjunctions with our will to power will be a never-ending source of horrors. In

¹⁴ This is a current French term for imagination, which literally translated means the madwoman of the house.
– Trans.

that event, we would be confining ourselves to looking for a new discipline of the Imagination. It would, however, be difficult to find such a new discipline, as long as we continue to see in it no more than a way of getting a certain *distance* to what is called *reality* and a way of acting upon reality. Now, this reality we feel is arbitrarily limited as soon as we compare it to the reality described by our traditional theosophers, and this limitation degrades reality itself. Another expression that is always offered as an excuse for confining reality is *reverie*, such as literary reverie, for example, or, to be more up-to-date, social fantasy.

However, one cannot help asking if it was not necessary for the *mundus imaginalis* to have been lost and to have given way to the imaginary; whether it was not necessary to secularize the *imaginal* in the form of the imaginary so that the fantastic, the horrible, the monstrous, the macabre, the miserable, and the absurd could come to the fore. In contrast, the art and imaginations of Islamic culture in its traditional form are characterized by the hieratic, by seriousness, gravity, stylization, and significance. Neither our Utopias, nor our science fiction, nor even the sinister "omega point" succeed in getting outside this world, in reaching Nâ-Kojâ-Abâd. Those who have known the eighth clime, on the other hand, did not fabricate Utopias, any more than the ultimate Shi'ite thought is a social and political fantasy. It is an eschatology because it is an expectation and as such implies, here and now, a *real* presence in another world and is evidence of this other world.



No doubt countless comments could be made on this topic both by traditionalist and non-traditionalist metaphysicians as well as psychologists. However, by way of a tentative conclusion, I should like to confine myself to raising three little questions:

- 1) We are no longer participants in a traditional culture. We are living in a scientific civilization, which is said to have gained mastery even over images. It is quite commonplace to refer to our present day civilization as the "civilization of the image" (to wit our magazines, motion pictures, and television). But one wonders whether — like all commonplaces — this one does not also harbor a radical misunderstanding, a complete misapprehension. For, instead of the image being raised to the level of the world to which it belongs, instead of being invested with a *symbolic function* that would lead to inner meaning, the image tends to be reduced simply to the level of sensible perception and thus to be definitely degraded. Might one not have to say then that the greater the success of this reduction, the more people lose their sense of the imaginal and the more they are condemned to producing nothing but fiction?
- 2) Would all the imagery, the scenography of these oriental narrations be possible without the initial, objective, absolutely primary and irreducible fact (*Urphaenomen*) of archetypal images whose origin is irrational and whose irruption into our world is unforeseeable but whose postulate cannot be rejected?
- 3) Is it not precisely the postulate of the imaginal world's objectivity, which is suggested to us, or imposed on us, by certain figures and certain symbolic emblems (Hermetists, Cabalists or the *mandalas*) that have magic effect on the mental images so that they acquire objective reality?

In order to hint at a possible answer to the question regarding the objective reality of supernatural Figures and encounters with them, I wish to refer to an extraordinary text, in which Villiers de l'Isle-Adam speaks of the face of the impenetrable Messenger with eyes of clay; his face "can only be perceived by the mind. Living creatures only experience the influence inherent in the archangelic entity". "The Angels", he writes, "exist substantially only in the free sublimity of the absolute Heavens, where reality is one with the ideal... They externalize themselves only in the ecstasy to which they give rise and which is inherent in them."¹⁵

These last words — *the ecstasy which is inherent in them* — seem to me to be of prophetic lucidity, because they have the virtue of shattering even the rock of doubt, of paralyzing the "agnostic reflex" in the sense that they break through the mutual isolation of consciousness and its object, of thought and being; here phenomenology becomes ontology. Undoubtedly, this is the postulate implied in our authors' teaching on the *imaginal*. There is no external criterion for the manifestation of the Angel other than the manifestation itself. The Angel is the very "*ekstasis*", the movement out of ourselves, which represents a change in our state of being. For this reason, these words also suggest what the secret of the supernatural being of the "hidden Imam" is in the Shi'ite consciousness: the Imam is the *ekstasis* of this consciousness. No-one who is not in the same spiritual state can see him.

This is what Sohrawardi alluded to in his narrative of the *Crimson Archangel*, what he meant by the sentence we quoted at the beginning: "If you are Khezr, you, too, can pass beyond Mount Qâf without difficulty".

Translated from French by Ruth Horine.

¹⁵ Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *L'Annonciateur* (epilogue).